Card Ticket to Hawaii

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12113934.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Underage
Category: F/F
Fandom: Little Witch Academia
Relationship: Diana Cavendish/Atsuko "Akko" Kagari, Anne Finnelan/Samantha Badcock, Lotte Yanson/Original Female Character
Character: Atsuko "Akko" Kagari, Diana Cavendish, Samantha Badcock, Anne Finnelan, Sucy Manbavaran, Lotte Yanson, Wangari (Little Witch Academia), Ursula Callistis | Chariot du Nord, Original Characters, Hannah England, Barbara Parker
Additional Tags: Card Games, Underage Drinking, Warnings May Change, Bullying, Masturbation, Song Lyrics, Roleplay, Poker, Gambling, Racist Language, Movie Reference, Marshmallows, Heart Attacks, Older Woman/Younger Woman, suicide talk, Racist Sucy(tm), Porn Watching, Prostitution, Sex Robots, Slime, Board Games, Dubious Consent, Mildly Dubious Consent, No onscreen teenage boinking but details are starting to get more specific, Animate Object, Transformation, Forced Suicide, Evil Hannah And Barbara(tm), Bittersweet Ending
Stats: Published: 2017-09-17 Completed: 2018-01-03 Chapters: 10/10 Words: 60346

Card Ticket to Hawaii

by KriegsaffeNo9

Summary

Lotte and Sucy place in a card game world championship in the Silver Witch Hotel and Casino, located in both Waikiki, Hawaii and Las Vegas, Nevada due to shenanigans. Chariot chaperones, and Akko, Diana, and Wangari tag along, because why not? But as the song goes, it's not paradise all the time. Can Lotte survive the unsupervised powers of Sucy? Can the others find some safe fun to indulge in while those two go at it in the realm of card games? And why the hell are we bothering with what Profs. Finnelan and Badcock are doing? All these, and more, ensue, when Lotte and Sucy take... a Card Ticket to Hawaii.
"Once more from the top for the press, m'am!" Wangari said, holding up her microphone to Prof. du Nord's face.

"Hello, everyone!" Chariot said, waving and smiling. "As you've heard, our very own Lotte Yanson and Sucy Manbavaran have earned their way into the first annual international Tsar Realms tournament!"

"And what exactly is Tsar Realms, m'am?"

"It's a fixed-card deck building game with four factions and--"

In the crowd, Finnelan gestured for her to hurry it up.

"It's... a very colorful form of poker, for children," Chariot said.

"Fascinating! Ms. Yanson--" Wangari sped over to Lotte, who fidgeted with the handle on her luggage. "--is it true that you won the qualifying tournament in a clean sweep two-nothing victory from the first round to the last?"

"Oh, no, it was very touch and go!" Lotte said. "I mean, it's true I won every single round and match I played, but it was never an easy victory."

"There were like three people other than me and her and she was the only one who'd played the game before," Sucy said, squeezing between Lotte and her luggage. "So if we're being honest, it's like if Babe Ruth called his shot in a little league match. There, was that normal enough a way to put it?"

"I know I got that one!" Wangari said, edging away from Sucy. "But here's the really cool thing: this colorful game Lotte is the Babe Ruth of is hosting its tournament in--wait for it--Waikiki, Hawaii!"

"Can you imagine it! Getting to spend a weekend in the most desirable location in the United States, just to play card games for a money prize."

"And free t-shirts!" Lotte said, with a jump and a clap.

"And where exactly will you be staying in this fantastic, one-of-a-kind trip?"

"At the Silver Witch Hotel and Casino," Chariot said.

"A casino, you say!" Wangari said. "How in the world did they open a casino in Hawaii?"

"The hotel is in fact located in Paradise, Nevada! It opened in 1952 on the Strip and was advertised as America's first openly witch-friendly casino. Due to unforeseen cross-contamination between nuclear radiation and the casino's Sorcerer's Stone, it bilocated over a site for future development in Waikiki in 1954. When pressed for legislation, the U.S. government literally threw its arms up and said 'Expletive it, let it roll.' And that's how it became Hawaii's first sanctioned casino."

"Fantastic. Simply fantastic. And why are Akko and Diana going?"
"Hi!" Akko said, waving.

"We've had a few unofficial government stipends for averting World War III," Diana says. "I decided I could set aside a little of it for a vacation."

"And I'm coming with 'cuz we saved the world together so we're gonna have an awesome saved-the-world vacation together!" Akko said.

"Yes, exactly that, and nothing untoward. Besides, Ms. du Nord will be there."

"You better believe it," Chariot said, adjusting her glasses.

"I don't suppose there's room for one more, eh?" Wangari said, raising an eyebrow. "I've always wanted to go to Hawaii and Vegas and now I could go to both of them at the same time. Report the poker tournament or whatever it is, liveblog it on the school social media platforms. It could go in the late Sunday edition of the student paper. Wouldn't that be fun and educational, teachers?" She held her microphone out to Badcock, who remained silent, and Finnelan, who frowned at her. "Anyone?"

"I smell thirst on you," Sucy says. "Like cologne on a lover's neck, it entices me, and like a fresh bowl of rice, it nourishes."

Wangari leaned close to Sucy, flicking the power off on her microphone and pressing her mouth to Sucy's ear. "I would cut your face off if it meant I could live your life for two and a half days. I'd go to jail forever after and it would be worth it. I don't give a fifth of a tenth of a fuck."

"You... I like you," Sucy whispered. She placed her hand on Wangari's, activated the mic, and brought it to her face. "Me and her just talked it over and her and me and Lotte are gonna be roomies."

"We are?" Lotte said.

"Yes!" Wangari said. "Jojo, Kim-Kims, I'm gonna need your stuff." Joanna and Kimberly hesitantly handed over their magic camera and endless notepad, Wangari pressing her mic into Joanna's hands. "Outie, bitches!" she said, running for the gate and diving in.

A few moments later she hopped back out. "Wait, wait, it's still pointed at Glastonbury. Got a little carried away!"

"We noticed," Finnelan said. "Look, just... leave, all of you. Have a good time in Hawaii."

"We certainly shall!" Chariot said. She drew her wand and cast the beacon spell. "We'll take plenty of pictures! See you all Sunday!" The gate's shade of green changed to a paler, sun-bleached shade. "Take a deep breath and hop in, their gate is at floor level, if I remember the brochure."

Two by two--with Chariot holding back Wangari from going through first again--they hopped into the gate, which returned to its normal color once the teacher passed through.

"Show's over, children, head off to what you were doing," Finnelan said, waving off the students.

"But m'am!" Hannah said.

"What are we gonna do without Diana?" Barbara said.

"It's the weekend, you're in the prime of your lives, I'm sure you'll find something to do while your idol is living it up without the rest of us." Finnelan doffed her hat and liberated a small kit from an elastic band above the crown. Badcock took the hint and felt around her mantle.
"I... guess... we... could..." Hannah furrowed her brow and rubbed her temples. "Barb, what takes three days?"

"I don't know!" She furiously Googled. "I'm getting self-help guides, I don't think that's what--is it what we want?"

"No! We're perfect and she's perfect! We just need to kill time so we don't kill ourselves! Maybe we could--maybe we could make her a gift! What takes three days to make?"

"I'm looking, I'm looking," Barbara said, the two finally wandering out of earshot of Finny and Bad.

"God, somebody should just introduce those kids to drugs," Badcock said, sotto voce. "It'd be a healthier outlet for all that obsession." She popped a Lunesta and a Ritalin, chasing them with a sip of water (with just a bit of rum for health and safety).

"I just picture them digging around the carpet for dropped crack rocks and it's so satisfying," Finnelan said, lighting a strike-anywhere match with her thumbnail and heating up the edge of her blunt. "Speaking of--going to party tonight, Sammy?"

"Well, if Ursula of the North is getting high on life, we may as well be getting high on drugs. How about you head to my room tonight? I picked up some old video tapes, some frozen snacks going right in the frier... had my granddaughter's prescription refilled, if you get my meaning."

"Oh, you tempt me. Let me fetch a little of the good sip and I'll meet you there. What kind of tapes did you find?"

"Nothing but hits, my friend. Starting off with the classics: Mondo Cane, gliding on in to The Evil Dead. Follow it up with Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals, three Puppetmaster films to cleanse the pallet when we need it..."

"There was an Emanuelle cannibal movie?" Finnelan said, impressed. "That's new to me."

"Oh yes. I can't wait to see how depraved and plagiarized it is. Moreover, and you'll love this, I used some very interesting internet software Ms. Albrechtsberger taught me about to get a copy of Revenge from Planet Ape and make it into a DVD."

"No way!" Finnelan said. "You sly devil!"

"Oh, aren't I just. Come on, Annie. Let's have us a hell of a time." She took Finnelan's free hand.

"Right, but don't forget the drinks," Finnelan said, walking Badcock towards her room first.

"Oh, yes, of course," Badcock said.

"Woooo!" Akko shouted, twirling through the curving leyline pathway.

"Please be mindful of relative up and downs, Akko!" Chariot said. "Gravity will return at the end of the path!"

Diana maintained a seated pose on top of her luggage, reading a printout of maps and hotel information. "The Silver Witch is rated at three stars... some metal band with a spiderweb for a logo is playing on Saturday. Blegh."

Sucy swamp past her with a leisurely backstroke, taking a peek at the printout. "Hey, Absolution by
Venom is killer, I won't have you talk bad about them."

"If you insist," Diana said, turning the page.

"I can't decide what I wanna do first!" Akko said, "Swim in the beaches or in the hotel pool, or maybe sightsee on the Strip--bilocation is so super cool!"

"I'm going to have to give a no to walking on the Strip unless I'm present," Chariot said, floating near Akko.

"Aww... alright," she said. not without a little pout.

"Oh, hey, it's almost time!" Wangari said. "Ladies and gents, get yerself ready, 'cuz we're gonna be landing feet-first in--"

Those present were unable to significantly adjust their posture before the terminal ended unexpectedly soon, leaving them all suspended in midair above a fountain with a depth of perhaps six inches. They all landed with varying degrees of awkwardness and bruising.

"Oh God, oh God, my deck!" Lotte sputtered, holding her luggage over her head and shaking the wetness off and onto her head.

"We're all using the same deck, Lotte," Sucy said, rising from the water. "And wild guess, they're gonna have more for sale if somehow your deck-condom-covered cards get wet."

"Aw jeez not the camera-a-a-a!" Wangari said, leaping out of the pond. "Someone! Anyone! Get me a--" A tall, tan-skinned lady in a colorful dress lay a wreath of flowers over her neck.

"Excuse me m'am, where's a phone saver?"

"Welcome to Hawaii!" the m'am said, pointing at a kiosk a few yards away.

"Thanksbackinasec!" Wangari said, sprinting for it.

"Well! That could've been a better landing, but we're all okay," Chariot said, wringing out her skirt.

"I don't think it could've been," Sucy said, pointing at the gate. Its constituent trees grew from patches of bare earth around the fountain, growing into each other just over it. "By the way, it's night now." The sky overhead was black and minimally starred; they were surrounded on all sides by tall, gold-lit buildings, with sprawling green mountains visible in the distance.

"Right! Honolulu is ten hours behind Luna Nova!" Chariot said, hopping out of the fountain. "Like my mother used to say, don't be too afraid of tomorrow, 'cause it's already tomorrow somewhere else--ah, thank you, m'am!" The lady handed out leis as the heroes worked their way out, Sucy taking three instead just to see if she could.

"Is that the pool?" Akko said.

"Oh, no, m'am!" the greeter said. "Presuming that you're here for the Tsar Realms tournament--"

"We are!" Lotte said, showing her student ID.

"Yep," Sucy said, likewise.

"--then the pool you're thinking of is an amenity courtesy of the Silver Witch!" She turned around and directed the witches' attention to the ten-story hotel rising up from the pavement. The walls were
sleek and lined with a lustrous gray stone that evoked the look of dull metal, and a sublimely tacky automated neon sign of a swimsuit-clad witch reclined across the frontispiece, reclining on a broom and kicking her legs in the air. The name of the place was in a bold blue, the witch herself in white and a paler shade of blue. So, absolutely no silver whatsoever.

The hotel emanated a wobbly field of distortion at its furthest edges, like heat radiating off a sidewalk in summer. People were striding or stumbling or running between the summery haze, appearing at one end of the distortion and disappearing at the other. The quality of light was different; even accounting for the neon, the air seemed slightly brighter.

"Cool," Akko said.

"Very. Check-out time is noon, though we can bump it ahead to 2 for a modest fee!" the greeter said. "Also, please be aware that prostitution is not legal on the Las Vegas strip or in Hawaii."

"...uh..." Chariot said.

"Well, it isn't!"

"I'm the only person of age in this group. And I'm a teacher. And I helped these people save the world last year! Especially those two!" She indicated Akko (who waved) and Diana (who offered a short bow). "But admittedly not her, other than in a spiritual sense." Wangari was dancing an impatient waiting dance as the cell phone saver worked its vacuumy magic. "You saw it on TV, didn't you? What kind of a teacher would I be to go whoremongering while I have students depending on me?!"

"One of the cool ones, that's for sure," Sucy said.

"Apologies, m'am, that wasn't a value judgment or inference of character! I'm legally obligated to remind everyone who comes through that gate, is all."

"Oh. Sorry, m'am."

"Don't be! You definitely look like you're more on the supply side of prostitution. That was a value judgement! Have a good time~" The welcome lady floated away.

"The nerve on that woman," Chariot grumbled. "Alright, enough fun-time fancies and frolicks. Let's get you all situated."

"Yes! It lives!" Wangari said, holding the camera overhead; it looked somewhat distressed at recent events. "Thank you, based God!"

Chariot handed out the hotel room cards. "Remember," she said, "we had two rooms, not three."

"Yes, m'am," Lotte said, taking her card.

"Secret's safe with me, teach," Sucy said.

"M'am, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to--" Wangari said, but Chariot snagged her collar.

"Ah, ah, ah. No shenanigans in a casino at 3 am. Do you hear me, everyone? ... Akko?"

"Don't worry, I see her," Diana said, looking over at Captain Crisis's Crunchy Deli between the endless banks of check-in counters and the elevator. An "Open 24 Hours" sign blinked in its
“She's probably going in for an early dinner.”

Inside the deli, Akko grabbed a menu, scanned it, and ran to the front counter.

The slightly sleepy-looking man at the front counter smiled at her. "Hello, and welcome to--"

Akko held out the menu and pointed at the entree labeled CHICKEN FINGERS. "Just eff me up, fam!" she said.

"...So, like, a double order, or...?"

"I say eff, I mean eff!"

"Five orders it is."

"That's what I'm talking about! Yeah! America!"

Back outside, Diana said, "You know, that sounds like a good idea. You all go on ahead."

Chariot sighed. "Okay, this went better in my head. Come on, let's get to our rooms."

"Yes, m'am," Wangari sighed, leaning 'til she could see the glimmer of banks and banks of shiny gambling machines on the far side of the check-in counter.

Lotte leafed through a pamphlet on the Tsar Realms tournament. "There's an opening ceremony at 12:15 pm Hawaiian time, then the first game is at 1 pm. Oh, I should probably be getting to bed soon! Maybe I'll order room service for a light pre-bed dinner! We can do that, right?"

"If not, well, I'll settle it when we get back home," Chariot said. "Now let's going before we succumb to temptation completely."

Lotte lay her luggage on the floor and belly-flopped onto her bed, which made a pleasantly soft noise as she landed. "Oooh, it's been so long since I had a different bed... this one feels so nice!"

"Namaste," Sucy said, planting her luggage by the bed nearest the air conditioner. Their room was aggressively un-themed beyond the vaguely silver-blue color of the wallpaper, the curtains unusually long and opaque, enough to shut out all light if need be. Sucy parted the curtains and looked out over the gold-lit streets and distant mountains of Honolulu; after she looked at it too long, the gold refracted into another scene entirely. With a wriggling shudder, the calm golden light was replaced by an eye-piercing kaleidoscope of neon colors. Not far away, a lance of light pierced the pre-dawn sky, launched from the point of an onyx-sided pyramid. There were buildings out to the flat line of the horizon, as if the world were an island of a city in a sea of bruise-blue. "Huh. That's neat." She pulled the curtains closed. "I'm gonna be in the bathroom a moment."

"Sure thing," Lotte said, pulling out her viewing globe and calling up the internet on it. She pulled up her personal strategy flowchart and gave it a quick browse.

Tsar Realms was a deckbuilding game where each player vied for a limited selection of cards on the table. She liked being able to pick up Grand Duchess Anastasia and the St. Petersberg Cathedral, drawing half her deck and sorting wheat from chaff as she pleased, but so did everybody else. She took a cue from Bruce Lee: flow like water, and don't hold on too tightly to tradition.

Sucy slid out of the bathroom in her jammies. For some reason the bathroom's entrance faced the
beds, which would make its light kind of inconvenient for anyone trying to sleep when it was turned on. "Should I call in dinner? I'm gonna wring our school's budget dry because I'm pretty sure Chariot's gonna gamble 'til we either lose all our money or walk out of this rich no matter where we place."

"Yes, please!" Lotte said.

"Also, I bought a couple of these from the Corner Head Shoppe on the sixth floor when Ursula wasn't looking." She threw a small cellophane-wrapped cake at Lotte, who almost caught it but definitively got whacked across the glasses with it. She readjusted them and gave the label a read.

"Brown... zed zed zed? With Sippin' Syrup?" The little round cake was in fact a dense chocolate brownie.

"Don't get excited, they just have melatonin in them." Sucy lay on her bed, picking up the phone. "And I didn't feel like going out of my way for codeine tonight. So whaddaya want for eats?"

"Oh, something light. Maybe a Caesar salad, if they have it!" She rolled off the bed. "I think I might take a bath before the food gets here, help me relax."

"Sure, go nuts," Sucy said. She placed an order and hung up, returning to her plan A for readying for game time tomorrow: endlessly shuffling her trade deck with a spell, because she had the sinking feeling she wouldn't be able to tomorrow. A few minutes later, Lotte stuck her head out of the bathroom.

"Excuse me, Sucy," Lotte said, "the bathtub's full of slime."

"Yes, it is full of slime, Lotte, you're very observant."

"How are we going to use it if it's full of slime? Why did--you put this here, didn't you?" Lotte stepped out of the bathroom, blessedly still dressed. "Why would you take our shower away from us before we even got a chance to use it?"

"Because it helps the place feel more homey. The more I look around the bedroom the more I notice all the anti-suicide precautions and it's making me depressed." She lay out a trade row and frowned at her luck. "Really, nothing that costs less than 5 rubles."

"Lotte, I mean Sucy, I don't want to have to use the other rooms just to take a bath! It's inconvenient!" Lotte sat back on her bed. "Can you fix it, at least?"

"I could. But it's useful where it is. You never know when we'll need it."

"It's slime, Sucy, it's useless by definition."

"It's good slime, Brent."

"Who?"

"Someone's not up on their timely internet reference that will be soon forgotten to the yawning abyss of time," Sucy said, "unless it's not, in which case, whoopsie daisy, egg on my face."

Lotte groaned.

Sucy smiled inwardly. It was never too early to establish the alpha.

Somebody knocked at the door before walking right in anyway. "Hey there!" Wangari said, placing
her camera, key, and notepad on the chest of drawers that held up the huge-screen TV.

"Chariot said to ask if you guys really meant to have me as your roomie."

"We're considering it," Sucy said. "Could you check the bathroom for us real quick? Lotte thinks she saw a spider."

"Sure thing!" Wangari said, loping to the bathroom. "Spider, spider... no, I don't--hey, what is--whoah, hey, wai--" SPLAT.

The color drained from Lotte's face.

Sucy chuckled.

"Please say you didn't have a foot snare spell waiting for her," Lotte said. "Or for the first person to get too close to the bathtub."

"Oh, no, that was all her being a total klutz. I promise."

Lotte chose to believe, for the sake of her nerves, and tried to ignore the sounds of struggle from the open bathroom door.

Eventually, a green, dripping mess emerged from the bathroom, with a thousand-yard stare fixed on nothing in particular. "The bathroom has been lost to the enemy. I'm goin' to Chariot's room."

Wangari sloshed through the room and out the door, leaving a trail of fluorescent green ooze in her wake and on the door handle.

"I think we've learned a very important lesson in this early hour," Sucy said.

"I'm not touching any of that," Lotte said.

"Your loss," Sucy said, unwrapping her Brownzzz. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm eating dessert first."

Akko lowered herself to the bed, not trusting her stomach with jumping on as she surely desired. "Ohhh, man, I think I went a little too American too quickly," she said.

"I'm startled you put all that down," Diana said, "and I've seen you eat steak like a hungry dog." She sat next to her, giving her plenty of room in case of disaster. "A well-done steak, at that."

"How in the hell could your auntie do that to a poor cow? Is that any way to immortalize its memory?"

"That's just how she... does things, I suppose. Present as wealthy, hope they don't notice her complete lack of taste." Diana twiddled with Akko's hair. "It's an embarrassment."

"You're tellin' me!" Akko belched. "Oof, 'scuse me."

"You're excused," Diana said.

"Well, that's good!" Akko thought for a moment. "Hey, wanna do it?"

"After you brush your teeth," Diana cooed.
"Well, then! 'Scuse me a moment." Akko shifted in bed. "Hang on. Wait. I need a little help getting..." She grunted. "Nope, not moving right now. Gonna need to take a rain check on doing you."

Diana giggled. "It's fine. We have the time."

"Oh, oh!" Akko reached for the TV remote. "And we have all the cool American premium channels! Wanna watch some HBO or Cinemax or Adult Swim or--Adult Swim is its own channel, right? Oh, maybe we can order a dirty movie while nobody's looking! Did Chariot block our--" The adult movie menu loaded. "Oh, baby, she did not."

"How irresponsible," Diana said, sipping her gin and tonic.

"Look at the selection! This Ain't Ghostbusters, This Ain't Ghostbusters 2016, Batman: The Unauthorized XXX Porn Parody, Eight Hot Muff Divers... huh. I thought these were supposed to have funnier names."

"Parody erotic film titles are a lost art."

"Yeah, it looks like," Akko said. "Maybe we could just watch something with girls kissing girls?"

"Sounds fine to me." Diana giggled. "I can only wonder what the rest of the faculty would think of Chariot for such a glaring oversight."

Badcock sneezed the pound note right out of her nose before breaking into a coughing fit. "By the Nine, I swear they cut that with salt and pepper. Son-of-a-bitching cheapskates, cutting it with whatever and knowing we'll suck it up our snoots no matter what."

"You crushed that Adderall yourself, you knob!" Finnelan said. "If your kitchenette counter is that dirty you should be glad that's all you snorted!"

"I... you're right, I did. Jesus!" Badcock rubbed her nose on the back of her arm. "The Lunesta must be kicking in. Sorry, Annie."

"It's fine. I didn't sell you the stuff, anyway. Maybe they did cut it before putting it into pills."

Badcock's room was smaller than Finnelan's, but it had an appreciable kitchen. Most of the teachers were content to eat their meals in the cafeteria or had them brought to their rooms; Badcock actually preferred to cook her own food, or, as today, fry up as many battered things as she could carry from the commissary's freezers. The most striking feature was an enormous flatscreen TV nested in the corner, three different kinds of video player hooked up to it and a stack of more exotic formats in a closet nearby.

The two had changed into casual clothes at the first opportunity, Finnelan wearing her Rolling Stones Voodoo Lounge tour shirt and baggy shorts, Badcock in a powder blue nightie and long socks. Well-fed in body and head, the two settled in to the softcore porn half of the evening, lounging on a worn faux-leather sofa. On the TV, Emanuelle wrestled with a snake.

"Think she's going to fuck it?" Finnelan said.

"Oh, she better," Badcock said. "Enough animals get killed in these things, at least one deserves to get laid."
Alas, the snake wound up getting its shit wrecked by the guy with the gun.

"Maybe next time, snakey," Finnelan said, before breaking into a protracted yawn. "Say, could you hand me one of those pills?"

"If you insist," Badcock said, planting a single blue pill next to her razor blade and pestle on the cutting board.

Finnlyn flipped the board over and made a nice long rail. She retrieved her pewter nose-straw from a short pocket and insufflated the pill in a single pass. She took a few deep breaths, making sure it had all dissolved into her nasal passages, before sniffing her way across the cutting board in case she'd missed a few crumbs. At her side, Badcock fidgeted in her seat.

"Oh, I'm starting to feel it," she said. "Mm! Oh yes, this was worth it."

Finnelan smirked. "It's always worth it to have more fun than Chariot's having."

"That lucky bitch," Badcock said. "Going to Hawaii and Las Vegas simultaneously. At least she has to babysit the Wonder Triplets while they play their card games."

"You can keep a secret, can't you?" Finnelan said.

"Well, I wouldn't be here if I couldn't."

"Even now, after the late unpleasantness, I can't help but think of Atsuko Kagari as a bad influence on Diana Cavendish. I can only hope she doesn't drag Diana off on yet another asinine adventure where she learns by failing upwards. Honolulu has an abundance of educational opportunities that leave one's dignity intact. If I knew for certain Cavendish could get Kagari out to, at the very least, some museum or art gallery or even a nice local luau, I think I'd be less, well, resentful."

"An edu-vacation, you may say?" Badcock said.

"You may say indeed. Las Vegas is done being a family-friendly tourist spot, I truly hope that Diana at least tries to keep her nose clean--" She shivered. "Oh, fuck, it just kicked in. Fast! That was very fast." She sprawled out on the couch, pressing her foot into Badcock's side. "Ah, sorry, Sam."

"Mm! I had a stitch there anyway. Could you rub it for me?"

"I don't see why not," Finnelan said, rubbing her toes into Badcock's side, just along her ribs. "Ah, you're a squishy one. Not the first big fry-up you've had this month, is it?"

"Oh, stop," Badcock said, giggling.

"It's not so bad!" Finnelan said. "It's a nice kind of squishy. I can feel where your muscles are hiding out. Some days I worry I'm going well past squishy and into overripe."

"That's just Chariot on your mind again. We can't all be amazons, you know." She put her hand on Finnelan's calf and squeezed. "Ah ha. I feel a little muscle here! You're not overripe at all."

"Well, this school does have me--"

Badcock leaned closer to Finny, moving her hand from Finnelan's calf to her thighs. "Ah, and these are good and firm! Broom riding does wonders for the legs."

"Samantha...?" Finnelan said.
"Ah, did I go too far?" she said, lifting her hand from Finnelan's thigh.

"No... no you didn't." She was blushing. "Samantha, are you coming on to me?"

"I might be," she said, putting her hands on both of Finnelan's legs. "Maybe it's the cannibal porno flick. Maybe it's the Adderall or the whiskey..."

"It's been a while since we've had any, hasn't it?"

"Depends on how you define 'a while.' And 'any.' if it's literally any, a couple of weeks ago Nelson and I masturbated each other."

"Same here," Finnelan said, "except it was last Wednesday."

"She gets around, that old slut," Badcock said. "It's been too long since we've had new and desperate pussy. I kept hoping that Ursula would put out, but she never did. And now that she's Chariot... I'm not even sure she got any from Croix."

"She had to have! I mean, she beat all our asses and nearly started World War III, the last she could've done is let Chariot wring every last drop out of her and then some."

"If you had the time," Badcock said, "and you had the means... what would you have done to Croix, I wonder?"

"I--er--well--I'd--wait. That's not a hypothetical question, is it?"

Badcock crawled up Finnelan and planted a kiss on her chin. "Just a little. It's me you'd be doing it to."

"Well... for starters," She picked up Badcock, held her chest-to-chest, and lay on top of her, the couch groaning as they shifted their weight upon it. "I'd establish a little physical dominance. Like so."

"Just a little," Badcock said, somewhat short of breath but her glasses fogging with excitement. "Would you kiss her, I wonder?"

"No, not Croix. I'd probably slap her around a little, if I'm being honest, but you... well, I'm going to have to apologize. This'll have to be the abridged take." She kissed Badcock; her mouth, their mouths, tasted of ash and cognac and bitter powder and a warm, womanly lust.

"Just this once, I'll take the abridged version and enjoy it," Badcock said, coyly, nibbling on Finnelan's ear and feeling her long forelock tickle her neck.

The two fell into each other, and were not done even when the tape had hit the end and the TV display a dull blue glow over their entangled bodies.

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While Wangari entered the second hour of her shower, Chariot took a nap.

At 7 o'clock Hawaiian time, 9 o'clock Nevada, Lotte lay in her bed staring at the darkness overhead. The light in the little hallway leading to the door was on, casting a dim glow over the bedroom. She stopped looking at the ceiling and looked at the TV, which was an ominously dark rectangle, and at
Sucy, lying in Nosferatu-like repose.

The air conditioner alternated between too loud and eerily silent. Her Brownzzzz lay uneaten on her side of the nightstand, half her salad in the refrigerator. She had felt totally confident and prepared right up until the time had come to try and nap, whereupon every nerve had been keyed up like an ex’s car.

Maybe she should just take a shower and get prepared for the day’s labors.

And so she would have to wait for anywhere from "just Chariot" to "everyone but Sucy" to wake up, and no way to check on them.

She crawled under her covers, alit her crystal ball, and tried to cram in strategies and card stats until her brain shut down.

Her brain had not shut down by brunch in the Bloodstorm Banquet Hall, a charming neo-Victorian/unlicensed-Game-of-Thrones-tribute mashup restaurant. She could only stare at her bowl of cereal taken from five different cereal dispensers and try to will her stomach into being hungry. Wangari captured her unhungry angst on film; while everyone else ate, she buzzed through the restaurant and took reams of photos, especially of the Luna Nova crew as they marched through breakfast.

"So you two will be in the game hall all day, then?" Chariot said as she refreshed her Mimosa from a pitcher.

"More or less," Sucy said, "if we're not refueling at one of the restaurants, or taking a nap in our room, or trying our hand at grown-up poker." She drizzled a long wavy line of sriracha onto her cheese-and-mushroom-medley omelette.

"Now now, let's not break any laws we can help not breaking," Chariot said.

"If you insist, teacher-san," Sucy said.

There were all sorts of people in the banquet hall. She wondered how many of the people in black shirts with nerdy things on them were here for the tournament, and how many were just dressed like they were. She felt pangs of envy over the people who looked better-rested than her, which was well under a quarter of the people she saw. Lotte felt light-headed. Was she really going to spend the weekend facing Lord knows how many people over endless hands of Tsar Realms? Was she only a big fish in the small pond of Great Britain? And why was Sucy not even remotely concerned with any of this?

Sucy, Sucy, Sucy. She'd placed second in the tournament, and only by losing a single round compared to Lotte's undefeated streak. Lotte had suspected the loss had been to fantastic luck on her opponent's part, pouncing on a clutch turn-one T-26 that chained into an early-game Lenin's Mausoleum. Sucy couldn't keep up with the damage and card advantage and got pounded before what should have been the midgame. Maybe that was too self-doubting a conclusion, Lotte thought; maybe Sucy was just lousy at handling early-game aggro. She'd have to remember that in the off-chance that she had to face Sucy in the tournament. The thought of actually battling her gave her a nervous twinge the way Sucy smiling for any reason put Akko on edge.

And speaking of, how was Akko already eating breakfast at all, much less a muffin medly she was sharing with Diana? She practically had to be rolled to her room last night. This morning. Today.
Deep breaths. She lowered her nose to just above her cereal and inhaled the powdery, faintly fruity smell of her mixed cereals. "I can do this," Lotte said.

"That's the spirit!" Akko said.

Wangari caught that moment too.

Diana downed half her milk in one go. "My God, what madman would mix chocolate muffin batter and then add semi-sweet and milk chocolate chips? That was so rich I think it glued my mouth shut."

"It's Vegas, baby, and also Hawaii!" Akko said. "It's double America! So let's eat like it or something like that."

"You're going to put on ten pounds with that attitude," Diana said.

"Well, I know I could use a little more weight here and there, knowwhatImean?" Akko said, winking belaboredly.

Diana put her hand in front of Wangari's camera's eyeball. "Please, we're trying to enjoy breakfast, Wangari."

"Well, you're not taking food pictures, so somebody's gotta!" Wangari said.

Chariot glanced around, then poured everyone at the table a finger or two of her cocktail. "While we're not documenting this breakfast, how about we toast to an amazing weekend?"

"If we must," Sucy said, picking up her glass.

"Heck yeah!" Akko said.

Wangari took her glass, pointing her camera down for emphasis. "To peace," she said, initiating a toast.

"The peace of the grave," Sucy insisted, "the only peace our enemies will ever know."

"That's the spirit!" Chariot said.

Everyone present, Lotte included, drank. Lotte shivered at the bubbly bite of champagne.

"I see a wussy drinker," Sucy cooed, slithering up to Lotte. "I hope that doesn't carry over to wussy deckbuilding."

"Not on your life," Lotte said.

"I sure hope that's the case. Would be a shame if Luna Nova only sent one deckbuilder with the drive to win."

"Now, now," Chariot said, gently tugging Sucy off of Lotte's shoulder, "let's not give each other too hard of a time. If you both work hard and do your best, you'll both bring pride to Luna Nova!"

"Yes, Miss Chariot," Sucy said, with the enthusiasm of someone being forced to swallow barbed wire.

"That's the spirit. Now buck yourselves up and get ready for the fight of your lives! If you need anything, you have my number." Chariot vanished into the crowd.
“Yeah, we're gonna catch a few of the sights before we check in on you guys!” Akko said.

"Yes, exactly," Diana said, and the two were off.

"The opening ceremony is at noon, right?" Wangari said. "I'll be there! Until then, I've got pictures to take. Yep... pictures." Wangari dove into the crowd.

"Hm." Sucy looked Lotte up and down. "We're not gonna see any of them 'til it's time to leave. I can feel that in all my angled places. You can feel it too, right?"

Lotte nodded, hesitantly.

"Guess it's just you and me from here 'til the end of the world. You ready to take your stand?"

"I was born ready," Lotte lied.

"You better be. When I scrape you off my boots I want to remember what I stepped in."

"...that was harsh."

"I'm trying to be." Sucy finished her omelette.
"Ladies and gentlemen, please: this is Tsar Realms tour-na-mine-t!" said the presenter. A bad midi version of "Mambo No. 5" began to play over the room's speakers. Lotte bopped her head along with the clipped, bit-crushed beat.

The opening ceremonies were held in what would normally be a show hall for, maybe ironically or maybe absolutely nothing to worry or care about even a little bit, a stage magician with a Finno-Russian theme. The sole presenter stood up on the stage, balding and bearded and overdressed. The judges seated behind him were waiting out the ceremony in polite stillness.

"Ha, yes!" the presenter said. "It's been a long trip for some of you, but lucky you, it was all worth it! Welcome to the first annual world tournament for Tsar Realms, the endpoint of months of brutal tournament matches across the globe! Everybody, give yourselves a hand!"

Lotte did so, along with maybe half the participants.

"Now, the creators of Tsar Realms couldn't be here today due to prior commitments, but lucky you, Ted Warlock, assistant manager of Fightwizard's advertising department, is most certainly here today!" He pointed his thumbs at himself. "I'm so very excited to see our game's first global tournament through! In fact, I'm so excited to see so many bright faces today, I'm going to have us go around the room and introduce ourselves!" He threw a microphone out into the crowd, most of whom recoiled in reflexive terror. Sucy seized the microphone with a spell.

"Hello, everyone," she said, standing up in her chair so that everyone may get a good look at her calf-length wine-red skirt and Cthulhu Strikes Back album tee. "My name is Sucy Manbavaran, hailing from Cebu in the Phillipines. One of my favorite foods is mushrooms, which are also one of my favorite things in general. My mother has huge tits which I hope to one day also have. I attend Luna Nova to study the alchemical arts and if I say anything about my specialties I will be shot by security." She gestured towards Lotte. "This is the other Luna Nova student here. Her name is Lotte Jansson. She's white and a liar. Thank you." She threw the microphone into the air and destroyed it with a generic bolt of magic. Feedback screeched through the sound system.

"WELL!" said Ted through his hands cupped around his mouth, "THAT WAS FUN! BUT I GET THE FEELING YOU'D LIKE TO GET RIGHT TO THE GAMES!"

"I'm not a liar!" Lotte said. "And I'm not clear if that's the official spelling of my last name! I mean, we're still all wondering about Finnelan..."

Sucy slithered back into her seat. "They will fear your reputation as a sower of untruth. You're welcome."

Lotte grumbled at her, having a difficult time summoning a counter-argument as the tug of sleep began to yank on her brain. She needed something to get her awake before the games began. She hoped against hope that the con suite had strong caffeine.

If she were more worldly, she would not need to have hoped.

Chariot settled in to her bed. She'd eaten her fill and felt like kicking back and digesting a bit before enjoying the sights and activities around Vegas and Hawaii. She checked out the pay-per-view channel, curious about what sorts of things were on tap. Inevitably, after scrolling past movies still in
theaters and not yet on video, she hit the porn. Smiling, she decided to see just how low-brow it got.

Be it chance or fate, within a few moments on the Parody tab she found a movie titled This Ain't Shiny Chariot. She raised an eyebrow. "How old is this...?" She pulled up its information and found it had been made sometime last year as a semi-nostalgia throwback to the aughts. It was terribly early for that, she thought, but that might be the desperate terror of entropy grinding away her power and virility.

Speaking of virility. There was a one-minute preview, which she engaged.

The actress they'd gotten to play her was one Suzie Cupid, apparently, a svelte ginger with a definite but unplaceable accent she could not act around. She had short red hair teased into roughly the right style, though her contact lenses were sinister vampire costume lenses, not the healthy crimson of Chariot's own eyes (if she may judge such things). Her uniform was maybe 60% accurate, though they may have been trying to dodge lawsuits (not that she had the desire or spare money to sue over something like this). They'd given her short boots and blue stockings, for one, and a little pin-on witch hat so it didn't get in the way of the action... as much.

The dialog definitely needed some reworking. "You want some autographs, boyz?" Suzie Cupid purred at the rather large men meeting her backstage at some venue. (The "z" was implied.) There was no Croix-analog in sight, which was some relief.

"Autograph? I think we're here for somethin' more than that," one of the guys said, struggling to recall his lines while looking directly at Cupid's breasts. The preview faded to black as the men groped a pleased-looking Cupid.

Chariot smiled. Harmless stuff, really, and it's not like they could know how apathetic she was towards men. And, really, she'd grown inured to the sheer volume of straight fan-made porn made in the wake of her popularity. And Suzie Cupid wasn't too hard on the eyes. She could take or leave the piercings and tattoos, a line of thinking that made Chariot intolerable boring nowadays, but there was something in that smirk of hers as she surrendered to her horny fans....

Ah, what the hell, it was only twenty bucks. Why not see it out? She could afford it.

Chariot was soon masturbating.

Wangari stood on the archway leading to the first-floor gambling hall in the Silver Witch, the smoothly-carved marble cool and faintly textured beneath her feet. Security hadn't shot at her yet, so she can't be going too wrong. She raised her camera and took a picture. She marveled at the architecture, the lighting a timeless suggestion of early morning, shaded afternoon, or late evening, bright enough to see cards by and dark enough to cast a dreamy haze over everything.

Endless nights taking Google Maps tours of the Strip paled in comparison to the real thing. The smell of smoke and recycled air, the jangling and sound effects of the slots and video card games, the thrill of loss and victory... her whole body prickled with the sensation of risk and reward. She jot her thoughts in the endless notepad.

She felt sorry for Sucy and Lotte, trapped in a card game tournament for far tinier stakes in a game she was surprised anyone played. This was where the real action lay.

Wangari rappelled down the archway, walked up to a video poker machine, and inserted a quarter. She lucked into a straight and won a buck off of her quarter. Smirking, she fed the quarters back into the machine and played again.
The presence of an adult looming behind her was impossible to ignore. Wangari glimpsed over her shoulder.

A serving woman in a crisp suit held a tray of drinks. "Rum and Coke, m'am?"

"Yes, please," Wangari said, taking a tumbler and squeezing lime juice into it. She dropped the wedge into the drink, stirred it up with the tiny translucent straw, and sipped away as she played a few more hands.

God bless profound incompetence.

Akko and Diana stepped out into the morning sun of Las Vegas, and then a little further out into the morning sun of Hawaii. The salty, sandy, misty scent of the sea wafted over them, more potent than a syrette of adrenaline.

"Oh, man!" Akko said. "I can't wait--"

A white van, unmarked other than a spraypainted mural of Eastern dragons wrapped around a yin-yang symbol with a katana running through it, rushed by, the occupants abducting both witches at once with the help of a large net.

"Aw, man," Akko said, kicking against the net.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" the aviator-sunglasses-wearing man holding the stick upon which the net was mounted said.

"Ha ha ha ha ha..." he said.

"Ha ha ha," he said.

"Ha ha," he said.

"Hello," Diana said. "I presume you're here to ransom me off to the Cavendish estate?"

"Or get revenge on us for saving the world when you wanted to see it explode a while back?" Akko said.

The van drove along in silence. There was, other than the sunglasses-man, a guy clutching a skateboard and a blow-up doll, a blonde with rippling muscles and nunchaku who was busy posing and stretching, and several other nondescript villains.

"Well...?" Diana said.

"There's a snake we need you to fight," the sunglasses guy said.

"What if we don't wanna?" Akko said. "We're on vacation."

"This snake's got cancer."

"Aww... poor guy," Akko said.

"It's highly contagious! Each bite is instantly lethal."

"That's...?" Diana said. "I'm going to need a minute but I'd like to unpack everything wrong with those sentences. Can I get my phone to do some fact-checking?"
"I don't see why not!" sunglasses-man said.

"Ah, thank you. Just a moment..." Diana thwipped her wand free from her belt. "Passar paret!"

A glowy portal opened up in the back of the van, leading outside the van. "Akko, you know what to do!" Diana said.

Akko transformed into her flying elephant form and promptly got stuck halfway out the portal. Her back half, specifically, her front half and Diana facing the kidnappers. "Gonna be honest, you mighta put a little too much faith in--ow! Ow, hey, crap, stop that!" The muscle woman was busy thwapping Akko in the face with nunchaku.

"Look, if you have a snake to fight, call Jennifer Lopez and Ice Cube!" She held on to Akko's trunk and pointed her wand between their captors. "Strahl!" She fired a beam of concussive force that shoved herself and Akko out of the van and onto the street, Akko flailing her stumpy elephant legs and flapping her elephant ear-wings 'til they were safely in the air and only barely clipped a tour bus and a few sedans.

"I'd be flipping you off if I had my hands!" Akko shouted as they flew over the van. "So toooooooot!" She barrel-rolled and flew above a high-rise.

"Good show!" Diana said. She sniffed the air. "And we're in Hawaii still, thank Mormo." She climbed onto Akko's back and held on to where her nape would approximately be if she weren't neckless as a criminologist.

"Hey, Diana," Akko said, "did you just make a reference to Anaconda back there?"

"O-of course not. I mean, it's a terrible movie from 1997. Why would you ever think I would know the two biggest stars who appeared in it? And, in fact, how would you know that movie even existed?"

"Diana, I know I'm not very smart, but I know my movies about giant snakes! I saw Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets and I thought, you know, I should study, just in case. And didn't it just come in handy when I had to battle your cousins and auntie!"

"...confession, I've watched Anaconda at least once a month since I was 13. Because I like to think Darryl and her daughters would be angry at me for watching it."

"That's the spirit!" Akko said. "Never be ashamed of what you like! Oh right, we were heading to the beach. Whoops!" Akko steered a hard right. "Now let's enjoy ourselves and forget all about those guys who'll never bother us again."

Chariot was still masturbating.

The tournament floor was a room marked for future expansion, the bare concrete walls pasted over with plastic sheets and Tsar Realms posters. A dozen one-on-one tables were arranged in a reasonably artful fashion as the tournament worked its way through the needlessly convoluted bracket. Lotte and Sucy were in the first round, battling against some truly nasty customers. Like this nameless guy Lotte couldn't place the name of even after hearing it several times.

Lotte shuffled her cards as her opponent, a man three times her age, played his turn. "Two Rubles, two Vodkas. Purchase a Tu-95... and play Baba Yaga... drawing a card... The Firebird..."
Lotte winced as the damage tallied upward. He had the foresight to obliterate every last one of her bases. Sitting pretty at 4 life she had approximately zero room for error before his green-heavy deck stomped her flat.

She examined her hand. A plan stitched together.

"You're seeing it here, folks!" Ted declared. "She's bounced her own base back to her hand--ah, and playing it again! That's six extra life, six rubles, and six attack--my God! I see her game! Election Hack goes to her hand, she's getting even more health and damage--"

Lotte lasted one more round, and that was all she needed. She burned every card that could be burned and emptied her opponent's hand before swinging to bring him down to -4 life. 2-0, just barely.

"Congratulations, Lotte the Liar!" Ted said. "Now, over at Sleepy Sucy's table..."

"Good game," Lotte said, offering her hand, which her opponent took begrudgingly. She regretted it, but kept smiling, and he smiled hesitantly back at her. "Really, you were great."

"Thanks," he said, and sauntered off with his deck. She waved the aches out of her hand and gathered her Cold War Heat expansion deck. She checked her cup of coffee, felt it was still lukewarm, and finished the semi-congealed glob of coffee, sugar, and non-dairy powdered creamer in a long and somewhat difficult gulp.

"And a clean sweep from Silver Sucy, the Creeper from Cebu!" Ted said. Sucy stood on her chair and bowed. "She's a showboat, that Sucy, but you can't argue with results! And now, Jorgenson and Monster Mash continue their needlessly prolonged lifegain-versus-lifegain stalemate..."

"Sucy, I gotta get to the con suite," Lotte gasped. "We're done for an hour or two, right?"

"I would presume," Sucy said, getting in some spine-bending post-game stretches. "We'll be getting a beep for the next round on these terribly classy vintage beepers." Sucy indicated her beeper pocket with her right foot, which was the closest limb to her backside at the time.

"Right! I'm gonna get some power-ups and take a power nap. Gotta get a grip..." Lotte's glasses steamed. "Oh, I think I'm channeling someone, Sucy. Excuse me."

"Sure," Sucy said, giving her a slap on the ass. Well, again, with a foot. Closest to Lotte's backside at the time. One might say it was a kick. Either way, Lotte got moving, and Sucy had a little time to herself.

In the room, perhaps. With the slime? With the slime, yes.

Finnelan woke up in Badcock's arms. That would explain the warmth and the mild numbness in her arm. At least, she hoped that explained the mild numbness. Badcock's glasses were off and she had drooled a little in her sleep, not that Finnelan minded... in spirit. In the moment, she minded a great deal, and tried to locate enough cloth to clean herself up with.

Ah, here's Badcock's panties! she thought. These will have to do.

Her Voodoo Lounge shirt was also in arm's reach, but no. That was the last show she'd seen the Stones live at, and Mordiggan knew how many more horcruxes Mick Jagger had left hidden away.

Badcock was so heavily asleep that Finny had no trouble maneuvering her into place on her couch,
covering her up with the blanket that they'd... where the hell did that come from, anyway? The Lunesta was clogging up some of her memories. Had it always been there draped over the couch? Did one of the spirits bring it in? Why was it bothering her so much...?

She followed her instincts, traipsing naked but for socks through Badcock's room, testing closets until she found a linen closet. And in that linen closet she saw a conspicuous lump under an old sheet. And under that old sheet...

A few glass vials of actual, factual, reasonably-powdery cocaine in vintage D-Hydro bottles.

"Oh, my," Finnelan said. "Baddy, you sweet little bitch. The party's not over yet."

Not that she was going to start without her. I mean, come on, she owed the old bat some breakfast first, at least.

Chariot finished masturbating.

"Remember, boys and girls," Suzie Cupid said, "your rock-hard cocks and tight pussies are your magic~!" She blew a kiss at the camera and the credits rolled.

"Amen, sister," Chariot said. In the lengthy pause as the TV menu loaded, Chariot saw herself in the reflection and realized what she had just spent the past...
She glimpsed at the clock on her nightstand.

Two friggin' hours?! Daughter Mormo that girl had stamina. Had there been any obvious camera cuts...? Maybe she should order it again to double-check.

No, Chariot, get a hold of yourself. Pitilessly self-indulgent pornography was no way to run a railroad. Was that the idiom she was groping for? (Man, wasn't that groping great? The way she had just--)

She grabbed a cup of water from her nightstand and splashed herself in the face, regretting not removing her glasses, and finding it had perhaps less of a de-libidinizing effect than she had hoped for, but nonetheless, it got her thinking strai--well, a little clearer than she had for the past couple of hours.

Wasn't there someone she should be chaperoning?

Maybe about five people she should be chaperoning?

"...damn," she thought, and rushed to the bathroom to clean up.

"Ah, delicious," Wangari said, flipping a chip onto the serving tray. "My compliments to the chef. Is he really Salt Bae?"

"A professional Salt Bae cosplayer, m'am," her attendant said, graciously taking away the remains of her meal (tomahawk steak, quinoa salad, roasted sweet potatoes, served with a Domaine Loubejac pinot noir). Her other, sexier attendant, one who was dressed for a hula for no reason other than it made Wangari happy, sidled up to her.

"Miss, I see you have amassed quite a fortune."

Indeed, Wangari was nested in a pile of sleek black chips, and was being served in a mobile private
booth dragged out onto the gambling floor to better enable Wangari's focus. She'd already acquired herself a high roller suite to be as far away from Sucy's cursed bathroom as possible and cashed out some of her earnings to the family Swiss bank account. "You're hella observant, mademoiselle."

"Yes, I am," her attendant cooed. "But surely this is not enough for madame? For there is a room for people as skilled in the gambling arts as you. Won't you leave this small pond and be the big fish you were always meant to be among your own kind?"

"Sweeten the pot for me."

"They're literally monsters. I think one of them came from space."

"Sold." Wangari leaned out of her booth and clapped twice. "Servants! To the place that I just got sold on by my hula girl!"

Wangari's casino-supplied manservants grunted, hefting her palanquin (for that is the twist: the booth was a palanquin the whole time) and maneuvered through the throngs of idle gamblers toward the elevators.
After a revivifying breakfast (fried egg sandwiches with sriracha) and a hot shower, Finnelan and Badcock were ready to achieve party perfection.

"I've been sitting on this for a while now," Badcock said, tapping her coke onto a Led Zeppelin carnival mirror. "Got it for a good price, cut it with a little mannitol, saw a few scary articles on that device Croix saddled us with, lost my nerve. You've heard all about those people getting killed in the United States, right?" She prepared it with a straight razor.

"Can't say I have. Poisoned coke?" Finnelan said.

"No, it's the, what's-it-called. The super-heroin they use to treat soldiers that swallowed grenades or some madness like that. Just a few flecks of it are fatal and it's a white powder that doesn't look any different from any sensible thing you'd sniff up."

"Scaremongering, I'll bet," Finny said. "Just start with a bump if you must." She picked up a tiny pewter spoon and dug a bump's worth from the pile of flaked cocaine. "Behold." She leaned over the mirror and sniffed it up. The stuff burned, but not for long, and a pleasant jolt ran down her back. "Ooh, yes, that's some good stuff!"

Badcock watched her. "Feelin' cold? Or like there's impending doom?"

"No, not at all. I feel like I should be doing more cocaine, but that's it." She fidgeted in her seat. "Are you going to get your nerve back or should I do a line or two while you're feeling around for your ovaries?"

"Oh, screw you," Badcock said, readying a line. "Sit back and watch a genius at work." She rolled up a pound note and sniffed up the fine powder in a single pass.

"That's the girl I slept with last night!" Finnelan cut her own line. "Watch it, that shit kicked in fast for me."

Badcock sniffled. "There's the drip..." She swallowed. "Urgh, the taste... a-a-a-nd here comes the kick..." She perked up. "Oh, my. Oooh, this ain't Adderall!"

"No substitute for the best," Finnelan said. Her heart skipped a beat; when it got back on track it was going good and fast. "Ah, damn, it's really... I think I'm gonna need to work this off quick. Sammy, are you up for a quick lay?"

"Lay? I mean, I really want to hop on my broom and buzz the campus a bit, but that'd be fine too!"

"Brooms later, pussies now," Finnelan said, embracing Badcock and sliding her tongue into her mouth. This was going to be perfect.

"Wai-ki-kiiiiiieeeeeeaaach!" Akko shouted, jumping in place.

"Actually, it's Kuhio Beach, but it's near Waikiki!" Diana said, not jumping in place but pretty excited nonetheless.
Kuhio Beach was a nice, cozier beach compared to Wikiki, minus the white sands but plus not as many people crowding the place up. Plus, what's not to love about golden sand and the way the ocean seemed two-toned, abruptly darkening as the water got deeper?

The two were dressed for beach-related success, both in one-piece bathing suits, Akko's bright red with gold racing stripes, Diana's sea green with indigo trim. Diana planted a beach umbrella in the golden-brown sand and Akko rolled out a beach towel, weighing it down with pointlessly heavy gold bricks she'd found somewhere. Maybe behind a bush? There were bushes amid the palm trees! Those were a plausible place to hide gold bricks.

"Remember to conserve your magic energy," Diana said, "we're not in range of the sorcerer's stone. Also, I'm going to need your help to apply this sunscreen." She splashed out a heaping handful and started rubbing herself down. "Fascinating true story: my sisters... well, my cousins used spray-on lotion and neglected to read that one had to rub it in. One day later and they were peeling like shedding snakes. Aunt Daryl applauded their honoring of Yig."

Akko was staring at Diana smearing lotion across her long, lithe legs. The Tumblr poem was running through her head without any other thoughts getting in its way. "Yes," Akko said.

Diana kneeled on the towel, smiling to herself. "Ah, speaking of. I'll need some help getting my back~" She lifted her hair, revealing the back of her neck and shoulderblades, uncovered by her bikini. "Won't you indulge me, Akko?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Akko said, squirting overmuch lotion into her hand.

Diana cooed as Akko worked the cool cream into her stiff back. At last, things were becoming perfect.

Wangari's assistant, the good one in the hula skirt and coconut bra, stepped through the silk curtains. "For privacy, madame." The mask was a black Mardi Gras mask with a gold diamond pattern along the trim and a fan of fine white feathers along the edges--and some convenient spirit gum to keep it held in place.

"Thanks, babe," Wangari said, flicking one of her sleek black chips at her assistant's cleavage and managing to rebound it off her breastbone and hit herself between the eyes. At least the mask absorbed some of the blow. The chip clattered to the ground and knocked over one of her chip towers. Alright, that's a sign she had to leave. "What's your name again, babe?"

"Kamala, madame."

"Like Ms. Marvel. Killer!" She dropped two chips into her hand on the way out of the palanquin. Before crossing the threshold, she worked the clothes-swap spell and exchanged her uniform for a long silk dress; like her mask, it was black with gold diamond trim, accented with pearls and a trim of feathers around the neck. She took a bare-footed step out of the palanquin (for why not stay comfortable?) and entered a room of near total darkness.

Near, as stark lights illuminated a poker table with crimson baize and unblinking eyes for the hole card cam. Ooh, so this was gonna be televised! That made things all the sweeter. Those dumb idiots in their dumb idiot card game tournament weren't getting televised, that was for sure.

She took her seat between an animate, humanoid mound of straw with a Disney Tiki Room mask taped onto what approximated its face and a seemingly ordinary man with a hand-chipped obsidian domino mask pressed into his face, staying in place by virtue of jutting into his skin as a
tremendously sharp object would be prone to. A number of men and women, some odd, some exotic, some truly bizarre freaks of debatable humanness sat around the table. The dealer, an aggressively normal-looking woman who was not in a sexy hula getup or a sexy witch getup to Wangari's frustration, shuffled a freshly-opened deck.

"It pleases me to welcome you here, O champions mine," the woman said. A green-tinted visor concealed her eyes, though Wangari nonetheless had the odd impression she had more than two. "I see a new mask has joined the ranks. What is your name, probability trooper?"

At once Wangari knew that this was a very pseudonym-y kind of place. She grabbed the coolest references she could think of with less than a second to respond. "My name is Sexual Heaven. I was born in Antarctica in the Norway research station before it was eaten by the Thing." She contemplated tacking on another unsubstantiated claim, and did so: "I got to touch Baby Bones once."

"You black motherfucker!" one of the more humanoid poker players said, standing up and drawing a revolver the length and bulk of a bodybuilder's arm from inside his tremendously unseasonable duster. There was a startling crack and a heat beam from the ceiling evaporated him instantly, his gun clattering to the table, unfired. The dealer added it to the pot.

"Please try not to threaten your fellow players," she said.

"Such nonsense makes a trifle of I, a collective intelligence of nanomachines that has chosen to live in straw for reasons," the straw monster said. His strawwy mass undulated.

Wangari adjusted her mask but cultivated an utter lack of expression. This was going to be the perfect poker game. James Bond would be jealous.

Sucy lay on the ground next to the bathtub. The cleaning ladies--she presumed they were ladies--had valiantly attempted to clean the mess Wangari left, but gave up after reducing it to a bright stain. They didn't even bother trying to clean the bathtub, and so were either cowards or geniuses. So Sucy lay next to it, listening to the silence of the ooze.

Her next game was a half hour ahead of Lotte's, so she took the time to call some lunch from the in-casino pizzeria. Yes, she could've gone to get it, but she wanted the delivery experience, Zhardammit. That's just convenience.

There was a knock at the door. She rushed it after closing the door that her slime not witness that she was a mortal being so pedestrian as to require nutrition. Her uniformed, overly-cheerful delivery girl was-a-waiting.

"Hey there! Room 1580, yes? Large mushroom with sausage, anchovy, onion, and Feta and bleu cheese?"

"Yes, m'am," Sucy said, absorbing the delectable pungency. "And the extras?"

"A 2-liter of Sprite... some styrofoam cups for sharing that Sprite... packets of Parmesan and red pepper flakes, of course... a complimentary miniature bottle of Tabasco... bag of assorted Jolly Ranchers... 16 oz. of prescription-grade codeine cough syrup for that cold you've got... an odor neutralizing candle for when you're done with that pizza... a reusable kit to disable the smoke alarm without alerting the front desk... our medium pack of unlubricated condoms... and of course the receipt."

Sucy signed and tipped well. "Thank you kindly. I'll be sure to order from Big Moe Houston-Style
Pizza next time I'm in Vegas."

"Sure thing! Enjoy!" She shut the door and made herself comfortable.

A short time later, Chariot unlocked the door and stepped through. "Knock, knock," she said, before reeling at the smell of Sucy's lunch. "Abhoth, what the hell died in here?"

"Don't ask how many people hung themselves in the closet before they lowered the bar too much," Sucy said from her bed, eating her pizza straight out of the box. "Other than that, some fish and hopefully some domesticated herd animals and nothing else. Would you like some?"

"No thank you," Chariot said, inching into the room. "What are you drinking?"

"A classic Houston virgin cocktail. Would you like a taste of the Purple Drank?" She banked on Chariot having missed any and all cultural reference to the divine libation.

"I could stand to hydrate," Chariot mumbled, and took a sip from the opposite of Sucy's double-stacked styrofoam cup. The taste was almost offensively sweet, the flavor as bright as the purple color of the stuff. "Huh... maybe it's my mood, but this is hitting the spot. Can you pour me my own?"

"Of course," Sucy said, mixing up a cocktail for Chariot. She'd enchanted soda and syrup alike with a vice multiplication spell and, as the song demanded, put so much drank in Chariot's cup the soda water didn't even move.

Chariot took a cautious sip and sputtered. "Jeez, that's... I guess 'strong' is the wrong word. Is this just liquid sugar with a little grape?" she said.

"Not technically," Sucy said, drinking her own. "I just mixed yours a bit sweeter than normal. And if you'd like some of this pizza, I'm afraid you better get a slice or two quick if you want any."

"It's fine, thank you," Chariot said. "I like my pizza a little less... pungent? Pungent, yes." She sniffed her drink and drank a little more.

Sucy discovered that Chariot could not handle her cough syrup. Within minutes of finishing, Chariot was sprawled out on her bed and snoring softly.

"Ah, Chariot, you virgin," Sucy said. She flipped through the VOD and settled on a terribly out-of-date yet blessedly free order of the pilot for Perfect Hair Forever.

Lotte bolted awake as her beeper informed her that she had only ten minutes to her next match, absolutely certain that nothing would ever be perfect again. She reminded herself where she was: in the con suite, or what she supposed was technically just the hospitality suite given this wasn't a convention, per se. She'd fallen asleep at her table after her modest lunch of a bunless hot dog, fun-sized bag of chips, and two bottles of Bawls Ginger Ale.

She wiped her entire face with a napkin just in case and tried to will herself into feeling the caffeine and guarana. Water, gotta make sure you've got water in your body... She stumbled away from her table to the table that had the giant water dispensers on them. She poured herself a few cups and slammed them back.

She noticed that only a couple of other people were here, including the people running the snacks. "Say, uh, is it alright if I have a quick musical number? For good luck?"
"Sure, lady, go nuts," the guy sitting near the nacho cheese pot said, eating Cup Noodles that definitely weren't on the snack menu.

Sucy waved her wand and conjured up a tiny army of spirits from the furniture, bags of snacks, and her own lingering dread made manifest. She raised her phone and hit play on a karaoke version of "Sword of Damocles." She improvised a little choreography as she sang, integrating unused tables and chairs and generally working out some nervous energy.

"--and I got the feeling Sucy's gonna be cuttin' the thread--" Lotte sang on the repeat of the first verse, grabbing a random passerby to join her in. They didn't struggle, and in fact seemed to get into a little ironic ballroom dancing with practiced ease. "Oh, can't you see..." Lotte said, and realized who she was dancing with.

She was shorter than Lotte by about a head, with rich blonde hair draped past her shoulders. Her face was round, her eyes large and a deep, sanguine shade of red. She had a little smile under a button nose. She wore a long dress, white at the top, with a pattern of blue butterflies fluttering down the chest and waist and joining a thicket of butterflies nearly turning the whole skirt blue.

"That you're at the start of a pretty big downer?" she said, finishing the lyric.

Ask Lotte what the greatest book of all time was and she would respond reflexively: House of Leaves, no question. Ask her what her favorite was, and she would say Night Fall, of course, and beg to not pick which one would be her favorite. Ask her who her husbando or waifu was... well, that she would admit was not from either of those things. That would be Aurora, the heroine of Beautiful Darkness, the French graphic novel, not the middle book in a non-Night-Fall book series that wished desperately to be Night Fall. Aurora was so brave and smart and tragic and beautiful and small. Very small, like a mouse. She took to wearing a mouse pelt later on in the story. That very image was on her cell phone case, brave little Aurora learnin' to make her own way.

No, there was no reason why her pet OCs on Night Fall roleplaying forums were fairies or pixies or leprechauns or smidgeons or Micronauts (from the extended crossover with them and the X-Men in volumes 272 through 275 back in '84). Why do you ask?

This blonde was not mouse-sized, but her resemblance to Aurora was uncanny enough to give her a nerdy little heart attack.

"Sha-da-la-la, that ain't no crime, that ain't no crime~" the pixies sang, and she dismissed them.

"Sha da la," Lotte said. "Hello."

"That was fine singing and dancing! Are all you card players so good at music?"

What would Edgar say in this situation? "I'm the best around, guaranteed," Lotte said. Oh, man, that was smooth! Keep the flow going, girl!

"You're in the tournament, yes? Is it alright if I watch?"

"Absolutely. You wanna see a champion burn her way through the competition?"

"Ooh, that sounds lovely! It may be un sporting, but something about total domination makes me excited. Seeing a true master take the helm and exert her will..."

"I'll own this next fight just for you. How about a little something tasty after, my little pixie?"

Her little pixie blushed. "My. So forward! You must be the champion I've been waiting to see."
"You better believe it." Lotte realized she had been holding on to the girl's hand for a little too long and a little too firmly. "What's your name?"

"Lilou." She reached into her shirt and pulled out a silver bridge-shaped charm she then dropped down Lotte's own shirt. Her nonexistent cleavage failed to catch it, but thank God she'd tucked her shirt in.

"Lotte."

"Go get 'em, tiger," Lilou said, waving her on.

Lotte spun on her heel and marched to the game room, plucking a bottle of Perrier from the deluxe beverage selection on her way out.

Everything was going to be a gigantic disaster. She could tell.

Twenty minutes later she lay out Koschei the Deathless, St. Barbara, Peter the Great, and the Motorized Tomb of Lenin, drew her entire deck, and dealt 80 damage to her opponent sitting at 5.

"You're welcome," Lotte said.

Her opponent burst into flames and ran from the table screaming until security whacked him in the head with a fire extinguisher and beat him with it 'til the flames guttered out.

"Bah gawd!" Tim said. "Lotte the Liar has become Lotte the Languid, taking victory at her own pace!"

"Might I recommend Lotte the Lapin instead?" his smaller, weaker co-commentator said. "Since she finished super fast like a rabbit that's running and she looks pretty mild and... uh... I'll just be quiet now..." Tim finished laying his withering glare on his coworker, who slunk away in silence.

Lotte bowed to the players and tiny handful of dorks who came to watch, gathering her deck right after. "My," Lilou said, just behind her. "I didn't expect a victory that quickly--much less two."

"What can I say," Lotte said, putting on her Edgar-being-voice, "with these many skills, I have to hold back to be sportsmanlike." She turned to Lilou, and remembered that the charm was still down her shirt, pressing gently against her belly. "I'm, ah, afraid that I'll have to step aside if you'd like your favor back."

"Keep it," Lilou said. "You said something about a bite to eat?"

"Yes!" Lotte said. "I'll need a moment to freshen up, of course."

Lilou raised a keycard. "I have my own room, if you'd like to visit a presidential suite."

"I'd love to," Lotte said, ordering her heart to stop having an attack this instant before it made a fool of her.

Sucy stashed the rest of her pizza in the refrigerator, lit an odor-neutralizing candle, and freshened up briefly in the bathroom, capping it off by eating a few complimentary Andes mints.

"Afraid I've got to split, sweet teacher," Sucy said. "You keep on top of things in here, alright? Make sure the slime doesn't get too far away from me."
Chariot shifted in her sleep, mumbling softly. Sucy rubbed her forehead for luck.

She tore open a condom packet, slipped it down her shirt, and emptied a mixture of Sprite, sizzurp, and a handful of Jolly Ranchers into it. The condom, not her shirt. She tied the top around a long, translucent straw, and blammo, instant goon sack.

Mind, there were a dozen subtler ways she could have got some lean to her next game. But this just seemed to fit the spirit of lean. Laughing to herself, she left Chariot in the grasp of a dark, dank dream.

Wangari wiped her brow with one of her chips. She wasn't anticipating pressure like this from a band of literal monsters, especially the hay guy. She had tossed her sidekicks' artifacts into the pot, which now featured a mountain of chips, the swearing guy's revolver, the camera and notepad, a taser sword, a plasma rifle, plenteous splinters of the True Cross, a signed copy of *Having Fun with Elvis On Stage*, a few house keys, and a Steam key for *Cuphead*.

It was imperative that she didn't lose. And yet she was running out of things to bet.

"Raise this soul I happen to have," the straw nanomonster said, excreting a jar filled with a milky smoke. The smoke periodically formed into the face of a man screaming in sheer terror, as a soul typically does.

It came to Wangari. She whistled. Kamala took her place right behind Wangari. Wangari reached back, picked her up by the waist, and threw her onto the table. "I call!"

"Wha--she can't do that!" Kamala said, scrambling for the edge.

"I believe you will find that yes, she can do that," the dealer said, raking her back to the pot with an enormously long and taloned hand that emerged from the darkness overhead and faintly sizzled in the light. "You should have read the terms of your employment more thoroughly."

"Aw, dammit," Kamala said, trying to take a comfortable seat amid the jagged crap piling the table.

Wan-Wan put on her most neutral face possible and commanded the sweat to stay bottled up for later. She had two pair and little hope.

"Hey! Hey!" Akko waved from the sea. "Lookit me, I'm in the water!"

"I see you, Akko!" Diana said, a katana whizzing past her head and embedding into a palm tree nearby. She checked the thrown katana and noticed a letter had been impaled on the blade. She read it around the stuck sword:

> WE'RE COMIN' FOR YOU, BABY. SIGNED--THE ROGUES!

She looked deep into her soul and told her soul that the katana was meant for someone else.

"Diana, you're not looki-i-i-ing!" Akko said, hopping up and down and waving her arms and an inflatable dolphin she found.

"Sorry, I'm looking now!" Diana said, all smiles, leaving the katana behind. It was litter now.

Several minutes into Badcock lying still and letting Finnelan take the lead, Finny realized that she wasn't moving.
"Fuck," she said.

Chapter End Notes

That straw monster showed up in a dream I had.

Also, this is clearly not in continuity with the Halloween drabbleathon, but I wanted to explore that OC in something longer than the penultimate block of 100 words in a series that was mostly 100-word blocks. Is that selfish...? Asking for a friend.

Apparently I need a lot of stress-relief writing this month. Ask me what I wrote today. (Note for self in the future: bad news at breakfast was involved.)
Lotte gargled and spat into the hand basin. "Thank you, Giuseppe!"

"One is delighted to be of service," Giuseppe said, withdrawing the basin and returning to his nook under the bathroom sink.

The secondary bathroom in the presidential suite was full-service. While not as richly appointed as the master bathroom, it had its charms, like the four interlinked jacuzzis, the shower she mistook for an ornamental waterfall at first, and everything being done for you by helpful servants unless you told them, very firmly, to please not touch or look at you while bathing.

It was a good thing she didn't need to pee because she sextuple did not want to see the toilet.

On the plus side, her clothes were dry cleaned and pressed for her while she bathed, and Lilou's bridge necklace looped onto a fine silver chain perfect for tying up a vampire. She hung it around her neck, clipped her badge on the collar of her Tsar Realms tournament shirt, and stepped out of the bathroom feeling like she could walk onto bed and fall asleep for a year.

Wait, no, not yet!

She took a moment to slap herself awake before hopping into the bedroom. "Hi, Lilou!" she said, maybe a little too excitedly.

Lilou uncrossed her legs. "Where were you thinking of eating, champion?"

"Ah, don't call me that yet, it's bad luck!" She blushed. "But, uh... well, I could go for a little something sweet, if you wanted..."

"I would like something sweet quite a lot," Lilou said, stepping very close to Lotte. Was there a more disparate coupling possible than between a Finn and a Frenchwoman? And why did her brain pounce on "coupling?" Dammit, Lotte, you need a nap after the third and final round for today!

"So come on let's go to the dessert store they have that I saw!" Lotte said, taking Lilou by the hand and rushing out of the secondary bathroom's antechamber into the vomitorium and from thence to the escalator that led to the elevator that led to the rest of the hotel. She had yet to see the rest of Lilou's hotel room.

Nurse Horowitz was enjoying her hobby, the traditional American art of scrivening eel teeth, when someone knocked at her door. "What!" she shouted. "I'm busy, dammit!"

"I think--I think Professor Badcock's had a heart attack!" Finnelan said.

Horowitz groaned. "Of course she did. Come on, bring 'er in." She clapped her hands and the steel door dragged itself open. Finnelan rushed into the nurse's office, dressed in a nun's habit, dragging along Samantha Badcock, dressed in a billowing white nightgown, in a triage stasis bubble spell.

"Were you two fuckin'?" Horowitz said.

"Does that matter?!" Finnelan said, pushing Sammy over one of the beds.

"For the magic I use, yes. Without that Cavendish bitch on-hand I have to dip into the black magic
"box to treat it." Horowitz rooted around a trunk with human skulls and eel teeth artisinally sutured into its leather surface. "Also, were you two on drugs?"

"I--that's personal!"

"So, yes. I'm not here to get you in trouble, you squishy bint, I need to know how to fix you." She pulled out a live, very hungry-looking fox that snapped at Horowitz's face. "I mean her."

"Well." Anne peered deep into her Lunesta-fogged memories. "Starting last night, or this morning?"

Diana and Akko's fun times with Frisbees came to an abrupt halt when something appeared out of nowhere from the edge of the water and approached them.

"Look. At. That." Akko stared at the beast as it frolicked across the sandbar. "Why does it look like me."

The beast looked like an Akko mascot costume. Not a great-quality one, maybe a step above a school mascot costume, but not quite a medium-intensity furson's quality, either. It had a big, nearly hemispherical foam head with a pointy felt hat, a permanently open mouth with pink stocking-grade cloth stretched over it, a padded bodysuit with a cheap morphsuit matching her skin tone (and mitten-like hands... why?), and an equally cheap Luna Nova cosplay uniform.

"Diana, you're not answering..."

"I'm looking," Diana said, flipping through *Dream Bunny's Mo'Bettah Guide to Hawaiian Cryptids Whose Influence You Can Only Escape In Dream Land*. "Here... it's a Cast Monster. They're an invasive specie from Florida, monsters that attempt to imitate costumed Disney World cast members but due to wariness about copyright laws instead just imitate people they see to lure them into a false sense of security."

"It's so damn spooky. But if they're invasive it means we can just blast it, right?" Akko said, freeing her wand from a convenient loop on her bikini's waist.

"Allow me," Diana said, pulling her own. "Let's send this--"

A skateboader skidded past them. As he was on a skateboard and not on something designed to plow through sand this involved substantially more effort than just picking up his board and walking.

"What a completely ludicrous man," Diana said, momentarily distracted. Even the Cast Monster was taken aback, covering its mouth and shimmying.

"Man, he must be smoking some heavy doobies! Eh, eh, eh?" Akko raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm certain."

On the other edge of the sandbar, Skater hopped off his vehicle and checked in with the half-drowned trucklette. "I think this wasn't supposed to be a water vehicle!" the chubby, bearded man inside said. "But here's a gun and your waifu, Skater. So blow 'em away!"

"You got it, babe!" Skater said, winking heavily and embracing his inflatable waifu. Teeth grit with determination, he forcibly skateboarded back across the sandbar to his prey.

The Cast Monster did some amazing backflips. "Diana, is it really okay to zap this guy? I'm starting to like him. Maybe he can be tamed! Maybe he can come home with us!"
"It's clearly got you, Akko," Diana said. "I'll just Murowa it out of existence and we can put this sad chapter behind--"

"Hey, wait, is that skateboard guy back with a blow-up doll? Ha, gross."

Gears turned in Diana and Akko's heads.

"Wait a second," Diana said, just as Akko said "Oh crap he's got a gun!"

The skater rested the barrel of his gun on his waifu's shoulder and fired, lightly peppering Akko with a dusting of shotgun pellets intended on use on small snakes at close range. "Ow, jeez, that stings!" Akko said, patting her shoulder.

"Oh, that tears it," Diana said, stepping in front of Akko. "Schlagen!" She swat her wand at Skater, nudging him off-course and into the stunned Cast Monster. Skater was knocked a good five yards in the air from the impact. "Murowa!" Diana flung a glowing-green magic bolt at Skater; unlucky for him, he'd neglected to put any points in Endurance when leveling up, and he exploded beautifully as his hit points hit the deep negatives.

"I got his partner!" Akko said, stepping forward. "Belga Veeda!"

A column of light slammed into the inflatable doll, exploding it so bad that Kuhio Beach was washed out with green light for several seconds. The Cast Monster mimed being quite impressed.

Diana crawled out of the crater the spell's recoil had dug for the two of them. She coughed up a whole live wad of barnacles. "Dead souls, Chariot actually taught you that?"

"I just said the words and hoped for the best," Akko said, digging a stuck sea anemone from her ear. "Turns out it works, who knew?"

"Right. I think I could use a little beach break for now." Diana rolled onto the sandbar. The Cast Monster skipped over to her and she finally Murowa'd it into a burst of toxic ash. "Not today."

"Awww," Akko said.

Wangari finished chugging her high-proof End of History ale. Shit, she desperately wanted to say, but now was the best time to bottle up her emotions and work through them later. Everybody was nervously drinking, so it was beyond tell territory at this point.

It was down to her, Strawmonster, a Frankenstein of some description, and a mysterious figure awash in darkness whom she never got a clear look at beyond the glimmering red eyes.

"Ah, yes," the dealer said, as she balanced a Faberge egg atop a pyramid of chips, "I neglected to mention, but for dramatic purposes, this is a two-part tournament. Today determines who obtains a quarter of the pot, rounded down. The rest shall be reserved for the victor of tomorrow's game, on top of the pot for that. You're welcome to return, provided you can front the dramatically increased minimum bets. Perhaps you'll take your losses with dignity. Perhaps you may return to win them back against all odds. What more are you willing to risk to win back what you've already lost?"

"Yeah, nice exposition," Strawmonster said. "Now let's see how this last hand turns out."

Wangari threw her bottle and its complimentary taxidermied animal coozie behind her. "I'm ready."

"Sure," the Frankenstein said.
The figure in the darkness indicated their agreement.

"As always, in clockwise order," the dealer said, for the sake of the reading audience.

"Two pair!" Strawmonster said, flopping his hand down.

"Royal Goddamn Flush," Wangari said, laying out exactly that.

"No way," Strawmonster said, his voice quavering.

In the darkness, the red-eyed figure tapped three Islands. "Cancel."

"...pardon?" Wangari said.

"I tapped for three blue and cast Cancel. You'll have to use your hole cards now."

"...uh..." Wangari turned over her hole card. "High ten?"

"Nice one, asshole!" Kamala shouted from within the pot.

"Hey, gimmie a friggin' break, I didn't see those Islands!" Wangari said. "It was dark!"

Frankenstein had three of a kind, and the figure in the shadows played Jace, Mind Sculptor. The winner was clear.

"Alas, Lady Chaos picks her winner and doles out punishment to the losers. I will see you tomorrow, if you're brave enough, and sufficiently laden with money." The dealer hit a button under her end of the table. "You will each be escorted to a random part of the casino. Have a nice day."

"Hey, uh, do I at least get to keep my--" Wangari said, before all their chairs flipped back and dropped them into pitch-black chutes and, with the help of a fundamental force of nature known as "gravity," booked a path down very, very quickly.

Don't die immediately, Lotte thought. For the love of God don't die immediately.

Lilou licked her little lips as she smeared a toasty marshmallow onto her open-faced s'more. She sniffed her assembled creation and nibbled on it intently before taking a huge bite out of it, smearing candy at the sides of her mouth. She tidied herself up with her napkin before taking another irresponsibly big bite.

Oh, Lotte was dead forever.

Lotte picked Auntie Everett's Vaguely German Infinite Candy Kitchen for their little bite to eat, shelling out some of her own, actual money to reserve a private s'more booth: an enclosed booth with mood lighting suggesting starlight, a little crackling fire in a shallow pit, and all the instruments and supplies necessary to make as many s'mores as they could stomach. Lilou had a heck of a sweet tooth, it turned out, and was on her third. Lotte had just barely finished her first. Was she dreaming this?

She might have been dreaming The World's Largest Open-Air Warm Marshmallow Dispenser, a giant vat of horribly expensive artisanal marshmallows. A convenient pipe leading from the vat dispensed sticky wads of half-melted sugar to their little booth on demand. While Lotte wouldn't have advertised like half the things in that title or even thought of having it open to the air at all, she supposed Auntie Everett had her reasons.
"You're from Luna Nova, yes?" Lilou said. "It must be so exciting, the study of witchcraft."

"You don't know the half of it," Lotte said. "You remember those cool girls who saved the world a few months ago? I'm their best friend. The world would've ended if I didn't help them get where they needed to be."

"Ooh," Lilou said. "How did you help?"

Lotte reached the impasse of truth or falsehood.

"I conjured Ithaqua and had him throw their high-test magic broom into the stratosphere."

Lilou gasped. "Ithaqua himself, the North Wind, the Wendigo?"

"Yes!" Lotte said. "You know about him?"

"Of course. My father and I are worshipers of the witch gods in spite of not being witches ourselves. Mother Mormo of course, Ithaqua, the Great Unnameable One, Cthugha, He Who Is Not To Be Named..."

"He Who Is Not To Be Named?" The god whose name was not allowed to be spoken or thought about overmuch and who was strongly associated with the weirdest of pants-off funtimes?

"Lotte, you're pinching yourself," Lilou said.

"Yep," Lotte said. "It was a long trip and it's been an intense couple of rounds. Maybe I did get to sleep in my room and I'm dreaming all of this."

Lilou smiled. "If it is a dream..."

A thumping sound reverberated overhead. Lotte and Lilou peeked from their booth and saw a tube emerge from the ceiling. After a few moments a figure fell out of it, landing right in the middle of the open-air marshmallow reservoir and sending a mighty wave of creamy fluff over the edge. Lotte squeaked and grabbed Lilou out of the way before a splash of the stuff washed over where she'd been sitting.

"Ooh, my hero!" Lilou purred, under Lotte. "Maybe this is my dream."

Lotte's blush was flourescent. "I'm glad to star in it, then," she said.

Whoever-it-was climbed to the top of the open-air vat, so enrobbed in small-batch boutique marshmallow cream it was impossible to tell her identity, especially not given her brown eyes, distinctive red eye markings that inexplicably survived her bath, and fan of hair that refused to be tamed by anything white.

"Huh," Lotte said as she helped Lilou stand up. "That sort of rings a bell, visually... but anyway, now that the marshmallows have been dirtied, maybe we should--"

The figure pointed at Lotte and furiously signed a long string of information in American Sign Language while simultaneously trying to speak, to little success in breaking through the liquid sugar covering her mouth.

"I sure wish I read ASL," Lotte said.

"She said 'Charlotte Marja Jannson, I know where you sleep and will enact vengance upon you if you don't help me get enough money to buy back my... stretchy superheroine?" Lilou said.
"Ah, she must be a crazed fan who wants my autograph. Let's not give them the time of day!" Lotte gently tugged on her new girlfriend(???)'s hand.

"Fans can be so pushy," Lilou said, following her and ignoring the increasingly loud and angry mmph-ing of somebody neither of them knew as she was gently escorted out of the marshmallow vat by showgirls in what some would call disappointingly-accurate dirndls.

"Do you feel that?" Lilou said.

"Feel what?" Lotte lied. It was a faint but distinct sensation: will anybody get the above reference? And would calling it a reference absolve her of a myriad of sins?

Probably not.

"Hunger? We could visit the cookie bar if you wanted to finish filling up!"

"Ooh, you devil. You know how to treat a lady," Lilou cooed, kissing her nose.

Lotte turned beet-red from the neck up.

"It's a madhouse! A MA-A-A-ADHOUSE!" Wangari screamed over the woosh of the hose Auntie Everett's overdressed showgirls turned on her in a stark shower room near the kitchens.

The overdressed showgirl manning the hose turned it off at least. "Feel better now you got to quote Chuckie Heston?"

"Kinda," Wangari grumbled, brushing watered-down marshmallow out of her hair. "Urgh. Are you gonna charge me for the marshmallow I fell in?"

"Charge?" the showgirl said. A camera embedded in the ceiling flashed unnecessarily. "If it didn't involve a lot more lawyering we'd have scraped all the stuff on you into jars. Between you and me, we got a deal going with other parts of the hotel to pitch drunk idiots in there and sell the resulting goo to whatever demographic would pay the most for it. Look at you, you're a tight young brown girl, and bare-footed! Even after our cut we're gonna be the highest-earning restaurant in the whole friggin' hotel."

"Okay, no," Wangari said. "To hell with that. I dis-permiss."

"Too late~" the showgirl said, clapping twice. A projector popped out of the opposite wall and, er, projected the image of a contract next to Wan-Wan. "You can clearly see: by falling into the Open-Air whatever, you waive any rights to what we do with the contents of the vat, irrevocably, even across alternate realities should they exist, and we have evidence they do."

"Yeah, try doing that when you're breathing through book lungs 'cause I turned you into a giant spider and you're hella suffocating 'cause--uh--" Wangari realized her wand clasp was empty. She ran her fingers along every hidden compartment she had magically sewn into her metamorphic dress, thought back to making the dress, and remembered, at last, putting her wand on a stack of chips as she walked out.

A stack of chips she had dug into while seeing and raising.

There was, charitably, a 50/50 chance her wand was now part of the starting pool for the next game (if she had been paying attention enough, and she doubted she was) or that it had rolled to the bottom of the palanquin. Or the palanquin cleaned up and--
Okay, step one, lost and found. Step two...

"I'll... I'm... I'll get my revenge!" Wangari said, running through the Shame Exit.

"Thas' what they all say!" the showgirl said, waving her off.

Finnelan sat outside the nurse's office, nursing a fat blunt and hating herself. The students in line for the nurse stared at her like the little bitches they were, especially that one with her head duct-taped onto her neck. She had half a mind to blow some smoke at them and see if that calmed them down, but that would be inviting a wealth of complaints. There were still fees pending from that time Akko and her buddies got an entire classroom tripping on mushroom spores.

Horowitz peeked through the door. "Hey, I'm gonna be casting a broadband disenchant in a second so I can force all the black magic I can into Baddy. Anybody who needs a spell on to live better get the hell out of here. Countin' from ten. TEN!" She closed the door and kept counting down.

Maybe it was the Lunesta, maybe it was the weed, but until the kids piled out of the waiting room and Nelson and Lukic stepped in, she had forgotten that her clothes were metamorphed on.

"Yo, Annie, what's u--" Nelson said.

A shockwave of disenchantment magic burst from the nurse's office, sweeping through Finnelan and leaving her dressed in a garter belt and nothing else.

"That's what's up," Lukic said, giggling. "Someone got her bone on a little too hard!"

"Shut the hell up you old bat," Finnelan said, flipping her off. "You're right, but fuck you anyway." She didn't bother covering herself up, she'd had sex with both of them. Especially Lukic. Whatever else may be said--like that she was a hideous crone and proud of it--she had coming up on two centuries of sexual experience on anybody else in the school, and her porn Tumblr had a couple thousand followers.

"Really, though!" Nelson said, flopping in the chair next to Finnelan. "It sucks whenever one of us is down. Especially since it means I probably won't be banging her any time soon."

Finnelan groaned. "Don't remind me. She's a tiger when she gets some uppers in her. The things we did last night..." She shook her head, holding out her blunt. Nelson took a gentle hit off of it. "I came four times. Four! I was almost done when she had her heart attack." She slumped against her seat. "Now I can't stop thinking... how much of her life did she shave off with all those drugs?"

"You know I'm an actual witch, right?" Lukic said, taking the blunt from Nelson and inhaling half an inch of it in a single breath. "We're all witches, for fuck's sake. If there's any damage she's taken we can patch it up, no matter how many gods' knobs we have to shine."

Finnelan took her blunt back, with a little force, and puffed on it. "Yeah. I... I guess I should lighten up a little bit. It's a hiccup, not a full stop."

"Yeah," Nelson said, putting a supportive hand on her thigh. "That's the spirit. How about we help settle your nerves a little more?"

"...here? In the nurse's office?"

"It's on my bucket list, baby." Nelson licked her lips. "Now am I gonna eat you out or do I have to wait my--"
Lukic flung her cloak off, revealing an elaborate web of leather straps and buzzing sex toys strapped to her bony, sallow body. "Wait your turn."

Finnelan smiled. "Come on, you scary bitch, let's have a go."

Outside, the girl with her head duct taped on peeked inside and saw something she would have many amazing years unpacking with her therapists.

"What's my name, bitch?" Sucy said.

"Sucy Manbavaran!" the man she stood on whimpered.

"What's my name, bitch?!" Sucy said, grinding her toes in.

"The Black Salamander! The Universal Solvent! Angelic Acid!"

"You better believe it." She stepped off her opponent's neck and back to her side of the table. "And now I play Perm-36. With three extra attack I take you to -2. You're welcome."

"My God!" Ted said. "A classic play from the Serious Sucy! We shudder to think of what she'll do next, but she's doing it as hard as she can!"

Sucy bowed to the people who clapped in fear of what would happen if they didn't, and retrieved her deck. Round three was done, and so she was cleared until tomorrow at noon. She took a victorious sip of body-temperature drank from the condom down her shirt; the taste of victory. The idle thought that she hadn't bothered checking on Sucy, she meant Lotte, for a while. Her quiet disdain was a valuable tool, but so too was predatory looming. Better to not give the Languid too much breathing room.

She found Lotte already victorious in spite of starting her match fifteen minutes after Sucy. She was seated on the card table next to... next to some other white girl with fetchingly blood-colored eyes. Lotte was holding up her phone, and both of them were singing along to the Dreams Come True version of "Fist Bump" from Sonic Forces, the one that played over Sonic having sex with the Avatar.

"What in the hell," Sucy said. sipping her sizzurp too fast and coughing up a precious lungful. "What in the hell?!"

"Oh, hi, Sucy!" Lotte said, leaning against the petite blonde at her side. "I've met this wonderful girl named Lilou."

"So you're Bruce Willis all of a sudden. Congratulations. Who is she and why is she here?"

"I'm here to see the games," Lilou said. "My father is here for the Game of the Black Emperors, but poker was never my greatest interest. I was quite lucky to find this fascinating creature!"

Sucy seethed. It was bad enough that Akko had found love, but Lotte? That she could not broker.

"I'm glad you found someone to spend the weekend with, Lotte, the Liar. I sure hope you get to know each other before you never see each other, ever again, by Sunday at the latest."

"She's on Discord, we've exchanged names!" Lotte said.

"Goddamn Internet!" Sucy said, storming off, tripping over her own feet and spraying the condom's remaining contents into her shirt and chin. She hard some very, very cautious laughs from behind
"Oh, do you need help, Su--" Lotte said, sliding off the table.

Sucy made a noise like a cougar offended by a racist joke about cougars and ran off, leaving a trail of sizzurp droplets behind her.

"What did I do...?" Lotte said, hurt.

"It's alright," Lilou said, snuggling up to her. "We should get back to your room, recuperate. Did you mention that you had a brownie waiting for you?"

"I do," Lotte said. "Want to get some vanilla ice cream from the commissary and have a brownie sundae?"

"You're an angel," Lilou said, virtually trembling. "That's my favorite thing of all time." She hugged Lotte. "You've shown me the most amazing time today. I'll never forget it."

"Oh, don't talk like it's over," Lotte said. "We have a day and a half to go! And tonight, of course." She yawned, so wide that her jaw popped. "Oh, dear... maybe not tonight. But I should take a nap at some point. I need the sleep. Desperately."

"Naps," gasped Lilou. "My other favorite thing. Come on. Let's get to your room and nap together."

Lotte's heart exploded, metaphorically, unlike Badcock's, not that she knew.

Sucy literally triped over Wangari among the penny slots. "For being the straight one," Sucy said, pushing herself up, "I have eaten entirely too much carpet today."

"Speak for yourself, man," Wangari said from the ground. "I gotta earn a boatload of cash quick so I can get Ms. Marvel and my money and maybe my wand back. Oh, and what's-their-nameses' stuff." She flipped a quarter. "Been feeling around for dropped spare change. Got any?"

"I have twenty bucks I can loan you," Sucy said. "But I'll throw in five bucks if you help me."

"Twenty-five, and I can borrow your wand."

Sucy rolled her eyes. "Sure, whatever. Most of my stuff is in alchemy, anyway. But this is important."

"It better be. What is it?"

"To paraphrase one of the ancient masters: 'My roommate is getting laid? I'm gonna slime the hell out of her.'"

"Is this roommate Lotte?" Wangari said.

"In fact, it is. Did you see how much slime she put into the bathtub? Oh, yes. I almost forgot. You got a very close look at how much slime she put into the bathtub."

"Hell, I'll do it for twenty bucks."

"Deal."

The two shook, and the dark pact was sealed.
The sun loomed low on the horizon. Akko and Diana lay on the beach towel, a magic privacy curtain put up by Diana giving them the illusion of total solitude on the majestic Hawaiian beach.

"Wanna do it?" Akko said.

"Yes," Diana said, and they did.

"Hey, uh, little lower?" Akko said at one point.

"Shhh," Diana said, staying right where she was.

Meanwhile, Chariot dreamed of Suzie Cupid.
Chapter 5-1: Aliens, Beaches, Secret Launch Stations

As they finished tucking their beach stuff into a bag of holding and returning the horribly heavy gold bricks back to the gold brick bushes, Akko's tummy rumbled. "Jeez, what time is it?"

Diana checked her watch. "It's close to seven PM Hawaiian time. That's five AM on Saturday morning back home."

"Really? Sure hope they're having a safe, fun time without us there to protect them!"

"Clearly we're absorbing all of the excitement for them," Diana said. "Though now that the late unpleasantness is done, I say we go get some dinner. Want to find a restaurant along the beach?"

"Yeah! I'm not done bein' on the beach just yet. And I'm gettin' a killer tan!" She was healthily toasted from a day in the sun, while Diana managed to blunt the edge of her porcelain whiteness.

"Alright then! As they say in Texas, so I hear, let's mosey!"

Four hours later, not that they knew it or would want to imagine it, Prof. Badcock had a cocaine-induced heart attack while making intense love with Prof. Finnelan.

Lotte slapped her keycard against the lock, which chirped open. She opened the door, revealing a tall, buxom, slime-coated figure standing in the doorway, eliciting a squeak of terror from Lilou (and Lotte).

"...Lotte...?" the figure said, revealing herself to be Chariot.

"Hello, Prof. Chariot," Lotte said, giving her a wide berth. Lilou had leapt into her arms, so that was nice, if a sudden and terrible strain on her scrawny non-muscles.

"I took a nap all of a sudden... I was going to freshen up." A dollop of slime dripped from the brim of her hat and splashed on the carpet. "Did you know the..." She snapped her fingers. "That the... the..."

"The bathtub is full of slime! Yes, I'm sorry I didn't warn you earlier."

"Right. I'm gonna... I'm gonna go out a while. You two keep your noses clean. Bye, two Lottes." Chariot sloshed out into the hallway and into one of the walls, correcting her course and slithering in a direction that may have been to her room, judging by how she refreshed the stains Wangari left behind last night. This morning? Holy crap, that was this morning.

"She really should have cleaned her glasses," Lilou said.

"Well, I'm sure she'll be fine," Lotte said, stepping around the snail trail her teacher left behind. "Just, you know, be careful of the bathroom. The ice cream's safe, right?"

"It is!" Lilou said, holding the Haagen-Dazs pint over her head.
"Then we feast!"

It was entirely too late when Lotte remembered that the dense, cakey Brownzzz was supposed to be a sleep aid.

Within minutes of finishing, Lotte (the big spoon) and Lilou (the sweet, cute lil' spoon) lay together in deep slumber.

Hannah and Barbara wheeled their creation through the halls of Luna Nova, Hannah taking point at the hand cart, Barbara taking drag. It had been a long and sleepless night and after a furtive breakfast with a lot of coffee, the two acknowledged they had hit an impasse. With the woman they trusted most out of the country and the named teachers busy having sex in the nurse's waiting room, they had no choice but to turn to the third on their list of people to ask for help.

"I'm scared," Barbara whimpered.

"We're both scared, you dumb bitch," Hannah said.

"I'm not a dumb bitch, you smelly whore!" Barbara said.

"Don't make me kill you!" Hannah said, aiming her wand at Barbara's head.

"I'll make you wish you were born dead!" Barbara said, brandishing her wand in Hannah's general direction.

"I'll eat your fucking skin, you--" Hannah shook her head. "Graah, I can't let this get to us! There's too much evil without Diana here! Come on, we have to hurry or we'll burn this whole school down!"

Let it be known that witch schools are dramatically behind mundane school on the subject of terroristic threats, mental health screening, bullying prevention, standardized tests, non-standardized tests... we could go on, really.

The two of them crossed the remaining few yards and squeezed themselves into the door frame. Hannah hammered on the door. "Constanze Amalie von Braunschbank-Albrechtsberger, we need you or we'll both be murdered!"

Amanda O'Neill answered. "Hey, quiet down out there, it's board game..." She checked her phone. "...daaaaay? Hey, do either of you have working clocks on your phones or did time break again?"

"We don't need any ginger lip," Barbara said.

"Hey!" Hannah said.

"Just bring us to Constanze or things get interesting for one last time."

"Sorry, she's downstairs playing... actually, it's easier to just show it to you. Come on in." She waved them and their bulky handcart in to the room and shoved all three of them down the deployment chute to Constanze's hidden bunker where board game night was set up.

"Hey, Amanda, we sent you up for drinks, not dinks!" Jasminka said, taking Constanze's fist bump for the sick burn. The two were on one side of two folding picnic tables with several huge, complex game boards connected. Hannah and Barbara lowered the handcart from over their heads and took a moment to push their spines back into position.
"Constanze, we need your help," Barbara said. "We've been trying to create the Great Work to distract us from Diana not being here."

"Oh, that must be messy," Jasminka said. "I remember when she left for that... moon thing?"

Constanze shrugged.

"You both drank all that poison and us three had to shrink down and fight the poison out of you. And it took so long my blondies were burned when I got back to them! The nerve of that poison. Is that ironic, Cons, me waiting on blondies, them waiting on a blonde?"

Constanze shrugged again. She crawled under the tables and towards the landing couch. She took the bedsheet covering the Great Work in her teeth and yanked it off.

Under the sheet was a half-built automaton of Diana, hooked up to a magic battery. Her upper body was mostly complete, dressed in the top half of a school uniform, eyes closed, cosplay wig firmly affixed to a sub-RealDoll-quality robot torso and arms.

Amanda, who rode down on her broom so as to not risk the Irn Bru and Afri-Cola, shook her head. "You two have a friggin' problem."

Cons waved her hand in front of the machine's face. "The on switch is here," Hannah said, pressing down under where the automaton's belly button would be once they got around to that part. The thing swiveled into a standing (seated, technically?) position and the eyes opened.

"Hello," it said. "My name is Diana Cavendish. ... It's nice to see you."

"We took the voice samples from some of her interviews after the world-saving thing," Barbara said, already running her fingers through its hair.

"Thank you for... touching... my... heir," the automaton said.

"Goodness, that's impressive," Jasminka said. "You should be proud!"

Constanze stuck her tongue out and held one of her stock phrase cards in front of its eyes.

"It's nice to see you... cons... TANJ.. alright... s... burger."

"We were just going to make her fulfill our dreams so we could save some time," Hannah said, "but it just feels... incomplete. She needs to be more real." She was groping the automaton's chest, which was a good several cup sizes larger than authentic.

"Yes, please... touch... my... b... rest... ha... na. Bar... bar... a... will you please... stick it in my asshole, goddammit!"

"Woah, that took a turn," Amanda said, cracking open an Irn Bru.

"We took a few voice samples from This Ain't Those Witches Who Stopped World War III XXX," Barbara said, rapidly tapping a button under a Dymotape label reading "BUTT STUFF." The automaton's eyes closed and she played some intense porno sounds. "For our purposes, you understand."

Constanze made a noise.

"That means she's interested!" Jasminka said. "But only if you beat her at A Man Cons Jazz." She gestured at the table. "We got the idea from an episode of It's Always Sunny! We put together all our
favorite board games together to test our strength and keep our minds sharp."

"It's like the Danger Room with more dice and fewer holograms," Amanda said, "it's fuckin' killer. Plus it might get your mind off of that horrible thing for a while! Plus, it's almost like you're playing with Diana. No way that chick isn't gambling her life savings away at the tables right now."

Hannah and Barbara looked at each other, looked at the ecstatically-screaming Dianatron writhing on the handcart, and then back at each other. "For her," Hannah said, "we'll do anything."

Sucy and Wangari stepped out into the warm Las Vegas night. Sucy had switched her sizzurp-soaked band tee for a fresh one: I'd Rather Be Listening To "HWC" By Liz Phair From Liz Phair 2003 Album. Wangari was stuck in her Sexual Heaven getup.

"Behold, the Strip," Sucy said, sweeping her hand out at the carnival of light and sound and people in motion. Two hours ahead of Hawaii, it was firmly night, so the ludicrous light displays were at full strength. "The most debauchery you can get with only a slight chance of being dissolved in acid. Perfect for our dark needs."

"Hey, uh, can you zap me up some shoes?" Wangari said. "Or just end my vestis spell? I actually want shoes if we're going on the strip, there's gotta be broken glass and puke and, I dunno, hooker dust on everything."

"Hmmm." Sucy licked the tip of her wand. "Metamorphie vestis adenda." She zapped Wangari's feet, providing foot-and-a-half-tall high-heeled platform shoes that verged on being stilts.

"Huh," Wangari said, testing her balance. "This height boost is... intoxicating." She lay a roundhouse kick on a convenient anti-mugging training dummy mounted on the street just outside the range of the wiggly distortion field around the Silver Witch. "Alright, let's see what we can do with this."

"First things first," Sucy said, unfolding a map she took from an anti-mugging-themed tourist kiosk next to the dummies, "let's pick an outdoor show to work our wicked deeds at. ... At which we will work our wicked deeds? Which sounds better?"

"Don't care!" Wangari said, continuing to practice her kicks.

"Whatever. We have the Naked Pirate Fights outside of Treasure Island, a classic. There's a revival of Masters of the Universe on Topless Ice... gotta see how they refrigerate that. If you wanna taste the schadenfreude there's Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets: The Outdoor Carnival Musical of the Certain Summer Mega-Hit."

"Is that one topless?"

"If there wasn't, they probably threw some in after the first week's box office."

"...what year is it again, and what time of year?"

"Shhh. It's Vegas. Time ceases to mean anything." She wiggled the map. "So what's it gonna be?"

Wangari weighed her options. "Well, first, what are we gonna do?"

"Make some money."

"Cool. What's step one of that?"

"Step one: find a dollar store." Sucy consulted her phone.
Neither of them noticed Chariot sloshing behind them; nor did Chariot notice them plotting, though she was admittedly still high on sizzurp.

"I'm a classic American girl who likes classic American games," Amanda said.

"I love Ameritrash board games with strong theming!" Jasmina said.

Cons held up a card saying "I am German."

"But the thing we all love is stuff that tells a story. So A Man Cons Jazz tells the ultimate story: the story of you..." Amanda hit play on a remote and "Pruit Igoe and Prophecies" began to play over Constanze's speaker system. "From the perspective of the board, you're vast and infinite and almighty, but only capable of accessing their universe through arbitrary rules until the stars come right. Just like one of the witch gods! And so, you take on the mantle of one of the witch gods and, you know, prepare to take over the world of the board."

Jasmina handed Hannah and Barbara a stack of Ancient One sheets from Arkham Horror, each with pages of extra notes and stats taped to them.

"First you must seduce a high priest of your mystic cult," Jasmina said, indicating the table-island with Mystery Date, the Game of Life, and several sets of Story Cubes and foreplay dice. "You get to find out who he was, why he's turning to you for power in his time of need, and of course you get to make love to him!" She clapped for emphasis.

"Then the battle begins," Amanda said, moving to the main table. "Arkham Massachussetts is the core of your influence, naturally. You can plant gates or close enemy gates..." She indicated Arkham Horror. "Go into the museum to collect Elder Signs to delay the other guys..." She pointed at Elder Sign. "...or start going out into the world to buy up railways to spread your influence around the Earth." She gestured to Eldritch Horror, with colored beads indicating which country used which Ticket to Ride board to represent its railways, except for Japan, which used Tokaido to show its tourist land map of Old Edo. "And if you bump into enemy units--" She nodded at Ghostbusters The Board Game map tiles with Mansions of Madness miniatures, ready to be used. "--or your avatar squares off against another--" She nodded at piles of Puzzle Strike chits. "Boom, bitch. Fightin' time."

Barbara raised her hand. "I see 'health' on this. What if our person dies?"

"Obviously, you play chess with Death on his behalf," Jasmina said, pointing to an antique Chess King computer. "If you succeed, he regains one health and life goes on! If you fail, you have make a stability test to cope with your devastating loss," Jasmina said, indicating a side table covered in Jenga towers. "If you fail, you have to escape the vortex of your Id before you can escape and live to find love again!" Next to the Jenga towers was the Monster Madness board game. "Then you just have to love a new priest and recover your stuff and you're back in the game."

"Okay," Hannah said. "But what are the actual rules?"

Constanze dropped a 200-page printout in between the two of them.

"I guess we can hold off on the endgame games 'til we get closer to the end," Jasmina said. "No need to overwhelm you!"

"How long does this take?" Hannah said.

"Cons, what time is it?" Amanda said. Cons held up her watch. "Huh, it's 10:00 AM on the dot.
"Or..." She checked her phone. "In Hawaii, midnight! And when did we start today's game?"

"Last night at eight," Jasminka said.

Barbara locked eyes with Hanna. "For Diana," she said.

"Maybe I should just kill myself right now," Hannah said, shakily pointing her wand at her neck. Constanze slapped it out of her hand and shook her head.

"We only do Yaga Roulette if we all fail our Sanity checks at once," Jazzy said. "The ol' Vortex of Despair rule! Gotta love it."

"Anyway!" Amanda said. "Let's get you guys started on bangin' your high priest."

Barbara held her breath and opened the little white door on Mystery Date. Behind it was a card showing a chubby, fedora-clad, mustachioed man with a revolver and a gold tube.

A look of delight and awe bloomed on Amanda's face. Jasminka burst into a giggling fit. "You got the dud!"

Constanze finished her second bottle of Afri-Cola and smirked.

Barbara pointed her wand under her chin. Constanze slapped it out of her hand and held up a card:

"Not yet."

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**Chapter 5-2: Operation: Upper Cut**

Diana and Akko took a nice post-meal sit on a bench outside where they had their dinner.

"Today I have learned that Tommy Bahama, a clothing store, also does restaurants," Diana said on a bench outside of what was apparently a Tommy Bahama restaurant.

"Today I learned that Tommy Bahama exists, has a clothing store that also does restaurants, and that he thinks fourteen Ameribucks is a good price for chips and dip!" Akko said. "What kinda sense does that make?"

"Have you been paying attention to what we've been paying for anything?"

"Nope."

"Keep it going, you'll sleep better." She looked up. "Oh, hey, a shave ice place."

"Shaved iiiiice!" Akko said. "Man, I hope Chariot's having as much fun as we are!"

"Where can I find some whores?" Chariot said.

The police officer tutted. "There's some nice folks over out by the Four-Leaf Clover that'll do you right. I got some cards for Bimmy and Jimmy's, though, ah, I think they mostly help male clients, Ms. Horrible Gelatinous Green Blob."

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm... Ursula... Callistis."

"Ah, thought you were cosplaying, we get cosplayers a lot in this town. They're fun!"
"Yeah." She blinked behind her ooze-coated glasses. "Girls are fine. I'm not into guys."

"Ah, then I would recommend the Highball just offa Paradise." He flicked a hooker card at Chariot, the card sticking to her shoulder. "Have a good time! Keep your nose clean, not too clean, eh? What happens in Vegas!" The officer waved at some tourists passing by, repeating his pitch for some ecstasy.

When she'd jolted awake not too long ago, a thought had stuck in her head and refused to go: Crossin' through the Yellowstone, 'bout to scoop me a yellowbone. She had no idea what it meant, but it felt like the meaning of life, and she had a powerful yet vague sense that this was the right direction to take. It was a sensation like iron being tugged toward a magnet.

She glopped onto the side of a city bus and watched the street signs pass by.

The tipping point for their decision came to a single factor: the Valerian stage show had free beer.

The stage show was theater-in-the-round on a huge, gruesomely-expensive-looking modular set enabling rapid swapping of acid-trip scenery and actors in expensive-looking costumes coming out and dancing and singing expensive licensed songs. The free beer kegs at each table were all accompanied by tip jars, Sucy noted, and most were virtually empty. The schadenfreude was thick and hot, just how she liked it.

Sucy moseyed up to a table with a young married couple arguing over who gambled their wedding ring first and thus who deserved to dip into their personal savings to buy both rings back. "Excuse me," she said, "but I am a poor wandering witchpsy."

The male half of the equation stared at her, trying to decipher her costume (a colorful shawl, fake jewelry, her phone set to play "Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves").

"Like... a sea witch?"

"No, good sir, one of the Wandering People, blessed with the gift of witchcraft by Mother Mormo Herself after she lost a bet to Zhar-Lloigor. I am here to peddle my simple wares." She held up a small vial. "A cure for hangov--"

"I'll take two," the couple said.

"Like hell, I'm gonna get four!" the male said.

"Oh yeah? Ten," the female said, "and I'm gonna try and drink myself to death first, you son of a bitch!"

"Sea witch, can you sell me anything to help me beat my wife?" the man said, tossing his credit card at Sucy.

"Fuck you, give me something to help me beat my husband!" the woman said, just throwing her wallet at her.

Sucy reached into her pockets and flicked trucker-grade caffeine pills at the both of them. "These will give you each the strength of Heracles and the willfulness of a donkey. Have fun!" The couple grabbed the pills from midair, washed them down with beer, pulled out some pocket knives and settled their marital issues in the traditional fashion. Sucy slid back to her and Wangari's table right next to them and emptied the couples' bank accounts into hers.
"Hey," Wangari said as she sipped a watery Pina Colada, "aren't you, like, Phillipino? You can totally play that card for selling small ethnic knickknacks!"

"I don't feel like selling small Phillipino knickknacks," Sucy said, "I feel like pretending to be a gypsy."

"I think they prefer--"

"I don't give a shit." She took a bracing sip from a secret condom of sizzurp.

"Alrighty." Wangari put her earbuds back in and hit play on a trance music compilation on YouTube. Sucy had wound up taking charge on this scheme, and frankly, she could use the chance to clear her head.

They moved seats once the couples' severed heads landed on their table, the couples' bodies continuing to fight.

Hannah shook the dice and rolled them. "Plus, plus, minus, 3. That's four spaces?"

"Four zones, which may be spaces but may also be jumps between board sectors!" Amanda said. "And the more hallows you build the more d6es you get to replace your FATE dice!"

"Okay. I'm going to, uh..." She picked up Monterrey Jack's token and put him onto the Ticket to Ride Europe board.

"Ah, wait, the sticky notes are spaces too, that means you landed in a thinny!" Amanda said, imploving her to put Monterrey Jack on the sticky note between Eldritch Horror and Ticket to Ride Europe. "Draw from the Thinny Random Encounter deck!" She waved at a stack of index cards.

"Why can't you just hand anything to us?" Hannah said. Behind her Barbara was making out with Dianatron at a high volume, rapidly tapping its BUTT STUFF button.

"Not when it's your turn. Your avatar's doing things, we can't im-pug-ne."

"It's pronounced 'impugn!'" Jasminka said.

"Shit, really? I've been saying it dumb in my head for years! Dammit." Amanda sighed and cracked open a fresh Irn Bru.

"It says here, 'your thoughtwaves reach out across the void and draw another reality cartoon into yours. Descend into the Hole and see what is conjured forth.'" Hannah furrowed her brow. "Reality cartoon?"

"See," Jasminka said, Constanze visibly bracing herself for it, "what we think of as 'reality' is a cartoon to another reality, and vice-versa. And every reality that we can imagine exists out there, including the realities of your own favorite animated series. So if you think about it, this is our reality cartoon, and we're really creating another universe, or reality cartoon, with our imaginations as we play the game!"

Constanze blew a raspberry, but softly.

"Can we switch places, Barbara?" Hannah said.

"No!" Barbara said. "I still have three minutes!"
Hannah whimpered. "Okay. What hole am I going into?"

Constanze slid to her knees and ta-dah'd at a large, irregular hole in the floor filled with an inky, swirling liquid that glittered reflectively in the workroom's light.

"And if I refuse?"

"You have to pull from the Thinny Refusal Resolution Deck," Jasminka said, pointing to a bag of sand sitting in a bear trap.

"Okay. Devil I don't know it is." Hannah inched to the Hole, rolled up her sleeve, and plunged her arm full-force into the morass, screaming as a burning iciness bit into her skin.

"Holy crap, her whole arm?" Amanda said.

"What a pony maneuver!" Jasminka said. "It's too bad I can't interfere, you look like you're having a bath, Tim."

"Pourin' on the obscure references today, Jazzy," Amanda said.

"I always get this way when I'm eating cherry pie." Indeed, she was.

Hannah strained, pushing against the floor with every limb. When at last she mustered enough strength she all but flew free, landing on her back, her hand glistening with a layer of ice, her skin a frost-paled pink. Clenched in her frozen hand, immaculate and warm-looking, was a brand-new, factory-sealed copy of the 1982 card game Slap Jak.

"Really?" Jasminka said, tsking.

"Your reality cartoon sucks at calling out to other reality cartoons," Amanda said.

Constanze smirked.

Hannah broke her hand free against the floor and held it close to her chest, trying to rub some feeling back into it. Like hell she was going to the nurse's office today, not when it had been cursed by geriatric sex. "Am I missing a reference?" she said once she was more in her right mind. "Is it something I should have come in know--"

The timer on her watch beeped and she threw the game at Barbara.

"Nevermind, not my problem now!"

Akko frantically rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Go away, headache!"

Diana smiled, trying to ignore the katana sticking out of the shave ice place, and the note which read:

IT'S NAP TIME. BUT WE'LL BE BACK TOMORROW. SIGNED--THE ROGUES!

At least, other than the context that they'd be clear for the night. And really, tomorrow could bring what it wanted as long as they had a nice, calming night to recuperate. She licked a fluffy wad of shaved ice from her spoon and delighted in the bright, fruity flavors.

"How about we call it a night?" Diana said. "Head back to the hotel, get some sleep. Tomorrow's another day."
"Alright," Akko said. "But can we jump on the bed first 'cause I couldn't this morning? And can we watch another porno before we go to bed? And maybe bang again?"

"You've said nothing I don't love," Diana said, giving Akko a kiss.

To all eyes, a mysteriously gooey figure peeled herself from the side of the city bus and slouched toward the Highball Inn. The Highball was a two-story faux-adobe motel whose neon sign depicted a highball glass tilting and pouring out bubbles. In spite of its proximity and the shockingly low prices advertised on the sign its parking lot was at best a third full.

She remembered that she wasn't presentable and felt around for her wand, finding it in its usual latch. "Blossom Freshness," she said, tapping her own forehead, and with a fwoosh of warm steam it was as though she had about fifteen minutes in the shower with an alright-smelling bar of soap and her clothes a quick wash-and-dry at the laundromat. As the spell did not target jewelry and considered glasses jewelry those were still caked with dried glop and worse than worthless.

After a moment's consideration, she reapplied her old disguise spell to dye her hair ocean blue. For the time being, Ursula Callistis walked the Earth.

She pressed her way into the lobby. There was a small waiting area where clearly a friendly, low-intensity party had broken out, a tall, strongly-built, extravagantly-dressed man hanging out with around half a dozen lady-friends.

Chariot took a seat opposite him, for he sat while his lady-friends were lounging around. "Hello," she said.

"Good evenin', m'am," the tall gentleman said. "You'd be surprised how many witches we get around these parts."

"What with the... place..." Chariot said, gesturing vaguely. "Do you know if I can find some whores around here?"

"You've come to the right man, my good lady," the man said, tipping his giant, neon-colored hat. "Have a browse through our selection. You'll find our rates quite agreeable."

Chariot lurched to her feet and browsed, glasses off.

"Like what you see, babe?" a whore said. She was tall, with light purple hair in a soft punk style, her body-hugging dress draped with steampunk accessories, a pair of goggles riding low on her forehead.

"Hmmm..." Chariot said.

"Hey, hon, I'm all hopped up and ready to go!" another whore said. She was on the short side, with long brown hair, a couple of locks pulled into an unusually-mounted ponytail. She dressed in a Japanese school uniform small enough to give her a bare midriff and barely conceal her underwear.

"Hrrrrrrmm..." Chariot said.

"Eh," a third whore said. She was black and had no strong theme going.

"How much was it, again?" Chariot said, feeling for her wallet.

"99 an hour for one," the nice man said. "160 an hour for two. 190 an hour for three, and let me tell
you, that is an absolute steal."

Chariot reached deep into her wallet of holding, grabbed last week's merchandise residuals, and set the stack of hundred-euro bills on the table. "I'll take all of them."

"So how much did we make?" Wangari said as Sucy worked an ATM.

"Hang on, gotta do the weird-computer-shit dance. A-a-and... here we go." The First National Bank of Irresponsible Compulsiveness spat out her card-based earnings. "Minus expenses, we've made a tidy 2,000 American dollars. Ish." She pocketed the -ish, not especially subtly.

"Hot damn," Wangari said.

Sucy wadded up a twenty and threw it at her partner's face, which she caught before it hit. "There you go."

"Hey, I was there when you made a bunch of money, doesn't that count? Plus, I can get my money back faster starting from a thousand than from 20."

Sucy pressed a twenty to her lips. "Hm... I suppose you raise a good point. I'll extend your loan to a cool thou." She flicked out the slippery fresh bills so that Wangari had to kneel on her gigantic platform heels to pick them all up.

"You're kind of a bitch, you know that?" Wangari said.

"Gotta be a bitch to make it in this world, Wan-Wan," Sucy said.

"If you want me to help with our revenge plot you really need to start treating me like a partner and not someone you're kicking around for funsies." She shook her pile of bills at her.

Sucy considered. "Hmmm...” She looked off into the middle distance.

"Well?" Wangari said.

"How about Chinese?"

"Food?"

"Yeah."

"Sure."

Chapter 5-3: And The Horse You Flew In On

Lotte and Lilou were still asleep.

Chariot was busy having sex.

Akko and Diana were busy having sex.

Hannah and Barbara were struggling to understand the party management rules as the characters of Slap Jak were added to Monterey Jack's cult.
While Badcock was adrift in recuperative sleep, the other noteworthy teachers were busy having sex in the nurse's waiting room. Perhaps ironically, cocaine got involved at some point, and with all the Lunesta that somehow wound up in the mix as well nobody could remember whose it was or when and how they'd got it.

A little travel took Sucy and Wangari to a place called Kung Fu Thai and Chinese Restaurant. They split a couple of appetizers; for their main course, Sucy went for the "black fungus with tofu ginger sauce" more or less by default, while Wangari enjoyed the beef chow mein. Inevitably, the subject drifted to occult conspiracy theories.

"The two Buddhas right by the door?" Sucy said. "The Twin Blasphemies, Nug and Yeb, or Zhar-Lloigor, depending on who you ask. The elephant? Shugoran, or Chagnaur Faugn, again, depending on who you ask."

"That seems mighty vague for a conspiracy theory," Wan-Wan said.

"Where I come from, the witch gods aren't really settled down into a neat pantheon. You have some people who think it's Nug and Yeb, and with those people, some think they're the reproductive organs of the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young, and some think they're her avatars who enforce her will on this base earth. And with Zhar-Lloigor it's all, 'so there's Zhar and there's Lloigor and they hang out in this cave,' or 'Zhar is the collective name of two bigass lloigor vortices...' You get the picture, right?"

Wangari shrugged.

"Trust me, there's a lot of niceties and they generally work things out by killing and eating people who disagree with them."

"Sounds rough. My family was kinda non-specifically religious. We went to this protestant church to fit in, but dad didn't believe in anything and mom thought that, like, the 'church thing' gets in the way of your personal relationship with the Lord. And me, well, I just sorta wing it."

"I didn't ask, but thank you."

"Hey, I didn't ask you to keep going. Gonna stop you there."

"Like hell you are," Sucy said, drawing her wand, while Wangari drew a keycard. "Wait. What's that."

"Key to my high roller suite," Wangari said. "I called the hotel while you were washing your hands. They extended me a little credit, so it's still all mine for tonight. Behave yourself and you can come up with me and spend the night in unimaginable luxury."

Sucy mulled this over. "Well. Let it be known Sucy Manbavaran is no fool." She returned her wand to her belt. "And, let it also be known that Sucy Manbavaran will check the bathrooms to see if that little white snake Lotte has infiltrated it."

"She couldn't have," Wangari said, though she didn't sound confident in it even to herself.

"She must have it out for you. Never underestimate a lustful Finn."
"It... it's not a sex thing, is it?" Wangari winced. "That's so gross. Like, come the hell on, going out of your way to slime up a barely-legal South African girl--"

"Wait." Sucy blinked heavily. " Barely legal? As in, you're 18?"

"Yeah, I was a late sign-up. My witch powers really bloomed my first year of college--"

"College?"

"Yeah, I graduated high school at 16. I was at Rhodes goin' for a Bachelor of Journalism degree but figured I needed some time to, you know, learn magic stuff while the iron was hot. I've got a second-year invitation reserved once I wrap things up in Luna Nova."

"A degree, you say... in BJs."

"Hell yeah," Wangari smirked.

"Can I high-five you?" Sucy said, unable to conceal the envy.

"Sure."

Sucy's hand tingled. "You lucky bitch. You're set for pickup lines forever."

"Big fan, huh?"

"You could say that," Sucy said. "But, really, let's save that discussion for when we're done eating."

"Eating food, that is," Wangari said.

"Yeah," Sucy said, sighing.

Lotte and Lilou were still sleeping when Sucy crept into their room and liberated her stuff. She left a note for Lotte if and when she woke up and slipped from the room, leaving the two to doze.

It was ten in the evening, and their precious energies were beginning to wind down. Sucy in particular was finally starting to feel the sizzurp.

"Here's where Kamala would've welcomed you to the suite," Wangari said, "but, well, she's kinda stuck in a pot." She sighed, hanging her mask up on the coat rack.

"Oh... can I borrow your wand now?"

"Sure," Sucy said, handing it off as she unloaded her stuff and took in Wangari's sweet-ass room.

It wasn't the highest-roller of the highest-roller suites here, being only two stories tall with a private movie theater, statues of half-naked witches with angel wings and halos, kitschy Shiny Chariot merch that Akko would probably get wet just looking at, master bedroom, and vintage in-room Game Gear. And a full kitchen, let us not forget, Sucy thought, as she stored her pizza in the fridge above cans of Japanese highball brands and next to bottles of Mexican coke and Cheerwine.

Wangari returned to her school uniform and almost immediately started shedding. "I'm heading to the master bathroom. Check the backup one for me, willya?"

"Yes, m'am," Sucy said, consulting the room map. The guest bathroom was larger than Lotte and
Sucy's actual hotel room, and the bathtub was the perfect size for slime. She let the ooze gel into existence while she availed herself of the separate shower stall; its gooey presence made her feel at ease.

Sucy flopped into the master bed next to Wangari, Sucy in her jammies, Wan-Wan in her fancy new Calvin Klein white t-shirt and panties. "Uh," Wangari said, "there's a guest bedroom, you know."

"But watching porn is cheaper if we both watch it on the same TV."

"Hey, I wa... yeah, you got me." She called up the porn menu.

"Bad news," Sucy said, scooting herself into the covers. "Lotte knew. The guest bathtub is full of slime."

"That bitch," Wangari said.

"I kept it at bay with some neutralizing agents, but you'll wanna stay away for the time being. Good news, I got plans for that stuff. It will be the agent of our revenge after we finish running Lotte through the wringer."

"Ooh, I like this train of thought," Wangari said.

"I could use a little funding, so be sure to win a lot of money to pay back what I loaned you, okay? But that is secondary. First, I'll have to destroy her will to live, then explode that disgusting relationship she's developing with that flighty diabetes monster, then, and only then, will I bathe her countenance in an endless deluge of clinging green ssllime."

Wangari stared at her.

"Sorry, got caught up there," Sucy said, smiling. "What can I say, revenge is kind of... you know... satisfying. So I'm pretty excited about that."

"Look, I don't care if you've got a revenge fetish as long as it helps me get my personal revenge. Touch base with me tomorrow before the big game, okay? If you need me."

"Sure thing, Wan-Wan."

Wangari mulled over the nickname. "Okay, yeah, I'm warming up to it. Higher Roller Wan-Wan comin'!" She cleared her throat. "So, wanna watch straight porn, or are you in the mood for guy-on-guy?"

"Straight," Sucy said. "And you better be heading to the 'ebony' tab."

"Got a little bit of the fever, huh?" Wangari said, ribbing her gently. Sucy hissed and recoiled instinctively. "Hey, easy now!"

"Hssss... sorry. Mind the touching. Some touches don't make me happy." She returned her attention to the TV. "But yes, I have a fever, and the only cure is that video right there." She pointed.

"Ha, wanna see some ladies use their BJ degrees?"

"I wanna see their career choices pay off in the biggest way possible."

"Hell yeah." Wangari licked her lips and hovered her thumb over the remote's PLAY button. "...Uh, so, are you gonna--"
"We're both straight friends now," Sucy said as she adjusted her jammies. "If we happen to enjoy ourselves next to each other while watching ladies avail themselves of handsome gentlemen, it's still straight. Think of it as putting on a show for the guys on the screen."

Wangari thought for a moment, said, "Eh, what the hell," and hit play on *Eight Babes Going Down*. Sucy and Wangari were soon masturbating.

Barbara rolled the dial. "Finally," she sighed.

"Now comes the best part!" Jasminka said, propping the land mine flipper thingey under the Slime Monster's foot. "Knock that sucker over!"

Barbara half-heartedly thumped the lever that tilted the Slime Monster piece over, spilling out the goop into the plastic-wrap-covered Tokaido board. "Ooh, that pretty geisha totally got it!" Jasminka tittered. "I bet she's so embarrassed!"

Constance flipped her chalkboard over after consulting several d% charts. "While Sasayako excuses herself for dignity's sake, she fails to reach the patent office in time. Amanda's patent for a Sorcery Solution System power plant goes through first."

"Hot damn!" Amanda said, checking off a list of goals. "Now I can finally start fielding those friggin' Brotherhood of Steel power armor guys. Hope that power armor comes with extra lube, 'cause Brother Vance is comin' in through the back door."

"Please don't phrase it like that," Barbara said, squirming.

"I'm being repped by He Who Is Not To Be Named, I have to phrase it like that. It's kind of his big ol' D." Amanda thrust her hips at the table. "Now clean up that mess, Jazzy. You know the Slime Monster Game rules."

"Wo-o-orth i-i-it," Jasminka said, picking up the components by the plastic wrap. Barbara watched, disinterested, and tried to fixate on Hannah alternating between kissing and slapping the everloving hell out of Dianatron.

"Can't I just throw the game by telling my guys to kill themselves?" Barbara said. "I don't care if they live or not and if this is what it takes to get someone to make a Diana I can put my fingers in for me... well... well, maybe learning all that engineering isn't so bad!"

The central table shook.

"Oh, what game is that from?" Barbara said.

"Yeah, what from?" Amanda said.

"The Towering Inferno had a--" Jasminka said, before a voice emanated from the approximate direction of Tokaido.

"zhar-lloigor, who self-identify as hannah-barbara!" the tinny, forceful voice declared. "we detest your negligence in the face of impending apocalypse! we reject your divinity! we shall feed upon your transcendent energies and burn our way to your reality! i am jak, earl of evil, and i will delight in tearing the hearts from your chests!"

"Oh, no," Jasminka said, softly.
Constanze honked in disbelief.

Hannah stared at the card for Jak, Earl of Evil. With clear effort, his illustration changed, extending his left hand's middle finger.

"Mormo's six total titties," groaned Amanda, "this is the first time a reality cartoon actually turned hostile on us."

There was a knock at the door. "Five minute warning, Ms. Ursula!" Jimmy said.

Yuki opened the door. "I think we're about done," she said, inviting Jimmy into the motel room.

The hotel room had doubled in size when Ursula fucked down the walls between two neighboring rooms. Six of the seven prostitutes she'd rented lay around each room in various states of unconsciousness. "Sweet Jesus, what'd she do to you?" Jimmy said, reaching for a stun gun hidden on his person.

"Nothing!" Yuki said. "I mean, other than have sex with most of us really, really hard. Like, really, especially Millicent. She was all 'Wanna go for a ride in the Victoria that never was?' and what's-her-name was all 'Call me Chariot, Croix' and she was like 'Whattaya wanna do, Chariot?' and she just started, like--" She slammed her fingers together in a complicated lock.

Millicent du Steamejack (as she insisted on being called) looked like a bad ragdoll in a video game. Her eyes fluttered open. "Do... do I still have hips?"

"Yeah, they're there," Jimmy said.

"Oh. Good." She fell asleep.

"She didn't hurt any of you?" Jimmy said.

"No, not at all," Yuki said. "I mean, when she got to me she kept calling me Akko and just cried a bunch and combed my hair, so that's a kind of hurt." She stroked her hair. "She's real good at combing, though."

Ursula exited from the bathroom, fully dressed and cleaning her glasses at last. "Ah, sorry for the delay," she said. "I'm afraid I haven't gotten off yet, but... well, I guess was about the experience more than the satisfaction." She double-checked the room. "I think this place wasn't as big when I started, who should I see about paying for damages?"

"I'll put in a word to the front office, they'll bill you," Jimmy said.

"Alright. Good to hear. For a pimp you're remarkably polite!" Ursula said. "Or, uh, is that a hurtful stereotype?"

"I'm not actually a pimp," Jimmy said. "I'm their bodyguard. I've found that a lot of their clientele likes the experience of renting a woman from a male owner, so I sort of, well, LARP it."

"Huh! Interesting." Ursula straightened her hat. "Well, I think I'm back to my senses. I don't know what was in that drink I had, but... well, this was fun, nonetheless. Thank you for the good time, ladies."

"Say," Jimmy said. "Are you gonna be in town tonight?"

"I am," Ursula said, raising an eyebrow.
"There's a rough customer who likes to come around now and again. I hear she's got her eyes on us next, and, well, you seem pretty tough. Like, tough for a witch, even."

"...as it happens," Ursula said, lowering the brim of her hat, "if you should need my assistance, the only pay I need is more time with Croix."

Millicent stirred in her sleep.

"I mean... whoever she is," Ursula said.

"Well, she's asleep, but, you know, I'll see what I can do when she wakes up," Jimmy said, holding out his hand. "Thank you for your patronage."

"You're welcome... what's your name?"

"Jimmy the Jew Morgenstern."

"Oh, you're Jewish?"

"That's my legal first name. My full name is Jimmy the Jew Morgenstern Fuck Israel Fuck Pakistan Too Fuck The Middle East In General WWW Dot Infowars Dot Com Roebuck." He tried to smile. "My parents... they're awful people."

"My condolences," Ursula said, patting his hand.

"I really should change my name," Jimmy said.

"That sounds like a great idea."

Chariot stood outside the Highball Inn, chewing gum and contemplating the midnight skies.

She managed to contemplate the midnight skies for about ten seconds before her thoughts swung around to how she had not successfully gotten off.

A vision welled up from her subconscious, and she swore softly to herself at the realization of what was missing. Rather, who.

"Suzie Cupid," Chariot said, swearing an oath to the gibbous moon, "I will find you, and I will seduce you."

Lotte and Lilou were asleep.

Lotte had a dream.

It had been a hard winter, but after finding the tiny little pixie girl in the woods and bringing her home and making her soup and serving it to her in thimbles and stuff it seemed like the spring was going to bring new life and miracles and all that good stuff. But to pay her springtime entrance bill, she needed to win a boatload of money at the legendary Madgiral Hotel and Casino in the heart of Neo Rio de Janero EX.

By chance she stumbled upon an amazing trio of adventurers here to obtain the Crystal Capybara from the wicked shipping magnate Ponce de Hitler. She knew them by name, as if in a dream: "Edgar! Belle! Arthur! I can't believe it! You have to be careful at this game of backgammon!"
"Why would we have to be? My dice rolling skills are second to none!" Belle said.

"That's what you think," Lotte said, patting her Aurora on her little blonde head as she sat on her shoulder. "If things go like they did in, uh, my visions of the future, you'll bet your arm and then lose and have to cut it off and get the cyborg replacement from the year 1994 and your whole look is thrown off for like nine boo--I mean three years, until use advanced biotech from the year 2010 to grow an identical bio-augmented clone arm!"

"Oh... good to know!" Belle said. "I think I'll bet instead that Arthur and Edgar will have to have sex with each other for the casino's entertainment."

"Wait, pardon?" Lotte, Edgar, and Arthur said.

It was suddenly time for the legendary roll, and Belle failed it, as foretold in book 125. "Aw, snap!" Belle said. "Well, guess you boys know what to do."

"I'm topping," Arthur said, picking Edgar up and throwing him onto the craps table.

"Tags for this one will be..." a familiar voice said nearby, "Seeding press, mindbreak, ahegao, fucked silly, pubic tattoo, omegaverse. And throw in some defloration for spice."

"Annabel Creme!" Lotte said. "Look, Aurora, it's Annabel Creme! And she's almost as tiny as you--!"

Annabel was dressed in a sleek black nightgown, her hair almost triple its length and double its volume compared to the waking world. She was seated on a throne of golden skulls, and smoking an entire three pack of culebra-style blunts at once. "You better believe it, bitch," she said, lightly. "Also, why the hell are you in my lucid dreaming exercise?"

"Pardon?" Lotte said.

"I hired this onieromancer to create a magic pillow that lets me lucid dream with perfect clarity and recall. I've been using it to help write Nightfall... and, you know, stuff like this." She indicated Edgar and Arthur on the table as spectators showered them with champagne and hundred dollar bills. "Gotta unwind from the hard stuff, you know?"

"Huh! I had a dream brownie with my new girlfriend, so maybe that's why we're in the dream with you." She nuzzled Aurora on her shoulder, who she reasoned was really her beloved Lilou in dream form.

"New girlfriend, huh," Annabel said. "What's she like?"

"Her name is Lilou! She's blonde, she's adorable, she loves sugar, she's small..."

"Do you know if she likes Night Fall?"

"Well, we haven't had a chance to discuss it yet. But she does love adventure!"

"Do you know if she's not a serial killer? You did meet her in Las Vegas while participating at a major card game tournament. Maybe that's what gets her off, the blood of champions spilling on her face as she humps their cooling bodies."

"That is worryingly specific a thought," Lotte said.

"It's a subplot in the next book. I'm thinking Belle picks up a card game I like but with a different
theme. As a matter of fact, I'm leaning towards 'Star Realms,' with an offbeat space theme instead of a generic Russian history theme."

"Yeah, that could be neat!" Lotte said. "Keep me posted if you need any ideas, I'm pretty good at the game, if you haven't heard."

"I have," Annabel said, looking away from the man-on-man sex at last. "It's part of why I'm worried. This lil' chomp wanders into your life and you fall head-over-heels instantly. Makes for great dramatic romance on the page. Makes for a whole lot of bunny-boiling, boyfriend-stabbing trouble in real life." She leaned in close. "Ask yourself why a girl who checks all your fetishes off on a chart suddenly steps into your life right when you need a pick-me-up. Wild guess, you needed a pick-me-up."

"I... er..."

"Mm-hm. Tread carefully, Lotte. You're in the least-real city in the world playing games with your heart and probably your pussy. These are very dangerous things to stake on anything... especially chance." She blew a thick cloud of weedsmoke into her face. "--oh, right. Add tag: autofacial!"

Edgar made some noises that, if Lotte was gonna be honest, were more disturbingly gross than sexy.

"I think I'm gonna have a pretty little dance with my pretty little lady," Lotte said. "Excuse me a mo..."

She reached for Aurora-Lilou's hand, and brushed her fingers against a moth's soft antennae instead. The plump, fuzzy moth fluttered away from her before she could think to catch it, and as she ran after the thing, she tripped, and fell into a yawning, fanged abyss from which there was no escape save--

Lotte woke up with a start in her bed. Lilou stirred in her arms. The sun peered through the window.

"Mm... good morning, my champion," Lilou said, turning her smiling face towards Lotte as she climbed out from sleep. "When's your first game?"

"Oh... at eleven." She checked the clock on the table. "It's 7:30? Wow. We've got some time!"

"We do! Want to do something fun before you do something else fun?"

Lotte looked Lilou in her wine-red eyes, remembered Annabel's warning from her dream, gathered her dreaming courage, and said, "Lilou, we should get married."

Chapter End Notes

As of this chapter literally every character has either watched porn, had sex, or both, and abused a substance knowingly or otherwise (cocaine, sizzurp, caffeine, oxytocin). For an easy drinking game, try the Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n Roll Game:
When sex things, drug use, or music references happen, take a drink. (Once per character per drug per scene. Careful with Finny and Bado.)
If any other reference (movie, video game, cartoon, tabletop RPG, etc.) happens, take a cautious sip, else you punish your liver.
"So," Wangari said, "that got weird."

Sucy and Wangari lay next to each other in bed, the air conditioning humming comfortingly in the background, the TV sitting on the porn ordering menu.

"A little just-friends dildo sharing isn't so weird. Plus, how many others have you seen that can shoot fake cum whenever you feel like it?"

"It was amazing, yes. It's still pretty weird."

"But did you have a good time?"

"...yeah."

"So don't think too hard about it. We watched some straight porn together, we shared a deluxe dildo of mine to help each enjoy that straight porno, we had a good time. Isn't it magical?"

"I guess."

The two lay in silence for a moment.

"You know," Sucy said, "it took me a while to open up to my being into guys."

"It did, huh?" Wangari said, looking at her at last.

"Mm-hm. Every time a cock popped into my head, I had to chop it up." She gestured: "Chop, chop, chop. Outta my head, all of you!" She laughed. "But, well, that all changed after that time I nearly ended the world when my unchecked psyche attempted to push into the outer world and remake it in its own image. I realized, you know, some of those thoughts deserve to be acknowledged, nurtured, celebrated. Not all of them, maybe not even most of them, but some of them, and one of them: heterosexuality."

"Hetero identity troubles, eh?" Wangari said.

"Seems like," Sucy said.

"That's rough. Everybody has it rough, really. It's kind of one of my fields of interest that--"

"Shhh." Sucy put her finger on Wangari's mouth. "Let's focus on the nice things we have. Like this room. And this porn. And this dildo we've shared. Think you're up for another round? I've found my second wind."

Wangari thought. "Maybe I could use a snack and a drink. Wanna raid the pantry?"

"I would love it."

The two spent the night together 'til at last they fell asleep.

"I'll bill you later," Horowitz said, slapping Badcock on the ass on her way out.

"Don't touch me, motherfucker," Badcock grumbled as she pushed through the door into the middle
of an orgy. Sammy wore a green backless hospital gown, making her the most-dressed woman in the
room and the one with the fewest chemicals in her.

"Ah... hey there, Sammy," Finnelan said, trying to rub away a trickle of nose blood.

"Hey, lookin' sharp!" Nelson said, crawling out from under her. "How's the, uh, how's the heart
attack fix treatin' you?"

"She didn't fix my heart," Badcock said, "she took it out and replaced it with an onyx spider statue. It
pokes my lungs when I breathe and it doesn't beat, it just sort of... ...spits."

"But she's gonna fix it, right?" Nelson said.

"The left hemisphere was completely dead."

"Ooh, so you're not gonna use it anymore?" Lukic said. "I could do some truly--"

"No," Badcock said. "In fact--no! No to all of you! I have a fatal heart attack and you, you do coke
and bang outside my door while that sawbones ruins me?! I can't believe you, any of you, right now!
Aaagh, I can't believe I chose fucking you over watching Emanuelle fuck!" She half-heartedly
kicked Finnelan in the side and stormed out of the room.

"Sammy!" Finnelan said.

"Don't even start!" Badcock said.

"I... Sammy... oh..." Finnelan kneeled on the cold tile.

"Damn, bitch," Nelson said, lighting up a cigarette she got from nearby. "You really dropped the ball
on that one."

"You're the one who brought the cocaine! ... Weren't you?" Finnelan said.

"Hm. Might've been me," Lukic said, "but truth be told, I'd have to have kept it somewhere very
secret if I did... mmm, I wonder if I have any more. Finn?"

Finnelan got her wand and metamorphie'd her garter into a plain black dress. "I'm out. I've had
enough for one weekend."

"Yeah, bitch," Nelson said, "you gotta be, like, sensitive and shit."

"Watch your tongue around me, Nelson," Lukic said, cracking open an ampoule. "Or have you
forgotten who the dom in this scenario is?"

"I wanna be top for a while!" Nelson said.

"Let's wrestle for it." Lukic smirked, showing lots of sharpened teeth.

"Ha ha, you're gonna regret this!" Nelson said, hopping onto the ancient crone.

Finnelan sat against the door to the nurse's office, face in her hands, trying to piece together her chain
of decisions since last night and trying to justify why she'd passed the time on waiting for Samantha
by fucking while high on coke.

"Is it safe to go in yet?" a student said, trying to keep her femur in place with her hand.
"No," Finnelan said.

Diana woke gently with the sunrise peering through the slit she'd left open in the curtains. She stretched, rested, content. Akko wasn't at her side, but she heard the sink going in the bathroom. No worries. Everything is where it needs to be.

Akko stepped out and closed the door. "Might wanna give the vents a few minutes if you need to go in there, I *destroyed* that toilet."

Something porcelain exploded in the restroom.

"That wasn't me," Akko said.

The bathroom door burst open from within. A wet snake slithered out, a ball python maybe, with little viper fangs for some reason and a chemotherapy bag taped to it. "Come... huff... come on, you lil' bastards," the snake said, "the boss fight's comin'... pant, pant... comin' to you..." It slithered across the carpet for a few feet before gathering itself up. "Gimmie a sec. s' warm on here. I like it. Still comin'. Gonna die pretty quick. You're gonna, I mean. I'm hangin' on."

"That wasn't me either," Akko said, hopping onto the bed.

"Wait," Diana said. "Didn't those guys who kidnapped us want us to kill a snake? Is this it?"

"Yeah!" the snake said, raising his head. "Had those... had those suckers on the run, lemme tell you. But now, they... pant... they got me a better deal. You see--"

"Anyway," Diana said, grabbing her and Akko's bags, "we'll see you later."

"Good luck with trying to kill us!" Akko said. "And if you had to come up through the pipes I just used, uh, sorry. Maybe rub some soap on yourself?"

"Hey, wait," the snake said, but they had closed the door before it could do so much as uncurl. "Come on, man! It was all night to get up here... come on... shit... shit. Carolyn, forgive me bab--" "fri--ggin'... air conditioning..."

Outside, Akko said, "Where to now?"

"To a usable shower. We're not conducting today's business in our sleep clothes."

The two marched down the hall to the Sucy-Lotte-Wangari room. A mysterious green stain stretched from inside the door down the hall toward Chariot's room. Akko stepped in front of it and knocked. "Hello?" she said.

Nothin'.

"They're not answering. Lotte's not that heavy a sleeper, right? What if Sucy made her drink that potion from that one time and now I gotta Psychonaut into her?"

"Sister Mormo, that better not be the case," Diana said. "That sounded like a major hassle." She checked her pockets. "Don't tell Chariot, but I picked a few keycards off of her when we were on the elevator going to our rooms."

"Huh, when'dja put skill points into that?"

Diana shrugged. She slapped the key on the lock and opened onto an empty room. "Hello?" she
said, stepping in and avoiding the stain. "Sucy, Lotte, are you in? We need to use your bath...
room..."

The room was empty and the washtub was brimming with ooze.

"Was there some kind of monster in here?" Akko said, stepping into the bathroom to give it a closer inspection.

Diana seized a pair of notes, one on each bed. "'Dear Lotte, sleeping with Wangari in her high roller suite, I'll beat your ass at Tsar Realms tomorrow. XOXO Saint Sucy.'" She read the other note. "'Hello everyone. I will see you later, I just stepped out to be... Married?!'

"Did you say ma--yip!" Akko fell into the bathtub.

Diana massaged her temples. "Today is going to be long, and it's going to be awkward."

Akko slopped out of the bathroom. "Hmm... I'd have to rate this seven out of ten. Smells better than Mr. Holbrooke's ectoplasm, not as tasty as that exploding pickled plum pudding I made."

"Try not to eat any more of that."

"I'll try!"

"Speaking of, do you have Sucy's number?" Diana dug around for her cell phone, hoping she hadn't forgotten it with the sick snake. "Ah, nevermind, we'll just pray Chariot's asleep when we go into her room."

"Let's throw her at Lotte, too! I bet she can stop her from getting married."

"If she's asleep, let's not disturb her. Besides, there's all kinds of hoops Lotte would have to jump through before she can get married. I mean, she's not even 18 yet. What horrifically negligent system would allow a foreign teenager to get married sight unseen?"

Lotte flicked through the jukebox's menu. "No, no, no, no... come on, there has to be... Yes! No, not 'Owner of Lonely Heart,' not for a wedding reception..." Lotte nibbled her lip. "That's it? Of course that's it. Uhm! Do you have an aux cable or something so I can play music from my phone?"

"Yes m'am!" the person marrying them said. "That will be a five dollar surcharge, of course."

"Of course," Lotte said, forking over five bucks and her phone. "'The Ladder,' by Yes. The best song of all time."

"Of course," the nice lady said, plugging in the phone to a discrete charging dock.

Their wedding was at the 5th Sylvan Church of Lost Vegas, an amazing fairy-themed wedding chapel. The chapel's interior approached tastefulness, the walls painted to resemble a mystical forest seen at fairy height with its jukebox (slash stereo system, evidently) decoed as a dropped cassette player. A guy in a perhaps unnecessary mouse costume sat in the back row, presently playing a game on his phone as he waited for the ceremony to begin.

With the wedding license and the Fairy Dust Marriage Package (a ceremony with one [1] provided witness and music, plus continental breakfast) she had spent over 200 dollars on this event, and oh boy that bill gave her heart the skippies, but it was now or never. And she wasn't raised to say never.

She took her position on the groom's side of the aisle. She had metamorphied up a dark green tuxedo
with leaf and flower-themed accents. She had cast a variant on sweet Lilou to let her create her own outfit, and ran out of the dressing room so she wouldn't see what she'd picked. Like a good groom, you know?

Lilou stepped out at last, holding a wreath of fake flowers in her hands. Surely she must have seen Lotte's phone at some point and gotten the idea for her outfit there, for she wore an exact replica of Aurora's blue-spotted dress, with little mouse-head-shaped pins in her hair holding up a veil.

She had never been so beautiful as she was now. The sayings were true.

When Lilou took her place next to Lotte, the nice lady marrying them—bleach blonde, with a vine-laden green dress and big costume elf ears gummed on—opened up a faux-leather-bound tome and read from it. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today under the gaze of Oberon and Titania to marry this wonderful young couple, so their love will bind them together the rest of their lives. Do you, Charlotte Marja Jansson, take this woman to be your lawfully-wedded wife?"

"I do!" Lotte said.

"Do you, Lilou Beldam Phalène, take this woman to be your lawfully-wedded husband?"

"I do," Lilou said.

"Then by the power invested in me by the state of Nevada and the grace of the faerie courts of Arcadia, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride!"

Lotte turned to her bride, lifted her veil, and was stunned, once again, by the endless depth and supernatural beauty of those shining blood-ruby eyes of hers. Trembling, overwhelmed with sheer love, she lifted Lilou up and gave her a kiss.

Their first kiss.

The mouse man clapped.

"The pact is sealed," purred Lilou.

"What was that?" Lotte said, setting her down.

"Nothing," Lilou said. "You said there's a continental breakfast?"

"Yes, there is, my beautiful wife!" Lotte said, her chest bursting with joy at those words. "Um, before I forget, do you want to be Lilou Phalène-Jansson, or just Lilou Jansson?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I think I'll sit on it a little longer."

"Of course... and thank you for letting me be the husband."

"You look like husband material," Lilou said, pinching her cheek.

"Should I just keep the song playing?" the nice lady said, pointing at Lotte's phone. "It's kind of still going on."

"Oh, yes, it's almost ten minutes long," Lotte said. "Go ahead, let it keep playing."

"Of course it is," the nice lady said, smiling and waving them on. "The green nameplates indicate items that are vegan-friendly by the way! ...ah, kids these days. They're so sweet."
Constanze pumped fuel into her M2 flamethrower.

"Cons, no!" Jasminka said, hugging her tiny friend away from the fuel tanks. "You can't just pour fire on the reality cartoon we're making, even if it's starting to invade our own! You'd be killing untold billions of imaginary innocent people!"

Constanze liberated two of her statement cards from a pocket she'd sewn into her skirt and flipped them into view: "I've always wanted to do that." "Not because I'm German."

"You'll also be toasting like a thousand bucks' worth of board games."

Cons growled and shuffled back to her seat, which was an easy-to-animate attack drone that had hovered out of Elder Sign's monster cup the last time she had to draw one.

"Back!" Amanda said, returning with more drinks and a bag full of food liberated from the cafeteria. "First thing on the docket, what the hell am I smelling that isn't food or drink? Did something else crawl out of the game?"

"That would be the Great Work," Hannah said. She and Barbara had dragged it to the gaming table once the crisis started getting heated. "We've never had her turned on this long, it may be heating up the patchouli oil I mixed into the rubber we cast for the skin over her armpits."

Everybody present stared at her, including the miniatures and pictures of characters and eyed creatures on various tokens, cards, and standees. Even Freddy Kreuger, over on the Nightmare on Elm Street subboard for the Dreamlands dimension table.

"She has to be real enough to matter," Hannah said. "That means she has to smell like a woman of breeding."

"It's not nice to kinkshame," Jamsinka said, "but I'm shaming you for having that kink, real hard." She planted her hands on her hips and shook her head disapprovingly. "Mm-mm-mm. Shame."

Amanda joined in, giving Barbara the shame-on-you finger rub whatsit.

"Don't lump me in with her!" Barbara said. "I don't need her to be that real as long as she's passably real! It's Hannah who keeps trying to smell her! I mean, in real life, trying to smell her. I just wanna, you know, finger her butthole. In real life."

"zhar-lloigor, you who would create a slave-god to slake your foul collective lusts, i too profess my additional disdain for your wickedness!" said Jak from within the board game. "may your reproductive organs, whatever they may be, shrivel and become nothing!"

"Dude's seriously trying my patience," Amanda said, handing out food and drinks to everyone except Hannah and Barbara, whose food she just set near them on the ground. "Have we tried getting some help in here?"

"Like from who?" Hannah said, unwrapping a sandwich. "The teachers? Chariot? The person who usually saves the world who's busy in Las Vegas far away from the people who love her?"

"...Yeah?" Amanda said.

"Maybe we should," Barbara said. "We've been here like a million hours already and all we've done is watch Jak take over our stuff."

Jak had rallied an army of ne'er-do-wells, outcasts, monsters, and bad picks for high priests to strike back against their divine overlords. He'd systematically acquired their power plants and railways,
unsettled Catan, destroyed their kaiju... Things were looking grim, even with Constanze massing her mighty forces to defend Russia and Africa and loose a deadly plague forcing them to break out the Pandemic Legacy pieces. At least Hannah and Barabara were their favored enemies, drawing heat off the rest of the team.

"Who's got nothing to do but is really good at board games?" Amanda said.

"I think I know someone," Barbara said, hesitantly texting. "Cross your fingers that she likes this stupid bullshit you made us play and that's ruining our lives. Mormo damn you, we just needed a sex robot made."

Constanze knocked back another Afri-Cola and texted a secret weapon of her own.

Sucy waited in the Tsar Realms antechamber, seated at one of the card tables. Today's garb was a long sari-style skirt and an ironic Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets t-shirt she stole from the merch booth last night. She sipped a bottle of fancy designer lemonade from the premium drink section of the hospitality suite. When she got her fill of watching early-morning nerds buying dice, life counters, and Fightwizard games, she texted Wangari.

"Hello Wan-Wan. How flows the gambling?"

"Goin good!" Wangari typed back. "Warmed up at the machines, took on the blackjack tables to build a good amount. Had some setbacks but I'm just about ready to buy back in to the game."

"Good. When is it, may I ask?"

"Like noon."

"My first game's at ten. Wish me luck, not that I'll need it."

"Same here, double for not needing it! [100 emoji]"

"Ha ha, same here. [eggplant emoji, several droplet emojis, tongue out emoji]"

"Seriously lady it's not sexy thoughts time you can dial it down."

"I'll try. Just remembering who you're getting revenge on [smiley emoji] [photo of Lotte curled around her little girlfriend]"

"[skull and crossbones emoji]"

"[100 emoji]"

Sucy finished her drink. "Well," she mused, "the time has come to design the instruments of my vengeance." She opened a doodle app and sketched out the Machine of Infinite Suffering. After a few minutes she realized that engineering wasn't her forte and just Googled something to plagiarize. It's not like she was being paid for originality, and it's not like the references weren't flying hard and fast all of a sudden.

"Oh, Sucy!" Lotte said, terrifying her out of her reverie.

"Chaugnar Faugn's blood-sucking trunk, don't sneak up on me," Sucy said, slapping her phone case closed. "What are you doing here so early?"

"It's nine, so the same reason you are."
"Shut the hell up," Sucy said.

"You're very abrasive today. You were very skittish last night, too. Is the stress getting to you? I mean, you're not even looking at me."

Sucy looked up and witnessed Lotte and her dumb stupid girlfriend. Lotte was carrying a cupcake carrier thingey, and her idiot girlfriend was cradling a green souvenir wax sculpture of a particularly buxom fairy queen... type... thing. "I have my reasons for not looking," Sucy said. "Why do you look so happy? Are you still happy from last night? ... Did you pay for a good time last night, Sucy, I mean Lotte?"

"Not last night," Lotte said in a lilting tone, cuddling against her stupid-faced girlfriend. "Me and Lilou just tied the knot! She's my wife, Sucy! My wife!" She giggled.

Sucy noticed the green rings on Sucy and What's-Her-Face's ring fingers.

"No," Sucy said.

"Yes," Lotte said. "Would you like a chocolate cupcake? The icing is green but it doesn't taste like anything special--"

Sucy cracked her neck.

"...Sucy?"

"No thank you, Lotte," Sucy said. She stood up on her chair. "I don't know where you've been, or especially where that goblin's been. If I eat your devil's cupcakes I could die and leave the world bereft of my miraculous presence."

"Must not have gotten a lot of sleep last night," Lotte said.

"Better than you did, you goddamn marriage-haver. I sincerely hope you're in the next heat just so I can stare you down, play my cards, and deliver unto you an endless deluge of vengeance so thick and sticky that you will be trapped in place by the fury of it. I'll destroy you so utterly your name will be stricken from the records of attendants. I'll send you home with nothing but a participation trophy, whatever STDs your little wifey has elected to pass on to you, and the knowledge that in all ways Sucy Manbavaran is the superior player, partier, and humanoid sophont." She took Lotte's face in her hands and brought her face so close their noses touched. "I will show you the face of terror," she whispered, and dragged her tongue across Lotte's face from chin to forehead. She stepped off the chair, retrieved her deck, and walked off, flipping the two of them the bird as she left.

"I don't think she likes us," Lilou said, tugging a handkerchief from her pocket and cleaning her husband's face.

"She's usually much nicer," Lotte said. "I, uh, I'd normally have to qualify that, but no, she's usually much nicer than this."

"Maybe she's jealous of me," Lilou said.

"Oh, Sucy's the straightest girl I know!"

"As far as you know. But, really, we can put her out of our thoughts for now. How about we have a few more cupcakes, Lolo?"

"Lolo and Lilou... I love it," said Lotte, smiling, her body wriggling in joy. "Let's, sweetheart!"
Sucy cowered behind the giant and unnecessary scoreboard and chugged an emergency condom of sizzurp. Married. Married! She crumpled the condom in her hand, trembling with outrage. At least Diana was the type to wait 'til after higher education to tie herself to that particular whipping post. She flung the condom aside and returned to her phone, redoubling her efforts to design her unspeakably foul instruments of terror.

If Lotte had the ovaries to get married on a school-sponsored trip to Vegas, then surely Sucy had the ovaries to yank out all the stops on her quest for vengeance.

Jak's team was sitting at 11 elder signs in Elder Sign and were one turn away from being able to use them on one of the elder gods present. It came down to Hannah and Barbara's Zhar-Lloigor or Finnelan's Yig.

Finnelan nursed from a jar of whiskey. "So, you're already doomed, and you want us to win the game for you, like you're six and need help winning Super Mario."

"No, of course not," said Jasminka, while Amanda said "Yeah, kind of." The two of them slapped at each other.

"Christ, why did I bother showing up?" Finnelan said.

Pisces blew a little bubble.

"Don't rub it in, you little bitch."

Constanze held up her blackboard. "Let's take a vote. Raise your hand if you want to burn the board and get this over with."

Hannah, Barbara, Finnelan, and Constanze raised their hands.

"Now raise your hand if you want to play the game out," she wrote.

Jasminka and Amanda raised their hands. Pisces floated on her side and waggled a fin above the water.

Constanze tallied the votes and grunted. She held up her blackboard: "It's a tie."

"Oh, you bitch!" Barbara said, pointing at Pisces. "I thought you'd vote with us!"

"The Great Work votes to kill everybody!" Hannah said, waving its arm while discretely trying to catch a whiff.

"The robot doesn't count, it's not sentient!" Amanda said.

"It could be," Finnelan said, casting an awakening spell on the Great Work. A green light suffused the machine; it twitched and lurched to life.

"Well, at least someone's being useful," Barbara said, reaching to grab the Great Work's boob. The robot slapped her hand away, crawled away from the both of them and toward Cons's flamethrower.

"Wait!" Hannah said, lunging for the Work, before Amanda restrained her and Barbara.

"Easy there, let's see where she's going with this," Amanda said. "I hate to say it, but if it... if she... if they vote your way, then--"
The Great Work doused itself in burning fuel and lay down to die. Emergency ventilation howled to
life to suck the foul, vaguely patchouli-scented smoke away from the survivors.

"Shit," Constanze said.

"You murderer!" Hannah blubbered. "How dare you give her the means to act on her desires!"

"It was your plan, you dipshits!" Finnelan said.

"We didn't have a plan, Hannah just--just--" Barbara said. "Oh, fuck it, and fuck you! I wish I'd
never called you and I wished you'd never been born!"

"Oh, that's rich!" Finnelan said, splashing her drink at Barbara and onto the table, across the Power
Grid board. Where the liquid splashed across power plants, the game burst into flames but soon
guttered out, leaving smears of ash behind.

"you monsters!" Jak said. "you horrors above us! you have violated the sanctity of the rule of turn-
taking!"

"Oh, and it has a voice box, because it couldn't be more anno--" Finnelan said.

"silence, yig, who identifies as finnelan! for your trespass against us i shall violate a rule in turn.
armies of jak! amass our elder signs from across all our campaigns! we shall seal a god, right here,
right now, in retribution!"

The Elder Sign museum front card glowed a glistening silver color. Silvery lashes burst free from the
card, thousands of filaments wrapping around Hannah and Barbara. "Oh, no," Barbara said, and the
two of them were dragged kicking and screaming into A Man Cons Jazz in a shamefully cheap-
looking visual effect. The room fell into stunned silence.

"Can I change my vote now?" Amanda said.

Down in That Steakhouse, You Know The One Diana shifted uneasily in her seat. "Huh..."

"What's wrong, other than nobody picking up their phone and that snake maybe comin' after us right
now?" Akko said. Just to be sure, she scanned the restaurant with her Lookin' Eyes, seeing no
obvious snake holes.

"I don't know. It's this vague feeling like... like I've got fewer people to carry my things for me and
say I'm pretty."

"I can carry things for you and I can say you're pretty!" Akko said.

"True. True." Diana took a long sip of her Mimosa. "Anyway, it's nothing I couldn't fix with a
handcart and a daily affirmations website. These bagel-and-lox sandwiches are to die for, aren't
they?"

"Mhm mhm! And they have miso soup for a side! Man, I haven't had morning miso since I was back
home."

"You know," Diana said, "maybe it's for the best we're out of contact with everyone else. We know
where they'll be again, we know how to get back to Luna Nova if something goes wrong... hell,
that's presuming something's gone wrong. Probably Chariot's beaten us to the punch on stopping
Lotte from getting married. Bet she's giving her some kind of life-lesson lecture as we speak."
"She mostly just gives vague hints and lets the Shiny Rod do the--oh my God, what if the Shiny Rod is back and it's attached to Lotte?! Wouldn't that be super cool?!" Akko said as the snake bored a hole through the ceiling. The two witches grabbed their food and stepped away as he slid out and onto the table, knocking over their drinks.

"Finally," he gasped. "Shit, give me a second. I--"

A waiter lay a large serving tray lid over the snake. "Apologies for the rude interruption, m'am. May we interest you in a voucher for money off our drink menu?"

"MAY you?" Akko said. "That's a hell yes if I ever heard one."

"Excellent! Please--" The waiter was interrupted by a katana lodging into his chest. With his last breath, he ripped off the piece of paper halfway down the sword, gave it a quick read, and held it out to Diana. "Letter... letter for you, m'am..." He collapsed onto the table, extremely dead.

"Damn, son!" Akko said, taking a bracing bite of her sandwich.

Diana regarded the letter.

GUESS WHAT? WE'RE AWAKE, BABY!
WE'VE KIDNAPPED TOMMY BAHAMA.
    BETTER MOVE FAST!
SIGNED--THE ROGUES!

She crumpled it up and threw it aside. "Son of a bitch," she said.

"Where'd that katana come from? Did the snake do that? Should I be worried?"

"I think we're going to have to take care of something before we can enjoy the rest of our vacation, Akko." She raised her hand. "Excuse me, can I get some witnesses so the police don't think I killed this man with a katana and then took it with me? I want to take revenge for his death using the weapon that killed him for poetic purposes."

Some people also in the restaurant volunteered and took some pictures. Akko autographed some stuff for fans of their world-saving exploits while Diana worked the katana out of the dead guy in an effort to spill the blood mostly onto some napkins she lay under him. Annoying, yes, but the whole affair would be over soon enough.

Lotte looked up from her viewing globe to see Lilou crying. It wasn't a subtle kind of cry, though she kept quite silent; her hands were over her face, her elbows on the table, her whole body trembling as she poured grief into a silent flood of tears racing down her forearms. "Lilou? Lilou, what's wrong?"

Lilou made a small, pained sound. "Lotte... I can feel it. It's going wrong. It's starting to go wrong."

"What's going wrong?" She shoved the viewing globe aside, precariously close to rolling off the far end of the card table. She wagered whether to get closer or keep her distance, whatever would be better for her wife's needs.

"Everything."

A panic attack, maybe? "What kinds of everything? Talk to me." She inched closer, ready to put an arm around her.
Her wife lowered one of her hands and peered through lids almost entirely closed. Her eye was glowing the searing, fearful red of a distant emergency flare. She spoke slowly, haltingly, through her ceaseless tears.

"Lotte Jansson, would you believe me if I told you the end of the world was here?"
Are They Unaware It's The Termination Of The Planet?

In an evening ceremony, Headmistress Holbrooke addressed the students:

"It seems our finest are in a little bit of trouble. To help them out, we're sending an emergency pair of magic routers to Diana and Akko. As Ms. Albrechtsberger is not answering her phone and much of that wing of the school now experiencing profound states of unreality, we have thus asked the rest of the science club to come up with a solution. Science club, show us your stuff!"

The science club (Young Miss Samaira Singh, a six-year-old who was technically only attending the Magic Daycare held in the science club room while her mother was wrestling a basilisk in the woods for some reason) stepped up to bat. She had tied the routers to a bottle rocket and positioned a bottle on an incline made of Play-Doh aiming it at the leyline gate. After securing the projectile, she lit the rocket with a firework punk and ran away, hands over her ears.

The bottle rocket sputtered out of the bottle and along the ground, popping into a bloom of red sparks and blackening the routers' casings. They had come almost within 10 meters of the gate.

Ms. Samaira Singh started crying.

"There, there, that was a good idea," Holbrooke said, patting the child's back. "I would definitely send a witch through if we hadn't obliterated the mana budget getting that bunch to Hawaii already. With Ms. Chariot du Nord on their side, I'm sure they'll get along just fine."

Chariot awoke in a filthy alley, soaked with sweat and reeking of the Night Train she had chugged to help get herself to sleep. She slouched into the light of day, cursing the bastard sun for being so bright. Instinctively, she checked her wand and saw the indicator blinking in the red. She didn't remember how, but she must've burned through damn near all of her mana last night between the whores and now.

When was now? Where did her cell phone go? Where did her wallet go? Hell, where was she? She was between a scary-looking McDonalds and a gas station. She could be in virtually any town in America. She needed a computer, or a pay phone, or some more liquor--

The front door to the gas station jangled and Suzie Cupid stepped out.

A flash of last night popped into Chariot's head--the hour-long ritual to Yog-Sothoth invoking Him to show her the weft and warp of time, that she may weave two separate paths together. By His name Panoptes she found who she was looking for, and by His name Atheon she crossed their paths. And then came the drinking to pass the time.

"Hello?" Suzie said.

"Oh--sorry. I didn't mean to stare, it's just--ah--"

"Rough night? Always, in Vegas," Suzie said, smiling. "Good thing it's Saturday, huh?"

"Why, yes, it is Saturday!" Chariot said, laughing. "I wanna have sex with you so bad Suzie Cupid."

"Oh ho ho! So you recognize me outta costume?"
Oh, no.

Oh, no, she'd said that out loud.

"Well, keep goin' to tryouts!" Suzie said, and walked past her towards her car. "Next time I'm in Vegas I might be shooting a new movie. Wash behind your ears and you might just get a shot. Good luck!"

There were a lot of ways Chariot could've handled things—a lot of mature ways, a lot of smart ways, a lot of reasonable ways. She could've cherished how close she came, gotten back to the hotel, cleaned up, and been there for the kids who were direly in need of her assistance. She could've established communications with her later, when she was sober and full of memories and with however many more orgasms she'd need to think clearly about Suzie Cupid.

So she let go of her disguise spell and shouted "I'm actually Chariot du Nord and I really do want to have sex with you!"

Suzie's hand froze on the handle of her car. She peeked back over her shoulder. "...Really?" She gave her that look, the eternal "have I seen you before?" gaze she grew accustomed to as Ursula.

Chariot pulled her hair back and took off her glasses and shook off the hat she thought she still had on.

"Holy shit," Suzie Cupid said. "You party way harder than I thought you would."

"Don't I just," Chariot said. "Can you take me home with you?"

"Sure," Suzie blurted.

Far away in the British isles, Daryl Cavendish slathered herself in lotion, readying to tan by the light of the impending full moon. As she did, her phone rang, a song by Snakeskin Boogie. After humming along a few bars, she clapped her hands twice and the handsfree headset enabled (because she liked clapping, dammit). "Mm, did you wake me?" she purred into the mic taped to her head, just in case.

"Hello, auntie," Diana said.

"Ahh, Diana, pleased to hear from you! How fares Luna Nova?" She fetched her moonbathing kit, tucked her phone inside, and headed downstairs to one of the ornamental gardens with an outdoor pool.

"It's fine," Diana said in blissful ignorance. "But Las Vegas and Honolulu are in a bit of trouble. In all honesty, of all the contacts I have you seem the most likely to know anything about katana-flinging rogues in Sin City. Does any of that sound familiar to you?"

"Yes, in fact," Daryl said. "You don't need to know the details--"

She visited Las Vegas in a get-rich-quick scheme and lost all the money she'd intended to gamble after a long weekend of penny slots and male whores.

"--but not long ago my path crossed with the Sin City Rogues of Waikiki Beach."

She'd run out of her money before the first night. To keep the party going she borrowed a lot of money and bought a lot of peyote buttons on credit from the Sin City Rogues. She could pay exactly
none of it back when the time came to go home.

"They are ruthless and will stop at nothing to address any sleight and correct every imbalance. They cannot be reasoned with... only survived."

They were perfectly content to waive the debt under one condition. And that's why her Vegas vacation ended with her whacked out of her mind on peyote watching the Rogues beat the everloving Yig Snake Daddy out of her daughters. Good thing the Cavendishes were healers.

"If you want to strike back at them, I can tell you this: the Rogues operate in both Vegas and Hawaii. They are most at home in Hawaii, but Vegas affords an endless number of ways to launder their drug money. You'll need to stare them down in their own urban dungeons... and their most secure and sacred place in Nevada is none other than the laundromat in the Wonderland East Shopping Center, between the Family Dollar and Dotty's Casino. Careful there, those slots are red-hot."

"An actual laundromat. Daughter Mormo," Diana said. "Well, Akko's finished passing the hat around for guns and knives, we're going to need all the mundane help we can get. Provided that the school doesn't come through with some mana routers."

"Good luck, sweetie. Score one for the Cavendishes, won't you?"

"Of course. Thank you, auntie." Ka-click.

Daryl opened the door to her favorite outdoor pool. To her incredible surprise Meril was there, wandering around confused and holding a cup of tea.

"Is there something wrong, snakeskin spirit?" Daryl said.

"Mommy," Meril said, "the maid brewed some tea and I poured some and I forgot I poured some and I found my cup and the tea is cold and I can't find the maid."

Daryl reached into her kit and pulled out a bottle of Xanax, tapping out a couple of 2mg pills into Meril's hand. She took them gladly and washed them back with a little cold tea. "Thank you, mommy," she said, returning to the house to resume her search.

Daryl settled into her pool chair and queued up her favorite Eleven-from-Stranger-Things-themed ASMR video to watch as she tanned. "Ah, kids these days... they're so easy to please."

Barbara stirred awake as Hannah kicked her in the stomach. "Ow! Fuck you, bitch!" she said.

"No, fuck you, slut!" Hannah said. "Fuck you for talking me into going here!"

"Talk--YOU talked me into going here!" Barbara said, crawling away from Hannah's kicks. "I was scared! You said to come! And now the Work is dead and we're in Hell and you're a--"

The two degenerated into howling invectives and punching and kicking each other and crying. When they realized Constanze still had their wands and they had none and they were in Rio de Janeiro for some reason, they stopped fighting, briefly. They'd landed on the stoop of a decrepit church in the slums. A fallen five-branched sign of the Three lay in the courtyard; the statue of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado had been unmounted and repositioned so that he was now orally pleasing a statue of Jak, Earl of Evil. All around them, the city was burning, the poor and rich and the tourists alike.

Also, an army of cheaply-armored minions with crude representations of Jak's golden, bejeweled harness strapped to their chests or equivalent gathered around the church, waving looted firearms and
melee weapons in the air.

"Death to the gods! Death to the gods!" they chanted.

"Finally," Hannah said, holding her arms out, closing her eyes, and waiting for death. Barbara hid behind her so she'd die second.

Alas, neither saw a grenade land in the midst of the barbarian horde, scattering and disorienting them and allowing a rag-tag team of colorful heroes to battle them to a rout. Within a few minutes the two of them were depressingly alive.

"Goddammit," Barbara said.

"Who did that? Come on!" Hannah said.

"Too-ra loo-ra, mates!" a chubby, fedora-clad, mustachioed man with a revolver and a gold tube under his arm said, walking up the church stoop. "That was a right good scrap, but we made it to th'other end! You lil' ladies doin' alright?"

A miniature Leng spider perched on his shoulder, voiced by Frank Welker, scatted out a funky string of almost-words.

"You said it, Pincher. Glad to see the faces behind the names!"

"Who are you and why should we care?" Barbara said.

The man looked hurt. "Why, uh, it's me, Monterey Jack? Remember? Your avatars, er, ah, they showed me a real good time...?"

"Oh," Barbara said, defeated. "You're the guy we bossed around."

"Yeah! Yeah, it's me!"

"You couldn't even save us when we were paying you," Hannah said. "Why should we care about you saving us now?"

Monterey took a deep breath and let it out. "Hate to interrupt ya in yer quest, mighty goddesses, just that I think I can keep you someplace safe so we can counterattack that nasty Jak."

Pincher chittered a funky beat.

"Too right, mate," Monterey said, patting its thorny abdomen.

"Okay, whatever," Barbara said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"C'mon, ladies. Corel 'n pals have been dyin' t'meetcha." Monterey put his hat over his chest. "Rest in peace, Oresto. Wish you were--"

"Shut the fuck up," Hannah said, stomping past Monterey.

"Awright, yer almightinesses," Monterey said, affixing his hat back. Pincher pat his back affectionately, skittering some comforting sounds.

"Monterey Jack's moving," Amanda said. "I think that means they made it." She squinted at the board as Jack's mini shuffled itself along. In the middle of the array of counters and pawns
representing heroes and units was a Zhar tentacle piece with a painter’s rendition of Hannah and Barbara on it, looking quite miserable.

"God luck and good speed," Jasminka said, petting her service possum. The dog-sized, white-faced trash baby looked upon everything with mild distress, as a possum does. His widdle owange vest said SERVICE ANIMAL, though truth be told Jasminka had sewn it herself out of yarn, and he was only a comfort animal in spirit.

"Fucking kill me," Finnelan said, slurring her words.

"Crap, she's coming down," Amanda said. "Cons, can you spare any more of your Adderall?"

Cons held up one of her printed statement cards: "Oh hell no."

"Well, somebody's gotta get her some uppers!" Amanda said.

"Yeah, like through the door or something?" nobody was around to say, but it was said in spirit, as the elevators leading out had scabbed over with loose game tiles, ectoplasm, and Abhothic secretions, locking them all in for the duration. In a show of good faith, Cons offered Finny one of her Afri-Colas.

Finnelan waved her off. "Just let me die. Throw me at the monsters or whatever. I've fucked up enough today, might as well use my body for something useful."

Pisces pressed against her bowl and rubbed at Finnelan's general direction.

"You weren't there," Finnelan said. "You weren't the one humping a, a body for minutes."

"Here," Jasminka said, offering Ghost Skull the service possum to Finnelan. The plump marsupial hung from off of her neck, wrapping its hairless muscular tail around her. "Let him transmit his love to you."

Ghost Skull snuffled in one of Finnelan's pockets. The second D-Hydro bottle of coke clattered to the floor, making a terrifyingly loud noise but staying intact. Finnelan regarded the cocaine as though it were a briefcase full of plutonium.

"Well, that solves one problem!" Amanda said.

Pisces did a barrel roll.

"Hey, don't be all judge-y, scaly!"

Pisces did a barrel roll in the opposite direction.

Amanda stumbled back into her chair as if pushed. Jasminka stifled a laugh. "Oh, boy," she said, "let's see if I have some burn cream."

In silence, Finnelan retrieved her cocaine.

Wangari stepped into her suite. "Sucy, I'm here! The text I got was... Sucy?"

A construction crew was chilling out post a job well-done. Dominating the living room was a two-story-tall construction with no clear purpose: a tall stone wall flanked by red columns and topped with a vaguely tyrannosaurus-looking skull of faux stone. In the middle of the wall was a fierce, toothy bas relief of Sucy's head. At the wall's base was a large stone basin with abbreviated stone steps leading up and down into it. Sucy was seated on the edge of the basin, contently leaning
against a stony outcropping and downing a condom of a syrupy purple--
"Sucy, are you slamming back condoms full of purple drank?"

"Why, yes, Wangari, and you can't begin to guess how happy I am that you--"

"First, that's not the proper glassware, you should be drinking it out of double-stacked Styrofoam
cups. Second, why the hell are you even drinking it? Did Big Moe die for nothing? Christ, you can
get fake drank made from CBD nowadays."

"CBD is for quitters."

"My sister takes CBD for her tremors!"

"Quitters at getting intoxicated."

"You can get wasted on things that don't make your heart stop moving!" Wangari stepped over and
grabbed Sucy's next condom. "Seriously, how many of these have you been sipping?"

"A few." Sucy flipped her hair magnificently. "But let me be honest with you..." She looked at the
condom as Wangari jiggled it about in her hands. "Speaking as one dildo sister to the other, I am so,
so grateful for your intervention." She turned away, holding out her hand out at the sacred drank.
"Destroy it, remove all temptation."

"...okay," Wangari said, wandering over to the sink and using a fork to poke the sides.

"Dildo sisters?" one of the workers said.

"It's nothing, little in-joke," Sucy said, winking. "She's a prostitute," Sucy mouthed. "Very
expensive."

The workers gave her thumbs up.

"Okay, it's gone!" Wangari said. "But what's this thing and--"

"First, I'm gonna need to collect interest to help pay for this, because it cost about eight thousand
dollars."

"Jesus," Wangari said, tossing a bag of casino chips at Sucy, who tucked in a thousand dollars for a
tip, then threw the bag at the chief builder.

"You're welcome," Sucy said.

"Have a good day, you two," the lead builder said, saluting and winking at Sucy.

"But, listen. I know it was a lot..."

"Really, I've got, like, half a million on me right now, I'm good to go," Wangari said.

"Sweet Shugoran, that's a lot," Sucy said, possibilities unfolding in her mind at that sum of money.
"Why even bother with that poker game if you're already modestly rich?"

"Because I can have all the money in the world but it doesn't mean a damn thing if I don't have Ms.
Marvel getting me drinks," Wangari said, hand over her heart.

"How noble." Sucy sidled up to her roommate. "Honestly, most days, I'd be the type to implore you
to be realistic about this. But... Zharlloigor, you should have seen what Lotte and her waifu were up to."

Wangari winced. "Oof, was it bad?"

"It was the worst. They took photos of you, Wan-Wan. Photos of you at your most... indisposed. You should've seen the look on that white girl's face... on those white girl's faces. I told them it was the most disgusting thing they could be doing and they just threw it back in my face. Leering at me, craving my hot Phillipina body, threatening to pin me down and pour ropy, syrupy slime over my luxurious hair 'til I was aesthetically pleasing to them."

Sucy was right in her face, pressing her chest against hers. "Uh..."

The spooky witch put her hands on Wangari's face. "Wan-Wan, they hurt me so badly... disrespected you so cruelly. They went back to their room to jerk off. It hurts so bad to think they're rutting like dogs and here we are, struggling just to keep our heads above the waters of Vengeance..."

"Uh..."

"Wangari... what's your last name?"

Wan-Wan shrugged.

"Whatever. Wangari, student of Luna Nova and Rhodes, let's make sweet jungle love to each other."

"I, er. I don't really swing that way, lady..."

"But we've masturbated together. We're on the same path of vengeance. There's a sacred bond there that can never be broken. Before the eyes of the Slime Pit, we can seal this oath with our nubile bodies. Also, you're 18 and I'm 17 so it's not weird."

"...uh..."

Sucy licked Wangari's cheek. "One or both of us can metamorphie into a guy if that makes it less weird."

"I... I have no idea if that would be less or more weird."

"I can get out my Ultimate Fantasy if that would help."

"I-i-i-it would..."

"I won't be long."

"Alright. Alright, let's give it a try."

It was weird.

Was that literally everybody but Lotte and Lilou?

No?

Let's fix that.
Diana and Akko rode in silence.

"So, anythin' special about this laundromat?" their Uber said.

"They're drug-dealing terrorists," Diana said.

"Really? Terrorists? Damn, man!"

"At least they're terrorizing the crap out of us!" Akko said. "Like with that monster guy who looked like me."

"That wasn't their fault, that was a naturally-occurring cryptid."

"Oh. Well, they probably terrorize on the side."

"S'at why you got all those guns?" the Uber said.

"It is!" Diana said, hoisting a pair of Tec 9s. "We passed the hat around and got a few loaners. Seems that Vegas people are real tired of people bossing their towns around."

"You'd think they'd be good for guns for a while, but apparently not," Akko said.

"Ha ha, funny how that works." Their Uber reached for their cell phone, safely clipped to the air conditioner vents. "Mind if I play some music?"

"Be my guest," Diana said.

Their Uber hit play. A needlessly creepy 80s synth-pop song played.

"Regretting that decision," Diana whispered.

"I like it," Akko whispered back, bopping her head along to the drum machine beat.

Was that everyone else? I think so.

Let's check in on Chariot again.

Chariot stepped out of the shower, sighing in delight. "Ah, I needed that like a flower needs sunlight."

"I can tell," Suzie said, smiling contently as Chariot dried her magnificent body. Her apartment was spacious, not too cold, if a little impersonal. These digs were temporary, the only personal touch being an array of stuffed toys, including a large plush Shiny Chariot. "Man, I was in junior high when you broke on the scene. I wanted to be you, wanted to be done by you, all the above and more. You're like the Cadillac of women."

Chariot blushed and half-heartedly concealed herself with her towel. "Oh... let's not get carried away, now."

"Oh, I'm not done getting carried away," Suzie said, rising to her feet. "I've done a lot of cool stuff on camera. But I've never gotten a chance at doing the thing I love the most. My... my own fetish." She blushed furiously, even moreso than Chariot.

"I know I only found out about you... recently, let's say." Time was still a knot of nonsense tied up
by visions of implacable golden robots marching across the surface of Mercury, Venus, and Mars for some inscrutable reason. "But I've been so consumed by the need to fuck you senseless that I'm willing to do literally anything you want to."

Suzie's breathing became labored. "I should be recording this," she said, fumbling for her phone. "Could... can... ca... your wand's charged, yeah?"

Chariot fetched her wand from the dresser. "Yes, it is. Enough for one good spell, at least."

"I..." She took a deep breath. "Can you turn yourself into that Shiny doll?" She indicated the big one.

"This one, specifically?"

"That one, specifically."

"Certainly. Metamorphie inanimus." Chariot tapped the crown of her head with her wand, and with a puff of magic smoke turned herself into an exact duplicate of the doll. "Oh, the construction on this is quite good. I'm glad to see that..." She felt something unusual about this form. "Wait a minute."

"Sure thing," Suzie said, rooting through her bedside drawer.

"This... this isn't factory standard," Chariot said, lifting up the doll's skirt and looking between her legs. This was one of the early versions, before parents complained that kids were getting the wrong idea with the doll having skin-toned cloth under the skirt. There was a very distinctive, lovingly hand-sewn addition.

"Is this too weird?" Suzie said, already buckled in to an impressive strap-on.

Chariot thought back to her high school days with Croix.

"It's in the top three of weird things I've done in the bedroom," she said, wiggling her doll head because the mouth didn't move, "but it's not the no. 1 spot." She turned on one plush heel and faced her panting imminent-lover. "Come on, everybody--let's put on a show!"

It got even weirder than with Sucy and Wangari.

Alright, alright. Let's bring this chapter on home.

Lotte left behind a "BE RIGHT BACK!" sign on her next game's table, a picture of a sad Lilou scribbled onto it for emphasis. Her wife insisted they go back to her family's room; it was where she'd feel the most safe.

The two lay on their sides in Lilou's god-emperor-size bed, acres of black silk sheets swaddling them, a crystal orrery hanging from the ceiling overhead tracking fifteen planets and two suns (one where Jupiter should be) and casting many-colored lights across them. Lilou was the little spoon again; Lotte took her big spoon privileges seriously and did her best to engulf her wife like a mother cat.

"Do you believe me?" Lilou said again.

"I believe you," Lotte said, hugging her again.

Lilou took a shuddering breath and released it. "Your friend, the girl with purple hair. Do you know how cruel she is? How petty?"
"Yes," Lotte said. "I... well, okay, I can see that."

"She is in communion with her god, Abhoth, the Source of Uncleanliness. If she should complete her ritual, then the Source will be loosed, and your world drowned in horror. All that lives will mutate beyond recognition... then beyond survival." She trailed to a stop, silently sobbing once again.

Lotte couldn't stop thinking about the forest of mushrooms that overtook the room that one terrible day, or the things Akko said she saw in Sucy's head. The way Sucy was suddenly and specifically obsessed with goo. The curiously elevated levels of slime. The sheer amount of drugs that seemed to be going around—the sleepy medicine they'd inadvertently injected, the way Chariot conducted herself after emerging from the bathtub, the rather suspect amount of drinking. Really, the gratuitous slime was bothering her. Poor Wangari. I mean, couldn't get involved with that on such short notice when there was an adorable lady to seduce and wind up marrying, but poor Wangari.

"I'll have to stop her," Lotte said. "In the tournament. I'll defeat her, and then I'll set her straight."

"Do you swear, Lotte? With all your heart?"

"I swear. With all my heart."

Lilou touched Lotte's hair. "The pact is sealed," she whispered.

"Pardon?"

"I've packed my eels. They won't have to see this."

"I'm glad. Eels don't deserve to be scared." She turned Lilou's head and kissed her. Their second kiss. "You're so thoughtful."

"I don't deserve a husband like you."

"And I'm so very lucky to have a wife like you." She nuzzled her cheek against Lilou's.

Lilou's father knocked. "Excuse me," he said through the door. "Lilou, I can't get past the two frogs. May you please help me?"

"Yes, father," Lilou said.

"I believe in you," Lotte said. "If it takes you a while... I'll see you at the tournament, right?"

"Of course."

The two held each other for a brief moment before they each sped to their next challenge.

In her heart of hearts, Lilou knew they was far too late.

Chariot and Suzie lay in a sweaty heap, panting.

"You know," Chariot said, when she was capable of speaking, "when I was readying to leave for Vegas sometime last year, I don't think I anticipated having the best five orgasms of my life in the form of my best-selling plush doll."

Suzie's eyes were damp, but her smile betrayed they were tears of joy. "I never thought I'd ever get a chance to make love to the first woman I ever fell in love with. You've made today the best day of
my life." She kissed Chariot's perpetually-open doll mouth. "I used to fantasize about my doll coming to life and... well, you saw what I always wanted to do."

"See? Pretty hard not to feel it. I mean, I could feel it earlier, but I think you wore me--"

Suzie's phone rang. Hesitantly, she answered. "Hello? ... Yes, sir. On the way." She hung up. "I'll... do you want to stay here a while? I may be a minute."

"I don't mind waiting. I'm completely out of magic, at that. I should probably try and get a taxi to take me back to the Silver Witch, if you didn't mind me..." She watched her lover place her strap-on back in the drawer and pull a heavy, metal suitcase from under the bed. In silence, Suzie popped it open, running her hands over what was inside.

"I don't mind," Suzie said, strapping on the helmet. "If I'm not back by seven, just go back home. We'll... we'll meet again. One way or the other."

"If you're in danger, I'm coming with you. I've made love to you, I'll certainly put my life on the line to make sure you're safe. What are you doing?" Chariot said.

"My employer's laundromat is under attack." Suzie adjusted the floppy padding of her armor. "The Robo Vampire must ride."
Lotte returned her viewing globe to her messenger bag, folded up the message in case it became useful again later, shuffled her deck, and waited for her first opponent.

She had a few minutes to go. Waiting was pure hell.

Wangari pulled her top back on. "Yeah... gotta admit, I don't think lesbian sex is the sex for me. Sorry, Sucy."

"It's alright," Sucy said, reclining naked on one of the couches and watching Wangari clothe herself. "We had a good time."

"Well, I'm glad you did. I think I'd be up for co-masturbating again, but the actual sex, not so much." Wangari donned her mask and metamorphied up a newer, fancier dress, with more feather trim, more gold and white in the pattern than black, and more costume jewelry. "But, you know, it was an experience!"

"A sexperience, you might say," Sucy said. "How about we have a drink? A last one for the road, before our greatest battle yet?"

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I need all the luck I can get."

"Luck, you say. Want I should brew you a luck potion?"

"Those are real?"

"Better believe it, soldier," Sucy quoted. "Just a moment." She sped to the kitchen and spliced up a bright pink, fizzy potion from a spread of ingredients she had laid out on the counter. "This is the real deal, too, not the fake stuff I sold to all those gamblers at Valerian." She poured it out into two cups and carried them to her roommate. "Looks delicious, doesn't it?"

Wangari sniffed the potion. "Smells alright. Kind of like if Pepto-Bismol came in soda form."

"Bottoms up?" Sucy said.

"Bottoms up. To peace," Wangari said, toasting.

"The peace of the grave," Sucy said, "still the only peace our enemies will know." The two downed their totally non-magical Pepto-Bismol egg cream at once. "Ahh. Delicious."

Wangari giggled. "Yeah, tastes like Pepto too! That's one of the best potions I've ever had, like, tastewise."

Sucy licked her lips. "By the way, can you spot me my wand real quick?"

"Sure," Wangari said, unlatching Sucy's wand from her hip and offering it to her butt-end first. Sucy flicked the wand open and cast a spell into the divot. "Mm, mm, that should set the snare spell. Now, Wan-Wan, can you walk into the pit?"

"What, to test it? Can't you just throw something in there?"

"I could," Sucy said. "But this is our revenge, Wan-Wan. We need to make absolutely sure it's going to work. What if the spell only targets pillows or Chariot merchandise?"
Wangari bit her lip. "Alright. But I'm not gonna set off anything else, am I?"

"Of course not." Sucy licked her chin, which Wan flinched from. "Walk backwards into it, so your back's facing the wall."

"Alright," Wangari said, hiking up her feather-trimmed skirt and marching inside, stepping backwards once she was securely in the divot. Grasping spectral tentacles locked her feet in place.

"It went off!" she said, trying and failing to lift her feet or dip her body too far one way or the other. "Reset the spell, I'll get out in a sec."

Sucy was busy getting dressed. "Hm... just a moment."

"Alright, fine. But don't wait too long, this divot's really cold."

"You really should be wearing shoes in there."

"Screw that, I like rocking bare feet... most of the time. You got my number, this is definitely not one of those times."

Sucy affixed her skirt. "I can't help but admire your dedication to your fetish."

"It's not a fetish! I just don't think most shoes are all that comfortable!"

"Sure thing, sweetie." Sucy blew her a kiss. "Just like I don't get turned on by hot babes covered in slime."

Wangari processed that statement. "Pardon?"

"I'm gonna be honest in this late hour," Sucy said, walking up to the Slime Pit and planting her foot on the front steps. "This? Is my fetish. The bathtub ooze? All me. You being a klutz? Nope. All me, being a wicked witch of the highest caliber, that is to say, forcing my bizarre fetish on helpless victims utterly uncontested." She shivered with perverted delight. "Princess Lucinda ain't got nothing on me."

Wangari struggled to throw off the spell by thinking really hard about rerolling a saving throw. "What was all that--all that dildo sisters stuff, all that revenge stuff?"

"Well, I really do want to get revenge on Lotte for falling in love and getting married."

"She got friggin' married?! Oh, man, that's going on the Sunday broadsh--crap, getting off-course here. What about her and what's-her-face jacking off to me?"

"I lied... maybe." She leaned closer to her victim. "That wasn't me, but you were absolutely gorgeous." She flipped out her cell phone and dialed up a specific number. "Hey, candy shop whose name I can't even begin to care about? Are you still selling the Happy Accident batch from Friday afternoon? I've got a couple hundred bucks that says there's a jar with my name on it. Oh, you are, and there is? Deliver it to the Tsar Realms tournament. I'm gonna be the one winning."

Wangari flipped a pair of birds and screamed every curse word she knew.

"Afraid I can't... stick around for too long. But I have a few minutes to... uh... shit, what's a good pun for this situation..." She tele-activated the slime pit with her wand. "Eh, whatever. I'mma slime you now." She propped up her cell phone set to record, stole Wangari's chips, and walked out.

The dinosaur head tilted forward, perhaps precariously given how heavy it looked, and bathtub slime
Some time later, Sucy darkened the threshold of the Tsar Realms room.

"Oh, man!" Ted Warlock said from within the depths of a newly-reinforced announcer's cave. "She's cut it close, but Sorcerer Sucy is returning to the killing fields, just in time for the next round of gaming to begin! Who will achieve victory, and who will merely know the bitter taste of defeat?"

Sucy sat on the table opposite Lotte. "I see you've already divorced," Sucy said, glaring at her former friend. "I'm glad to see misery loves you more than that little blonde bitch did. And just to be clear, the blonde bitch in question is the bitch you married, not you, who is indeed quite little and quite a bitch and most assuredly hating yourself for daring to commit the sin of love and the sin of getting in the way of Sucy Goddamn Manbavaran the Invincible. I know you have to be utterly inconsolable, wondering how you can make it up to me for your transgressions. Tell you what. When we go home and you can barely walk for the carding I'm gonna give you, you can put on your Sunday best, march your well-used Finnish--"

Lotte cleared her throat. "You done?"

"Motherfucker, did I give you permission to inte--"

"You gave me permission to kick your butt the second you talked smack about my wife. Now lay down your cards and play like a woman, ryökäle!"

A chorus of "ooo!" went around the room.

"My God!" Ted said. "A real pity these two aren't about to play each other, but man, let's hope they keep up that energy. Now, Strength Anger takes his own stand against Lotte the Luciferean while Angry Agnes matches her wits against Sucy the Slayer..."

Diana popped her back. "Hmph. Alright. I think I'm sufficiently limber now."

The laundromat lay ahead of them, utterly unassuming, if perhaps a little too dark given the time of day and the shoddiness of the awning. Akko popped out of the Family Dollar next door with a gigantic bottle of cola. "Dude, you gotta see what they got in there! There's like some big drinks, there's all these cans of slime, it's all just a buck a pop!" She squeezed the cola between her legs and juggled little cans of green goo.

"What possible use could you have for slime?" Diana said.

Akko shrugged. "'Unno. Could come in handy!"

"If you in... why did you bring the novelty flying disc?"

"Oh, this?" She pat the Frisbee strapped to her chest. "Well, the no. 1 cause of dungeon crawling going bad is when your stress goes out of control. So when we get to breather rooms we can throw this lil' guy around and cool off! Wanna throw it around a little right now? We have the element of surprise and you're lookin' pretty worn out."

Diana massaged her temples for the second time in a day, always a bad sign. "Maybe... maybe you're right. Come on, let's have a few throws."

They passed the time a little throwing the disc between themselves, the array of firearms and melee
The Frisbee arced towards his neck. He grabbed it and brought the edge of the toy to his neck in a smooth gesture, his throat erupting into a fountain of blood. Sputtering he fell to the ground and bled out in moments.

"Throwin'... my only weakness..." he said helpfully as he died.

Diana and Akko stared at the body for a good long while.

"So, like, he was allergic to plastic or something?" Akko said.

"I haven't the foggiest," Diana said, retrieving Shades's Uzi.

"Keep an eye out for another Frisbee in case that one's haunted," Akko said, jumping over the body.

The gun-toting criminals chatted amongst each other. "I think we'd all like to say we're hardcore criminals!" a mustachioed gentleman said.

"Ah. Good to hear," Diana said, emptying the Uzi into the largest concentration of men. A couple of them jerked around, neat splats of red bursting from their shirts, before falling down; she dropped the gun at her feet and ducked behind a chest-high wall, Akko right behind her.

The two witches emptied out their guns in the direction of their enemies, who occasionally popped out from cover to shoot more bullets back at them, and in under a minute they'd run completely dry, other than the emergency weapon.

"Shit!" Diana said, tossing an empty pistol at a nearby villain. His head exploded like a watermelon wrapped in det cord. "Grandma Mormo!" Diana said, ducking back behind the wall.

"Maybe Gun-types are weak against Thrown-types?" Akko said, joining her as bullets chipped away at the concrete wallette.

"Well, hell, that's as sound as anything else that's happened to us this weekend! Try one of those shuriken."

Akko tossed what was legally speaking a paperweight definitely not intended for throwing at people. She hit a chubby guy in a Hawaiian shirt; he was instantly and utterly slain.
"Huh!" Diana said. "This'll be easier than I thought."

"This'll be goddamn cake!" Finnelan said, climbing up the ladder with the porron's handle clenched precariously in her teeth. She paused to rub some nose-blood away with her sleeve. Just a couple of bumps had gotten the life back into her, enough that she could finally shake down the Kraut midget for more Adderall to stretch out the high.

"Dear God, woman!" Amanda said, holding the ladder steady, "I never thought I'd ever say this but you're on enough Adderall to tame a room full of aughties tweens, do you really think it's safe to climb a ladder on top of trying to aim that weird free-love party shit at Jasminka's mouth?"

"Oh, don't be such'cha stick inna mud, Amanda!" Jasminka said. "A Man Cons Jazz is fun! Just 'cuz the game's gone evil doesn't mean it ain't fun no more!"

Jasminka was their last, best hope for a subject, with Cons having checked out after only a few cupfuls of wine got her good and sloppy--she was napping on the couch as they played, kicking her legs like a pupper having a bad dream--and Ghost Skull having drank three times his weight in wine before screaming at his own ass a few minutes (normal possum behavior, according to Jazzy) and falling asleep, and Prof. Pisces being a teetotaler. It was a good thing she was such a goddamn glutton or they'd have lost to any number of Jak's minions in the contest.

"Open wide, pinkie," Finnelan said, doing the math in her head as she lined up the metaphorical sights on the porron. Jasminka popped her mouth open, rubbing her tum tum happily and readying for the drink. "Alright... just gotta..." She tilted the porron forward and launched a sniper-like stream of wine at Jazzy's yawning maw, the droplets of red wine all landing securely within all the way from the top of the precariously tall stepladder.

Amanda kept time. "Fifteen... sixteen... seventeen... keep it up, keep it up! Twenty! Keep that hand steady!"

"Just a little more," Finnelan said between grit teeth. Her hands were starting to twitch, and droplets began to splash across Jasminka's face. "Son of a bastard, don't you fail on me, you..."

Jasminka gulped down the last of the porron's contents. "Mm' mm~"

"That's thirty seconds of pour! Goddamn!" Amanda said. "And that's an eighteen foot ladder and you're standing right on the top thing like you're not supposed to so that's... 23 feet! Lucky number!"

She glimpsed at the board, a Pictionary sheet revealing that the proportional best on the other side was sixteen feet for thirty seconds with marginal spillage.

"We did it! That's another Thinny down and that's Argentina back on our side! Jak's bros are off the mainland! We got 'em whipped!" Amanda pumped her fists in the air. "I can't believe I ever thought you shouldn't get super high on coke, teach!"

"Fuck all those little bastards on that other side of the dimension!" Finnelan said, licking wine residue from the spout of the porron. "I mean that are in the other... you know what I godsdamn mean! The universe can bite my still-tight ass!" She knelt on the stair's top platform, ready to climb back down, and promptly tripped. Luckily, she didn't hit any of the many board game tables, causing potentially cataclysmic events. Instead she just landed on her good arm. She may be a witch, but strung out on speed and after a long day of ups and downs her landing was artless and she shattered every bone in her right arm and embedded shards of shattered porron in her hip.

"Oh," Jasminka said, rising from her spot. "That doesn't... that doesn't look..." She leaned to the side
and barfed up a pint of wine. "Oh, no, I'm wasting good drink. Thash... thassho bad..."

"Aw, shit," Amanda said. "Aw, shit!" She scrambled for the first aid kit and emergency surface alert. After a moment's hesitation she slammed the red button. "Hey, uh, if anyone's up there, Prof. Finnelan just broke a bunch of bones and she ain't sounding too hot! And, uh, if you got more good board game people, send 'em down."

Pisces watched this play out from her bowl as she managed the team's holdings on the Scythe board. She felt a hollowness in her heart, a sense of distance. An omen, perhaps. Their machines would only hold out so much longer against the encroach of Jak as he ruled from his fortress off the United States mainland. Russia was teetering towards a final loss; he could counter their counterattack all too well, and they had expended so much in this offense, both in the game and in their reality, they could not hope to recover if they failed now.

Amanda waited by the intercom as she dug around in the first aid kit for things that could set a bone, hoping for a response. None came. They were alone.

"Man," Amanda said. "I just wanted to bang a hottie and rule the world."

"You'll live long enough to regret this," Sucy said after savoring a mouthful of Happy Accident marshmallow cream. She shredded cards from her opponent's hand with Imperial tactics and the dark sorceries of Rasputin and piled on passive bonuses from a city's worth of landmarks keeping her health safely in the 30s while her enemy hung on barely in the 10s.

Lotte lay out her hand, a brutal sweep of Mythic horrors with the universal card General Winter headlining. That was a sledgehammer of a final hit, but she didn't even announce her cards, much less look her opponent in the eye. Her opponent was absolutely not Sucy. She didn't hear their name, and they had spent every round since the fifth desperately trying to salvage a victory from a no-holds-barred assault. She had lucked into a strong early green card, then winnowed down her deck 'til it was nothing but heavy-hitters hand after hand. He could barely slow her down even with gold cards chipping at her hand and blue gasping for life.

They didn't even acknowledge their current opponents, who fell before them as surely as wheat falls before a... whatsitcalled... combine harvester, that's it. It became evident to even Ted that the other matches were formalities. Match commentary fell by the wayside; the showrunners were planning instead for the inevitable final match and how to best hype it up.

"I can only wonder what's going through your head," Sucy said. "How badly am I gonna make you eat your words? How long are you gonna cry when you realize it's over?"

"Malachite Mistress," Lotte said, still not looking at the man she played, "Nav, acquire a Fext to the top of my deck with Mistress's faction bonus, draw a card with Nav's, Fext, destroy your Flag Over the Reichstag, rest goes to you. Game."

"Sure," Sucy said. "Ignore me. Fine tactic. You can't ignore me for long, you heartslut. Sooner than later we're gonna be staring each other down, and the end will be here, and not for me. You understand?"

Lotte drew a fresh hand for her second game against her opponent, who was at present trying to augur victory with a starting hand of one ruble and two broken bottles of vodka.

"I bet you do, you dowry-giving Aryan-looking switch hitter."

"Lord a'mighty, the smack talk comin' out of Sonorous Sucy's mischief hole!" Ted said.
"This is the second-most mischievous hole I have on me," Sucy said, licking her lip open-mouthedly.

Lotte wondered where Lilou was. With any luck, safe in her room feeding those eels.

The haystack, the mystery man cloaked in darkness, and a semi-mobile gargoyle were the only returning players.

"I see our numbers have diminished," said the three-eyed dealer. "How unfortunate. Still, the game must carry on, and the pot grow ever deeper."

She flourished, and the pot grew full.

"--me go--" said Kamala, shrieking in terror. "What--where--how did--what the hell happened? Why are some of you back? I--I thought that one was gonna let me go home!"

"Not being selected for the first day's bounty does not remove you from the pool," the dealer purred, brushing an icy-cold, chitinous hand across Kamala's face. "Please show some dignity. You are a prize and should behave like one."

Kamala cowered behind a stack of chips and prayed for death.

"I just hope everyone has a good time," the man in the shadows said. "As good as that janitor over there, at least."

The janitor sweeping up shed hay was whistling a cheery song. Maybe it was the wand he found that put him in a good mood.

"Enemy sighted! Taking 'em out!" Akko shouted, aiming the rocket launcher and squeezing the trigger. The gun made a farty noise and a solid projectile popped out, punching a gun-toting ganger through a window. "Ha ha, hilarious."

Diana finished katanaing the last miniboss, a final swing slinging the man's blood from her sword before she returned it to a sheathe she'd found. Not in the dungeon, mind, just around. They'd ran out of throwing weapons midway through the first floor, but there had been plenty of random debris Akko referred to as "physobjects." They hadn't even needed to use magic yet. Now they stood in the third floor of the dungeon, the wide-open white-walled motivational-poster-festooned meeting room littered with bodies.

"That's the last guy, huh?" Akko said, throwing the rocket launcher and its three remaining rockets into a trash can. "That really was easy. Wow, we're like mass murderers now!"

"Shush," Diana said, approaching the heavy iron door leading to the next room. "We're not out of this one yet. Our goal should be behind this door, because, well, I'm going to be honest, I don't think they'd put it anywhere else even if you paid them to do so."

"Got it!" Akko said, drawing her wand. "Anybody else waiting for us, we're gonna ship 'em back home in a coffee can!"

"Yes, especially with the rocket launcher," Diana said.

Akko nodded.

"Well? Aren't you going to get it? I see three more missiles poking out."
"But it has germs on it now," Akko said.

"You're covered in the blood of at least two dozen men and that's just who you killed at close range," Diana said.

"But blood isn't ge-e-e-erms!"

Diana remembered her discussions with her therapist and engaged in her calming meditation of thinking really hard about taking some Xanax and imagining it kicking in. "That's fine." She kicked in the boss door and brandished her katana. "Boss of the Rogues, prepare to be sliced open from..."

The room was empty, without even a carpet or wallpaper, though there were a bunch of cheap TVs lined up on the wall facing the door showing what they presumed was a live feed of somewhere else, somewhere fancy. A tall bald man in a suit stood behind a desk, looking exactly like Akko imagined he would look like. Also in the room on the video was Tommy Bahama, a genial, bearded fat man with a straw hat, Hawaiian shirt, and khaki shorts, also exactly like Akko imagined him other than being tied up. And last but not least there was a cage with some scared, sad-looking snakes in it, lying on the villain's desk.

Akko rolled in, wand at the ready. "Yeah, time to--oh, hey, a screen thingey. Hi, Tommy Bahama!"

"Hey there, Akko," Tommy Bahama said. "Saw you at the restaurant last night! Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"It was pretty good but you gotta do something about the chips and dip prices, man. It's completely ludicrous!"

"I'll see about that!" Tommy Bahama said, the bald man stepping in front of him.

"Ahem. Akko, was it? And I do believe Diana Cavendish. Famous witches both, but witchcraft alone is not enough to stop me. You've come to a dead end. Continue searching and my prisoners will come to a dead end of their own..."

"You're in the Silver Witch," Akko said.

"Akko!" Diana said. "But also yes, we can tell where you are."

The bald man furrowed his brow. "Your investigative genius is to be commended--"

"There's a sorcerer's stone in the background," Akko said, pointing. "Like, right outside your office."

"And your nameplate says that you're the CEO of Silver Witch Inc.," Diana said, "and there's only one Silver Witch casino."

"Goddammit," he mumbled. "Well, while we're disclosing fully, I'll have you know that I've got my best agent en route to destroy you. Or perhaps capture you. You'll find out when she decides how best to punish your insolence."

"That's what they all say," Diana said, stepping forward and slicing through the TVs with two mighty swings of her katana. "Alright, to the Silver Witch, before--"

Heavy footsteps echoed from the stairs.

"Well," Akko said, "that's a boss."

Their attacker stomped into the room and revealed their true form to the brittle fluorescent lights: a
woman, judging by the lipstick and the shape of her jaw, clad head to toe in a silver poncho with floppy silver foam padding sized for someone twice her height. Moving looked like a chore for her and the thin slit in her visor didn't seem to provide any visibility at all. On the other hand, she had an M60 machine gun and a plush Shiny Chariot doll hanging off of her.

"Man, what's with these people and dolls?" Akko said, keeping her wand pointed at their attacker.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the doll said in Chariot's voice.

"Oh, crap, scary living doll!" Akko said, hurling a fusilo spell at it. The doll dropped to the ground, dodging the attack.

"Hey, hey, ease off the merchandise, lady!" their attacker said, brandishing her gun and firing off a short burst. Diana interposed herself and conjured a defensive shield, the rounds ricocheting off.

"Akko, attack plan theta!" Diana said.

"Roger!" Akko said, just emptying a shitload of cheap fusilo spells into the attacker. The energy bolts rebounded off the armored shell like she'd just shot them at a bank door.

The two kept firing for a few moments before it became apparent neither of them were gaining ground.

"Well, there's that," Akko said.

"Attack plan alpha it is," Diana said, raising her sword and charging, shouting at the top of her lungs as she crossed the distance. As she came in katana range, the boss stepped into her range and kneed her in the gut, sending her flying back and rolling along the floor and across multiple corpses. "Ow," she whimpered. "Bad idea. That was a bad idea."

The armored woman strapped her gun to her back and advanced. The doll ran out between them.

"Ah, excuse me a moment!" she said nervously. "I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding. Akko, you just happened to find all these dead bodies here, right?"

"Well, I made like half of them," Akko said. "And why are you bein' so familiar with me, scary doll?"

"I'm not scary, I'm the best-selling Chariot doll! I bet you had one of me!"

"Two," Akko said. "So they could be married."

"Aww," their attacker said. "That's adorable. Hey, that's sort of what we did earlier, huh, Chariot~?"

The doll sputtered. "Please, not in front of--"

"Time out!" Diana said, trying to remember what the hand gesture for that was. She just held her palm out and hope that got the point across. "What the hell is actually going on here?"

"Well, I got a call from my boss and I've gotta kick your asses," the lady in the armor said. "Not really negotiable, I took out a big loan from them to pay for the Robo Vampire power armor. Least I get to use it."

"Counter-offer," Diana said. "We help you defeat your old boss, you get to keep the power armor, and we don't have to fight."

"I'll consider it."
"Next on the docket: Chariot?"

"It's a long story," the doll said.

Akko shot a disenchanted spell at the doll. With a soft pop and a plume of smoke it turned into an incredibly naked Chariot.

That ground things to a halt for a good, long time.

"Thank you, based God," Akko said, before fainting in bliss.

Diana tried to force herself into behaving like a lady and instead stared directly at Chariot's gigantic titties. "hbuh" she said.

"Cho!" the Robo Vampire (let's go with that) said, uppercutting her in the gut so hard she slammed into the wall and fell back down in a shower of plaster, sparks, and an obliterated light fixture. She was soon with Akko in night-night land.

"Sweet lady Mormo, you don't have to be so rough on them!" Chariot said, stepping over corpses with a daintiness she found vaguely shameful on reflection. "They're my students!"

"If I turned 'em in without a bruise, I'd get punished," Suzie said, tossing the unconscious witches over her shoulder and jamming their wands in a convenient storage compartment. "Not the rules I make, but the rules I follow."

Chariot fidgeted. "Suzie, I understand why you made your decisions, but... I think you might be going too far."

Suzie regarded Diana and Akko. "How old are they?"

"Seventeen."

"Huh. I thought they'd be younger."

"No, not of legal age..."

"Oh, they're definitely A-O-C for, like, being girlfriends, just not appearing in porn or watching it."

Suzie patted their backs. "They're tough, they'll bounce back."

"You're not actually going to--"

"Yes I am," she said, turning to the window Akko blew open. "You can follow me or you can look for some clothes, but this is the life I'm choosing." She marched to the opening. "I know a little sex can't make your mind up for you... but I hope you know that under the circumstances, I'm about to make the decision that's best for me, right here, right now. Do you read what I'm putting down?" She gestured grandly; Chariot followed the sweep of her hand.

"...I understand," Chariot said. "Can you hand me their wands, please?"

"Sure," Suzie said, throwing the wands back to her.

Chariot pressed Diana's against her head and cast the spell. She turned back into the Chariot doll. In silence, she marched after Suzie, and the two of them leaped from the window into perfect three-point landings on the sidewalk below. By the time someone called the Ghostbusters over a mysterious broken-glass-shaped hole three stories above the single-floor shopping mall, the two of them were long gone.
Time passed.

Samantha Badcock crept down the hallway, perpetually refreshing the website on her phone, trying to see if her heart from Shur-Fine So-So Hearts, Your Website For Discount Tickers, was finally en route to Luna Nova. She looked up in time to avoid bumping into Avery, that one witch, you know the one.

"What's going on at this hour, young lady?" Badcock said.

Avery pointed down the hallway, which had turned into damp subterranean caverns overgrown with eldritch plant life and the spoor of random encounters. "That team the little science one leads is ending the world. And apparently Ms. Finnelan's on a lot of cocaine and helping them stop it."

"She's on--wait, she's what?" Samantha said.

"There's some speaker noises, but anybody who goes to investigate doesn't come back, or they do but it's later and they're hurt."

"Son of a bitch," Badcock said, straightening her uniform and gunning it.

"Wait, if your heart's all messed up--" Avery said. "Whatever. I'm gonna lie down and wait for death. How 'bout you two?"

Joanna and Kimberly, whoever they were, were recording events with a regular note pad and a cell phone camera.

"We're gonna die doin' what we loved," the one with the glasses and the cell phone camera said. "Or at least that we did to pass the time constructively."

"Eh, I'm ready for this planet to get flushed, yannow?" the notepad one said. "We had a good run. I just wanna be here for the really cool parts."

"Yeah... whatever." Avery lay face-down on the ground and waited for something to wander out and eat her, or whatever.

"So it's come down to this," the dealer said, shuffling the cards a final time. "Who will achieve victory? Who will walk away in shame? Time is running low."

"All our time," the man in the darkness said.

"Speak for yourself, person who I presume does not perpetually recycle matter into his being to sustain his existence indefinitely," Strawmonster said.

"Very well. Then let us--"

Someone poked a hole in the endless darkness of the room. A humanoid glob of slime sloshed their way through, holding up an enormous bag in one hand and a souvenir wand from the 10th floor gift shop in the other. "Hold the fuck up!" she said. "I'm buying in to this game and I don't care who I have to kill to do it!"

"How bold," the dealer said. "Gentlemen, do you oppose this opponent's entrance?"

"If they can buy in, let 'em lose," Strawmonster said.
The gooey figure struggled to reach the table, throwing down a bag full to bursting with premium obsidian chips. "It took more and faster poker than you've ever seen to get that," Wangari said, "but it was goddamn worth it."

"Oh my God it's you," Kamala said, not even sure what she was feeling at this point.

"I'm gonna save you, Ms. Marvel, no matter what it takes!" The dealer threw out a fresh hand of protector-encased cards. "Let's fucking do this."

"Welcome back," the man in darkness said.

"To where you're gonna lose," Strawmonster said.

"May I inquire why you took so long to return?" the man in darkness said.

"Quote-unquote friend magicked me into a thing that poured goo on me. The spell wore off so I walked out."

"Oh. So you're not one of the 'slime girls' that are so popular on the internet lately."

"Hell no--and speaking of hell no, hey, you! Janitor guy!"

The janitor looked up from sprinkling sawdust around the trail Wangari left behind her.

"Trade you my wand for this one! It's prettier even if it's got one tenth the amperage it should have!"

The janitor's wizened face brightened and he tossed her wand to her as she volleyed the souvenir wand at him. She twirled it, holstered it (or at least stuck it on her hip) and returned to the game.

"It's come to this!" Ted said over the loudspeaker. Lotte and Sucy stood back to back in a circle of every player who concentrated to pose lying sprawled on the floor, as if the witches had physically beaten their asses rather than just in game form, so the photographer may make an especially cool picture for the website. "The wins are tallied, the finalists chosen. Sucy Manbavaran and Lote Jansson, tied at two perfect runs! But now, here and now, only one may emerge victorious."

Lotte wrapped her arms tight around her bride, who'd finally returned a couple of games ago. "Are we any safer now?" Lotte said.

"There is a little hope," Lilou said. "But not much. All that you know is in a precarious balance. One tilt--"

"Shut the fuck up," Sucy said, in an unknowing echo.

Lilou flinched and held Lotte tight. Lotte felt tears through her shirt. She clenched her fist.

"Sucy Manbavaran," Lotte said, not looking at Sucy. "You've insulted my wife for the last time."

"Oh, I haven't begun--"

Lotte's wand was in her hand. "Metamorphie vestis." A spiral of magic swept across her and Lilou, and the two were clad in spectacular garb. Lilou was draped in golden, glittering silk with a baby blue waist and ponytail ribbon, a platinum tiara set with pearls, a pearl necklace dangling down to her chest, and neat translucent silk sleeves that Lotte didn't know what they were called. Lotte wore a swank Red Army leather jacket and thin-framed round-lensed glasses.
Lotte really did hope people knew the designs were swiped completely from Dr. Zhivago (herself, as Pasha in the army) and Don Bluth's Anastasia (guess), because Dr. Zhivago is a classic and Anastasia was perpetually underrated and so romantic and the animation was beautiful and it wasn't Bluth's fault that non-magic people didn't know Rasputin really was a witch and he really did turn into a scary monster though it was after World War II and Hellboy mostly killed him in the 90s--

--ahem.

Sucy deigned peer behind her. "Fancy. Want me to send your mama a picture of you in that uniform?"

"My mother loves Dr. Zhivago, she would get this reference. Would your mother want you to know whose god you're tributing today?"

"No..." whispered Lilou.

"Pardon?" Lotte whispered back.

Sucy narrowed her visible eye. "What god? What god are you--did you just say I'm not living the life Zharlloigor would have me live?"

"Don't..." Lilou whispered.

Lotte braced herself and said "Yes. That's exactly what I said. Your god would be ashamed of your conduct today and he'd give you a good talking-to if he were here right now and driving everyone crazy."

Sucy rest her wand upon her forehead. "Metamorphie vestis aleph one." The lights flickered; many stories above, the sorcerer's stone audibly groaned. Vile sorceries metamorphosed Sucy's clothes into something far, far more extravagant and far, far, far less comfortable. Her new dress was composed of many, many layers of near-translucent silk, overlapping patterns barely keeping things at an R rating. Live black lotuses grew around her neck and the hem of her dress. Coils of gold and silver wove up her thighs and torso, not actually concealing anything in their wide loops. Bone jewelry clattered at her waist and wrists. Blue bands of paint streaked across her eyes (presumably both) and mouth.

"For your information, Little Miss Prissypants, I'm living exactly the life Zharlloigor Be They One Or Two would want me to live. In fact, if he were angry at me, it's for not inviting Shugoran to this place and letting him find out what your lights taste like, so I can laugh at your sex doll wife's tears while I blow my mind open with the most holy of intoxicants. And the reason I'm not doing that is that I have no acid to waste on a tactless little Christ-kissing Aryan wannabe who shames the Walker on the Wind by pledging herself to the God of the Witchhammer." She was now, at last, looking Lotte right in the eye. She gestured with her wand and forced Lilou away from her, stepping closer to her. "You better pray to your sad little God o' the Cross. He's gonna ignore you, like he always does, because I'm gonna smother you in the tides of my vengeance like a horse in Boston the day the molasses tanks burst."

"Please stop touching me," Lotte said, for Sucy's hands were firmly on her ass and squeezing tight.

"No, you heartslut." She forced her mouth on Lotte's, slipping her tongue into her former friend's mouth, licking her teeth and tasting sweetness.

Lotte heard Lilou crying into her hands and somehow that was worse.

"I think we've just witnessed a rape threat or two," Ted said, reaching for his phone. "Please give us
"a moment to call the--"

Sucy and Lotte aimed their wands at Ted.

"We'll settle this here and now," Lotte said.

"You better fucking believe it," Sucy said.

"Yes, m'ams," Ted said, hand edging away.

The two witches paced away from each other. The world became surreal; light felt liquid, air a rough blanket drawn about them.

"This is it," Lotte said to her wife. "The final battle. I'll stop the end here."

"Lotte," Lilou said, "this is the end of the world."

The elevator up to the boss was taking its damn time.

"Was that tower always there?" Suzie said, pointing at a giant golden statue of some He-Man-looking guy with a dagger and a mean expression.

Reality was pulled taut.

"There was an Aliens board game?!" Amanda said, slapping a new mag into her P90. The cheap-looking xenomorph's remains melted into the floor, to Cons's intense disgust.

"There's a new one that came out that's pretty neat!" Jasminka said, eating some Grumble Puffs, feeding the occasional puff to Ghost Skull and taking solace in the chlorp of his mandibles.

"Whoopee," Finnelan said, preparing some cocaine for injection. It was, after all, a fine topical analgesic. "If there's a cannibal movie board game out there maybe it can kill me so the thing I love most gets to kill me instead."

Pisces farted.

"You don't get to use my mother's name, you goddamn fish," Finnelan said. "I should empty that bowl out and let you drown."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Amanda said, snapping her fingers. "It's too late in the game to turn on each other!"

The board game tables emit a pulsing red light. The last challenge in between themselves and Jak's fortress had been a bitch times a thousand, but it was done and dusted now. There was only one challenge left.

"It's never too late to give up," Finnelan said, eyeing the needle. "When you fuck up enough, it's all a question of if you're brave enough to finish pulling the trigger."

"Really, though," Jasminka said, patting Finny's good shoulder.

"Don't touch me, you fat pig."

"Aww! But pigs are cute when they're fat!"
"Just... fuck, I haven't done anything since I broke everything. I'm just a goddamn burden like I am everywhere else." There was an old vein in her leg she liked to use. It was shallow, and when she was stressed out, like now, it pulsed visibly. There was more than enough coke to overclock her systems and send her out with a bang. Die tripping, like Aldous Huxley, invincible 'til she broke. That might salvage today. That might just salvage a long life of watching--

Something thin and golden fell from the ceiling. Amanda snatched it out of the air. "Here it is, guys," she said. "Our card ticket to Hawaii. This one's for all the marbles. You ready?"

Constanze loaded her SMG and nodded. Jasmina shouldered her chainsaw, or rather it was the groundskeeper's chainsaw, whom he gave it to her on the condition that she wouldn't use it on any of her Jam Buddies, whose gummy innards tended to clog the chain up something fierce. She didn't know how he would know that, but trusted his judgment.

"Sure," Finnelan said, pressing her needle against her thigh. Or she would have if someone cold, wet, and clammy hadn't interposed herself. "Goddammit, Pisces, don't interfere with--"

"Anne?" Badcock said from a hole in the biomass that had sealed them off from the outside world.

"...Samantha?!" Finnelan said.

The card yawned wide and reality snapped completely.
Diana and Akko dreamed.

The two of them sat on the ground in a mostly-empty... room of some kind. The floor was white, there was a small stage flanked by three-step staircases and slightly concealed with shiny paper clouds and a rainbow painted on the back wall.

"Diana?" Akko said.

"If you're not just a character in my dream," Diana said, "say something that only you would know in real life, and when I wake up tell it to me again." She turned her logic around in her head a bit. "Okay, nevermind, I'll just roll with it. Hey, Akko. That's a fancy stocking cap you've got on."

"You too," Akko said. She checked her head. "This is going over my hair blob, and I'm not a fan. Huh, did we die fighting what's-her-face in the robot suit?"

"The technical term is 'power armor,' and hopefully no. This feels more like a dream than an afterlife, you know?"

"I heard that salvia is what it feels like to be dead, so maybe when you're dead everything feels like a dream you can't wake up from." Akko trailed off "...and now I'm sad."

Diana gave her a hug. "We're fine. I know we..." She trailed off, witnessing the man in the musty, frightening rabbit costume. It was dark brown, with a white face and belly, a red-and-white-striped stocking cap with long, vaguely Rasta-looking (if Akko could judge such things, which she couldn't) scarves or heavily-frayed costume ears. Its eyes were rolled to the back of its head and its mouth twitched like a dying insect's leg as he spoke:

"Hey, kids, welcome to Dream Land! Looks like you've taken a bad fall back in Daytimeville. That's the place where you go when you're up and doing things in the day! Right now you're in Dream Land, which is more real than Daytimeville ever could hope to be."

"Oh, shit, you're Dream Bunny," Akko said. "From the book!" She pointed at the Dream Bunny bigass book o' cryptids, which Diana had in hand and was waving.

"It is! It's the guy!" Diana blinked with extra hardness. "Is this what it feels like to be you, Akko? Christ, it hurts."

"You said one of the C-words!" Akko said. "Mormo's not gonna be happy about that!"

"It's alright," Dream Bunny said, continuing to edge towards them. "Now that you're in Dream Land, you're safe and far away from everything that could hurt you. And you have a wonderful investment opportunity in a Daytimeville Dream Bunny of your very own!"

"My mom said to never buy real estate in an imaginary place," Akko said.

"Your mother was short-sheeting you on a growth industry," Dream Bunny said. "Now that we have that behind us, let me show you one of the amazing things about Dream Land! If you want to sing a song, all you have to do is start singing and the words will come to you. Let's start with an old classic."

"Wait a moment," Diana said. "I think I'd like to start us off with a song I just wrote... about why
we're here and what's going on in the waking world." A beat began to play from somewhere, and Diana started a painfully Caucasian rap:

"My name's Diana and I'm here to say
I'm into my Akko in a major way
I like to dress up when we're going to bed
My fav fashionista's named Edith Head
But that's not what got us in trouble today
That's an evil man who's up to no good today!
But even he's not the problem we seek
The worst thing that's coming through town this week
Your bigass book is chockfull of spooks
That float around and give us bad looks--"

"Really? 'Looks'?'" Akko said.

"--shut the hell up, I'm making a point
so we can get up and out of this joint!
Dream Bunny comes from 615 BCE
And he won't give us information for free
But this loophole I found will tell us all
The thing we should stop so we can have a ball!
The Luna Nova library may have an Eli Roth ban
But I just found out that Lotte's girlfriend is a--"

"--beautiful woman," Lotte said, holding her wife close in one arm as she shuffled her deck one-handed with some eye-hurting Gunslinger-level hand trickery. "I know right here and now that doesn't sound like much, but..."

"Here and now," Lilou said, "it's everything."

Darkness seemed to descend upon the card-playing stage. The air conditioning had gone from "adequate" to "blistering wind at their back." Sucy waited for Lotte to finish shuffling, her hair billowing like an indigo cape. In the stark light illuminating her from on high her gray skin was faintly luminous, projecting its waxy pallor around her like grease on a lens.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ted said, cowering behind the announcer's table, "I think we're witnessing a Tsar Realms showdown like no other. One could swear that the armies of Russia past and present are gathering about us to wage a war never before seen on American soil."

"I think that's exactly what's happening, sir," his smaller, weaker co-commenter said, pointing.

The walls fell away. Dense snow-scoured taiga stretched for hundreds of yards all around, the golden lights of Hawaii and the rainbow nightmare lights of Vegas shining like stars between the snow-burdened trees. Funny, that, given it wasn't even two PM yet.

More, there were new people present. Armies silhouetted against the lights of the city, eyes glinting like far window-light, waiting for who would call them to battle first.

Lotte let go of her deck and it floated away from her, the top five cards lining up in a trade row next to a stack of Vodka cards. Her opening cards appeared in her hand--three of them. Across from her,
Sucy snapped her fingers, and a hand of five cards appeared between her fingers.

Snow fell.

"Turn one, bitch," Sucy said.

Two rubles and a yakut knife. She analyzed the trade row.

"I'll buy one Gopnik Runner," she said, the card on the trade row vanishing. A lean young man, built for running, walked from the forest and squatting just behind her, so the stripes on his pants lined up with the stripes on his shoes. He knocked back a stiff drink from a bottle of aftershave.

A yakut appeared in front of her.

"Well?" Sucy said. "Ain't got all day, slut."

Hand trembling, Lotte took the knife in her now-empty hand, wound up, and threw the blade at Sucy. The handle dinged off of Sucy's forehead and a red "1" appeared above her head, soon fading. The esoterically-dressed witch didn't even blink.

"My turn," Sucy said, and took that turn she did. She had enough rubles to buy a Kolob card, to Lotte's dread, and punctuated her turn by slinging her own yakut at Lotte, the blade burying in her ribcage with a breath-stopping force. She felt the number 1 float above her head like a brand of shame before the blade vanished. The strength left her legs and Lilou caught her before she landed on her ass.

"Speak to me," Lilou said.

"Kolob..." Lotte said. "He can scrap any card in the trade row when he's played. Predicting the trade row is pretty much impossible now. We're flying blind."

"How can you stop that?" Lilou said.

"I can't."

Amanda extricated herself from a flipped truck. "Are we alive?!" she said to the universe, hoping someone would answer.

Constanze made an angry noise and climbed down from Vegas Vic, a huge machete clenched in her teeth like if a Somali pirate and a Caribbean pirate had a baby. She held out a comment card: "I am, you're not."

"Oh." Amanda tried to shake off the concussion, hoping it wasn't permanent now that she was dead. "Shit, I think I got conkied pretty bad. I don't know if you've noticed but board game night kinda sucks tonight."

In characteristic silence Cons held out Amanda's PDW.

"Do I gotta? If I'm gonna haunt Las ... are we in Las Vegas?! I thought we were supposed to be in--"

It sunk in at last that around her the worlds of Waikiki Beach and Las Vegas had now overlapped. Not that she had any more than the most vague mental image of Waikiki, but she could guess the neon-rainbow casinos didn't belong in Waikiki and confused people in swimsuits were substantially less likely to be in Nevada. The shimmering images of things they'd built in the board game--the reinforced CDC buildings, the SSS power grids, the Russian giant robots--jut at odd angles from
both styles of building present. The only free-standing and solid game object was a colossal gold
statue of Jak, leering at them from behind rows of skyscrapers and casinos.

"Fuck me, everything's gone Mortal Kombat Annihilation. And why does everything Jak build have
to have him in that same pose?" Amanda mimicked it, leaning forward a little on her right leg, arms
slightly raised, elbows bent forward, her gun in her right hand.

Cons shrugged.

Jasminka slouched into view, leaning on her chainsaw and trying to not put too much weight on a
leg that was super busted. "Hi, guys," she said. "Don't suppose someone has an item that can give
me health?"

Cons rummaged through her pockets and yanked out a tall, rectangular, 1920s vintage Chinese
takeout box.

"Oh, Food! Good ol' Food," Jasminka said, prying open the box and finding it full of small brownish
chunks each labeled FOOD. Bitterly mindful of conserving her mana, she chomped the vaguely
savory wads and felt her femur snap back into place as her health restored just a little. "Mm-mm.
Now we just need to find the grownups."

Constanze pointed.

Profs. Finnelan crawled sputtering out of a fountain a few yards away. She blinked away the red
water, which had a strong taste of grime and copper, and tried to find her fellow faculty. There was
Pisces, her bowl shattered, swimming in a panic and trying to avoid the growing red cloud in the
water, and there was Samantha...

...impaled through the belly by the outstretched sword of a Jak statue, a perfect copy of every single
icon of Jak save for the blood trickling down its elbow from Samantha Badcock's stone sword-
wound. Badcock's body lay limp, her upper half propped on the fountain's shoulder and head, her
legs dangling in air.

"I think something went wrong," Badcock said, looking down at her wound.

"No," Finnelan said, scarcely a whisper, feeling for her wand.

"Should we help?" Amanda said.

"Nah," Jasminka said, gesturing with her chainsaw. "Too much temptation, you know?"

"...temptation to do what?"

"Nothing," Jazzy said.

Finnelan blasted the sword off at the hilt, and tagged Samantha with a feather fall spell on her way
down. She trudged through the fountain and caught Badcock with her good arm. She cast every first-
aid spell she knew, but soon she was left with only the triage bubble as an option and precious little
mana left to cast. "No, no, no, no... come on, any of you, do you have a healing item? A spell?
Anything? I don't have anything for this."

"Keep it in there," Badcock said, struggling to stay awake. "That'll stop the bleeding. That's better
than..." She mouthed words, but couldn't speak them. She slipped into unconsciousness, and the
relief Finnelan felt that she wouldn't be suffering was matched only by her guilt over that feeling.
"We need a Healing spell!" Jasminka said. "Shit, did any of us get one?"

"What's-her-name did," Amanda said. "And now they're in the board game, somewhere--"

A ragged mutant in a gold-painted harness shoved his way through a crowd of gosmacked onlookers that formed a rough arena. "Armies of Jak, Earl of Evil! We have found the gods themselves! And now they will fall to us!"

A chubby, mustachioed man with a revolver in one hand and a gold tube in the other pushed through the crowd on the opposite side of the arena. "Too-ra-loo-ra, we're just in time, mates!"

He beckoned and a small gang of colorful characters in mismatched styles gathered around him.

"Monterrey Jack?" Amanda said.

"An' the rest of the Cultist's Union of Comraderie and Courage!" he said.

"We're not using that name."

"Alright, how 'bout just The Good Guys?"

"I object to that!" the ragged mutant said. "From my perspec--"

"We're the Good Guys, screw you!" Amanda flipped the mutant off. It sputtered in shock.

Monterrey raised his tube. "Come on, lads, we got a battle to win!"

"Jak Bros! Cha-a-a-rgel!" the mutant leader said, brandishing a halberd made from a traffic sign. A massive horde of monsters poured through the crowd, though to their credit the monsters didn't try to hurt any civilians.

"Eat it, bitches!" Amanda said, cocking her P90 and firing. She raked a long burst of armor-piercing rounds across the line of mutants, feeling like she was in Stargate SG-1 and thus much better about being dead. Cons emptied her SMG into the horde and Jasminka held out her shrieking chainsaw, which mutants marched into headlong without concern for how badly they were about to die.

An army of mutants and a rag-tag gang of weirdos met in the arena and battled for the fate of mankind.

Diana burst awake at the splash of cold water across her face. "Mother Mormo, who... oh."

She and Akko were awake now, without stocking caps and ominous rabbit or wands or weapons, tied to chairs in a fancy high-rise office. The very same office where they had stared down the master of the Silver Witch Casino right before--oh shit, they'd been betrayed by Chariot and kidnapped by a lady in power armor. It was like being stranded in the mirror-universe-AU Metroid fanfiction of her youth, minus the promise of lesbian sex.

Hopefully minus the promise of lesbian sex in this context.

Their captor sat behind his desk, a fat cigar between his lips and a glower on his face. Behind him through a plexiglass wall was the sorcerer's stone, rotating slowly and casting its supernal light upon all of them. Tommy Bahama and the basketful of snakes were tied up in the corner (yes, even the cage was tied up to be sure). "Astonishing," the villain said. "These are the two who gave me such incredible trouble?"
"You better believe it, you son of a bitch," Akko said, flipping him off even though her hands were tied behind her chair.

"Not so tough now that you've been captured by your betters, eh?" the man said, indicating Chariot--back to being a doll--and that lady in the power armor. "You've done a good job, Suzie Cupid. You alone have--"

"Wait," Diana said. "Suzie Cupid? Like the woman who played Chariot in that porn?"

"Wait," Suzie said, "you let them order porn?"

"It's not my business to ask what my customers desire," said the villain, while Chariot said "It's not like they're lily-white innocents, they're 17 and sexually active!"

"It's the principle of the thing, dammit!" Suzie said to both of them. "You should be at least putting up a token effort, Mr. Romero, no relation to the late lamented George, and you should've made sure to block the channels when you reserved the room, Chariot! Jesus, lady. It's not like a hanging offense or anything but it's also not that hard, you know?"

Chariot fidgeted on the boss's desk. Diana swore that a pair of blush stickers had appeared on her face.

"Are you done moralizing?" Mr. Romero said.

"Yeah, I'm done," Suzie said.

"I should dock your pay for that. And yet, I can think of a means for you to address such a lengthy digression." He tapped out an inch of ash into an ivory ashtray. "Ms. du Nord, I hear that you're naked under that mystical disguise. Surely I can have you switch into something more comfortable, once you assume your true form." He raised an eyebrow.

In the cage, the largest snake raised her coils over the eyes of the smaller snakes.

"I think that can be arranged," Chariot said, padding to the center of the desk.

"I hope it can be!" Akko said, staring at the plush doll's butt and waiting for the spell to end.

"Priorities!" Diana said.

"What could possibly be higher priority right now?!" Akko said.

A tube pushed out of the floor and the snake wriggled out. "Oh, God... oh God... oh sweet Pappy Yig give me strength," the snake said, resting on the shag carpeted floor.

"Oh," Akko said.

"Actually, was the strength of the snake actually established anywhere beforehand?" Diana said. "Maybe it's the concussion talking, but I think we might be safe."

A door opened behind them and a waiter stepped in, two bottles of Armand de Brignac balanced on a serving tray. "As you wish, sir, your usual drink," the waiter said, placing the massive, gold-colored bottles on Mr. Romero's desk. He turned on his heel and walked out; the snake bit him on the heel as he left. The waiter exploded into a fine pinkish mist.

"Oops," Diana said, and strained against her bindings in earnest.
"Now that's not the right kind of tip to be giving a man in the service industry, let me tell you," Tommy Bahama said.

"Sorry, guy," Akko said, trying to look away from Chariot.

"Now, with that late unpleasantness behind us," Mr. Romero said, "let us see what you have to show me, Ms. du Nord." He took one of the bottles and worked off the black wrapping around the cork.

"Of course," Chariot said.

"Chariot!" Akko said, struggling to keep her mind off the snake or the thought that Chariot was gonna be naked again soon, "You have to listen to me! It's not too late! I can feel the good in you emanating out and stuff so please have something lined up to save us!" The snake paused in its slithering to take a swig from a bottle of water that lay in its path for no clear reason. "Come o-o-o-on I don't wanna explode today!"

"Akko," Chariot said, "I hope you understand why I have to do this." She ended the transformation spell.

She returned to her true form. Not naked, tragically, but dressed in her signature skintight ass-kicking outfit, so not all that tragic, really. She'd added some vicious-looking spikes to her boots, Akko noticed after a few seconds. Romero was looking upwards, of course, and so didn't notice them until Chariot kicked him in the chin and straight through the plexiglass wall and into the sorcerer's stone. He hit hard enough to make it wobble in its orbit before he plummeted a couple of stories to the ground of the stone chamber.

"Nrraaagh!" Suzie said, grabbing a trash basket and scooping up the snake in it and flipping it over so that the snake was trapped and unable to attack.

"Aw... come on, lady," the snake said.

"Papa!" one of the little snakes said. "Are you okay?"

"Almost!" the snake dad said. "I'm like... (wheeze)... nine-tenths okay..."

Chariot activated her energy blade and sliced Akko free. "I'm sorry about knocking you out earlier, but there were cameras and microphones everywhere. We had to carry out the ruse a little bit longer."

"I'm fine with that," Akko only half-lied.

Chariot kissed Akko's forehead. "I'll get you patched up when we get back home."

"Why can't we... oh, right, health insurance," Akko said.

Suzie crouched by the snake. "What was that about a papa...?"

"You gotta listen to me," the snake said. "I'm sick. I'm real sick. But the cancer, it's some kinna... some kinna mutant cancer... givin' me super-venom. Been going after the local crime syndicates, thought I'd be able to... make a difference... but they gave me... a choice..."

"Papa, what did you choose?" one of the kid snakes said.

"To take these witches out, and get treatment, at last." He wheezed. "Might just... might just make it, if I do..."
"Aww," Akko said. "Maybe this guy ain't so bad after all."

"Yeah, I can't hate this snake," Suzie said, reaching for the basket.

"I mean, he did kill an innocent person," Diana said, "but we've been killing a lot of people today too, so maybe we--"

Romero hovered back into view. His gushing scalp wound painted the right half of his face with a slick, ruby-colored fightin' mask. He held a pair of wands, each burning with a fierce light. "You'll live just long enough to regret that," he said, narrowing his eyes at the witches.

"Aw, snap," Tommy Bahama said. "I forgot he's a witch too!"

"Meep," Akko said.

Chariot threw her students their wands. "It's four on one now," Chariot said.

"Make that five!" Suzie said, flipping the basket over and freeing the snake.

"Five on one..." Romero said. "If you had ten more witches on your side it might be even." Romero landed on the floor.

"Pour it on!" Suzie said, shouldering her LMG.

"Wait, wait!" Akko said, holding up her free hand. "I wanna see where he's going with this."

Her allies gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Their enemy took a few ominous steps forward, and intoned an attack spell: "Ngaru!" A storm of poorly-composited lightning bolts cascaded from his wands, washing over the four human battlers and knocking them down.

"Crap, crap, crap!" Suzie said, struggling. "That power surge locked my joints! Gotta run a system check!"

"Why didn't any of us dodge that?!!" Diana said, struggling to lift her head. "We're fast! We're good at that!"

"I dunno! Wasn't as dramatic as standing in a line?" Akko said.

Romero tapped his wands together. "If it's drama you want, then it's drama I shall provide." A ball of glowing energy gathered at the intersection of his wands.

It was down to Wangari and the man in shadow.

"Straight," Wangari said, laying out a fan of five cards from three of hearts to seven of spades.

"Death Bed Hand," the man in shadow said, revealing four aces, the words "HA, HA," "YOU," "ARE," and "DEAD" written across the top of each; his fifth card was a "NO JOKER."

Wangari slapped down her hole card. "That's Two Pair."

"Pardon?"

"That's Two Pair. Your Dead Man's Hand only counts as--"
"This isn't a Dead Man's Hand. It's a Death Bed Hand. Completely different." He held the cards out closer to her; Wangari leaned over the table (to the dealer's silent but intense disdain) to squint at them.

"Well, crap, you're right," she said. "Well... that's game, then." She swallowed her pride and slumped back in her seat. "You got me. Son of a bitch!"

Kamala ducked behind an armoire and whimpered in terror.

"You brought your everything to this field of battle," her opponent said, adjusting a small, round pair of sunglasses only now catching the light. "You are a worthy opponent and this battle has been a worthy one."

"Thanks," Wangari said. "Be nice to Kamala, alright? She treated me good. She's worth treating good.... better than I did."

"Oh, I have no use for souls," he said, gesturing vaguely. Kamala launched from the pot and landed in Wangari's lap. A few chips landed in her own lap a second later. "And please, for the trouble."

"Can I go?" Kamala said, just above a whisper.

"Yeah, you can--" Wangari said, and Kamala pulled herself free from Wangari's sticky lap and ran for a glowing exit door at full clip. Wangari would never see her again. The witch groaned and slumped into her seat. "Goddammit."

"Fortune is a fickle mistress," the dealer said. "But know this, O champions mine. None who have contested here was unworthy, and all who leave may know that they were in truly rarified company."

The distinguished competition waved at the pot and the goods sank into their own shadows and vanished. "Young miss," he said, "I will be here another day, perhaps, if there is another day left for us. Perhaps before we leave you would like another game?"

After a long moment, Wangari looked up at him, feeling disgusting and worthless, and said, with all the effort she could muster, "You know, maybe. Where you want this to go down?"

He took his own long moment in the darkness. "Not long from now. I will see you in time."

"Of course you will." Wangari stood, and someone fell through the ceiling in a rain of building materials and a beam of light that scared the hell out of her and the dealer.

It was a woman in a ridiculous padded poncho, judging by the distinctively lady-like grunt of pain as she landed. "Th' hell?" Wangari said in the moment before Chariot landed on top of her, and Diana and Akko sequentially likewise in an awkward pile. "What in the blue hell?!"

Chariot looked up, confused. "Wangari? What happened?" She blinked. "Ooh... did you fall into that bath too?"

Diana took Akko in her arms and rolled off the pile and into an action pose. "Hang tight, he won't be--"

A man floated through the hole in a nimbus of energy. "Still haven't had enough?"

"Hell naw!" Akko said, flinging fusilo blasts at the guy. Suit Lady hovered onto her feet with boot jets that looked like someone firing off sparklers and editing them into the shot, in real life mind, and let loose with a long burst from an M60 machine gun. Their opponent dodged the hail of magic and
mundane fire and answered with a flurry of slashing mystical blades that flew through the air and cut through the floor.

Chariot backflipped out of the way. "Watch your feet, he's doing it a--"

The guy they fought flung himself through the floor, blasting it apart under all his foes' feet.

"Aw, son of a--" Akko said before trailing off into a scream as the four fell through the hole.

Wangari stood up, took a deep breath, and cast an air jet spell, trying to spray off as much of the gunk covering her as she could manage. She managed decently, to her credit. "I'll see you in time, weird guy," Wangari said, and dove after them.

A few moments later a breathy snake fell down the ceiling hole and into the floor hole.

"I will indeed," the man in shadow said.

"Lay 'em out, boys!" Sucy said, seated on the cannon of a T-34. She saluted as a line of the tanks fired off in sequence. The Zbruch Idol absorbed their fire, but shattered, the image of the Axis Mundi fading as its magic fled; the last shells burst around Lotte, blasting the last of her health away and winning the round for Sucy. The Phillipina witch waved to her adoring crowd of nerds busy hiding in craters and behind shattered tanks and the bodies of giants.

"Oh, no!" Little Anastasia said just behind Sucy. "That's round one! If Sucy wins again, it's game over... for everybody!" The Russian National Orchestra swelled an ominous note before one of Sucy's T-34s exploded them. "...aw..."

Sucy's army cheered, drank, and fired heedlessly into the air as they returned to the forests behind her, Sucy taking the opportunity to stretch in ways that pulled her translucent clothing tight over particular parts of her anatomy.

The card game hall was a ruin, even moreso than it was before. Flammables burned, tables were shot to flinders, even buildings on the other end of the street were lightly peppered with missed gunfire and black magic.

"Good luck, Big Sister Lotte!" Little Anastasia said. "It's gonna take all our smarts, but I know we can save the day yet! Isn't that right, Mimi the Matryoshka?"

Mimi the Matryoshka rattled hollowly. The two marched through the snow and into the sorcerous mists of the Tsar Realms game.

"Do we have to buy her in the next time around?" Lilou said.

"Not strictly, no. I didn't know she'd be so... Orko-y," Lotte said.

Sucy cracked her neck. "Mm. Delicious. Now, where were we, Lotte? Ah, yes, seeing who's going first: me, pounding you into the permafrost, or you, getting a chance to warm up before I--"

The sky cracked open, and with a sound like thunder a bald man in a suit flew through a hole in the aurora-lit night and landed in the snow, smoldering. Diana and Akko surfed through the hole on a piece of debris, wands at the ready and linking to shoot a surging, twisting beam of magic at their foe, who rolled out of the way and onto his feet, returning fire while the two witches landed on the snow and snowboarded after him. A chick in a robot suit carrying Chariot flew through the hole next, the robot lady firing off a machine gun at their enemy. Last came Wangari on a souvenir
broom, shooting buff spells at Akko and Diana to keep them on top of their enemy's physical prowess.

"Sucy? Lotte?!" Chariot said. "And who's that... person?"

"My wife, Lilou!" Lotte said as Sucy said "A dead bitch walking." The two bickered with each other for a few moments.

"Forget I asked! We were getting our asses handed to us by the guy who owns this place, but we started to gain ground a few stories up when Wangari joined up! We need your help to nip this in the bud!"

Sucy and Lotte locked gazes, aimed their wands, and mag-dumped their stores of mana into a mass Evict spell. A wave of force flung the combatants and a few gamers who were too near to them clear out of the building and, well, elsewhere. They weren't too concerned.

"They've got this," Sucy said, twirling her wand in her hand.

"Yeah," Lotte said, locking hers shut and returning it to its holster. "This... this is important." No tells, no tells, no tells...

"You better believe it is."

"...yes? Did that come off sarcastic?"

"Ah, so you can't hear the death wish in your own voice. Duly noted." Sucy snapped her fingers and the first-turn hand of three cards appeared before her. "Three rubles. I'll take the Sharpened Pencil."

A section of the Red Army marched out of the wintery gloom, half of them with submachine guns, half of them with their magazines.

"Your turn, bitch."

Lotte scanned the trade row, her hand, and Sucy's unblinking stare and content smirk. She did not see Lilou's expression, made in silence just behind her, though Sucy certainly saw. And thus, the smile.

A snake slithered across the snow, late to the party, but determined to catch up.

The Cultist Union--I mean the Good Guys convened on hallowed ground, some weird fairy-themed wedding chapel kind of place. The guy in the mouse costume watching them creeped Amanda the hell out. Could he see ghosts? Or was she more of a zombie? Or if she was a ghost was she one of those visible ghosts like every ghost she had ever seen or heard about in real life? Wait, she'd gotten shot a few times, so if she was a ghost--

Constanze smacked her.

"Ow!" Amanda said. "Jeez, lay off me, Cons!"

The short witch held up a blackboard: "You're alive."

"Wait, I am? ... Dammit, you tricked me again! Why?"

Cons flipped the blackboard over: "So you would fight without fear of death, like last time."
Amanda grumbled. "Yeah, I guess I did..." Constanze grabbed her legs and turned her around to the upended pew around which the leaders had gathered.

Hannah and Barbara were stuffed in a suit of power armor to share, cheek-to-cheek in the helmet and barely capable of breathing, much less moving, but with a decent defense rating at least. Finnelan and Badcock were in the corner, Badcock finally de-sworded and getting as many stimpacks and healing potions in her as the Good Guys could spare. Pisces swam around in a punchbowl filled with treated water, reading the rules for Slap Jak.

"So, what's the plan?" Amanda said.

"It's right simple," Monterey Jack said. "Jak's army is right here--" he indicated a bunch of red stick figures drawn on the pew, a big gold stick figure behind them--"and we're here--" he pointed at a smaller number of blue stick figures in a simply-drawn church a short distance away--"and this is the road between us." Monterey tapped the empty space between the two forces.

"Yeah, and...?"

"We..." Monterey dragged an imaginary line from the church through the massed fiends into the statue. "...attack."

"Solid!" Amanda said, clapping.

Constanze groaned.

"Well, I don't hear you coming up with a better idea," Amanda said.

Cons waved frantically at the section of wall she'd painted up in an elaborate plan to infiltrate enemy lines and destroy Jak.

"Whatever! I've been up for..." She checked her phone, then Constanze's watch, then gave up. "A billion years. So let's get this done!"

"Shouldn't we be special in this plan?" Hannah said, trying not to eat more of Barbara's hair. "We got sucked in to the game, we had a shitty time..."

"Well, you'd be attackin' with us," Monterey Jack said, gesturing vaguely. "That's special."

"If I'm readin' that right," Jasminka said, analyzing Constanze's plan, "Constanze wants to fill your armor with plastique explosives and blow you up in the middle of the bad guy army, quote, 'even if that's too good for them.'" Jazzy tsked.

"Dude!" Barbara said.

Cons wrote up a counter-argument: "Name one thing you could do to help us."

"Like, set things right now that the chips are down! You know, hero stuff!" Hannah said. "The guys who usually save the world aren't here, so--"

Diana and Akko crashed through a stained-glass window and onto the planning table. A moment later some chick in heavy armor holding on to Chariot flew through another stained-glass window and landed on Hannah and Barbara, crushing them both. Wangari drifted through on a feather fall spell. "Third time's the charm," she said, alighting next to the mouse guy.

Akko stood up. "I can't be-LIEVE Lotte and Sucy would just shove us out like that! What a big jerk
maneuver!"

Diana checked for broken anythings. "Alright, still alive, still in one piece. That's two up."

Hannah and Barbara made pained noises. "These kids sound like they're in trouble," the armor girl said, tearing the plate armor off of them. The two hacked up bile and fell in a contused pile, Barbara's every exhale accompanied by a spray of blood droplets and Hannah mindlessly devouring another lack of Barbara's hair. "Shit, anybody got a healing spell?!!"

"Nobody cares," Constanze said, throwing a blanket over the two.

"I care!" Chariot said, flinging the blanket away. "I think I have a healing potion left for these two. Now somebody fill me in on what the hell is going on before we finish our fight against that son of a bitch who's tried to kill my students and me several dozen times today!"

"It's long and stupid!" Jasminka said.

"Like, the stupidest," Amanda said, after a long pause.

"Then give me the Wikipedia summary!" She tilted the potion into Hannah and Barbara's mouths, one at a time.

Mr. Romero straightened his tie. "I trust this will be a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"Yes, indeed!" Jak, Earl of Evil said. "Is that not right, Jaki, my equally-evil twin sister?"

"Yes, indeed!" Jaki, Jak's Evil Twin, said.

"Especially if it keeps Jak, Earl of Evil safe!" Iridi, Jak's Guard, said.

"Very well. Then let's conquer those meddlesome witches and then Las Vegas!" Romero said.

"And then, the world!" Jak said.

"Yes, the world!" Jaki said.

"Once Jak conquers the world, he will be safe forever!" Iridi said.

The mutant armies cheered the newest ally for their evil cause.

"Wow, that's..." Chariot said.

"Yeah, yeah," Amanda said, not making eye contact with anyone.

"Not our best moment, any of us," Jasminka said.

"Especially not you!" said a Japanese woman in an indigo kimono with gold trim, a woman with pale green skin. "Why did you let Zhar-Lloigor destroy the Slime Monster while I was in range of its death burst, Yig Snake Daddy?"

"I, er..." Jasminka said.

"I have nightmares, every night. The smell, the texture, the endless amount... it haunts me." The
woman shivered and hugged herself.

Wangari pat her on the back. "There, there. I've been there before."

"You and a statistically unlikely number of us, at that," Diana said, narrowing her eyes at the green stains in Wan-Wan's hair.

"Yeah, it's some kinna weird magic pattern thi--wait, the dream!" Akko said.

"...right, the dream!" Diana said, snapping her fingers. "Patterns of strangeness, visions of apocalypse, every weird thing coming together in the last hours... it all ties in to Lotte's wife."

"Wait, what?" effectively everybody present who knew Lotte said.

"Later with the 'wife' thing," Diana said, gesturing for everyone to calm down. "But what she is has wide-reaching ramifications for everything going on. Lotte's wife is a--"

Lotte purchased a--

"Oh no you fucking don't," Diana snarled, firing a continuity anchor spell into the ground, using up a decent chunk of her mana stores. "Lotte's married to a Mothman."

"This thing!" Akko said, holding up the Dream Bunny Cryptid Whatever turned to the page on Mothmen. The illustration was of a vague, humped, cuddly-looking shape with two glowing red eyes and massive ragged wings.

"It's an augury of disaster with something like a will and mind of its own. It's forbidden by the nature of what it is to actually say what's happening or give good advice in a coherent manner. At best, anything it says is metaphorically true, or true without being usefully specific until one can apply the benefit of hindsight. Did anybody get a handle on any weird thing Lotte's wife might have said?"

"She's overly-trusting of Finns and thinks I look good covered in marshmallow," Wangari said, huffing.

"Wait, is the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man attacking?" Suzie said.

"Oh man, that'd be cool!" Akko said.

"No, I got evicted down a tube and into an open-air marshmallow tub. Did Lotte help? Did her Mothman? Nope. Neither."

"Wait," Suzie said, "like that episode of the Rescue Rangers?"

"The what?"

"Can we maybe not get sidetracked by complete nonsense while a mutant army prepares to conquer the world and Lotte continues to be married to a disaster herald?!" Diana said, realizing that her temples were in dire need of a massage and dreading that the three-temple-massage day was upon her at last.

"Whatever you do," Finnelan said at last, "try and find a new heart for Samantha. I checked her phone and I can tell you her replacement heart is nowhere near as good as her last."

"What's her blood type?"
"A+," Badcock croaked.

"Noted! I'll get you transplanted as soon as I find a decent-quality heart out there. So let's add that to the plan. In fact, if I may be so bold as to suggest tweaking both Constanze and Monterrey Jack's plans--"

A katana plunged into Diana's chest, a note attached to it. Breathless, Diana whispered an emergency healing spell and yanked the blade out of herself, not quite closing the wound before she ran out of juice. She mouthed the word "help."

Akko was on her first, tapping her wand against Diana's and filling her up. Hesitantly, the other young witches pitched in mana 'til Diana patched herself together. She was on her knees, gulping down air and babbling incoherently, but she was alive.

Akko read the note on the sword aloud: "'We're comin' for you right now. Signed, The Rogues-Jak Teamup Starring Seth Romero and Jak, Earl of Evil.'" She crumpled the note and threw it over her shoulder, hitting Jasminka on the forehead to her consternation. "Well! We're out of mana and stuck in a box and monsters are coming."

"New plan," Diana said, taking the katana in hand. "Fuck plans."

Lotte purchased a two-ruble food truck. Saint Barbara replaced it.

Her heart skipped a beat and bile leapt into her throat.

"That's your turn, right?" Sucy said, eying the eight-cost abomination. "That means I can take my turn now?"

Lotte looked down at her played hand, her troops returning to her side of the field, every ruble spent, every point of damage dealt, no location abilities to use, no hope but that she could get a card-remover into her next hand. She waited for the draw.

Her Likhoradka card was not among them.

Sucy lay out two three-ruble cards and a pair of rubles. Wordlessly, she pointed at Saint Barbara, and the card vanished.

Saint Barbara, the patron of Russia's nuclear arsenal, floated in from the hole in the ceiling. She was fair-skinned, her hair long and dark and tied in a braid, her dark eyes half-open and wise and her mouth in a tiny, knowing smile. She was chained to a white tower, a heart of burning-bright uranium shining like a beacon in her chest.

How real would a nuclear bomb be?

How real would an alpha strike of every bomb in the Soviet arsenal be?

"My, my, my," Sucy said, licking her lips. "Nothing like a little nuclear armageddon to liven up the proceedings."

"Sucy, don't do this," Lotte said.

"Do what? Play less than my best? Fuck you, whitey. I'm going to win this the way I'm gonna win this and you can either roll over and die or try and kill me before St. Barbara gets into my hand. And lookie here..." She nodded her head at her deck. "One more draw, and I'll be shuffling my discard,
and St. Barbara will be one of fourteen cards in my deck. So you have three rounds, or four, or five, to drop me from 44 health to zero. Those aren't terrible odds for you, huh? I mean, if you can get enough cards in hand to do 44 damage to me in up to five hands. And I don't knock any of them out. And I don't gain any more health... which I will."

Lotte ran down her list of cards in her head, the cards she could buy before cycling her deck, how many cards that would draw more cards she had, how many Sucy had...

Lilou squeezed her arm but stayed silent.

"Ah, right, my turn's not over. Shoot 'em, boys." She snapped her fingers and her Sharpened Pencils raised their rifles and opened fire.

Lotte closed her eyes and let the SMG rounds pepper her for three damage. Down to 30.

"I can do this," Lotte said, trying to will the pain to abate. "I can stop her. I believe I can stop her. Lilou, do you believe in me?"

"..."

"...you just have to say it. You just have to say it..."

"..."

"...please... I need this."

Lilou pressed her face into Lotte's shoulder and wept in silence.

Her head was light. Her vision unfocused. The snow was so cold, and coming down in thick flurries. That snake curled up near a patch of flaming debris trying to keep itself strong, but General Winter was cruel. That goddamn smug smirk on Sucy's face. St. Barbara haunting the battle to come.

"The world's not going to end here," she said, "not if I can help it."

Lilou took a deep breath and pulled Lotte in close, holding on to her like a rope in a storm. "You can't," Lilou said, each word scoring her skin with a long, deep cut that drew vivid blood that seeped into Lotte's uniform and touching her skin, hot and sweet. "Not like this."

The armies of Jak and the Rogues (current members: Seth Romero) marched down the streets of Las Waikiki, firing blaster rifles and firearms into the air, a chunky Russian giant robot bringing up the end of their doom parade. The police cordoned off the streets; the mayors were passing this off as a parade for no particular reason other than a bunch of armed monsters wanted to throw a parade. The people were buying it for the time being, confused tourists from both towns throwing leis and beads at some of the more female-shaped things, some of them even receiving a glimpse of unspeakable boob or a concealed extra head in return.

The end point of the parade was the 5th Sylvan Church. A single young woman waited on the front steps of the church between a pair of replica Venuses de Milo with fairy wings and arms attached. She held a katana in her hands, one on the handle, one on the blade. She had smeared pixie glitter makeup on her cheeks like eyeblack.

The army came to a stop, many-armed drummer boys ceasing their drumming and many-fingered flutists ceasing their tooting. A messenger stepped forward and read from a vellum scroll.
"So speaks Jak: You gods who have descended to battle us, we shall taste your blood and become as gods ourselves. So speaks Romero: You two, with the hair, all you had to do was fight a snake. Would that have been so hard?"

"Why us, of all people?" Diana said.

The messenger asked someone behind him, who asked someone behind him, etc., until the question reached the mighty Seth Romero standing beneath the lumbering Russian superweapon. He answered, and the answer propagated back like a wave:

The messenger shrugged.

"Here is my declaration against the both of you," Diana said. In a flash she crossed the yards of distance and sliced the messenger's head where it met the shoulder without the blessing of a neck. She kicked the body down. "Come get some!"

Inside the chapel, the witches' secret weapon, empowered from the last scraps of mana they could pull together, revved up Jasminka's borrowed chainsaw with considerable difficulty, ultimately having to ask for help from Jazzy herself.

A dozen monsters waving mismatched polearms rushed Diana, who waited for them with katana in a defensive stance, and Akko crashed through the front of the church in flying elephant form, waving a chainsaw with her trunk. "TOOT TOOT SONIC WARRIORS!" she said. She leaped over Diana and flailed her chainsaw around in an adorably boneless flail that ground a lot of monsters into a crimson mist.

"That woman is worrisomely good with chainsaws," Diana said, beaming with pride, and rushed into the crowd of enemy troops to join Akko's attack. Behind her, the rest of the combat-ready witches piled out, Cons taking potshots with her SMG, Amanda cowering behind her and emptying mag after mag of P90 ammo into the air. Suzie flew through the roof, squeezing the trigger on her MG and suppressing the riflemen trying to take shots at Akko. Chariot super-leaped into the air, Suzie catching and throwing her further yet, and landed a crater-making flying kick in the thickest concentration of mutant monster whatevers, disrupting the formation, such as it was.

Wangari followed behind at less safe a distance than most would be comfortable with. She held up her phone and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of Luna Nova, mostly ladies, I bring to you the most brutal battle I've seen in a good minute or two! Here we have the star pupils of Luna Nova's world-saving efforts pitch their martial prowess against an implacable enemy without even the strength of magic to their name! Can they take home a win against impossible odds? Your guess is just as good as mine, but I'll follow as long as I have space and battery on this phone. And, uh, sorry, Jojo and Kim-Kims, I kind of... your stuff has been lost to the war effort. Very tragi--" A grenade flew by her face, bounced off the ground, and exploded a car. "Hot damn, did you all see that?!"

Jasminka ate some popcorn and enjoyed the show from the steps of the church. Finnelan sat next to her with a wand and a joint. "Found some weed under the floorboards," she said. "Rolled a couple joints for Sam. Want in on that shit?"

"No thank you, I live clean," she said. "Want some deep fried batter nuggets?"

"Yes, thank you." Finnelan popped a few into her mouth. "My God, this is like the platonic idea of unhealthy snacking. Amazing."

"Like those combat moves!" Jasminka said, pointing at Diana slaying a long-necked dragonoid, leaping through the spray of blood and up its humped back, jumping off the peak and driving the
point through a low-flying bat monster.

"Amazing what splitting a lethal dose of cocaine between four strong young witches can do."

"Mm-hm. I think Amanda's got the scaredies, though."

Amanda screamed in mortal terror and beat a goblinoid to death with her long-empty P90. "WHY THE HELL AM I DOING THIS?!" she shouted at the gun, "IT'S LIKE BEATING SOMEONE TO DEATH WITH A MOVIE CLAPPER THING!"

"Got 'er moving, though!" Finnelan said.

Pisces appeared between them, battering the side of her water bowl in an attempt to move. Finnelan picked her up. "Got a date waiting?"

Pisces tilted a little bit this way.

"Shit. Shouldn't keep him waiting, then." She stretched her legs and got to steppin', Jasminka at her side because why not?

Not a few yards into their stroll through a mountain of corpses and an eerie charge filled the air, like lightning before it strikes.

"...was that the weed kicking in?" Finnelan said.

"No," Jasminka said. "I felt it too." The fine hairs on her arms were standing on end, soon joined by the rest of her hair in a spiky pink afro. "What in the hecky?"

"I'm the Blood Orange Elephant!" Akko said. "'Cause I'm orange, and I make blood come out!"

"Well?" Sucy said. "Take your turn, slut."

The numbers in her head were gone. The numbers, the hands, the counters and counter-counters, all gone. All she felt was the blood of her wife staining her suit.

The snake. The snake desperately warming itself.

The gamers cowering behind destroyed machinery, Ted and his underling staring silent in fear for their lives.

Akko and Diana and all her friends flung free of the building, eight stories up from the ground.

Sucy's eager smirk.

St. Barbara waiting in the woods.

Lilou's blood on her skin.

"I concede," she said, holding out her hand of cards loosely and letting them drop from her fingers.

The snowfall ebbed.

"...pardon?" Sucy said.

"It's not worth it if I hurt more people. It's not been worth it to hurt who I've already hurt. I..." A thought bloomed in her head and grew tall and proud. "That's... that's the end of the world, isn't it?
The end of my world. Hurting my friends, throwing them aside... literally throwing them aside, just so I can beat Sucy. And worst of all, I hurt my wife. Because I was too stupid to realize what I was doing." She turned and hugged Lilou, feeling the weeping cut on her wife's cheek trickle hot blood onto her own. "I'm so sorry, Lilou. I, uh, I'm sorry my being dumb made you bleed somehow."

Lilou nuzzled her. "It's not too late to make amends."

"Yeah, like picking your hand up and fighting me, whitey," Sucy said. "Haven't dropped my cards. Haven't accepted anything. So you pick that hand up Zhardammit and you fight me so I can win."

"I refuse."

"You can't--Tim, she can't refuse to keep playing, can she?"

"It's Ted," Ted said.

"I swear you were Tim for a few minutes, but anyway, tell me I'm right."

"Hey, if she doesn't wanna risk nuclear armageddon, I'm not gonna tell her no."

"Oh, screw you!" Sucy conjured a fresh condom of sizzurp and took a nip consisting of the entire thing. While she enjoyed her libation, Lotte consulted the spirits of the hotel. Sucy flung the condom into the snow. "Okay, okay, got my sizzurp in me, I'm ready to kick your ass. Pick your damn cards up and fight me!"

"I have a better idea," Lotte said. "How'd you like to fight me? Fist to fist? Honorably, like a--"

"Also fine." Sucy adjusted the fit of her gauzy skirt, found it didn't really get any less tight between how close it was knit to her body and those gold and silver coils she had on, and grunted. She flung her cards aside. "Let's do this, Lotte the Liar."

Lilou kissed Lotte's cheek. "Be brave."

"For you, I'll never be afraid again." Lotte rolled up her sleeves and marched toward Sucy across the blood-spattered, body-strewn, vehicle-wreckage-littered snow.

Sucy cast a quick spell to sharpen her fingernails into talons and shuffled through the snow. Lotte was almost halfway to the center of the snowy field between them and Sucy about a yard or two away from the start when the floor fell from beneath Sucy and she fell in with a swooce of air and disturbed snow.

"See you later," Lotte said.

The snowfall tapered to a stop.

"Is..." Ted said. "Is that it?" He emerged from hiding.

The armies emerged from the forest, confused.

"You know what," Ted said, "I'm gonna chalk that up as a win for Lotte the Lover because I don't like the one she just flushed. Congratulations, Lotte the Lover, winner 2-1 against Sucy the Slippery Serpent of Sin!"

Relieved cheers and clapping sounded from the gamers who had not perhaps more intelligently gotten the hell out of dodge, joined by the assorted Tsar Realms characters and things who were glad they wouldn't be shooting at each other anymore.
"We're not done yet," Lotte said, straightening her collar. "Lilou, I know it's been a long day... but I don't suppose you'd be up for joining me on a rescue mission?"

Lilou rushed across the snow, skirt billowing in her wake, drops of blood trickling on the snow behind her, and threw herself into Lotte's arms. "Always."

"First, let's get you a healing spell."

"It's fine. I'll be fine."

"Alright..." She turned to the snake. "Snake, where are our friends going?"

Sucy fell for several minutes before plummeting out of a tube in a ceiling. She noticed a particular scent in the moments before she landed in The World's Largest Open-Air Warm Marshmallow Dispenser.

"Huh," one of the showgirls said. "Was that an Asian teenager just now?"

"Yuh-huh," another said.

"Jack-fuckin'-pot."

"Ngahhh!" Suzie said, pummeling an ogre 'til it broke and throwing its destroyed body at some smaller enemies. "Come on, stupid friggin' monsters, come and get killed by Suzie Cu--" A three-headed snake slithered up her body and squeezed, her armor groaning under the strain as it wrestled her to the ground. "Aagh, they got me, they got me!" She pounded at its heads, but they were so quick, and her suit was running low on energy.

"Got it!" ElephAkko said, gently applying the chainsaw to the snake's heads. "Good luck!" She took back to the sky and charged a flight of gargoyles toting shotguns (utterly ineffective at the range they were using 'em at but that was a theme with bad guys this weekend, it seemed).

The streets were piled with the dead and dying. After long minutes of fighting the mutant army was down to its last fighters, but the mech loomed up the street waiting to take its turn. Between the lot of them they were utterly out of magic and ammo and down to classic fisticuffsmanship and what they could loot from their fallen attackers.

Diana sliced her way through a row of not-orcs. "Is that all you got?!"

Wangari took video. "Look at those greenskins die in droves! Those Orruks(tm) don't stand a chance!"

Chariot helped Suzie to her feet. "Son of a bitch," Suzie said. "Those friggin' whippersnappers got to fight all the idiot gangsters with guns. Why do we gotta bat cleanup on hordes of whatsits?"

"Just our luck, isn't it," Chariot said. "Look on the bright side, once we're done here, your old boss won't be able to--"

The Russian robot hefted up a rocket launcher and fired off a single missile that streaked through the air. Chariot jumped up and kicked it away, the warhead exploding far overhead. "That all you got?" she shouted at the machine, which fired a lightning cannon at her. She lit like a plasma ball and jittered like a bad wind-up toy before falling unconscious in a toasty heap.
"Aw, dammit," Suzie said, picking up Chariot and dropping her off behind a flipped car for safekeeping. She ran for the robot, jumping over the dead and building up some momentum for her jump jets to turn into flight. She soared into the air, taking a moment to punch a gargoyle through the chest and steal its shotgun. She shook it off her arm and flew at the mech, her onboard computers looking for entry points and hatches. Punching it out was out of the question, but maybe--

A flak cannon swatted her from the sky, the explosion and spray of fragmentation knocking her out cold. She corkscrewed through the air, striking the street, bouncing, and coming to a stop on a car.

"Aw, crap, Robot Girl's out!" Amanda said, flinging her poor, pummeled-to-death P90 at a painfully generic skeleton. "And I'm out!" She felt around a pile of snerson insides before realizing there would be nothing inside guts to use as a weapon and cursed herself for defaulting to her RPG looter's instincts.

Constanze climbed out of a minotaur-y-sort-of-thing's mouth, a bunch of stupidly-shaped knives taped to her person or in her mouth. It was a bad time to be a tiny German, but then, seldom were the good times indeed. She threw some of her knives at Amanda and before she got to her next tactic, she got lifted off the ground by a grasping white hand engulfing her.

"The time has come to finish this!" Seth Romero said. He floated on an ominous mechanical platform that emitted steady pulses of sound as it drifted over the corpsey ground. He slammed Constanze into a building three times before dropping her into the crowd, a guy with a baseball mitt catching her.

The giant robot fired off a few more rounds of flak into the mutant hordes, scattering Diana and Akko. Akko took the brunt of the damage; her alternate form suffered too much damage and she reverted to her true shape, the chainsaw falling out of her grasp.

"Diana!" Akko said as she struggled to get back up. "Are you okay?"

Diana coughed. "No... I'm not. I think that tore open the..." She hacked up a handful of blood. "I think I'm broken, Atsuko."

"Diana," Akko said, "I love you forever."

"I lo... koff... hack!" Her oath to Akko died in her throat. She covered her chest wound and felt for the katana. She wouldn't be passing from this world unarmed, choking on her own blood. Better to walk toward her final death.

"Shit," Finnelan said, "they're really getting their heads handed to them."

"We should help," Jasmininka said, finishing her fried dough nuggets.

"Yeah, if only one of us had both arms and wasn't carrying a fish," Finnelan said.

"Mm, if only one of us wasn't so busy not fighting and could also hold the fish."

"Oh, we're not playing this game, little miss!"

"Are we not? Are we in fact not?" Jazzy said right as a massive cannon fired off somewhere behind them. A shell the size of a Volkswagen dug its way into the giant robot and exploded inside its guts, flooding it with fire. The smoldering, dying machine fell backwards into the street, causing a little earthquake in its death throes. "Woah, nelly! What was that?"

"Do my eyes deceive me or is that a freakin' tank?!" Wangari said, turning from the dead-ass mech to what was in fact a four-story tank with smooth, organic lines, two pairs of fanged treads under its
heavy chassis, and a cannon big enough to fit a double wide inside. "Yes indeed it's a freakin' tank!"

A hatch popped open and Lotte popped out in a Sovie tuniform of some kind. "Hey, guys! Sorry I'm late, but I brought some friends!"

"Wow!" Princess Anastasia said, bumping Lotte away. "You really knocked that big ol' robot down to size! I bet you can--" An inverse-gravity spell struck the princess and lifted her shrieking into the air, buoyant at about ten stories up.

"Oh thank God," Lotte muttered. "I mean oh no. Who did that?!"

"It was I!" Seth Romero said. "You who dare to--"

"Catch!" Lotte said, aiming her wand at him and casting a spell.

He caught the thing that flew through the air and realized too late it was the snake.

"Remember me?" the snake said and bit him all over the face.

"Diana, catch!" Lotte said, sending a little spirit of the air along with her wand in tow. The creature tried to drop the wand into Diana's hand, but Diana snatched it out of the air and crammed it into her wound, using a spell to reshape it into spiritual biofoam.

"Thank you," she said, using the wand's remaining juice to heal up Akko.

"Hot damn, back to full!" Akko said, popping and locking for emphasis.

"Akko, ten fingers!" Diana ran at her.

"What now?" Akko said, and Diana jumped into the air, onto her head, and once more onto the platform. Seth threw off the snake at last, but only after being bitten like a thousand times.

"Remember me?!" Diana said, winding up for a slash.

"What?" Seth Romero said. His sorcerous toughness left him merely dying, swelling in weird places and turning a gross shade of purple.

"Hey, that's...that's my line!" the snake said.

"Oh, sorry, I was busy dying. Sorry about that." Diana rested her katana on her shoulder. "Right, what's a good one... Akko, I need a one-liner."

"How about..." Akko said, rubbing the knot on her forehead. "'KTNFN: Katana for now!'"

"Perfect," Diana said, slicing Seth in half vertically. After a moment he split into two halves, blinked rapidly, and disappeared with a bright jingle.

The floating platform lost power and crashed into the ground.

"Critical hit!" Wangari said for the benefit of the viewing audience.

"Did we win?" Amanda said, still standing in some snake guts. The guy with Constanze threw her at her, knocking them both to the ground and into the grossest of the dead stuff.

"I think we just won!" Jasminka said.
"Well, that was anticlimactic," grumbled Finnelan.

"At least you were here."

"AS AM I!" The voice thundered through the steel and concrete valleys of Las Waikiki. "JAK, EARL OF EVIL, ARRIVES TO DESTROY YOU!"

The ever-burning giant robot burst into even more fire, a column that rose into the sky. Jak, Earl of Evil, emerged from the pillar of fire. He was muscular, sour-faced, with shaggy brown hair, a golden, bejeweled harness around his chest, a shorter-than-strictly-necessary grass skirt, and a glowing short laser sword, because why not. He was stuck in a position with his legs spread wide and his arms akimbo, hopping out of the fire like a Chinese vampire. Shortly behind him was his nearly-identical sister Jaki, and behind her, Iridi, the raven-locked space-bikini-wearing warrior with the laser boomerang and nipple-shaped energy shield.

Diana twirled her katana and Akko menaced Jak with the snake, but Amanda pushed them both aside.

"No," Amanda said. "We gotta finish this. This is our final boss, our final fight. We're doing this ourselves."

"You sure about that?" Lotte shouted from the tank.

"Totally sure," Amanda lied. Constanze took her position next to Amanda's right, Jasminka to Amanda's left, Finnelan to Constanze's right, and Hannah and Barbara driving up in a golf cart with Monterey Jack hanging off the back.

"Don't start the party without us, fellas!" Monterey Jack said.

"Hey," Hannah said.

"HERE, AT LAST, THE GODS OF OUR WORLD!" Jak said, his brow furrowing even further somehow. "IT PLEASES ME TO GREET YOU IN THE RUINS OF--"

Pisces jumped out of her bowl and sailed at Jak. Everyone present watched to see what happened, Jak especially.

Pisces slapped him on the face and Jak exploded like a meat firework. The shockwave sent precious Pisces flying back into her bowl.

"No!" Iridi said. "I have failed!" She pulled the pin on a plasma grenade and swallowed it whole, also exploding.

"I ascend to the throne!" Jaki said.

"What's your blood type?" Diana said.

"A+, it so happens," Jaki said.

"Ah. Interesting." She nodded at the team. "Go on, don't let me hold you back."

"Fine," Amanda said, rolling up her sleeves, and Cons's Angels descended upon her. After a few minutes Jasminka hoisted Jaki's heart into the air.

"Ta dah," she said, throwing it at Diana.
"Thank you!" Diana said, catching it. "You guys can finish up here, I'll go ahead and help out Prof. Badcock."

"Tootles!" Akko said, waving with the snake's head, to his dignified acceptance. "Thanks for the deus ex machina, Lotte! Mind if we ride back with you?"

"Ah, sure, if you don't mind sharing a ride with my wife."

"If you think that would be safe for us to do," Diana said.

"Well, she's a little under the weather..." Lotte said. "Ah, she said she's feeling fine."

"Can I join?" Finnelan said. "I'm just about done with board games today."

"...board what?" Akko said.

"Oh, nevermind," Finnelan said, heading to the tank.

The fire column remained, the door within still open. "I think we're supposed to go in," Amanda said.

"Oh, right!" Jasminka said. "This part of the game we usually have when one cartoon isn't crossing over into another one. This'll be exciting!"

"What part is this?" Barbara said.

"The wish-granting part."
Wangari took her phone back and slid it into her pocket. "And that's the tall and short of it!"

"Huh," the cop said. "So the guy who ran the Silver Witch was the head of the evil Waikiki Rogues? And now he's dead, plus the rest of the gang?" He shrugged. "Well, that's pretty cut 'n dried. Of course we'll have to close down the Silver Witch for the time being while we investigate it."

"Aww. We got like a whole night left before we go home! We can crash there for one more night, right?"

"Ehh, I'll see what I can do. Anyway, gotta call in somebody to sweep these damn streets. So damn many mons--"

The monsters vanished with a soft pop, as did the robot debris and parasitic buildings and statue of Jak and the floating Russian Grand Duchess.

"Oh. Nevermind! Nice." He held his fist up, but his partner didn't reciprocate. "Hey, wait a... oh, yeah, that was a Waikiki guy. Shit, I'm gonna need to look him up on Facebook or something, I liked him. He was gonna give me this chutney recipe..." The cop meandered off, checking his phone.

"Got a good feeling about the rest of the night," Wan-Wan said. She walked towards the low afternoon sun before realizing that walking was for the birds and looked for an Uber.

The void was endless, save for the softly-glowing spark of creation just within Amanda's grasp. She could see, just barely, her friends floating in the dark, and also Hannah and Barbara.

"Guys?" she said. "Is this what the last phase of the game looks like when you're in the same Reality Cartoon?"

"I think it is," Jazzy said. "It's so..."

"...exactly like The Neverending Story, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Well, we did cross over a bunch of preexisting board games, you know. Maybe we should try to include a little more original in its next iteration. If that's how it works for sacred relics, anyway!"

"What the hell is going on?" Hannah said.

"It's the wish section, like I said to you already," Jazzy said.

"That was Barbara, you idiot! I wasn't paying attention!"

Constanze grumbled.

"Yes indeed," Jasminka said. "Anyway. Usually there's only one person who gets to make the wish and usually it's just to, like, have one last time to say goodbye to your beloved high priest before letting him rule the world you've made for him. Then you get to roll another amazing sex adventure!"
"But today we gotta use it for more heroic... you know... stuff," Amanda said, reaching for the fire. "So I'm gonna make the first wish, okay? Got a good one. You all trust me?"

A general rumble of agreement rolled around the circle.

"Alright. I wish... that the worlds stopped bleeding over and the heroes--I mean the people of the board game land get to return home, like, here. And also restore the planet to before it was hard ruined by the war. Can I do that, get a twofer?"

The flame pulsed with gold light, the pulse traveling out after the light touched, a world was born all around them, beautiful and bright. Rolling green fields teeming with life, a gleaming city of tomorrow on the far horizon, puffed shoggoths slumbering contently in a crystal-clean river. In moments, they were joined by familiar faces--the remaining heroes of the Good Guys around them, the brutalized remains of Jak's army a little further out but closer than any of them would have liked, and, after another long moment, the entire population of Tsar Realms. As the pulse traversed outward, the early evening sky of this beautiful new world lit with new-born stars.

Lamentably, Princess Anastasia skipped up.

"Wowie-zowie, this planet is off the hook! I'm super hyper to be here!" she said.

"Yeah, sure," Amanda said. "Alright, twofers are a-go. Who's next?"

"Man," Jasminka said. "I don't know what I could wish for. There's so much possibility. I may need a--"

Hannah grabbed the flame. "I should be next! I suffered the most in here!"

"Like hell you did," Barbara said, wrestling for it and being thrown off by the frenzied Hannah. "Come on! I got bitten by a crow!"

"Fuck you, you stupid bitch!"

"I'm not a stupid bitch, you smelly whore!"

"'Ey, guys," Monterrey Jack said, patting down, "the hard part's over with, now you can finally relax--"

"RELAX?!" Hannah said. She pushed away from the rest of the group and pointed out at the Good Guys. "I HOPE YOU ALL KILL YOURSELVES!"

The flame pulsed, and the gold light swept through everything. The grass was first, withering and drying to dust. Monterrey Jack was next, unlatching a .45 from his belt. "Zhar-Lloigor," he said, his hand trembling as he tried to put it back down, "I think you spoke a lil'--" He pressed the gun into his mouth and fired.

A wave of increasingly horrible suicides radiated through the board game people present.

"Goddammit, you!" Amanda said, going for the flame.

"I'm--it's still my--" Hannah said.

Constanze bashed her in the kneecap with the back of her machete, forcing her to one leg, and then jumped up and brought the pommel down two-handed into the back of her head, the flame dropping back into the air. She climbed up Hannah's body and grabbed it and said "Undo!"
No pulse. The suicides grew in intensity and horror. Cons started crying.

"Lemme try!" Jasminka seized the flame. "I wish that everybody who just died at their own hands be brought back!"

No pulse.

"No... why isn't it..."

Amanda stared at the lines of Russian soldiers unhesitatingly ending themselves. "It's one of the rules. You can't negate another player's wishes or make a wish that totally negates it."

"This isn't negating the first wish?!" Jasminka said, the words barely discernible as she blubbered through her sentence.

"The wish didn't make them," Amanda said. "It only brought them back home." Amanda was crying too. "Brought 'em back to die. Because of Hannah."

As the pulse touched the stars, they began to wink out, one by one. The sun in its lowly orbit began to burn red.

Barbara touched the flame in Jasminka's hand. "Just bring us home," she whined.

They were in Luna Nova, back in the Cons Cave. Across its many tables A Man Cons Jazz burned. Fire suppression kicked in and the table was awash in brackish water. The tattered scraps of a far-away world washed away into drains in the concrete floor.

"No," Constanze said.

"Hbuh...?" Hannah said, kneeling on the floor. "Is it done?"

"Yeah, it's done," Barbara said, picking her up and putting her on her feet.

"Done?" Amanda said.

"Yeah, the stupid game is done and all the stupid people are dead and we're back home. So it's--"

Amanda punched her in the jaw. Hannah ran, but immediately hit a corner. Barbara reflexively crawled after her and got trapped too.

Bleary-eyed, sobbing, Constanze handed out blocks of soap in socks to her friends.

"I could never help resolve Sasayako's loss of faith in me," Jasminka said.

"I never got to meet my priest. He stayed behind to watch the guard towers. He was waiting for me," Amanda said.

Constanze pulled on a pair of chainmail butcher's gloves and cracked her knuckles.

In silence, the three carried out their retribution.

The team drove by the Silver Witch to recharge their wands before heading to Finnelan. The tank disappeared while Diana was busy performing heart surgery in the church, but it wasn't too far from the casino anyhow. The walk back was only interrupted whenever they had to explain that Lilou bleeding profusely from several long cuts on her face and shoulder was totally normal and expected,
so it took them a good half hour and several ambulances that stopped to try and offer help to cross
the single block.

"Huh," Akko said. "It's a real ghost town in here."

"Yup!" a Vegas cop seated at the front desk said. He was eating a bowl of marshmallow fluff from a
hefty plastic jug he was sharing with a couple other cops, some toasting s'mores over burning
paperwork. "Whole place run by magic crooks. Seems the guy liked to magically impersonate
Marisa Kirisame and beat up prostitutes on the side, too."

"Just like the real Marisa Kirisame. That son of a bitch!" Suzie said. "Glad he's been sliced in half."

"And that's one plot hole closed," muttered Chariot.

The cop gestured with his spoon. "We're evacuating the building for, like, dusting for fingerprints
and shit? Plus Auntie Everett's Vaguely German Infinite Candy Kitchen actually sold dirtied
foodstuffs to fetishists for huge amounts of money. Can you imagine it?"

"The nerve of that lady!" a s'more-eating cop said. "Too bad she got away somehow. Definitely after
destroying the last batch of evidence."

"How tragic," the first cop said. "Ah, well. The chase will begin again... eventually. You guys got
like an hour to get your stuff, have a good time."

Diana cleared her throat. "If I may ask, where are we going to spend the night?"

"There's a hotel that'll honor your reservations for tonight." The cop flung an address card, which
Diana caught. "Were you the batch that came in through the whatsit, the magic witch hole?"

"Yes, in fact."

"Ah, that's closed for the time being so no suspects can make a magic runaway."

Diana swallowed. "So, uh... we're visiting from Great Britain..."

"Go get your stuff, you'll figure it out." The cop gestured vaguely.

"Did I hear we need to raise some money?" Wangari said, stepping into the lobby in style (having
fallen asleep in the Uber and taken a brisk nap before waking up and morfie-ing herself up a nice
dress for going out on the town).

"You just did," Finnelan said. "Unless I can talk someone's ear off for a refund I think we're short
five hundred dollars a head."

"I hear that as challenge," Wangari purred.

"I might have an idea on how to raise some money quick," Suzie said.

"I'm picking up what you're putting down," Chariot said, resting her head on Suzie's cheek. "Come
on, let's get up and out of here."

"I'll be a little behind," Lotte said. "I've got, you know. Things to talk about."

"Of course, of course," Diana said. "And, ah, keep an eye out for Sucy. Call her if you can't find
her."
"I think she'll be easy to find," Lotte said, winking laboriously.

"Why, yes, it's me," Sucy said. "How could you tell." Sucy was intermittently caked with thin layers of marshmallow cream over her ironic t-shirt and skirt, having given up on her vestis spell. She had a seat at an abandoned baccarat table in the abandoned first-floor gambling hall, paraphernalia lying where it fell or looted by people who realized they were surrounded by impossibly collectible ephemera.

"Magic, of course," Lotte said. She pulled out a chair for Lilou. Lilou's dress was good and ruined, her overflowing blood saturating it past the point of recovery no matter how many cleaning spells and blood-staunch spirits Lotte cast on it.

"Red's a good color for you," Sucy said. "Matches your eyes."

Lilou blinked. "That was a compliment."

"Yeah." She sipped a Shirley Temple. "Yeah, it was."

"Might I say the experience... sweetened you up a little?" Lotte said. She giggled at her own joke, Lilou giving her a faux slap for the badness of the pun.

"You could say that," Sucy said, gazing into her drink. "They took pictures..." Lotte's phone buzzed. "That would be them. You're welcome. Oh, how helpless I was. So drenched in thick melted candy that I couldn't begin to resist them when those buxom women dragged me from my slimy prison and, in awe at how much money they stood to make from my befouled state that they in fact groped every inch of my being to recover candy to resell to the most demanding perverts in the world."

"You're breathing funny..."

"Yes," Sucy said, shivering. "I fancy myself as the alpha in any given relationship, Jansson, in what passes for platonic or otherwise. But here and now, oh, baby, I have never been so wet as when I was being paraded in front of--"

"--mmI get it," Lotte said.

"Alright, alright." Sucy finished her drink. "Besides, they gave me a two percent cut if I let them rub the stuff off me."

"Good for you." Lotte walked around her. "So did you ever know the secret of Lilou?"

"Is that her name?" Sucy said.

"It is," Lilou said.

"I didn't even know she had a secret. I just can barely take that Akko and Diana are together. Two of you getting love interests is like..." She snapped her fingers. "Like..."

"Oil and water?" Lotte said.

"Dark matter and ylem?" Lilou said.

"No, it's just really annoying," Sucy said. "And only the numbing bliss of sizzurp could dare tame it. That and I planned to beat you in the game, step on you, drag you back to my room, and use a black magic machine to pour slime all over you."
"Eew," Lotte said, not too concerned.

"Well, I've been a bit of a jerk," Sucy said. "Not that you're totally exempt yourself, lil' missy, but I'm content enough that we can tackle that particular obstacle later." She threw her glass behind her, hitting a slot machine. "So, I hear we've got an hour to get our stuff."

"More like fifty minutes now," Lotte said. "But I took a minute to call up a bunch of spirits to get our stuff for us!"

"Oh, yeah. That's your thing." Sucy sucked on her finger and contemplated. "I'm gonna get some more drinks. You two... you do you." Sucy oozed away toward Days And Nights, the abandoned bar she looted for her drink. When the door closed behind her, Lotte and Lilou were alone.

Lotte reached into her suit and pulled out the silver bridge necklace. It was drenched in blood; she rubbed it clean with her thumb. She let the necklace go and it fell onto her chest. She thought of everything she could say and said the only thing that was right to say:

"Care to dance?"

Lilou took her hand, stood, straightened her skirt. The PA system kicked in, and a song played, slow and soft, like something out of a good dream. "More than anything," she said, and as the song played, they danced. They danced between the silent, still slot machines; across poker tables, blackjack, cards laying where they fell, trickles and splashes of Lilou's blood left behind in memory of her passage; between fountains gurgling to a stop, beneath TV screens glowing dazzling blue; below flags and banners, below flights of stairs, where the shadows fell as lights began to snap off and cast the Silver Witch into darkness.

When the music stopped, the emergency lights were all that remained, glowing like stars in the high ceiling. Lotte and Lilou lay next to each other on a fainting couch in a chill-out room where exhausted gamblers and drinkers could lay and nap off their hangovers or fear of losing money. After a time in silence, Lotte rest her head on Lilou's shoulder.

"You've never asked what I am," Lilou said.

"I didn't need to know," Lotte said. "Would it make you feel better to tell me?"

"It's not right to leave you in the dark. Now that the time has passed, I can speak more freely."

"Without hurting yourself?"

"Without drawing blood."

Lotte squeezed her tight.

"Charlotte Marja Jansson, where there is tragedy, I am cast like its shadow. When it passes, so do I. I live my little life in moments. This moment was brief, the window almost gone. But I have been loved." She rested her head on Lotte's. "And I have loved."

"You're... leaving?" Lotte said.

"Yes. It won't hurt. I promise. I'll be gone for a while. I'll return when I am cast again. I will see death and speak against it in what ways I am allowed. And maybe one day, may it never come, I will be cast into your life again."

"I'd be fine with that. I've seen a lot of trouble and I've made it through. If it means getting to live a
"life full of adventure..."

"Not adventure... despair. The lessening of good people. That is what casts me. I love you too much to wish that upon you. I would lose you forever; that is how much I love you."

Lotte sniffled. "How much time do we have?"

"The same as any lovers have... never enough."

"Then let's be together 'til our time comes."

"We will."

They were together in silence until a man wreathed in shadow stepped into the chill-out room.

"It is time," he said.

Charlotte Jansson and her wife Lilou Phalène-Jansson stood up, the two of them drenched in Lilou's blood. "Is this your father?" Lotte said.

"Of course."

"I'll... I'll see you on Discord."

Lilou smiled. "When the stars are right."

Lotte tried to laugh. "That's what the gods say, isn't it?"

"It is." Lilou held Lotte's face. "Charlotte Marja Jansson, my husband, I was only your wife a day, but my heart belongs to you. I can't ask for all your heart; it would be vanity, selfishness. But I hope that some part of you will love me as long as I will love you."

"I'll love you, always and forever," Lotte said. They kissed. Their third kiss.

"I'll see you in time," Lilou said, and let her go.

Her human guise fell away. Lilou Phalène's true guise was scarcely a form at all; shadows, living darkness, almost human in its utter inhumanity. In the whirling darkness burned two crimson eyes, like distant stars wet with tears. Her father shed his human shape as well, and with one ragged wing soothed his mourning daughter. The two moved, not through space or time, but something between, and were gone.

An icy chill of certainty wracked Lotte's limbs: I've lost you. Without strength she stumbled to the ground, grasping her necklace in her hands, and sobbed into the cold marble.

Some time later, perhaps an eternity, Sucy helped her back on her feet, put her arm across her shoulder, and led her out of the hotel.

Outside the hotel, just outside its wavering aura on the Las Vegas side, and protected by a circle of spirits carrying the luggage, Diana and Akko said their goodbyes to the hostages.

Tommy Bahama shook Akko's hand. "From now on," he said, "the chips-and-dip appetizer shall be half-off at all Tommy Bahama restaurants."

"Hell yeah," Akko said. "That's progress, there."
"And this lil' guy's getting the healthcare he needs," Tommy said, giving the snake a loving pat on the head. "Guy's got kids to take care of. He ain't gotta break bad on their behalf ever again, or I don't sell affordable wear that represents a lifestyle of permanent beach hangouts."

"Thanks, guy," the snake said. "It's been... wheeze... a rough life... but I think we got it in order. And thanks, witches. You saved me when I was at my lowest." He nuzzled Akko's outstretched fist.

"Any time, snakey. Snake it easy, okay?"

"Any time, every time." The snake cuddled up with his wife and kids in a much larger, more comfortable, non-caged basket Tommy provided from... somewhere.

"See you later, kids!" Tommy Bahama said, walking off into the Vegas night.

"Wait, this isn't--" Diana said.

"There's a Tommy Bahama restaurant here, too!" he said.

"Oh. Huh. What a coincidence."

"Sure it is," he said, winking, and vanishing in a shower of golden pixie dust.

"What a wonderful guy," Akko said, leaning against Diana. "This was a good adventure."

"I was hoping for something a little more tranquil, but I'll take it." She kissed Akko, mindful of where her fancy looted katana was pointing. "Any vacation where we make love is a good one."

"Oh yeah," Akko said. "And now we get cheap scary Vegas hotel sex. That's gonna be awesome."

"As long as we check for bedbugs first. It's an epidemic in America."

"Like the health insurance!"

"Yes, Akko. Like American health insurance drinking blood from sleepers in hotel rooms and apartments."

"Exactly. Oh, hey, it's the rest of our buddies!"

Sucy carried an inconsolable Lotte out of the hotel. "Hey," she said.

"Oh, Mormo, what happened to Lotte?" Diana said.

"Wife had to go bye-bye. She's taking it pretty hard."

"Aww, poor girl!" Akko said, giving Lotte a hug and immediately regretting not thinking to zap the blood off her first. So much blood. Like, she was saturated with it, especially with that big coat she still had on.

"The wife she knew for maybe a day and a half," Diana muttered. "Well! Maybe we can get her mind off her troubles somehow. Would you like that?"

Lotte nodded, but slowly. Her glasses were fogged and streaked with tears.

"I think I know a place that can help."

The four heroes wound up getting absolutely shitfaced at the Oak & Ivy, who gave them a generous
discount for averting the apocalypse, before taking a taxi to their replacement hotel. The Highball was a reasonably clean place, with Diana and Akko getting a double-sized room that had just recently been installed judging by the three beds and knocked-out walls. It smelled, somehow, vaguely of sex, which was all it took for the two to get naked and get banging.

At Suzie Cupid's apartment, she and Chariot were filming a very special movie. For fund-raising purposes. And nothing else.

Wangari absolutely ignited the blackjack tables at the Luxor before discovering their poker rooms had closed, briefly taking the opportunity to yell at the Konami-branded slots about the lack of poker and that all Konami was bastards (AKAB), before settling in at the High Limit room and playing high-stakes blackjack until she was physically lifted up and thrown out of the casino. But not without a lot more money in her pocket than she started.

Finnelan and Badcock pooled some small cash together, gambled for about half an hour before losing all of it, and retired to the Highball to rent a whore for an hour and then watch some porn. Finnelan paid. They touched nothing harder or softer than alcohol that night, and things were alright.

The beating of Hannah and Barbara, which began at 5 pm Saturday Vegas time, or 1 am Sunday Luna Nova time, continued until dawn.

Lotte returned to her mundane clothes at last, took a long, hot shower, and retired to the outdoor hot tub. More often than not she sat just outside it, dipping her toes in, once in a while crawling in when she felt it was safe to do so. There were... what was it? Health reasons. She didn't think too hard about them, but she knew they existed, and might as well keep them in mind. At some point in the night, Sucy slinked out there and took a seat by Lotte, saying nothing, looking at nothing.

After a while, Lotte started singing.

"Take me down, pretty Sucy, take me down..."

Sucy joined in after a few bars, and in drunken solidarity, sang for Lilou, wherever she was.

Other than a few giant robot battles on the taxi ride to the airport and a giant spider invasion at the airport proper, the plane ride home was utterly unremarkable. Wangari sprung for Supra First Class seats back to London for everyone present. Stadium seating, personal air conditioning, complimentary poppers, the works.

"No, really, nobody deserves to fly in this sort of comfort," Finnelan said as she stretched out on her bed-seat next to Badcock.

"What can I say, it's easier to spend it than deal with people askin' me for money," Wangari said as her masseur pampered her feet. "Not that most of it isn't in the ol' Swiss bank account by now. ... by the way, sir. Do you know a native Hawaiian girl named Kamala? Worked at the Silver Witch?"

"No, m'am," her masseur said.

"Alright. Thought I'd ask. Been asking."

"Yes, m'am."

Chariot, sitting next to Wan-Wan, used an in-flight gaming computer to compose a letter to Headmistress Holbrooke explaining the reason they'd be back late. And another letter to Suzie, checking on the progress of finding an editor.
"Magic Fingers," Badcock said. "This thing has Magic Fingers." She hit a button and her bed rumbled. "Ooh, mama~"

Diana, Akko, and Lotte were asleep, having not slept. Akko snored like a cartoon character and Diana predictably was as graceful as a marble statue in repose. Lotte's seat buddies were Diana's katana and a framed photo she'd retrieved from her luggage before boarding the plane. It was a wedding photo. Lotte was smiling at full force, so excited she seemed a heartbeat away from fainting. Lilou's smile was coy, cryptic, her eyes knowing... and perhaps relieved. There was no sadness.

The intercom activated at an agreeable volume. "Hey there to those wacky kids in the Supra First Class, this is your captain speaking with a personal message. We're fixin' to take off, just kick back and enjoy. We will be arriving in London in ten hours, give or take. Local time will be 3 pm on a Monday. If you need anything, just think it, the SFC psion will detect your thought waves and interpret them fittingly. May the God of the Cross drown in the waves of Great Cthulhu. Ia!"

"Think he's really a believer or is he just mugging for favors?" Badcock said.

"Eh," Finny said. "Mm. Should I order us something for when we level off?"

"If you're thinking how I'm thinking? Yes."

After a moment, Finnelan said, "Sorry again for, you know... fucking while you were doing heart surgery."

"Well, you held my hand while Diana replaced my ticker," Badcock said, "and that was for free. Maybe if you eat me out when we get home..."

"Consider it done," Finnelan said, and dialed in an order for two Xanaxes from the in-flight console.

The plane rumbled off the tarmac and into the air.

"Ah," Wangari said. "All's well that ends... uh..."

"Mixedly," Finnelan said.

"Yeah. That was kind of a mixed bag."

"Honestly, it was a hot mess," Chariot said.

Wangari felt her phone in her pocket, heavy with pictures she'd ordered last night from Auntie Everett's deep web website. "Yeah. If you put it like that, yeah."

"At least it's all over," Chariot said.

"Yeah. Time to take a trip on the Naptown Express."

"We're on a plane and you use train metaphors?" Finnelan said.

"Why not? Trains are cool."

Meanwhile, in coach, Sucy was sneezed on by a small child.

Wangari had to get in a revenge kick somewhere, after all.
By five in the evening, the witches were back home, walking through the driver's leyline terminal. Headmistress Holbrooke and the Cons Crewe were the only ones waiting for them.

"How was the final battle?" Holbrooke said.

"Saved the world, made dip half price at Tommy Bahama's, no biggie," Akko said, dusting her hands.

"Good, good!" Holbrooke clapped.

"How was your end of the apocalypse?" Diana said.

"It was alright 'til Hannah and Barbara committed universal genocide," Amanda said.

Constanze started crying again, her whole body thrown into the act, snotty and pouring tears.

"Aw, there there," Jasminka said, kneeling and dabbing at Cons's face, though she was getting misty-eyed herself. "We came so close. For a little while there, they knew real happiness and peace."

Diana turned the sight around in her head. "What was this, again?"

"I think it was like the bad guy with the statue and those weirdos they were hanging out with?" Akko said. "They came out of the board game or something."

"Like Zathura?"

"How was that your go-to?"

"Name another movie with that plot."

"Jumanji, genius!"

"Oh... oh. Oh! Huh, completely slipped my mind." She knelt to look the grieving witches in the eye. "I'll be sure to give those two a stern talking-to."

"Also, uh, we just woke up," Amanda said. "It's been... it's been a rough weekend."

"We fell asleep after dropping off Hannah and Barbara at the nurse's office. That was after beating them up for a while.

"Man. Wanna go to the cafeteria, get some eats?" Akko said, putting her hand on Amanda's shoulder.

"Yeah... sure."

"You go on, I'll have to look into Hannah and Barbara," Diana said, heading out with her luggage in tow.

"Seeya!" Akko said, taking her own and guiding her buddies away.

Joanna and Kimberly slipped into view. "Hey, boss," Kimberly said. "How was tricks?"

"Tricky as hell," Wangari said. "Also, uh, I gambled away your stuff. Hope you don't mind a little replacement." She pulled out a brick of greenbacks and made it rain, her underlings snatching their pay out of the air. "Treat yo'self."
"I've got some mince pies in the refrigerator if anyone would like some," Badcock said. "Chariot, would you like to join?"

"Yeah, that sounds nice," she said, walking with them and Holbrooke to the teachers' quarters.

"I'm gonna wash up and maybe get a few shots," Sucy said, jogging toward the student dormitories.

"Oh, yeah, speaking of her!" Wangari pulled out her phone and hit SEND. Photos of Sucy in the marshmallow vats got sent to every student and teacher on her contact list.

"I'll allow it!" Sucy shouted over her shoulder.

And that left Lotte.

Little Lotte, in her first-place Tsar Realms prize shirt, a silver bridge necklace hanging over her heart, a small prize purse and promo card in her bag, and a framed photograph in her hands, the setting sun catching the ring on her finger. Luna Nova hadn't felt less like home since the first night she spent here. She took a breath, held it, let it out, and walked back to her room, heart heavy, mind far away.

"I miss you," she said.

There was only one wheelchair in Luna Nova, and Hannah and Barbara had to share. Nurse Horowitz had broken out what she had called her bigger, blacker magic box, and even with all the devil spiders knitting their bones together into their old shapes the two were in an amount of pain so considerable she had deigned just give them a Perc-O-Pop(tm)-brand fentanyl lollipop.

Also to share.

Just the one.

Roughly five minutes into trying to coordinate in getting around Luna Nova the pop fell out of Hannah's mouth and onto the dusty floor. The two spent a long moment in staring at it.

"I hate you," Barbara said.

"I hate you more," Hannah said.

A familiar cadence of footsteps sounded behind them.

"Diana?!" Hannah said, turning in her seat.

"I knew you'd be back!" Barbara said, struggling to see her first.

Diana flinched. "Mother Mormo, I've killed several dozen people this weekend and you two somehow look worse than any corpse I've made."

"That ginger and the fat bitch and the little one beat the hell out of us because we ruined their stupid game that deserved to be ruined!" Hannah said.

"Please help us everything is pain," Barbara said.

Diana rolled her eyes. "Look, they took you killing the board game constructs very hard. Rather unusually hard, in fact. I think you should apologize to them. Sincerely, if you can manage."

"We can try!" Barbara said.
"Good." She readied her wand and cast a spell.

Hannah and Barbara waited to be blessed with healing light. They were not. The Perc-O-Pop(tm) flew to Diana's hand, and with a spell she scrubbed it clean. "I'll be taking this. No candy if you can't play nice."

"But--!" Hannah sputtered.

"And I'll tend to you tomorrow. Be sure to think about being nice to others, you two." Diana walked past them, taking a few contented sucks on the non-specifically-sweet lollipop.

"Okay," Hannah said. "On the count of three, we strangle each other."

"One..." Barbara said.

"Two..." Hannah said.

"Oh God I can't I'm sorry Diana" Barbara said.

"I hate you so Goddamn much" Hannah said.

It was a long night. And neither of them got to see Diana get smacked with a high dosage of opioids. That was another whole thing entirely.

Things were better by Christmas.

On Daoloth's Day, Amanda, Constanze, and Jasminka gathered around a single card table, a game board drawn on posterboard and a deck of cards made from index cards. "Today," Amanda said, "we explore the mysteries of the universe by... you know... doing this."

"In the name of all those heroes we lost to time," Jasminka said.

Constanze took her turn first, shuffling the high priest deck and spinning a card onto the board. A simple drawing and a name stared up at her: MONTERREY JACK.


With some effort, Constanze smiled. "I'll treat you right," she said.

On Cthulhu Day, in the grips of interrupted sleep and certain alkaloidal herbs, Lotte painted a portrait of her wife halfway between her human and Mothman forms. Did she cry? Yes, she did.

On Nyarlat Hotep Day, while the rest of the room was distracted by The Shining, Sucy crept out into the halls of the dorms and to the far door leading to the courtyard. She braced for the cold and pulled the door open.

A tall, handsome man stood just outside. "Warm hearth for a stranger, friend?" he said. He was a young man, maybe in his mid-twenties, with sand-colored skin and short, dark hair. In spite of the cold he wore a fine-pressed suit and no coat.

"Of course." Sucy bowed and gestured grandly, letting the guest in.
"Thank you, m'am." He brushed snow from his lapel.

Sucy led him to the common room, a kettle whistling over the fire. Sucy poured her guest a drink. "Ah, fine stuff," her guest said, wafting the steam to his face. "I take my tea neat, thank you kindly." Her guest took a seat, propping his patent leather shoes on the coffee table. "Nice place you got here. Eager young minds, full of dreams, full of potential. So many futures winding away from here..."

Rule number one about Nyarlat Hotep day: Show hospitality to visitors, and ask no undue questions.

"So," Sucy said, seating herself next to her guest, "I've been feeling bad about something."

"You were told to feel bad about something," her guest said.

"Yeah. Maybe it's, what's it, Lima syndrome, but I've caught a little feelings anyway. I have a friend who has a wife who's a Mothman."

"You need a disaster. In abstract, cataclysmic. In practice, purely personal. Like the song goes, you need your own innermost apocalypse."

"Yeah. Exactly."

"It so happens," her guest said, "that apocalypse is my specialty. You know what the word really means? 'Revelation.' A parting of the veil. I can show you exactly what you are and where you belong. I can show you things that would steal the light from your eyes and the rest from your sleep."

"I thought Daoloth Day was last week."

"I am the voice and soul of the Outer Gods, child. Today is anyone's day it needs to be." He took her by the chin and made her look into his eyes. "Would you like to see an ending?"

"I would," Sucy said, licking his wrist.

Her guest raised an eyebrow.

"Hm."

"Too much?"

"I didn't say that..."

"I warn you now, good sir," Sucy said, "whatever you're into, I'm into it."

"...wow. You are."

Sucy licked his wrist again.

Her guest raised the other eyebrow.

"Jesus."

"I turned eighteen recently. So it's not weird."

"No, that's still pretty weird. But I like weird." He let her go. "Alright. Let me teach you a little trick."

On Christmas Day, the Day of the Three, Chariot called the teachers of Luna Nova to the faculty
lounge to share a very special video, hooking her tablet up to the projector.

"It better be porn!" Nelson shouted as Chariot flicked the lights off.

Smiling, Chariot hit "play."

*Sexy Chariot and the Number One Fan* unfolded on the white sheet Chariot tacked up.

The faculty of Luna Nova were soon masturbating.

Then they were soon all having sex with Chariot and each other.

Then eventually Chariot slipped out. The sex was fairly self-sustaining by then. She had a... let's not call it a date. She had a visitor to see.

Also on Christmas Day, in the ample pre-dawn hours, Sucy performed the magic equivalent of calling in an SAS hit on her own location. By noon, a Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath shambled out of the woods, groaning and bleating and getting its slippery tentacles on everything as it struggled to pull itself towards Luna Nova. Sucy was the first out to meet it, just ahead of Akko, shouting: "I know the melting point of wood, you trunky sombitch!"

It was freakishly unsafe. Just freakishly unsafe enough to cast a dark pall of uncertainty over Luna Nova. Just uncertain enough to cast a shadow.

Lotte and Lilou had a little time to themselves.

She was healed. She was beautiful.

"Do you still love me?" Lilou said.

"I dream about you. Some nights they're so real, I don't want to wake up. I miss you so much. I love you so much."

Lilou hiccupped. "Lotte, I don't know if I'll ever be able to see you again. I... I can't ask you to love me like this. It's not fair. You're so beautiful, so wonderful. I can't... I can't lock you away."

"I... I promise... I promise that if I fall in love again, I'll fall in love with them as much as I've fallen in love with you. I can't use this all up. I see you here and my love just grows. It'll never run out."

"I... I believe you." She put her arms on Lotte's shoulders. "When you dream of me, when it feels real... that's because it's really me. I say hello, when I can."

Trembling, Lotte kissed her.

And then they fucked.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for readin' a fic where most of the pairings were with OCs. Well, one pairing and one desperate need to get laid with only some emotional attachment. I don't imagine Chariot's in love with Suzie, just that she was desperately lustful and needed to work out some pent-up sex stuff. One may presume it was a bizarre form of masturbation... but
now I'm just reading into my own work. Which is sad. Really, really sad.

This was going to be a brief fic where Lotte and Sucy clashed over a card game in chapter 2, ending in a dramatic win for Lotte. Then the next three chapters would've followed Wangari, Akko and Diana, and Chariot as they had way more exciting adventures in Hawaii and Vegas, then conclude with everybody getting wasted and going back home.

That changed pretty quickly.

The final bits are a bit of a sidequel to my Thirteen Days of Witchmas, as it happens.

I am terribly tempted to write up the Chariot/Suzie porn.

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