**And We Shall Purify**

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Category:** F/F, F/M, Gen

**Fandom:** Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon | Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon, Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon | Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon (Anime & Manga)

**Character:** Original Sailor Senshi Character(s), Other Original Characters, Sailor Senshi

**Additional Tags:** universe expansion, Canon Continuation, Seattle, Canon-Typical Violence, I kept waiting for an expansion of the Sailor Moon universe and so I decided to make one myself, Teen Angst, but not much angst Superpowers, Lost Memories, Friendship, okay it got angrier than I was expecting, Anxiety Disorder, Implied/Referenced Sexual Harassment, Underage Drinking, Supernatural investigator, its the gay, Suspected abuse, but not really

**Series:** Part 1 of **Trappist-1**

**Stats:**
Published: 2019-05-31 Completed: 2019-08-10 Chapters: 15/15 Words: 90803

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**And We Shall Purify**

by Parsonsaj

**Summary**

Rory had always thought what everyone thought: that Sailor Moon was an elaborate prank, possibly some kind of publicity stunt by Japan. Cool, but very fake.

And then the neighborhood stray started talking.

Or, an American teen struggles with superpowers in Seattle.

This is an original series in the spirit of Sailor Moon. It is meant to be an expansion of the Sailor Moon universe, loosely connected to canon.
Chapter 1

The absolute silence of space was so oppressive, it seemed like a physical weight. From their position on the Moving Palace, they peered out over the star before them, whirling and writhing with swirls of blinding red. Just beyond the star’s light, he could barely make out the dark shape moving within it.

“What an ugly existence,” his Lady spoke from the throne beside him, peering over to him with bright eyes, waiting for confirmation. “Don’t you think so, Elpis?”

He bowed his head. “Of course, Lady Pandorana.”

“A pathetic star and its dull little satellites. Formed from corruption.” She held out a hand. Moving before her, he kneeled, helping her down from the throne. Her steps pattered across the stone until she reached the edge. She pressed her hands to the forcefield. Her gaze passed over them, and she smiled. “But we’re going to make them pure again.” She turned back to him. The red light fell over her tan skin—in the reflection, he could see the star’s inhabitant moving. “Look how big he’s gotten!”

The entity’s roars were silent. Still, it broke over the palace in waves. Elpis shuddered, the walls crumbling in spots around them. It grew stronger by the minute.

Her eyes glistened. “I think it’s time we fed him.”

Episode 1: A Soldier, Far From Home

The sun wasn’t awake yet—high above, speckles of stars stood out like powdered sugar on a stove top. At 5:00 AM, the whole of Seattle was quiet. It was one of the only times Rory could get some peace in this city. Plus, it was better to be outside pretty early. Most of the folks who would have been lurking along the street side saved their business for the deep night. Those crooks were too lazy to wake up before daybreak.

The bright pinpoints shown down on her from the blackness. From atop the railing, Rory heard a rustling beside her. She peered over. “Well hey there.”

The little orange cat had been creeping around the neighborhood for weeks. It had to be a stray, and it must not have liked people too well, because it always kept its distance. Still, it seemed to have taken a liking to her. “T-t-t. Come on, little girl. You ain’t gotta be scared of me. You’re probably hungry, aren’t you? Or thirsty?” Rory always imagined it was a girl.

The cat blinked at her, then pattered along the rail to stand by her feet. It butted its head against her calf.

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Rory reached down, scratching at its ruff. The smell of peach drifted up from her teacup. She let her gaze drift back up to the pre-dawn starscape.

“You know, I just can’t take my eyes off this one star. Same star, every night. It’s like it’s calling out to me.”

The cat gave a little *Brrrp?*
The star was so small. It was off behind so many others that were larger than it was, but for some reason it stood out. It’s tiny ring of light seemed slightly red, like a harvest moon.

Rory shook her head, the starlight glittering in her eyes. “I don’t know what it is.”

She sat up, watching as the cat stepped away from her. It moved back to her bedroom door, meowing.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I would bring you in, but my mama would never let me keep a cat in the house.” Sighing, she gulped down the rest of her tea, setting the cup down on the peeling deckwood. Rory stretched over her head, the sleeves of her wind suit crinkling. She grinned at the cat. “But I know where to get you something good. Want to come with me?”

The cat said *brrrp?*

She took that as a yes.

She always waited until she was out of the neighborhood to get started, where no creeps were prowling in the alleys and the buildings got big without being real skyscrapers.

The sun was beginning to rise as she made her way down the boulevard. “We’re talking the scenic route, baby girl.”

The cat pattered along beside her.

Rory was a huge fan of 80s fashion. It may have been a result of her watching too much Fresh Prince growing up, but her color-block wind-breaker was hands-down her favorite piece of clothing. Of course, she only ever wore it on mornings like these.

The sky shifted black to bright blue just as she moved into the city proper. She looked down at the little cat. “Can you keep up?”

Rory eyed an upcoming alley—as good a place to start as any. Her heart leapt with adrenaline as she targeted a particular spot on the brick. Surging forward, she jammed her foot up, and then she was in the air.

Quick—in a spinning motion, she launched herself from one wall to the other, back, forth. Letting the momentum carry her, she hooked her hand over the ledge of the building, propelling herself up.

She swung over onto the gravel rooftop. *Yes.* Wind whipped past her face as she grinned uncontrollably and kept running.

“Come on, little cat,” she laughed. “Don’t fall behind.”

*Mreow.* The little orange cat appeared over the roof’s edge.

Rory raised her eyebrows. *Wow. That’s one agile cat.*

When Rory was young, her mother used to scold her for climbing the walls in the hallway of their apartment. She didn’t remember it, but she could believe it. Freerunning was the most natural thing in the world.

Her arms pumped at her sides, the breeze catching in her jacket. Her plum-woven braids whipped behind her as her chest heaved, and she propelled herself onto the next rooftop, then the next. It
was almost like flying.

The skyline of Seattle sped past her. It was crazy to think how much the city had changed in just
the past ten years—far off, she could see the needle glistening in the sunlight, almost reflective
since it’s futuristic chromatic revival. On every side, each rooftop housed their own little gardens
and green houses, vines spilling over the edges. Seattle had moved up from being one of the most
beautiful cities in the US, all the way up to number one. It was no wonder they’d been nick-named
"Tokyo of the West."

And damn, if it didn’t make for a good run. This must have been, she thought, what it felt like to be
a superhero.

Running out of breath, she spied the rooftop she’d been waiting on. Leaping across, she rolled to a
stop before standing again. “You still here, little cat?”

After a moment, the cat moseyed up beside her, licking its paw.

She had expected it to give up. “You’re really a special little cat, aren’t you?” Hanging her legs
over the roof’s edge, she scratched behind one of its orange ears. “Very impressive.”

The cat purred. She glanced over—she’d always thought it was cool, the little crescent pattern in
its fur. Right in the middle of its forehead.

“Alright. I promised you some breakfast, didn’t I?” Scanning over the edge, she found a spot that
would let the little cat get down. “Come on, then.”

Jumping up, she turned and hung over the edge of the roof, dropping down each level by the
window frame until she was close enough to make a landing. The little cat followed behind her,
jouncing down the fire escape.

She rounded the corner, emerging out on the front-side of the building—Clarke’s Convenience.
Unzipping her jacket, she pulled it off to straighten out her work uniform beneath. “Hold on,” she
said, wiping a bead of cooled sweat off her forehead. “I’ll bring you something.”

The cat—she was going to have to name it at some point—just stared, watching with huge eyes as
she entered the market.

Some older hits from back in 2020 bopped through the overhead sound system. Rory shook out her
jacket, stowing it on the coatrack left for employees.

Brenda, her boss, blinked at her from over the counter as she entered. “Well, you’re here early.”

“Just went for a run this morning.” Rory slicked a hand over her braids, sweeping them back in
order. She grabbed a sandwich from the cold case. “Plus, I’ve only got a half-shift today. Might as
well get done as soon as I can, Ms. B. Can you ring me up?”

Brenda was a full-figured, older white lady with two kids. She’d been good to work for since Rory
had started high school, even letting her on unofficially while her mama was trying to get her work
permit registered. She talked about her kids almost constantly, and, when she wasn’t, she was
trying to mother her too. She was good people.

“Well,” Brenda said, “I won’t complain about the early assist.” She eyed the sandwich. “Egg salad
for breakfast, Rory?”

“Kinda.” Rory’s eyes drifted over the standing stock—today was going to be busy. Her eyes caught
on one of the magazines waiting to be shelved.

**NASA RELEASES UPDATES ON EXPLORATION OF PROXIMITOUS-50: NEW INFORMATION ON THE CLOSEST STAR SYSTEMS TO EARTH**

*Including a new exoplanet in YZ Ceti, unusual activity from Trappist-1, and the abrupt disappearance of HR 8832, NASA this week…*

*Disappearance? How could a star just disappear? Rory frowned. Maybe it went supernova or something. As much as she enjoyed watching the stars, pointing out the constellations, she wasn’t an astronomy expert. She made a note to read that later.*

“Here you go.” Brenda passed her the sandwich. "How did you get here so fast, anyway? I thought buses didn’t run this early.”

“I ran the buildings,” Rory tore the package open with her teeth.

Brenda huffed, apparently not having realized what she meant when she said *a run.* “Girl! You’re going to get yourself killed one day, I swear. That stuff’s dangerous.”

Rory shook her head. “Okay, Ms. B.” She pulled out the sandwich, moving back out the door. “Okay, little cat. I got your breakfast—”

The empty street stared back at her.

Rory blinked, peering down both sides of the road. Nothing.

She lowered her arm, the sandwich hanging limp in at her side.

Where did she go?

At 2:00 PM, Rory emerged from the convenience store, stretching over her head. It had been a pretty busy day, for a Saturday. She was just glad to be off at this point.

The sun had shifted, the afternoon light filtering down through trees boxed along the roadside, leaving shadowy patterns like lace on the side walk. It was a beautiful day, and she had time. *I should stop through the park.*

Moseying down the street, jacket tied around her waist against the spring heat, she thought back to the article she’d picked up earlier.

*…Trappist-1 exhibiting solar flares at the greatest rate seen since its initial discovery.*

*HR 8832, however, has been home to an even greater phenomena. On the ARC probe’s most recent relay of the area, the star of the HR 8832 star system seems to have disappeared completely. Astronomers charged with the research are baffled, though several theories have arisen.*

“It’s possible there’s been a malfunction in the ARC’s relay system,” suggested Team Lead Justin Harris. “It’s also possible that, at the time of the star’s reading, there was some sort of immense dark matter storm—we’ve seen dark matter, even in the little we know about it, cause this kind of interference before.*

*The most alarming factor is that the exoplanets within the HR 8832 are exhibiting effects from this*
blackout. The planet’s temperature readings have all dropped exponentially, and some even appear to be coming out of their accepted orbits. This would suggest that, indeed, something has happened to star HR 8832. We’re going to continue looking into it.”

How weird. Rory peered off into the trees, approaching the park in the distance. You’d think if it was a supernova, they would have picked up on that right away. They didn’t even mention it. But what could cause a star to disappear?

Freeway Park was quiet. Usually, on the weekend, places like this were slammed, but she couldn’t even hear any kids running around. Birds sung in the trees above her, the blue sky shining through the trees, but she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy.

She looked back down to the foot path, and her footsteps slowed as she noticed a shape on the pavement. Unmoving.

And bright orange.

Her heart clenched. “Oh no.” Quickly, she jogged up to the shape in the path, confirming just what she had feared. “Oh no, little cat. Are you okay?”

Little cat was still—she couldn’t see any injuries. Maybe she was just hurt? She could probably get her to a vet, though she didn’t have anything to pay them with. She stroked over the cat’s warm fur, tears welling up. “What happened to you?”

She saw that little crescent-shaped patch on her forehead—poor thing. Though, now that she was looking at it up close, it didn’t actually seem to be fur there? Just a little shape. Maybe a birthmark?

She stroked her thumb over the shape.

It hit her like lightening. Rory seized, an ache in her head bursting behind her eyes. What is…? Before she could understand what was happening, blackness swum in her vision, and she hit the pavement.

Rory didn’t know where she was. She peered into the blackness, stars on every side. Before her, there was a shape—round, bright yellow-orange, and dotted with red. Transfixed, she reached a palm out. She could feel something familiar. It was the same feeling she had, she realized, when she looked up at the stars in the early morning.

She could hear a voice. It was like it was coming from inside:

Do you remember?

She could see a hot sheen, she noticed, bright on her dark skin. Coming from behind.

Do you remember?

Hello?

She turned. Red light and heat towered over her like the sun. It opened up, a gaping maw, and roared.

Hello! Oh, gosh, oh no—
She jolted. Had she passed out? Her vision was hazy at the edges, but she could already tell it was much dimmer outside than it had been before. How long had she been out? She groaned.

She was still hearing a voice, she realized.

“Hello? Oh, thank goodness. You have to get up quickly, Aurora, it’s coming back!”

Aurora? No one called her her full name except her mama, and this wasn’t her mama’s voice. And, wait, what was coming back? Her head throbbed, and she sat up, her vision clearing.

There was no one there.

All around here, the park was empty. Sunset rained color from above, and shadows. No people, though. She stood—she was sure she’d heard someone talking to her. “Hello?” Her voice echoed back to her from all sides.

“Down here, Aurora!”

Rory’s eyes widened. They darted down to the pavement, where little cat had gotten back up. Thank goodness.

But wait.

Little cat narrowed her eyes. “Aurora! We have to go now!”

“What the hell?” Aurora scrambled back.

“Language!” Little cat frowned at her. “Rude!”

“You can talk?”

The cat sighed, shaking her head. “Yes, finally. I was starting to think we would never make the connection.” Her eyes shot wide again. “But there’s no time to talk! That beast is coming back, you need to hide until you can defend yourself!”

As if on cue, Rory suddenly picked up heavy footsteps in the distance. Dread fell over her. Little cat was right—something was coming. “Okay.”

Reaching down, she scooped up little cat.

“Hey! I’m not a sack of potatoes!” Little cat dug her claws into her shirt.

Hugged her to her body, Rory took off.

The steps behind faltered—then picked up again. It must have seen her. Where could she hide? Her eyes widened. *The rooftops!* It couldn’t follow her. She made a break for the nearest alley, shooting for the wall at the end. “Hold on,” she told Little Cat.

“Oh no, not this again,” the cat whined.

Using her momentum, Rory hit one, two, three steps up the wall, catching the ledge with her free hand before pulling herself up. She rolled over onto the rooftop.

She ran. The afternoon sky blasted bright from behind her. She could hear the footsteps, faintly, but they were getting farther and farther away. After a minute or so, the exertion caught up with her and she collapsed, knees falling hard onto the rooftop.
She panted. “What was that thing, little cat?”

The cat detached herself from Rory’s shirt, dropping to the gravel. “It’s hard to explain, but it used to be a person. Now, he’s in the clutches of the pithos.” She licked her paw passive-aggressively. “And my name is Celene.”

“The pithos?”

“I can explain later. For now, that thing is coming for you. You must defeat it!”

Defeat it? Rory gestured to herself. “With what? My incredible fashion sense? Girl, I don’t have any weapons!”

“Here.”

At that moment, a light seemed to project from the birthmark on Celene’s forehead. Rory watched as the light resolved into a shape. What was that? It looked almost like the spirit stick at her high school, but it had a brooch on the end with a symbol like a B. Wait, no, she recognized that—it was beta, the Greek letter, β.

“There. Take up your scepter, and transform! Quickly, Aurora. I don’t want you to get hurt.” Somehow, the cat looked legitimately worried.

Transform?

Reaching down, she grasped the…the scepter. As her hand closed around it, power shocked up through her finger tips.

“Now, say Crystal Power Beta, make-up!”

What else could she do? The words stumbled through her lips.

Light, light like darkness. What is happening?

She could feel something happening, even as her vision was lost—something wrapped over her arms, her legs, her torso. It wasn’t over her clothes; it was more like they were being replaced. Something burned on her forehead.

The light faded.

Her feet hit the rooftop. Had she been floating? She gaped. The uniform was bright and dark, a dark unitard keyholed at the hips, a dark skirt, accents in marigold, a bow in orange. “What…is this?” Though, this uniform looked kind of familiar, actually.

Her eyes flew open when she realized where she’d seen one similar.

She brought her hands to her chest. “Holy shit! Am I like Sailor Moon?”

Celene narrowed her eyes. “You’re exactly like Sailor Moon.”

Crunch.

Rory’s eyes moved to the edge of the rooftop. The ledge was cracking under the grip of a huge, monstrous hand.

She backed up.
Something that might have once been a man pulled itself up on the rooftop. It staggered to stand. Body crooked, it grinned across at her. “Star Soul detected.”

Celene hissed. “Here it comes!”

The creature stalked towards her.

“What do I do?” She scrambled away as it moved towards her.

“You must tap into your power, Sailor Beta! Free this man from the pithos!”

It lunged. It still sort of look like a person, but its arm had grown into something that looked more like a monstrous bear’s paw. Wicked claws extended from shadowy fur. Rory jumped out of the way (thank god all the free running had made her so agile) rolling to land behind the creature.

It growled, turning back to face her undeterred.

Fighting a monster. How was she supposed to do that? Her chest heaved with exertion as the thing came towards her again.

Celene, from the other side of the roof, shouted, “Use your scepter!”

As Rory leapt away again, the creature seemed to hesitate—before turning towards Celene. “Interference…” it wheezed, “…will not be tolerated.”

Celene yelped, running up onto the ledge before the creature stalked towards her.

Rory’s eyes widened. If that thing knocked the little cat off the roof, she was done for! She looked at the scepter in her hand, the β shining back at her. Come on, Help me out here, magic wand. Her gaze flicked back to the monster, still in pursuit of Celene. “Hey,” she shouted across the rooftop. The thing stopped, turning to look back at her. She thrust the scepter in its direction. “Pick on someone your own size, creep!”

The creature stared for a moment before its grin seemed to get impossibly wide. “Star Soul collection re-initiated.”

Okay. It was moving towards her. It’s now or you’re going to die, Rory.

As the creature drew near, something came to her. Like remembering a quote from a song; the phrase rose in her mind with conviction.

Dire Stellar Gust.

Rory inhaled sharply. Thrusting the scepter out beside her open palm, she shouted the phrase. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The wind came from nowhere. Behind, yet somehow, it didn’t seem to hit her. The creature screamed as a barrage of dark wind, like starlight, came at him—the starry flecks within seemed to be sharp. Trying to escape, but already a black smoke sluffing off of it and into the air, it stumbled back—

—and over the ledge.

“Oh, shit—” Working on instinct, in the split second she’s seen him go over she redirected the wind down to the alley’s floor.
Celene jumped up beside her. “Language!”

Rory peered over the edge.

Down in the alley, a guy was groaning, the wind dissipating where it had caught him. *Whew.*

Groaning, he clutched his head, no trace of the bear claw or the inhuman grin.

*Thank goodness.*

He opened his eyes, gazing up at her. “*Whoa.*”

Rory realized she probably shouldn’t be seen like this. Rising from the roof’s ledge, she took off, dusk descending around her.

She figured out how to turn back just before she got back into her neighborhood. Her work uniform, her tennis shoes, the color-block jacket around her waist reappeared as if nothing had happened.

Getting down from the roofs, she walked back home.

Her mama stopped her as soon as she got in the door. She ached all over—that thing didn’t even land a hit, so how did that work? “*Whoa* there, girlie. You’re back from work awful late.”

She could smell barbeque chicken, mac n’ cheese, and greens on the countertop. “*Yeah,*” she quickly lied, “I was chilling with Narma after work, but I started feeling bad. Is it okay if I eat in my room?”

Her mama frowned at her. It must have sounded weird. Rory never made requests like that. Moving over, she pressed the back of her hand to Rory’s forehead. “…you don’t feel hot.” She slowly grasped the plate before handing it over. “Just this once. Feel better, sugar.”

Once in her room, Rory pulled out her phone and shot a text to Narma.

*Hey, if my mom asks I was at your house this afternoon ok*

*You’d be doing me a huge favor. I owe you! v.v*

  *What’s this? Rory up to some salacious activity?*

  *Well you u gotta tell me everything.*

  *Not salacious! o.o*

  *You wouldn’t believe me if I told you*

  *I got you girl. But I expect deetz at first opp*

  *There are no deetz! But thank you!*

  *Wow boring*

At least she had that covered. She really was exhausted. After scarfing her dinner as fast as possible, she set her plate aside and passed out.
Chapter 2

Episode 2: Just Call me Nemo—or, America gets Jealous of Japan

_Sailor moon._

Rory’s eyes shot open. That’s right. The monster, the transformation, the magical gust of wind that looked like a glorified galaxy bath bomb. She had _powers_ now.

What did that mean?

Reaching over, she unlocked her phone and cut off the quiet tone of her Sunday alarm.

6:00 AM.

Outside, crickets were chirping. The sun just barely peeked over the horizon. Rory slowly sat up, stripping her jacket from around her waist to throw it in the corner.

_Scratch scratch._

Her eye flicked over. At the window, just outside on the upper porch, Celene stood, pawing the doorframe. “Let me in!” Her voice was muffled by the glass.

Rory rolled out of bed, moving to lock her door before letting the cat into her room. “Celene.”

The cat yawned, which, weirdly, sounded like a regular human yawn. “Good morning.”

“Okay, you’ve got to explain things now.”

Celene stretched. “That’s why I’m here, at this early hour. Might as well talk, now that we’re finally able.”

Rory eyed the walls of her room—she usually didn’t speak out loud this early, for fear of waking Tyrell or her mama. “How are you able to talk, anyways?”

“I have always been able to talk.” Celene took a seat by the window. “You just couldn’t understand, until we made a connection. Once you touched the insignia on my forward, I was able to use my magic to connect with yours.”

“Why do I have magic? That thing yesterday—it said something about a Star Soul? What is that?” Still, something about it sounded familiar. Rory couldn’t put her finger on it.

Celene stood, her expression becoming very serious. “You are a Sailor Soldier—a defender of the universe. The presence of those creatures—the pithos—awakened the power inside of you, allowing you to activate it.”

Rory paced, her socks dragging against the worn carpet. “Why, though? I don’t get it. Did I always have this power? Was I born on the second full moon when Aquarius was in retrograde, or something?” Question after question rose in her mind. She was afraid she was going to forget them before she was able to ask. She turned back, kneeling before the cat. “You gotta understand, I know absolutely nothing here. What do I have to do with Sailor Moon?”
America had considered Sailor Moon a hoax by Japan for a long time. She was a publicity stunt, an elaborate prank, or a hyped up idol depending on who you asked. Still, the sheer amount of news footage of the skirt-toting super-heroine made her existence hard to dismiss. Rory thought that America was probably just jealous. The US had always wanted anything that anyone else had, and if they couldn’t have a superhero, then they didn’t exist.

Well…she felt into her pocket, pulling out the scepter (it looked more like a large, fancy pen than anything.) She guessed now they got their wish.

Celene’s whiskers twitched. She looked almost ashamed. “That’s a bit more complicated. For some reason, many of my memories are incomplete. I can picture the planets, but I can’t recall their names. I remember that I was supposed to be guardian for a battalion of Sailor Soldiers, but I can’t remember who.” She peered out to the morning sky, sunrise bursting color in all directions. “When I saw you leaping across buildings, I thought you might be one of my charges, but I wasn’t sure. It wasn’t until I saw the symbol on your scepter I remembered what it was.”

Rory smoothed a thumb over the β. “So there’s a planet Beta out there somewhere?”

“No, actually. The name of a planet is not necessarily tied to its symbol. Unfortunately, the names of our battalion are lost to me right now. I suspect they may be planets those of this world have not yet titled.”

Rory groaned. “So, I’m the guardian of a nameless planet? I’m just like Sailor…blank?”

The intensity in Celene’s eyes hardened. “Just because this world does not know their names, it doesn’t mean they don’t have one. Earth is not master over all the universe.”

Dang if Celene wasn’t a serious cat. Rory held up her hands. “Okay, I got you.” She could do without cat scratches, thank you.

The cat relaxed. “I suspect my memories will return with time, especially now that our connection is restored. For now, Sailor Beta will do.” Celene’s tail whipped restlessly, “You must understand: if your powers have awakened, it means that you are needed. There is a terrible threat to the universe, and only the Sailor Soldiers can stop it.”

Rory let the news sink in. She smoothed her hands over her legs. An image flashed through her mind: that creature taking a swipe at her. “…You say soldiers. Are there others out there?”

The cat’s ears stood straight. “Yes. Sailor Soldiers generally form squadrons based on a shared star system. The faster we can locate them, the more I suspect we will remember. Though, just as in your case, this activity is sure to prompt their powers to awaken.”

Rory sighed, laying to stretch back on her bed. “So, we just have to wait, then.”

“We still have work to do,” Celene jumped up beside her, taking a seat on her comforter. “The pithos is still an imminent threat.”

She turned to her. “What is the pithos, anyways?”

The cat narrowed her brow. “I’m not entirely sure why, but these creatures seem to be after your souls; that is, the souls of Sailor Soldiers, distinguished by their connections to star’s satellites. These souls—your soul is extremely powerful. If they are seeking this power, and they are willing to steal living souls to get it, it can’t be good.” Celene tucked her head into her legs. Now that Rory knew she could talk, it seemed weird to see her do normal cat things. “The only reason I know what they are is because I overheard someone referring to them by that name. It must have been
one of their leaders.”

Rory rested her hand on her chest. “A powerful soul…”

She’d always thought of herself as pretty ordinary. Besides her free-running, she couldn’t think of anything about her that was especially unique.

They were silent for several minutes. Rory sighed. “Why can’t Sailor Moon handle this?”

“Aurora?”

Rory jolted when she heard her mama’s voice from outside the door. “Yeah, mama?” Quickly, she gestured Celene under the bed.

“It’s time to get up. You need to shower for church. Why is your door locked?”

“Sorry,” Rory jumped to the door, undoing the lock. “I just wanted some quiet last night.”

She opened the door. Her mama stared back at her, squinting, as if trying to puzzle something out from her expression. “…that’s okay. Just hurry and get ready.” She turned and left down the hall.

Truth was, Rory didn’t know how to be ready for this.

The agent peered down over the neighborhood, the streets full of holes, the houses breaking down on every side. “Truly pathetic.” She kicked gravel over the edge, letting it fall to the ground beneath. They’re rotting in their corruption.

Still, she couldn’t keep the smile off her face.

Raising the frequency stone on her wrist, she murmured the coordinates of the Moving Palace, then waited for the signal to go through.

“Desidia.” Lady Pandorana regarded her from the throne, the guardian Elpis standing loyally at her side. Her commander grinned pleasantly. “I must admit, I’m surprised to hear from you first, of anyone.”

Desidia grimaced. She’d had a pattern of reporting late (for totally reasonable reasons!) and her tardiness was often remarked upon. She was lucky, she thought, that she was allowed to continue serving the cause.

Her Lady folded her hands. “What have you to report?”

Desidia bowed her head. “My Lady. I discovered this morn that one of the pithos under my command has been destroyed. This would suggest that it successfully crossed the path of a Sailor Soldier.” She looked away. Hopefully, the discovery would distract her commander from the fact it was, in fact, defeated.

Pandorana clapped enthusiastically. “Excellent!”

She folded her other hand behind her back, saluting. “I request your permission to create additional pithos, my Lady. I believe I have pinpointed the approximate location of the soldier here on earth; I just need a greater force with which to take her down.”

“Consider it done. The sooner we seize the star souls, the better.” The commander’s eyes glittered.
“And Desidia?”

She swallowed. She would follow her Lady’s command unquestioningly, but there was something about that tone of voice that unsettled her. “Yes, my Lady?”

“Don’t dawdle.” She waved goodbye.

Desidia bowed as the communication died. *Yikes.*

The mid-day light blaring over her, she couldn’t resist the yawn that rose up. Still, now that the soldier’s location was found, there was no need to overwork herself. A peaceful existence was a pure existence, after all. The pithos could track their target; she wouldn’t need to lift her finger.

Eyes scanning the streets below, it was only a matter of time. She watched a young woman exit one of the low-level hovels, continuing alone down the street. There could only be so many wayward girls in one neighborhood.

Rory pulled out her phone, pulling up Narma’s name in her contacts. She glanced to where her mama and Tyrell were loading back into the car to go home. “Hey mama, I think I’m going to hang with Narma. You guys can go without me.”

Tyrell raised an eyebrow from the backseat. “Girl, weren’t you just at her house yesterday?”

Luckily, her mama ignored the question. She narrowed her eyes from the driver’s seat. “Okay. Try not to get home too late. You have school in the morning.”

Rory resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I won’t. See you guys later.”

Their Buick turned, speeding down the street. Satisfied, Rory turned back to her phone.

*I’m coming to you. You at work or something*

*Girl please the aquarium is dead*

*I was about to throw myself in the shark tank*

*Lol b right there.*

Rory bit her lip, taking the turn towards Pier 59. She’d been thinking about it, and she hadn’t gotten the chance to ask Celene. Was she allowed to tell anyone about her powers? Like, obviously she shouldn’t “reveal her secret identity” or whatever, but that only mattered with strangers, right? She couldn’t imagine letting one of her friends in on the secret would do any harm. She and Narma were tight; they had been ever since the girl had moved into her neighborhood three years ago. It wasn’t like she was going to be ratting her out to the news or something.

Anyways, she probably wouldn’t believe her. Who would?

She turned her gaze to the sky, where the afternoon sun was just beginning its descent. How did Sailor Moon deal with these sorts of problems?

The enormous teal building rose up in the distance. To anyone who didn’t know it, it would have looked like some kind of warehouse, but the interior hosted huge, elaborate tanks that were appropriately nautical. The Ocean Pavilion, where Narma had gotten a job the previous
summer (thank god for work permits) was much more impressive: a cylinder of walkways surrounding a massive central tank, the buildings glass walls letting visitors get a peak at the goods. Sundays tended to be slow, though. Apparently, there were other events nearby that tended to pull potential customers away.

Whelp. Rory to the rescue.

The moment she came in the entrance, Narma yelled “Shukriyaa!” Across the room from her position at the entrance desk. This got her a few odd looks from the wandering patrons, but she just rounded the desk and headed in a beeline for Rory, sticker in hand. “Nothing to see, just a very special guest!” Narma slapped the sticker (VISITOR) onto Rory’s church sweater without hesitation. (That was one advantage of having a friend who worked in an aquarium—free access.) Wrapping her arm around Rory’s shoulder, she steered her back towards the desk. Under her breath, she hissed, “My manager is a psychopath!”

“Slow down.” Rory shrugged her arm off, leaning on the desktop. “What happened?”

“The psycho woman started handing out these discount tickets for Monday afternoon. Now, there is no one here, and tomorrow we are going to be slammed and I am here by myself. Again.” Narma dragged a hand through her hair.

Rory could see the silver fading to black at the roots where Narma had failed to re-dye it. She must really be stressed.

“That’s rough, girl. How much longer you got tonight?”

She fiddled with her nose ring. Rory subtle tugged her hand away from it. “Four more hours of this dead show. I am dying inside. I need to be entertained, Rory.”

Rory’s eyes passed over the desk, noticing an open notebook. “Hey. You got some new designs?”

Narma followed her gaze to the notebook. “They’re garbage. I keep trying to think up something new, then I realize I have done this one before.”

The page was covered in salwar suits this time. Most of the sketches were half colored in, strips of colors crossing the line drawings to test different combinations. The colors were mostly dark, Narma’s punk aesthetic coming thru even in the traditional fashion she was creating. Narma always maintained a weird medium between passive-aggressively rebelling against her parents and leaning in to their culture. Rory could respect that.

Most of the drawings had notes written in beside them. Dumb! You did this in the fall! Switch these colors.

Rory ran a finger over one of the drawings. The figure was obviously modeled after Narma herself—straight, should-length hair and a dramatic pose. “You’re too hard on yourself. These are nice.”

Narma scoffed. “Nice on my Grandma.” Suddenly, her eyes lit up. “Hey, you had me play cover-up last night. What’s the deal? You have to tell me.”

She should have known this was coming. Rory scratched a hand over her sweater. “Honestly, it’s pretty complicated. I’m not sure it would really be okay if—”

“Excuse me.”

They both froze, Narma turning to look at the man who had come up to the table. “Yes? Can I help you?”
The man was unassuming. He smiled, though, in a sort of carefree way. Maybe it was just the fact that most people wouldn’t start off smiling when they were asking for help, but something about him creeped Rory out.

He directed his attention to Narma. “I’m sorry to bother you, but—” he twitched. “I wanted to ask. How pure would you say you are?”

Rory cringed. Dang, she hoped this guy wasn’t one of those creepy missionaries that asked way too personal questions, hoping to expose you as a sinner. They gave Christians a bad name. “Excuse you?”

Narma eyed the guy. “Okay, A, If you’re trying to give me the good news, I’m Hindi, and B, if not, you come on too strong, buddy. Not interested.”

The man twitched again. Was he on something? “You misunderstand.” He gestured behind himself. “Me and my companions—”

Oh no, there were more of them. By the curve of the central aquarium, a trio of surprisingly incongruous men were standing around, deep in discussion. They… didn’t seem like they belong together, in a way. One looked like a businessman, full suit and briefcase. Another was a construction worker, his graying beard spilling down his chest. The third was a punk rocker—he couldn’t be much older than them. Weird.

“—merely wish to find purity in the world.”

Narma leaned away from him. “O…kay. Well, you and your friends are going to need to pay to get into the exhibit.”

The man stared back wordlessly, eyes glazed over. “You misunderstand—”

Just then, Rory caught movement in her periphery. Turning, she noticed a bright orange shape on the other side of the glass. Celene pawed at the window, trying to get her attention.

Rory shot an apologetic look in Narma’s direction. She said “Sorry, be right back,” before heading out of the building.

The paranoia of being seen talking to a cat was stronger than she would have anticipated. Walking quickly towards Celene, she scooped her up, the cat squawking in protest. Moving into a nearby alley, she dropped Celene back to the ground. “What’s up?”

The cat shook out her fur. “I really wish she wouldn’t do that.” She narrowed her eyes. “There has been a spike of negative energy in this area.”

Rory couldn’t help it; her lip twitched upward. “What, are you a Feng Shui master now or something?”

Celene bristled. “This is serious! And I’m able to pick up on their malicious energy because you are. Don’t you feel it?”

She paused, her stomach twisting. “Actually, yeah. Things were feeling off. I didn’t know why.”

The cat’s tale whipped aggressively. “That’s the star soul sensing a threat! It feels as though it has picked up a similar presence to the one we faced off with last night.”

Tension shot up through Rory’s shoulders. “So there’s another one of those things here?” Her eyes
flicked to the building behind them. *Narma.* “We need to come up with a plan.”

Just then, screams erupted from the building behind them.

“There’s no time,” Celene cried. “You must transform!”

It was just Narma’s luck. Her manager gives her the dead shift, and she still has to juggle a handful of creepers. She sighed, watching Rory run out of the aquarium with a sense of finality. There went her shot at salvaging her afternoon.

The guy at her desk was still looking like he had never heard of payment before. “I wish to seek out the purist here on earth, so that we may bring them to the heavens.”

How many times did she have to tell him before this guy got the picture? She put a hand on her hip. “You still have to pay to enter the exhibits. You guys need to buy tickets. Otherwise, I will have to get security.”

His mouth twitched. The smile never dropped from the guy’s face, but for a second, it almost looked like a snarl. “You misunderstand.”

He kept repeating the same phrasing over and over too, like a robot. Narma was seriously starting to think this man might be stoned. “Look, buddy, I don’t make the rules.”

“I have to know. How pure would you say you are? This is a corrupt world.” The man leaned across the counter.

Alarms going off internally, Narma’s fingers hovered over the security alarm under the counter. “You need to leave, sir.”

“I have to know.”

Narma’s gaze shot to the space behind him when a shout rocketed through the building. The other guys—the three the man had come in with—something was wrong with them. Patrons ran for the door around them, the fluorescents above them flickering. Her eyes widened when she saw the smoke-like substance around their hands. Some kind of grenade?

She yelped when a hand shot out, grabbing her throat. Panic erupting within her, she grasped at the hand, trying to pry it off.

The guy—no, the *creature’s* mouth stretched from one side of his head to the other. His eyes glowed, neon bright. “I have to know. Is your soul one of the pure ones hiding on this rotting world?”

What the hell? She gasped—his grip was too strong. Her chest burned.

“Put her down!”

The voice caused the creature to turn. Its loosened grip wasn’t enough for her to tug herself free, but the spots in her vision cleared enough to see what was behind him.

It was a figure, with dark skin, braided hair, and a skirted silhouette. Squinting, Narma thought that the figure looked familiar, but for some reason, she just couldn’t call up a name?

A symbol like a B shined from the figure’s forehead.
The creature let go. Falling to the ground, choking against the throb of her injured throat, she heard it say, “Star soul detected. Engage collection.”

The figure yelped as the other three men charged towards her. The figure cried out, “Four of them?” Before backing away. Narma pulled herself up. She had to get out of there. Screw Martha and her dead shifts; she didn’t get paid for this.

But then the creature, no longer distracted, turned back to her.

Sailor Beta grimaced, dodging as one of the pithos gave a swipe at her with its enormous bear-claw. She was way outnumbered. Why did there have to be four of these creeps? Quickly, she tried for enough distance to pull the scepter back out. *I need you to have a little more kick here, you got it?* She pointed the wand. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The wind whipped from behind her, as it had before. The rocker in front went down, crashing to the linoleum, but the other two further back were getting back up with a quickness.

Rory glanced back to the cat by the entrance. “Celene? A little help here!”

“Hang in there!” The cat called back. “Don’t let them corner you, Sailor Beta!”

Rory gritted her teeth. “*Girl, that is not helpful!*” Out of the corner of her eye, her stomach dropped when she saw the Creep-in-Charge advancing back on Narma, grabbing her by the collar. “Why are they after her?”

Jumping back, she moved towards Narma. She needed to take out that guy ASAP. As the businessman hissed and grabbed for her, she saw a light burst into being on her right. From Narma’s direction.

Looking over, she gasped. The creature appeared to be reaching into Narma’s chest, pulling out a blue crystal-like object. “*Hey! Let her go!*

“Sailor Beta!” Celene darted between them. “She has a star soul! You mustn’t let the pithos capture it!”

No way.

*Narma?*

But that thing was reaching into Narma’s chest! What if she hurt her getting him off?

But there wasn’t time. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The attacked rushed towards the pair, Rory directing it as much away from Narma as she could. It wasn’t a direct hit, only enough to dislodge the pithos. He snarled, getting back up. Glancing back, she could see a small cut on her friend’s face—sorry, Narma—but the crystal sank back into her chest.

Her friend groaned, trying to get up.

“Hurry,” Rory yelled as over her shoulder she saw the other two crowding in. “It’s coming back!”

Celene rushed forward. As Rory evaded the pithos (the big one was going to be on her any second)
she heard the cat address her friend. “Miss, take this!” She didn’t see it, but she caught the tell-tale light of Celene using her forehead pocket dimension.

Narma screeched. “You’re talking.”

“Do what she says!” But Rory cried out as the construction worker’s massive bear claw nailed her across the torso. The force knocked her back to the opposite wall.

“Quickly! Raise it to the air. Say, Crystal Power Epsilon, make-up!”

_Epsilon._

Dazed, Rory struggled to stand. It was an odd but persistent pain, as if the claws had not cut but dragged across her entire body. A dull, aching burn. The construction worker stomped towards her.

Blacklight filled the building.

The creatures winced, the brightness blinding. Squinting against her arm, Rory peering to the other side of the room, where the dimming light revealed Narma, suited up in periwinkle and violet. She stared at herself. “What is happening.” She turned her gaze up, meeting Rory’s with a shock. “Rory?”

“You’ve got superpowers,” Rory yelled to her as she crawled out of the way of the construction work’s next blow, only for the businessman to come in on her other side.

She needed to hurry. The leader, who had initially gotten the worst blinding, was coming to his senses, his gaze re-focusing on Narma. Or, Epsilon, apparently.

“The power is within you,” Rory heard Celene say as she shrunk in on herself, the pithos getting in each other’s way above her. “Let it come to you!”

The pithos businessman finally managed to shove the construction worker out of the way with his briefcase, and he swung back, aiming his claws right for the center of Rory’s chest.

She heard a stuttered phrase. “Typhoon Strikedown!”

_Whoosh._ Heavy rain poured down on the businessman as if a geyser had just opened in the ceiling. He crumpled, the pithos construction worker jumping back in surprise.

On the other side of the room, she saw the leader fall under the same deluge.

Rory knew an opportunity when she saw one. While the construction worker was distracted, she directed one more gust straight into his chest. He smacked back into one of the aquarium’s support pillars, the supernatural smoke evaporating off his limbs.

The room was finally silent. Panting, Narma stared over at her, eyes wide.

Rory rose to her feet, still clutching her aching middle. “Okay, as I said, things got crazy last night.”
Chapter 3

Episode 3: Scatter in the halls—Or, the Failure of Facial Recognition

This was going to be more difficult to hide than Rory thought.

Celene lounged on her mattress behind her, answering her questions as she listed them out. It was evening; already, the local news had caught on to the chaos that had erupted at the aquarium, although they were preemptively labeling it a terrorist attack. She and Narma were unmentioned.

In the mirror before her, she twisted her hips, letting the skirt flare out. Now that she was looking, the leotard and skirt seemed to be a dark grey, the layers beneath orange and marigold. “What’s the skirt for?”

Rory had to believe this ridiculous uniform had to serve some kind of practical function. Otherwise, why even transform? It seemed like a waste of time.

“The skirt provides an invisible layer of shielding. It’s not impenetrable, obviously, but it should lessen the brunt of any direct attacks to the lower body.”

“The tiara?” She adjusted the black metal band over her forehead, the yellow gem gleaming from its center.

“It’s a concealment device. It’s enchanted. No matter how familiar one is with the wearer, the device makes it impossible to recognize them.”

She peered back at the cat, remembering a news clip she had seen the previous year. “And Sailor Moon can use it as a weapon, right?”

Celene looked bothered. “I’m…not sure. I recall a great deal of general information. The specifics are where things get fuzzy,”

Rory peered down at the uniform’s hips, where there were segments cut away. She frowned. “Why is the fabric keyholed here?”

“I believe that is purely aesthetic.”

In the gap of exposed skin the uniform uncovered, she could see a massive, bruised scrape where the construction worker’s claw had caught her across the torso. A scratch or two was easy to cover up, but massive wounds like this were much more visible. She was lucky he’d gotten her somewhere she usually wore clothes over. She poked a finger at the gash, then winced—still tender.

She felt bad for Narma, whose wound was going to be a bitch to hide. She was already dealing with the adjustment of finding out she had superpowers, she didn’t need drama.

_Narma stared at her from the other side of the aquarium. “GIRL. What the fuck?”_

_“Language!”_
“We should get out of here.” Rory eyed the outside world, where the growing sound of police sirens could be heard in the distance. “I don’t know how we would explain this to anybody.”

From the floor, the punk rocker groaned, beginning to sit up.

Narma stiffened. “Right. Okay. But once we move, you are explaining everything.” She coughed, bringing a hand up to her throat.

Rory winced—she could already see the hand-shaped bruises forming. She nodded. “Right.”

Moving quickly through the streets, she founded the closest alleyway that looked abandoned. She hurriedly showed Narma how to un-transform (“Just suck all the power back up in your chest. Does that make sense?”) until the fading light left them leaning against opposite walls of the alley.

“It was weird,” said Narma, holding her head. She adjusted her shirt, but there was no hiding the handprints. Rory passed her her belt, a fabric material that Narma immediately wrapped around her neck. “When I saw you come in, you didn’t look like yourself. For some reason, I just couldn’t recognize you.”

Celene nodded from the ground. “There are enchantments in place to make sure Sailor Soldiers can only be recognized by other Soldiers.”

Rory would need to ask her about that later. She took a breath. “So basically, you’re a guardian of the universe or something? And you were born with this power, but it is just now activating because the pithos are showing up.”

“What are the pithos?”

Rory shrugged her shoulders. “Girl, I have no idea.”

Celene had stepped in, explaining the best she could. At this point, Narma knew as much as Rory did. It felt good to have someone else in this with her, but it seemed really strange that another of the “star souls” ended up belonging to her best friend. Was that the reason they’d gotten along so well in the first place? Could they sense it in each other or something? It just seemed too convenient.

She pointed another item of interest. “What about the bow?”

“It’s for identification. Think of it as a crest. No two soldiers’ are alike. For instance, one’s symbol can be seen in the center gem. By that means, it has been used for tracking in the past.”

Rory sat down on the bed, eyes passing over her backpack, It was going to be time to head out soon—school started in an hour, and it was a long walk. She glanced to Celene. “It seems crazy that some kind of magical military would have cats as their trainers. Basically.”

Celene didn’t respond, tucking further into the ball she had curled up into. “Hm.”

Desidia peered down over the city, taking a seat on the building’s ledge. It was too much work to stand up all the time. Nervous, she fiddled with the frequency stone on her wrist, but she knew she was just delaying the inevitable. Taking a breath, she spoke the coordinates for the Moving Palace and waited.
Pandorana smiled when she saw her. She was clearly expecting good news. *Yikes.* “Desidia. It’s been a week in your current time since your last communication. I trust you have made progress?”

She shrunk in on herself. “Well. Um. Actually.”

Lady Pandorana’s eyes widened. “Hmm?”

“The pithos I had sanctioned at our last communication have been destroyed.” She avoided eye contact. “I was right about the location area, but it seems an additional star soul has awakened since my mission first began. I have pin-pointed the area of the city they originated from—I’m sending it over right now.” Desidia punched in the coordinates, transmitting them to the Palace. “I apologize for the delay, but…”

“Silence.”

Desidia froze.

Her Lady’s voice was as cheery as ever. “That’s a shame. I was hoping I could trust you to purify that city, but it seems my trust was misplaced. Don’t you think so, Elpis?”

The Guard nodded. “Yes, my Lady.”

Desidia shook. “My Lady! I believe I have found a location to corner them—I just need a little more time.”

Pandorana’s lilac eyes glittered. “And how many more of my pithos will I have to sacrifice for this strategy?”

A bead of sweat dripped down Desidia’s neck. “A group of three, I believe, will do the job.” She swallowed. “I will…go myself.”

“Alright then.” Pandorana smiled. In her throne, she leaned forward. “The Great Beast is very hungry, Desidia. Take care of this for me. We wouldn’t want its next snack to be you.”

The line died.

Desidia collapsed back against the rooftop, her full-body tense breaking. *Man. Time to get serious.* And she’d been hoping not to get involved here.

The previous day, she’d watched the movement from that neighborhood, and this seemed to be a place of congregation.

Down below, in the courtyard across from her, students flooded into school, rushing to make it by the bell.

It was time to make one last move.

Rory moved through the hallway, clutching her backpack to her side. At least she’d made it on time. Her homeroom bell would be ringing any second, so she didn’t have a lot of time to hang around.

But it was weird. How was she supposed to just go class when she knew that she was some kind of intergalactic soldier? That knowledge, the idea that there were things going on outside of this planet made everything here seem small. And she had so many questions! Even the Q and A
sessions she’d been having with Celene at every opportunity weren’t enough to satisfy. Each time she learned something, she just came up with more questions.

Like, what were their planet’s names? Why couldn’t Celene remember? If she was meant to be their guide, it seemed especially troubling that she couldn’t remember so many things about who they were supposed to be. It was almost like someone was trying to sabotage them.

Rory sighed, closing her locker. Well, now wasn’t the time for those questions—she had to get to class. As she moved down the hall, the intercom buzzed. “Don’t forget the pep rally this afternoon, at 2:00 am, everyone. Show up to support your school. Candygrams will also be sold in celebration of Easter and other spring days of observance. Don’t forget.”

Oh—she had forgotten. She wasn’t super into the pep rally, though it was fun to see everyone that hyped up. Still, any excuse to get out of class was a good one.

She tried to slip into homeroom without drawing a ton of attention. It always felt awkward when you were the last one in. Narma, who thankfully shared the same homeroom, patted the desk beside her and gestured her over.

As Mr. Rodriguez got started with history at the front, Rory felt a nudge at her fingertips from the space beside her. Glancing down, she saw Narma trying to press a note into her hand. She took it.

Subtly unfolding the note, she read what Narma had written. *do you train with your powers or anything?*

Writing back, Rory waited until Rodriguez’s back was turned and slipped it onto Narma’s desk. *no, at least not yet. it’s a good idea tho. I can run it by celene.*

Narma wrote back. Luckily, Mr. Rodriguez was an old fashioned guy who loved writing notes up on the board. *you free tonight?*

*I gotta work this evening. how about tomorrow? you got aquarium shifts?*

*girl I aint going back to the aquarium*

Rory frowned. Tearing another piece of paper from her notebook, she responded. *why not? I thought you loved the aquarium, except your boss??*

*everytime I think about the aquarium I think about that thing’s hands around my neck*

*Yikes.* Rory hadn’t had any sort of nightmares or anything yet, but Narma had gotten it worse than her. She couldn’t help but shiver at the idea of getting strangled.

*: how are the bruises?*

*still bad. my mum was super nosey about the scarf when I got back. I had to tell her it was from a nice hindi boy so she would back off*

*: but also lol. you going to the pep rally?*

*Free get-out-of-class-pass? You know it.*

The bell rang.
For just a second, as everyone was standing up from their desks, Rory thought she saw something shoot by the classroom’s window, but there was nothing there. She brushed it off. Must have been wind.

The gym was already screaming with pop music by the time Rory left class for the pep rally that afternoon. She stood outside the double doors, waiting in line with the rest of the crowd. She knew lots of people would be going, but she hadn’t expected it to get this crowded.

“Hey, are you going to the pep rally?”

Within the mass of commuting students, Rory turned to see a guy standing a few feet away from her. He had sandy brown hair, and was honestly a little dorky looking; large, wire-rim glasses and a colored button-up. Still, something about him made her immediately tense. “Uh, yeah. You know. Better than class.”

The guy smiled. “Yeah! Hey, just so you know, there’s a new edition of the school paper coming out this Friday. You should check it out!”

He pulled off his glasses, cleaning them on the edge of his shirt.

Rory inhaled sharply, realizing where she’d seen him before. Last time she’d seen him, he had a giant bear-claw.

It was the first guy—the first person she fought who’d been possessed by the pithos. She hadn’t realized he was that young. Then again, maybe anyone would look different with a bear-claw.

Of course, now he was just a guy. She wondered if he’d been aware during that time.

Her heart leapt—what if he recognized her? She clenched her hand.

Wait, no. Celene had said they couldn’t recognize her in uniform. “Sure,” she laughed nervously. “I’ll do that.”

Satisfied, he turned back to the entrance, where they all shuffled in like sardines.

The bass in their sound system was pounding, the school’s cheer squad chanting from the floor. Rory greeted some of her classmates on the way in, scanning the crowd for Narma. Narma had texted her at lunch that she might be a little late, so she shrugged it off when she could find her.

Maybe something had been wrong with lunch today, though. There was something making her feel slightly queasy; she just hoped it didn’t get any worse.

She took a seat in the upper bleachers, watching the doorways in case Narma couldn’t find her. There was supposed to be some cheer routines, then a guest speaker, and then some games set up along the sides of the basketball court they could play until it was time for school let out. She didn’t get her hopes up for the guest to be anyone special, though; they were just one carbon-copy school in a city full of them.

Several moments passed. Rory watching the clock above the bleachers, enthusiasm slowly fading as time for Narma to get out of class had well passed by, and she hadn’t heard anything. Should I go check on her? That girl’s pretty quick getting around in between classes. She hammered her toe against the plastic base of the stairway.
She considered going down into the crowd, but if she did, Narma might miss her. They would just end up circling around each other. So she stayed seated.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Rory jumped.

Peering over, she found the same dorky guy she had spoken to earlier scooting down the bleachers towards her. “You look kind of freaked out.”

Rory crossed her legs, trying to get the discomfort in her stomach to settle. “Yeah, I just thought my friend would be here right now. I hope she’s okay.”

The guy looked thoughtful. “The teacher probably just held them over. Happens to me all the time.”

That…kind of made sense, actually. “Yeah, maybe.”

He held a hand out. Wow, who did that anymore? “My name is Edward, by the way.”

She grinned, taking it. “‘Edward?’ You go by Eddie or somethin’?”

“Nope! Edward R. Murrow was one of the greatest journalists of our time. He’s my hero. I want to become a journalist once I get out of here, so I go by the full name as a nod to him.”

What a weird guy.

“I can respect that.” She paused “Would you be mad if I called you Eddie though?”

He sighed. “Everyone does.”

The bleachers began to fill out. After several minutes, the cheer squad threw themselves into their main act routine, and the swell of teenagers amassed into a chorus of chatter and pubescent stank.

Yeah, Rory thought, she was still a high schooler. The world hadn’t changed that much overnight.

“Everybody’s getting really hyped,” said Eddie from beside her. “Any idea who the guest speaker is?”

She shrugged. “No clue.” Glancing over, she eyed him. He looked like a writer. There were ink stains on the sleeves of his button-up. Man, she didn’t even know they had a school newspaper. “So, some juicy stories coming out on Friday, right?”

He turned back to her. “Oh, yeah! I actually got my stuff on the front page this time.” Leaning forward, voice hushed (which made it hard to hear amidst the conversation,) he said, “You’ll never believe what I saw.”

“Welcome everybody!”

It turned their attention back to the floor, Rory still unsettled.

Principal Garrish stood in the middle of the basketball court, microphone in hand, the gym lights focused down her. “Thank you all for gathering here today. I know you’re devastated you had to miss your afternoon class.”

The students laughed. Rory clutched her stomach—the butterfly sensation was only getting worse. She needed to grab a ginger ale after this.
She watched the door—no sign of Narma.

“This event is about showing your support for your school. It’s about taking a moment away from the books to appreciate the gift of all the people you have around you—your teachers, your staff, your fellow classmates. Today, show off your school spirit and have fun, so that when you go back to class tomorrow, you can work even harder.”

In the sudden dimness of the gymnasium, Rory was then able to make out the shape of a woman standing close behind Principal Garrish. She couldn’t see much of her; just the edge of her heals. She seemed to wait patiently while the Principal was getting them warmed up.

“We’re going to have some free games available for everyone here, so enjoy that and, if you would like donate the school’s improvement fund, But before that, we have a very special guest here to speak to you today.”

The woman in the darkness stepped forward. She was wearing sun glasses, dark boots with those striking heels, a white, Greek-looking cocktail dress and a black jacket. Curly honey hair hung down in her face.

Rory had no idea who that was.

Narma had been feeling sick all day. She couldn’t think of a singular thing that might have caused it. She packed her lunch today, so the half-cooked cafeteria food hadn’t done it. She hadn’t done any vigorous exercise. Maybe she was still recovering from the fight a week ago? But she felt much better. Who knew.

So now she was lying in the Nurse’s office like a grade schooler. The woman kept trying to give her saltine crackers, but if she stuffed one more cracker in her face she was going to explode.

The nurse had stepped out, probably to oversee the upcoming pep rally. It made sense—there were more opportunities for students to make idiots of themselves in an enclosed space. Plus, it wasn’t like she was going to do anything else for her.

The nurse’s station window shown light down into the quiet room. Narma tried to tune out the discomfort in her belly, listening to the quiet shuffling out in the office. Arm over her eyes, she heard a pair of footsteps pass close.

“We really appreciate you coming down here on such short notice. I know the kids will appreciate hearing from an influencer of such high public regard. You know, for many of them, its their dream. The world certainly has changed.”

Narma open one eye, unmoving as she silently listened to the conversation. That sounded like the principal. Who was she talking to? There was supposed to be some kind of special guest at the rally, wasn’t there? Who did their school manage to nab?

“Well, you know…” This woman sounded nervous. She didn’t immediately recognize her voice, but she would have thought some big shot would speak with a little more oomph. “I’m just wanting to make sure the children are staying pure in these…difficult times.”

Pure? Had Garrish brought in a priest or something? Narma has had quite enough of that this week. Stomach clenching uncomfortably, Narma sat up, scooting closer to the door from her cot.

“…I see,” Garrish replied. “I…thought your contribution would be more…business oriented. I
know you got started right out of high school; I was hoping you could talk to the kids about your experiences building that sort of business.”

“Oh, yes,” the woman startled. “I mean, the best business practices are those of purity. That is, that they are conducting their business in a genuine way. Does that make sense?”

“Oh,” said Garrish, sighing. “Oh, yes, of course. I understand what you mean now.”

Narma squinted into the darkness. What the hell were these mad women talking about?

“Well,” Garrish recovered, “we really appreciate you coming, Ms. Klavsta.”

Klavsta?

As in, Sophie Klavsta? She was a prominent fashion vlogger from Sweden whose clothing line had garnered ridiculous success over the past few years. She was famous for never showing her face, preferring to keep the focus on the clothing. Narma knew, because she’d been following her for years. She was low-key one of her idols. But…the weird thing was…

That didn’t sound like Sophie. Narma had seen probably hundreds of her videos—she would recognize her voice. Did their principal get jipped?

The Principal and “Sophie” carried on their conversation, continuing out of the office. Curiosity peaked enough to overpower her unsettled stomach, Narma rose, quietly exiting the nurse’s office and following them down the hall.

She kept a distance, not wanting to be caught stalking them. After a few moments, the Principal headed on to the gymnasium and the woman who was supposed to be Sophie turned down a hallway.

Just as she was about to turn down it herself, a tapping above her caught her attention.

Peering up, she saw the tiny hallway window taken up by orange cat.

With a quick glance to make sure no one was looking, she got up on her tip-toes and flicked the latch. Celene pushed open the window with her head, letting herself in. “Something’s not right,” she said immediately, hopping down on top of some lockers.

“Hold on.” She snapped her mouth shut as the woman walked back out, passing her. Narma turned her attention back to the hallway, moving down it with the lightest tread possible. What was that woman doing down there?

“‘Hold on?’” Celene hissed indignantly.

Narma, undeterred, slinked past rows of unused lockers. Where had she gone?

She was about half-way down the hall when she came upon a supply closet. There wasn’t really anything else around—all the classrooms seemed to be locked. Had she gotten something out of there?

Decided, she opened the door.

A woman stared back with wide eyes. Most of her clothes were missing, and she was bound. She gave a muffled scream around her gag when Narma came into view.

What the hell? With finality, she understood she was looking at the real Sophie Klavsta. If that was...
true…

Who the hell was in the gym?

“I want you all to give it up for Sophie Klavsta!”

Rory heard a wave of skepticism from the crowd: “What, no way!” and “Did they really get her to make an appearance in-person?”

She vaguely recognized the name, but…

Wait. Wasn’t she that YouTuber Narma was obsessed with? The one with the clothing line? Narma was going to be crushed if she missed her.

But, as Rory peered out over the figure in the center of the gymnasium, something seemed off. It coincided with the twist in her gut as the woman began to speak.

“Hello, children,” Sophie said, shifting from toe to toe. “I’m here to talk to you about something very important.”

‘Hello children?’ Who spoke like that that? And wasn’t she supposed to be Swedish or something? Rory couldn’t hear any accent at all.

Seemed she wasn’t the only one thought this was fishy. Around her, she heard whispers of “That’s not her,” and “Does this lady think we’re stupid?”

Sophie cleared her throat. “Your purity is the most important thing, children. If you don’t have that, you’re worthless.”

What the fuck? Principal Garrish looked startled too, shuffling towards the mic as the boos started. “I thought you were speaking about something else today, miss.” She said it like, “take the hint,” or maybe, “Shut up. Now.”

After a moment, the woman who was almost definitely not Sophie Klavsta yelled, “Ugh, this is too hard! Forget it!” She flung her arms out.

Rory tensed as the woman’s hands began to leak smoke.

“I have to know who hear has the pure soul I need!”

Rory’s eyes widened. Pure soul?

Screams rang out from the corners of the room, where figures were standing, familiar bear claws forming over their hands.

The woman yelled, “Just give it up!”

Chaos.

Students and teachers clambered off the bleachers, scrambling towards the door as the pithos examined their captives individually. If they didn’t yield results, they were tossed carelessly down the steps.

That’s why she was feeling so sick. How did they make it to the school? She stood with the rest of
her classmates, trying not to draw attention in all the cacophony.

Eddie peered to her as he began moving down the steps. “We have to get out of here!”

She drew back. “You go on; I’ve got to make sure Narma got out okay.” Before he could say anything else, she wove through the crowd, heading for the railings.

One of the pithos had moved to block the exit, probably realizing everyone was escaping. Down at the bottom, Narma—or, rather, Sailor Epsilon—burst through the gym doors behind him. Celene stood beside her, tail whipping aggressively.

Rory had to get somewhere she could transform.

Making a decision, she jumped the rail and darted behind the bleachers.

“Hey now.” Narma held her arms out as the pithos before her tilted it’s (her?) head, currently jacking the body of a blond classmate. “That’s just not right. You have to take a girl out to dinner first.”

The girl smiled. “Star soul detected!”

Beside her, Celene hissed. “Sailor Epsilon! That’s the woman I heard talking about the pithos!”

Narma glanced around her adversary—indeed, there was a snazzy dressed woman with two bear hands launching herself around the room, yanking unsuspecting teens up to check their souls. She was almost 100% the woman who had attacked Sophie. “Got it. Shank the bitch, and avoid a bear hug.”

Celene sputtered.

The blond pithos lunged at her, Narma turning sideways to avoid it. “Celene, I have literally only done this once. I might need a little guidance.” She really regretted not taking those dance classes like her grandma wanted.

“Just use what you know!”

Narma ducked to avoid another swing. Okay, so, she knew her attack could hit multiple targets at once. It seemed to work better if they were closer together?

Narma narrowed her eyes, spying another smoky-handed freak in the right corner. Well, guess I’m herding these guys. Turning abruptly, she ran in that direction.

She ran immediately into Rory.

Sailor Beta was coming from around the bleachers, and the pithos in that area immediately turned its attention in her direction. And then it saw Narma, and looked torn.

“Epsilon,” Rory called to her over the screaming. “That woman—I think she’s controlling them.”

“I know. Help me get them together,” she called back, swerving through the crowd as the pithos followed quickly behind. “We should take out her lackies first. It will make it easier to take her out if we’re not juggling—” she dropped, dodging a claw as if came hurling through the place her head had just been, “—three other guys.”
Rory echoed “Three,” eyes scanning the room around them. Her eyes widened as she peered over Narma’s shoulder.

“Whoo, that was easier than I thought!”

Turning, Narma backed away rapidly, watching as the Sophie imposter strode towards them with the third pithos. Narma cursed; out of time. Raising her scepter, having no choice, she called on Typhoon Strikedown, raining down on the two pithos closest to them. The one closest to her went down, but the one by Rory only faltered. Stubborn.

Acting quickly, Narma darted away from the collective, passing between Rory and the pithos, drawing its attention. Two sets of feet pounded behind her. I’ll keep these guys distracted. Take her out, Rory.

Rory watched in alarm as the space between her and the imposter disappeared in an instant. The woman was across the court one minute, but then she thrust her arms back, sweeping through the air. “I’ll tell you,” the woman said, “You two are slippery. Luckily, I still have the chance to collect your souls, so it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Who are you?” Rory gritted her teeth, scrambling back up the bleachers, trying to gain some distance.

The woman smiled. “Doesn’t matter! Now stay still.” The woman whipped her arms forward, and, almost as if the claws were pulling her, was shot through the air like a comet.

Directly above her.

Jerking back, Rory whipped out her scepter and fired a Dire Gust into the woman’s stomach.

“Sophie” was thrown back the way she had come, landing on her back. “Argh! Brat!” Immediately, she began to get back up.

Rory’s gaze whipped to Narma—she was going to need her help, if this woman recovered so quickly from one of her Gusts. She just hoped she was handling the pithos okay,

Apparently, her attack had a turn time.

Narma had called out for a second Typhoon Strikedown several times now, but the scepter in her pocket had only flickered dimly. Damn, she needed an actual weapon. All she could do right now was dodge, and she wasn’t great at it.

She gritted her teeth as the railing she vaulted over slammed into her shoulder, the pithos quick behind. It was a good thing these creatures didn’t seem very good at strategy; they could have cornered her if they were coordinating. Instead, they greedily charged after her, tearing up the gym floor as they scraped across it.

Across the way, the woman who’d been controlling them was working way more efficiently. Despite the numbers, Rory had really gotten the short end of the stick here. That woman could fling herself across the room, her claw coming down like a guillotine.

Epsilon panted, turning back to the creatures as they tried to follow her under the bleachers—really
too small for their massive “paws.” “Alright, you fellows, you need to chill.”

They roared.

An enormous crash rang from above them on the front side of the bleachers—a scream tore through the air. Narma looked up. She could see the shadow of Rory (Beta?) and the woman come to arms. Oh no.

Darting out from the enclosed space, she froze to see Beta, pinned with the women’s immense claw by the shoulder—she could see the place where the claws were piercing the skin. “Beta!”

Rory’s eyes winced, peering over to where Narma had come out of her hiding place. “Look out!”

Narma jumped, one of the pithos growling venomously as it’s smoky claw embedded in the wall where she had been.

The woman wouldn’t be distracted it seemed. Epsilon could see the woman reaching for Rory’s chest. Narma had seen that same glow from her own. She gasped. No time.

The second pithos was still trying to get out from under the bleachers. This was her only chance.

Epsilon held out both hands. One to the pithos behind her, whose claws were seconds away from unstuck and ready to rip her soul out, and one at Sophie’s copycat. “Eat shit!” She cursed. “Typhoon Strikedown!”

WHAM.

A downpour was unleashed on the bleachers. The woman was blasted off of Rory, who winced at the after-shock. The pithos behind Narma cried out as it got a power washing.

Then the second came out, no time to avoid it.

Narma braced herself as it flung her back against the bleachers. The air was knocked from her—a pain in her chest might have been a cracked rib.

The thing was still coming.

Beta/Rory gasped, brushing water from her eyes. Her deep gray suit clung to her.

Below, the woman sputtered, spitting out the remains of the deluge. “How dare you treat an Agent of Purity this way? We’re trying to make a better world here. Just give up already!”

Narma—that thing was going to be on her any second. And she looked hurt, Beta had to act quickly.

Beta narrowed her eyes, observing the almost perfect trajectory from the woman to the pithos behind her. “News flash, lady. We’re the good guys. Catch up.”

The woman’s eyes widened as she held out her scepter.

“Dire Stellar Gust!”

The attacked rocketed through her. Rory gaped as the woman seemed to disappear completely, reduced to nothing more than particles and a pile of stylish clothes. The mass hit the pithos full
force, the host collapsing within a circle of stellar dust.

Holy crap. That thing got stronger.

The pithos out of commission, Rory rushed to where Narma had fallen against the bleachers. “Damn, girl, you took a hit!” She kneeled beside her, examining the area Narma was clutching over.

After a moment, Celene emerged from behind the bleachers. “Great work, Sailor Scouts—oh my!”

“I’m okay,” she hissed as Rory helped her to stand. “I think I should go back to the nurse’s office though. Wait.”

As Rory moved to steer her towards the door, Narma pointed to the pile of clothes.

“I need those.”

The police showed up. Rory could hear the sirens squalling from the street outside as Narma handed the damp ensemble to the shivering woman in the choir room. They would need to make themselves scarce soon.

“Thank you,” said the women Rory presumed to be the real Sophie Klavsta. She shook out the excess water, slowly pulling them back on. “But…how did you know I was here?”

Narma grinned. She gave the vlogger finger guns (Rory gave her a look like she was crazy. GIRL. You have a broken rib). “You know, it was a super cool student who told us where to find you. Indian girl. You’re really lucky that she came to the rescue. She said she was a big fan, maybe you should shout her out. Or give your number of something, you know.”

Rory gave her a flat look. This seems like an abuse of power.

“Y-yeah, maybe,” Sophie brushed her hair back. “Well, thank you anyways.”

Rory straightened. She’d never gotten to interact with anyone as Sailor Beta before; it was a little exciting. “Just doing our duty, ma’am. It sounds like the police are here—you may want to file a report about what happened.”

“Thank you.” The woman hesitated. “Just...what was that woman? She looked like a monster.”

Rory smiled stiffly. Girl, I know it. Her shoulder throbbed, bleeding under the dark fabric. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”
“This morning brings us some startling reports. There was chaos at Garfield High yesterday evening when an unprompted terrorist attack put students in the hospital, and their parents in a panic.

It was 2:00 PM at Garfield high school Wednesday evening when a pep rally took an alarming turn—a woman believed to be an esteemed guest speaker revealed herself to be an imposter. Multiple assailants were present in the room, and began to attack the student population. There were eight injuries, before the police arrived on scene to find the school in pandemonium. Investigators have yet to discover the reason for the attack, or what the assailants had hoped to achieve. It can certainly be said though that the students will be returning to school tomorrow with a new sense of uncertainty. Our news team will keep you up-to-date on any developments.

In other news, the ARC team at NASA has taken on an unexpected new job: tracking down the wandering planets of the former HR 8832, where the star had abruptly disappeared—”

“Terrible.”

Rory peered back to where her mama was placing pancakes on the table, eyes affixed to the story on the screen.

“To think those hoodlums would target a room full of school children. Just terrible.” Mama’s eyes dropped back down the Rory, where she was sitting at the table. “You sure you don’t want to stay home from school today, baby?”

It was Friday. The school had closed down Thursday, because no one wanted their kids there after a supposed “terrorist attack,” and the investigation was still in-progress. Knowing the truth, it had been sort of excruciating to wait around while she could have been out freerunning, or just doing her dang job (Brenda had been understanding, bless that woman).

Across the table, Tyrell stiffly finished his plate, kissing their mom on the check before heading out the door. “I’ve got to go. Bye, mama.”

“Be careful.”

Rory took the pancakes, swirling her fork in the plat of butter. “I’m sure, mama. How else are we going to show these guys that they can’t get to us than by getting back to business?”

Her mama smiled, worry lining all her features. “That’s my girl.”

Narma had ended up in the hospital. They’d quickly realized will power wasn’t going to take care of her broken rib, and Rory had called a taxi to take them in. Rory just needed some disinfectant and a bandage, but Narma had to get her torso wrapped. Luckily, her parents didn’t hear the news until after they’d wrapped her up, so they didn’t see the handprints. They would have taken a lot more explaining. Right now, mama and Narma’s parents were simply under the impression they’d sustained their injuries in the attack.

Rory brushed a hand over the bandage under her shirt. At least, at the end of the day, they were
both alright. But it had gotten nasty. Well, at least they didn’t have to deal with the pithos anymore.

At the outskirts of the city, two men took in the skyline from the mountain. It was a shame, really — this glistening planet, the endless possibilities of these creatures, and they use their brilliance to destroy it. There was only one way to salvage this world now. Of course, its time had not yet come. For now, they had a much rawer beauty to harness.

“What a disgrace.”

Lupido turned, watching Fastosus throw a handful dirt from the crest of the tree. “Hm?”

Fastosus turned to him, his wild hair pushed back by the air of the higher altitude. “Desidia. What a waste of space. Did you hear? She had two star souls in her grasp, and she let them escape us.”

Lupido couldn’t stop the smirk that twitched onto his face. “What would you wish her further? She’s already reduced to dust.”

Fastosus sneered. Picking up a stray pebble off the tree, he hurled it into the air before them. “It is merely embarrassing, brother. Sister Desidia was not worthy to join our cause in first place. A relief to see her gone.” Eyeing Lupido, he slowly smiled. “Hey. Would you indulge me in a wager?”

Oh, and here he went. Fastosus would never pass up the opportunity for a bet. He always believed he was going to win. “And what wager is this?”

Fastosus’s gaze sharpened. “I bet I can acquire both star souls before you can. A test of skill. What say you?”

Lupido considered the other agent. Fast had always had a brashness Lu found unsavory. It was an interesting proposal. And perhaps allowing Fastosus to trip over himself trying to hunt both star souls at once might be to his benefit. “What is the prize?”

The other Agent grinned. “Bragging rights, of course.” He paused, his smile turning sly. “And the loser owes the winner a favor.”

A favor. Lupido subtly took in the other agent’s form: Fit. A handsome face. His lip twitched. He certainly wouldn’t mind wiping that smug expression off of it.

Fastosus probably planned to have him grovel at his feet. He should be more careful not to put himself in situations he couldn’t handle. Lupido flared a wrist out. “I accept.”

After all, Fast had no concept of how to truly take hold of one’s desires. You had to savor it. Take it slow. Pull it apart until the only thing left to do is wait until it falls into your hands. How could one achieve purity if they remained unfulfilled?

There was more than one way to make someone grovel.

He was going to lose.

—

Rory knew something was off when she got into the cafeteria that afternoon, and the whole room was whispering. And it wasn’t the kind of whispering where you really didn’t want anyone to hear
you; it was, distinctly, the sound of gossip.

Rory was wondering what she wasn’t in on, when Narma charged up to her lunch table and slammed a skein of paper down in front of her. She whispered, but didn’t whisper, “Look at this!”

The paper was topped with *The Garfield Times*. The school newspaper? That’s right; Eddie did say it was coming out today. But then she saw what was on the cover. It was a sketch—framed facing upward, a black line that had to be the edge of a rooftop and a colorless evening sky.

Against the sky, dark and distinct as a Rorschach blotch: a silhouette. Her silhouette. Or, rather, the silhouette of Sailor Beta.

The headline read *A Superhero for Seattle?*

Narma stared at her. She whispered, “Isn’t that crazy?” Her expression said, “What the hell do we do?”

Rory took the paper. It looked like Eddie did remember something from his time as a Pithos. Though, the story he told wasn’t exactly accurate. According to the article, he was walking home from the post office when a monster appeared. He’d seen it flee to the rooftop, and then seen a skirted figure take it down.

Well, he couldn’t exactly tell them *he* was the monster, could he?

Her stomach dropped as an “amendment” from the article brought in the circumstances surrounding the pep rally, citing student accounts of two women in uniform. She underestimated Eddie. He’d seen a lot, and he wanted everyone to know about it.

She gestured for Narma to sit down at the table, and Rory shrugged off her jacket. It was a real stuffy, all of a sudden. “What are people saying? Anyone believe this?”

Narma tapped her nails in a staccato on the table. “People saw it—all of them. Some think it was a joke, but most want to believe. A lot of cheerleaders saw things the other day that they couldn’t explain; those girls have clout.”

Rory smoothed out the paper. “Well. It is just a school newspaper, right? They were bound to get excited about it. Just look at Sailor Moon.”

Narma bit her lip. “Hm. Maybe.” She adjusted her scarf.

Rory frowned across at Narma, lowering her voice as someone squeezed in beside her. “Oh, sorry. Hey, we just need to be careful.” She peered around, paranoid now. Man, she had never been the type to care if some stranger was listening. Guess it was time to start. “Hey, I talked to Celene about…that thing, you know. We might be able to start training soon.”

The cat had been looking around, and she finally said she’d found a good place for them to practice. Rory just needed to scope it out. She just hoped the cat thought it over and didn’t pick somewhere a wandering black girl might get hounded by the police for going. She wasn’t sure how much Celene actually knew about humans and the world they lived in.

Narma unpacked her naan from her lunch bag, ripping into it with unnecessary force while she pulled out her Tupperware of shahi paneer. “Hopefully we won’t have to.”

“Girl, you saw that woman turn into dust. I don’t think we’ll be seeing her again.”
Everywhere Rory went for the rest of the day, the paper haunted her. In every class, it seemed at least two people were reading the article. News was spreading.

Behind her, she heard a passing conversation.

“Yeah, I asked her, but she said she couldn’t do it. Like, immediately. She didn’t even think about it.”

“I swear, she probably thinks she’s too pretty to be working with the rest of us peasants.”

“Right? I don’t know what the hell Carmen’s problem is!”

Well, at least the paper wasn’t the only point of gossip going on.

She took a breath as she pulled the last few items out of her locker. It was just as she’d told Narma; it wasn’t as though anyone was going to recognize them in uniform, so they just had to make sure no one saw them transform. She was just glad she didn’t have work that evening—she wasn’t feeling up to free running that day, but at least she could stop through the Yarn Barn before they shut down. She needed a new bundle of blue yarn.

Something occurring to her, Rory peered over her collection of items to take home. Didn’t I bring my jacket today? Realization struck her: I never picked it back up when I took it off at lunch. Her heart leapt—the Beta scepter was in there. She almost left without it. She hurried back to the lunchroom, relief flowing through her when she spied the bright purple jacket on the lunch bench. Oh thank god. Celene would have killed me.

Relief slowly melted into confusion when, getting closer, she noticed velcro straps on the jacket, and a patterned detail inside the pocket. This isn’t my jacket. It must be that other girl.

She froze.

Which means that chick has my jacket.

Grabbing the leftover jacket, Rory hefted her backpack over her shoulder and darted to the school’s entrance. It was a pretty bright color. Maybe I can spot her?

What had she looked like? She remembered long, dark hair. Bursting through the double doors, she scanned the steps, then the street. Come on, come on!

Any second, that girl might reach into her pocket and find the scepter. They’d all seen the newspaper. They all knew about Sailor Moon. She had to catch up with her.

There! Rory just caught a glimpse of purple turn the corner. She took off, backpack thumping painfully against her injured shoulder.

She couldn’t let anyone see the scepter. Even if they didn’t know what it was, they would know that something was up. She ran.

Once around the corner, Rory could see the girl at the end of the block. The shadows of trees flew by her as she sprinted down the street. The girl was still walking. Could she call out to her? But no, she was too far away. Dang it!

The girl stopped. Rory almost let herself slow down, but then she saw the bus stop sign the girl
stood beside.

And the bus chugging up the road.

Rory held a hand out as the bus came to a stop, the girl loading on. “Wait!”

They didn’t hear her. As she got halfway up the street the bus took off again, speeding right past her. Rory threw her hands down, spiraling in place. Stopping, she eyed the destination sign: PIKE PLACE, DOWNTOWN. Could she free-run down there? Dang, no, it didn’t matter. She would never keep up with the bus. That girl would be lost to the ether before she ever made it down there. She watched the bus drive away, nearing a stop light. Maybe…

A plan forming, she turned and darted back down the street. *Come on Rory. You can do it.* It was never the wrong time for a pep talk.

Apparently, somebody up there liked her, because the bus slowed to a stop at the light, right next to a corner store beside the school. She leaped as she neared the store—snagging a hand up, she pulled herself up to the roof. She was glad it was high enough to be out of the line-of-sight for the bus goers. Taking a step back from the edge of the roof, she launched forward—crouching to land on top of the bus.

The bus gave a thud as she landed. She hoped no one bothered to check the roof. Carefully, she laid down flat, waiting to ride out the trip. She needed to keep an eye out during any stops.

The stoplight changed, and the bus chugged on.

Rory blew out a breath, watching the sky pass above her. It was blue, but dimming, evening setting in. In a distant corner, she could see the vague shape of the moon.

*Sailor Moon* had always seemed like a superhero, even back when Rory thought she was fake. Did she have to go through things like this? If all the news stories were true, if she dealt with as many threats to Japan as they publicized, she had to be exhausted. How did she do it?

*I’d like to meet her one day.*

After thirty minutes and the girl with the scepter never exiting the bus, they reached Pike Place.

Pike was an elaborate market full of shops, ice cream parlors, farmer’s stands, and neon lighting as the city began to darken. Rory watched the girl disembark from the bus-top, dropping down behind it to follow her on the street. At least *Sailor Moon* wasn’t a stalker.

Ahead, the girl entered a shop called *Gem Heaven*. Thank Jesus, she was going to catch her.

“Well that looked dangerous.”

Rory stopped, glancing back to where the voice had come from behind her.

There was a guy standing there. His broad shoulders were squeezed into a long-sleeve, patterned shirt, the kind of pattern that felt like it meant something. His dark hair was pulled slickly into a pony tail, stubble over his square jaw. He smiled, teeth as bright and striking as his eyes: a clear blue. “But you look like the kind of girl who enjoys taking risks.”

*Uh. Whoa.* Rory swallowed, straightening. This guy had a look, but no way he was in high school. Did he go to Seattle U? “Uh. Yeah, I guess so. You know, you do what you gotta’ do when you miss the bus.” She chuckled nervously. *Watch yourself, Rory. A guy that good looking has got to*
be trouble. Her eyes darted back to the shop—she couldn’t lose track of that girl.

He regarded her. Guy had an intense gaze. “You seem distracted. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to bother you when you’re busy.” His grin slowly spread. “I was just curious. You don’t see someone leap from the top of a bus everyday.”

Guy was smooth as heck. “Yeah. I mean, you right. Then again, most people would probably bust their kneecaps. I don’t recommend it. I just…have a lot of practice.”

The guy tilted his head back. “Yes. Most people.” He pulled his hands of his pockets. “You are an interesting girl, Ms…?” He held a hand out.

It took her a second to realize he was asking her name. “Uh, Aurora! I mean, Rory. I go by Rory.” She took his hand, periphery hyped aware of the door to Gem Heaven.

They shook. “Rory. Hm. I’m Lucas.” Mercifully, he released her hand, beginning to walk backwards away from her. “Maybe we’ll see each other again sometime.” He grinned once more before turning and continuing down the street.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said weakly, watching him go.

Fudge, the girl! Turning, she darted into Gem Heaven. scanning the room for any purple jackets. Peering around to every corner of the room, she didn’t see anyone. She turned to the shop owner. “Did you see a girl in a purple jacket come through here.”

The woman at the desk looked shifty, drumming her nails on the table. “Ah, no, I don’t believe so, dear.”

Rory narrowed her eyes. She was sure the girl hadn’t come back out the door. She watched the woman’s gaze dart towards the back. Hey—there was another exit back there. ‘Thanks,” she called instinctively before darting for the back exit.

She emerged into back street. Her eyes scanned the area. Oh, wow, she’d really almost lost her. Faintly, in the distance, she could make out a purple shape moving up Pike street. Already out of breath, she took off.

Man. She thought she was gonna’ have down time after school. So much for that!

That girl must have figured out she was following her, if she’d taken the back exit. Rory pumped her arms, still running as the girl turned down first. This was going to get a lot harder if this girl was actively trying to avoid her.

She pushed herself faster—she could see threads of sunset bursting in above them in the horizon. Narrowing her eyes, she identified the girl’s trajectory. She was heading for the museum.

There must have been something different physically in doing free-running and running through the streets. Her stomach was starting to hurt.

It was a good thing the museum had free entry to students. As she entered, Rory flashed her student ID and continued inside, the counter clerk calling, “No running!” behind her.

It had been a while since she’d been in the museum. It was almost overwhelmingly quiet, not even any music playing over the intercom. People meandered through the building, casually taking in the paintings hung on white, white walls. Rory’s gaze passed though the different lower rooms visible from the entryway. I don’t see her. Her attention turned to the staircase. She must have gone
upstairs.

Tromping up the steps, Rory brushed by the patrons, rounding the stairtop-rails. She turned to search the next room, when she found herself staring at the girl in the purple jacket. She was behind the railing opposite her.

The girl grimaced when she saw her. Rory didn’t know her name, but she recognized her—they’d been in an art class together in middle school. She turned and fled down the hallway into the next gallery. Dang—Rory rounded the railing and moved to follow her.

Then the lights went out.

People screamed. The darkness coincided with an enormous crashing sound from above, as if something had fallen down on top of the museum’s roof. The sound sent Rory to the ground, covering her head as many of the other patrons around her did the same. She glanced behind her, the girl no longer visible. No, come on!

She began to get up but dropped down again when the noise duplicated. This time, loosened shards rained down from the skylight. A museum worker came trudging up the steps, “Remain calm, people! We’re going to find the source of the outage, and the building should restore power in just a few minutes—”

Crash—

Something came through the skylight. Rory shielded her eyes as glass fell around her, something landing heavy on the staircase. She heard the tell-tale noise of the employee falling back down the steps.

Peeking through her fingers, she looked to see what could have been just a guy, if it weren’t for a couple of things. Mainly, the mass of smoke engulfing his head like some kind of hair, and the massive shadowy jaw overlying his own mouth. It was quiet for only a moment before the creature (who also had claws apparently, great) opened its mouth.

RAAAGH—

The museum goers scattered in every direction, anywhere to get away from the staircase. Rory scrambled backwards, stray glass cutting into her hands as she struggled to get out of the monster’s line of sight.

Okay, that was definitely a pithos. A different pithos. What the hell? Her hand rose to her pocket, even though she knew what she would find there. Nothing. The scepter was in that jacket.

The creature turned, and Rory scrambled up, turning to move down the hallway where the girl had disappeared. She needed that scepter now. How was she supposed to defeat the pithos without it? She moved forward, almost going into the next gallery before realizing there was glass all over the floor. In the far corner, she spied a second pithos, stomping around in the direction of any girls it spotted.

That…made sense, though. Apparently, Sailor Soldiers were almost exclusively women. They were on the hunt.

Rory panted, backing back into the hall. Behind her, there was a door on the wall. This place had conference rooms; this had to be one of them. Quickly moving inside, she shut the door behind her.

She turned, leaning back against the door. She had to come up with a plan.
She froze when she found a familiar purple jacket on the floor in front of her, at the far end of the small conference room.

She let herself breathe. Girl must have ditched it when she realized it was how Rory was spotting her so easily. Well, she didn’t have to worry about her following her anymore. Rory knelt to the floor, fishing into the pocket, relief sweeping through her when her hand closed around the rod of the scepter.

The door opened, and closed.

Rory froze. Slowly looking up, she met the startled gaze of the girl she’d been chasing. She was plastered against the door, in the same position Rory had been just a second ago.

Nobody moved. The girl stared from the door, and Rory’s hand was clutching the scepter, in full view of God and everyone. They looked at each other, both out of breath.

Slowly, Rory head her hands over her head. The girl’s eyes locked on the scepter, confusion flashing in her eyes. Stomps and screaming resounded from the halls outside. “You took my jacket by mistake.”

The girl looked confused, then understanding when Rory carefully stripped off the jacket she was wearing, tossing it over.

“That’s yours.”

The girl took a breath. Rory tried to remember her name—something like Lina or Lisa? Last name Nguyen? She said. “I, I didn’t realize—” Her eyes were locked on the scepter, though. Like she knew what it was. “What is that?”

Rory didn’t answer. Not directly, at least. The less she could get of this telling, the better. “Doesn’t matter. You saw those monsters out there, right?”

Lina? No, Lisa, she was pretty sure, nodded. “Yeah. Like in the newspaper.” Lisa’s head whipped to the side as a particularly loud crash sounded from outside.

Rory winced. *Dang, Eddie! Why’d you have to make this so difficult?* “Yeah.” Rory raised the scepter. “Now…Lisa?”

The girl nodded.

“I need to get out there.” She had to be super careful here. Lisa could blow everything open. “I can take out the monsters. But you gotta promise me, you’ll never tell anyone what you saw. Okay?”

Maybe she could reason with her. Might as well try. It was the only chance she had. “If anyone knows anything like you’re about to know, I can’t stop the monsters anymore. Okay?”

Lisa stared at the scepter. Finally, she nodded.


Lisa swallowed. “I swear.”

Rory sighed. “Thanks. Now. You probably want to shield your eyes.” She thrust the scepter into the air. “Crystal Power Beta, Make-up!”

Light like darkness. A tingling sensation wrapped over her limbs, an audible note ringing in the air,
and then she wasn’t Rory anymore.

Lisa uncovered her eyes, flinching against the door when the girl she’d been in the room with was suddenly unrecognizable.

Sailor Beta approached the door, flexing her fingers. Lisa moved as she approached, staring openly. “You should probably stay in here.”

And then claws pierced the door, and ruined that plan.

“Shit—” Rory grabbed Lisa, shoving her behind her as the pithos ripped the door off its hinges.

“Star soul detected,” it growled. Its claws dug into the frame, Lisa screaming as it ripped a chunk of the wall away.

“Come on then!” Sailor Beta took her chance, darting under the pithos’s beefed up limb (this thing was tricked out, what the hell?)

Thankfully, the beast followed her. Sailor Beta sprinted into the open gallery. It seemed people and gotten smart and hid while those things were distracted, though Rory could still spy a few stray folks cornered here and there. “Well?” She cried as the lion-like pithos stomped towards were.

“Bring it!”

The pithos charged. Its maw gaped open to reveal the clenched jaw of the guy it had taken hold of. How did that happen? There was no time to ponder, though. The pithos sucked in a deep breath—Rory planted her feet, unsettled when the inhalation was strong enough to move her—and roared.

The building shook, and the air came out as a blast that slammed into her, knocking her back into one of the museum’s pillars. Rory gasped, trying to get back the air that been knocked out of her.

From the floor, she called out, “Dire Stellar Gust!” The wind storm knocked into the first pithos, but Rory’s heart stuttered when he shook off the attack without apparent injury. Her eyes widened. Maybe she was a bit in over her head here. Where was Celene when she needed her?!

Creep number two was right behind the first, eager to get in on the party. Sailor Beta rolled out of the way, mind frantically searching for a strategy. She leapt back up, flipping onto the stair’s railing. But the pithos were unrelenting, flanking her like the guardians of a library step.

She eyed the rail beneath her. She couldn’t stay up here; they could slash through this thing in a second. One got behind, ready to snatch her off her roost. The other got ready for another roar. She was screwed over either way she went. She quickly examined their positions. Unless…

The one in front roared, the one behind’s claws closing in. Quickly, Sailor Beta leapt across to the opposite rail. The first pithos’s attack connected with the second, blasting it back into the wall. As hoped, the smoke burst off the second figure like a cloud of dust.

The first pithos smashed through the railing.

Rory’s eyes widened as she scrambled back into the hall. Oh, he’s mad now. The pithos sucked in a breath, the next roar tossing her effortlessly down the hall. She caught herself, grounding her boots and gloves into the flooring. In the doorway to the first gallery, the pithos loomed, taking up the whole entryway. Just you and me, big guy.

What now though? This thing was so huge, Dire Gust didn’t seem to touch him. Or—the thought struck her as he opened his mouth again—not from the outside.
As he sucked in air again she quickly thrust out the Beta scepter. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The pithos breathed the starry wind and all its shards right in. Immediately, it began thrashing, throwing itself against the wall.

Rory laughed, wiping sweat from her brow. “Yeah! Suck on that!”

The smoke burst away from him, shredded.

Rory leaned back against the wall, exhausted. Not bad, if she did say so herself. She sighed; she still had to walk home. And go to Yarn Barn.

She reentered the destroyed conference room. Lisa sat in the corner, watching. Rory’s coat was on the floor. Rory considered the object for a moment. The door to the conference room was completely missing, the room gapping open into the hall. She couldn’t transform back here.

Which meant she couldn’t take the jacket.

Rory threw a hand out towards it. “Keep it,” she said.

Lisa stood. She said, “What…how is that possible?” She gestured to the uniform of Sailor Beta; the wand.

Rory eyed her. Girl, you know I can’t tell you. “…See you at school.”

Rory left through the front door of the museum, in full uniform. Maybe she could find the nearest rooftop. Or maybe the back alley of Yarn Barn.

It was starting to rain

From atop the building across from her, Lupido watched her leave with interest. Fastosus had to be joking if thought such mindless attacks would be a match for a Sailor Soldier. So inelegant.

The man had no idea how to break a heart.

Once home, Rory quietly closed the door behind her. The house was quiet. Under the jittery lights of the kitchen, Rory noticed a note on the countertop. Dropping her backpack to the floor, she looked at the note.

Have to work late honey. Fixed you a tup of HH. Tyrell’s off again. Love you.

Taking the tupperware of microwaved Hamburger Helper back to her room, she pulled out her homework, her phone, and her latest project.

Almost immediately, she heard scratching at her window. Celene. She moved over to let her in, before going to sit down.

“What happened?!” Celene shrieked. “I felt a disturbance, but I couldn’t find you!” Celene padded over before leaping up onto the bed.

“Those things are still coming,” Rory said flatly. “I had a really long day.”
Concern on her face, Celene quieted down, curling up on the bed beside her. Appreciating that she wasn’t going to press, Rory scratched her behind the ear.

She opened the bag from Yarn Barn, pulling out the yarn and the scepter she’d hidden away. She smoothed out her project—the scarf was almost done, but she really needed some time to disengage. Flopping back on the bed, she typed out a message to Narma.

bad news. somebody knows.

WHAT! AURORA WEST YOU HAD 1 JOB

well shit I got more bad news

what’s that?

my parents saw the bruises.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Couple of questions on this chapter, if you have the time:
1. Does the first scene work? Does it seem unnecessary?
2. Is the training scene okay? Should I actually show them training?
Hope you enjoy. :)

Episode 5: Soul Music – Or, The First Rule of Sailor Scout Fight Club Is That You Don’t Talk About Sailor Scout Fight Club

Stars stood bright against the infinite blackness on her every side. Rory hovered above the planet. It was the same as she’d seen it before: bright yellow, with dark orange spots like chemical flares, or storms. Even in the vast coldness of space, she could feel the heat on her skin.

Here again. Why?

It had to be hers, where her powers came from. Why else would she be seeing it? Even so, the bright sphere remained nameless.

Aurora.

Rory straightened, her legs extending into the bottomless space beneath her. A voice? That’s new.

She turned, expecting to see the burning star behind her, as the first time.

It’s…me?

Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say she saw Sailor Beta. Herself, but in uniform. Light glistened off her tiara. She held herself straight, with a sternness Rory had never had. There might have been something else, something different, but she couldn’t pin-point what it was. The Soldier stared back at her with cold focus. Her mouth didn’t move, but Rory heard a voice anyways.

There’s something here.

Rory shook her head; she didn’t understand.

Sailor Beta didn’t blink. Something behind her eyes was quaking.

It’s hungry.

The silence of space was interrupted by an eruption of noise as, all-consuming, an explosion rocked through them. Rory watched, filled with a horror she didn’t understand, as from behind them planets scattered in all directions. Everything, everything, was screaming.
Rory opened her eyes.

The ceiling stared back at her. It was blank and starless. She waited for her heart to stop racing.

Saturday.

--

Narma approached the scarp yard, her bag hanging burdenously off her shoulder. “Alright, Rory,” she called out, Rory looking up from her seat on a large pipe in the distance. “You got me here at 6:00 AM. What are we doing?” She was risking it all to get filthy on a Saturday morning, especially after the way things had blown up last night.

She was coming back from school and had just discarded her shoes at the door when her mother and father approached. The tenseness was palpable. “Hey guys.” She eyed the way the pair of them huddled together like a flock of birds. They usually weren’t so clingy. Maybe they were just being weird because she got hurt. “Why are you just… standing around?”

The two of them glanced at each other. Her father took a step forward. “Narmada. We wish to have a discussion with you. Please go sit in the den.”

She lowered her backpack, where she’d unconsciously been clutching it to her chest. “O…okay.”

She placed it on the floor and moved to take a seat.

They’d been acting weird yesterday too, ever since she’d come home from the hospital. Like they were treading lightly around her. She broke a rib; she wasn’t made of glass.

The scent of cumin in the air from her mother’s cooking in the other room, usually a homely smell, only exacerbated the butterflies in her stomach.

Having “a discussion” in her house was not unusual. They’d had “a discussion” about her clothes. They had “a discussion” about her getting a nose ring for non-traditional reasons. They probably just wanted to lecture her about being safe in school. Narma took a deep breath, trying to settle her unease. Yeah, it was no big deal. She plopped down on the couch. “What’s up?”

Her parents sat together on the love seat across from her. They held hands. “Narma,” her mother pursed her lips. “Are you being abused?”

And if that didn’t pull the rug out from under her. “What?”

Her father gripped her mother’s hands tighter. “Narmada. Your doctor spoke to us at the hospital. He explained the broken rib—”

“That was the pep rally, I told you—”

Her father gave her a stern look for interrupting him, but there was pain in his eyes. “But he also said he found bruises. They looked over a week old. They looked like hands—” His composure broke, tears slipping down his face as her mother embraced him.

Narma was rigid. “I…” she searched for an explanation. She had never seen her parents cry before, not like this. “I—it happened at the aquarium. There was an attack.”

Her mother’s jaw tightened. “Then why did you try to hide it?”
Shit—she was right. If it was an incident like the pep rally, she had no reason to try and cover it up.

Of course, they didn’t know what had actually happened in the gym that day.

Her father ground his teeth. “Was it that boy? Did he do that to you?”

For a couple seconds, Narma had no idea what he was talking about. Then, unconsciously, her hand rose up to the scarf, and she remembered what she told them about where the scarf had come from. Slowly, making a decision, she said, “Y-yes.”

“I knew it!” Her mother cried, sobbing into her father’s shoulder.

What was she supposed to do? She hated upsetting her parents like this, but she couldn’t tell them the truth. She held her hands out in a placating gesture, praying internally that her parents would calm down. “It only happened the one time,” Narma insisted. “Then I knew he was bad news; I’m never going to see him again!”

Her father said. “Promise, you will not.”

“I won’t,” she shot back immediately, moving to pat her mother on the back.

But how was she to keep such a promise? It was no man; she was fighting monsters.

Narma stretched, the barely rising sun warming her shoulder blades. And from what Rory told me last night, nowhere was a monster free zone.

Pants already covered in construction dust, Rory stood. “This old equipment and supplies have been abandoned. We should be able to use this stuff for target practice. The best thing is that the company who owned all of it shut down, so now it’s a public space again. They can’t arrest us!” Rory gave her a thumbs up.

Narma snorted. “They couldn’t arrest us if they tried.”

Rory put her hands on her hips. “Girl, you just broke a rib. We’re not that powerful.”

Celene appeared, hoping up on top of the pipe. “Greetings, Epsilon.”

The cat squawked as Narma ruffled the fur on her head. “Call me Narma.”

Even though it was dark enough outside that few people passing would be able to see them, they still transformed between the work station and a few stacked of pipes for the most coverage. The power settled over all of Narma’s limbs, and she stretched. It was such a weird sensation; the magic or whatever it was almost felt damp. She emerged from the blocked-off space. “Alright, I’m ready.”

As weird as it was to have this power, it was nothing compared to learning Rory was a super hero.

Rory’s eyes brightened as she saw Narma emerge in full uniform; she bounced toe-to-toe, limbering up. “Great! So, I have a bunch of empty cylinders over here we can practice our attacks on, and also some mounds of dirt? I don’t know girl, I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

Narma stretched out her legs, reaching for her toes. “Better than I would have done. I think we should just practice hitting stuff.”
“Yeah, that probably qualifies as a plan.”

They began aiming their attacks, Narma having to be especially choosy about what she wanted to try. She drenched one dirt pile, then waited. She wanted to see how far out she could make those things go. “My thing runs on a timer. I can only do the typhoon attack every once in a while. I think it has to charge up.”

Celene had taken up her role naturally as their couch. “Some attacks will require more energy than others. You may be able to work up your endurance and use them more often.”

Rory held her own scepter out. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The bizarre dark wind crashed into the cans one after the other, but Rory frowned, moving to line them up again.

Narma furrowed her brow, “What are you trying to do?”

Rory hefted the can into a new position. “I’m trying to direct the Gust to only hit the second one. I did something like that before, but I haven’t been able to do it again. It might come in handy; the gust itself didn’t even touch the liony guys yesterday unless I hit them at the right time.”

Narma watched Rory awkwardly re-position the can. This was the same girl who’d been suspended from school for a week for filling their middle school classroom with dollar store balloons. She texted people to say goodbye if she forgot to in person, because she didn’t want them to feel forgotten. The girl used “dang” as a swear, for fuck’s sake. She was too goofy and laidback to be a superhero. And she seemed to be good at it? Bizarre.

Celene whipped her tail, gaze focused. “You have the ability to conjure other attacks. I expect these abilities will come to you as you gain more experience, in the same way your first attacks were remembered.”

Narma paused, peering over at the little orange tabby. “Remembered?”

Celene stiffened, before curling in on herself. “You know my memory is not the best. I used to know all the celestial bodies under my jurisdiction, and their associated powers, but it’s all so a fuzzy now.”

Narma slowly turned back to her cylinders. “… Whatever you say.” But why did something feel off about that? She must really be getting paranoid if she thought a cat was lying her.

After an hour or so of practice, it turned out her limit was at fifty feet, though the further she went, the weaker it got. She could cast three strikes only up to about twenty feet, and two after there. Though, she was giving herself twenty-five on that last triple-strike (she may have been being a bit generous.) She wiped her brow, a little jealous that Rory was able to fire off her gusts without such restriction. There were pros and cons, she guessed.

She took a seat on the pipe, not worrying about the dirt caked into her uniform. They were already filthy, coated head-to-toe in construction dust. “So. Those guys you fought yesterday. They were tough?”

Rory frowned, her next blast still knocking the first can slightly askew. Girl was stubborn. “They were just big. Those things were smoked all over: arms, legs, head; they had claws. It had this roar that was strong enough to move me.”
“Gross,” said Narma. “Wonder how that happens. Like, you’re just walking down the street, and suddenly you’re a monster? Hard to picture.”

Rory slumped, letting the wind storm dissipate. Narma eyed the fading wisps. She wondered if their attacks were combinable. “Beats me. As long as we can save them, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Narma shrugged. “Maybe.” She thought about the attack in the gymnasium. She brought her fingers to her chin. “If they’re back, does that mean there’s someone new controlling them? That other lady got dusted.”

Rory peered off towards the rest of the city, the needle lit with the bright colors of sunrise. “Could be…” She trailed off. Rory held a finger up. “Mm, by the way, I got something for you.”

“Oh yeah?” She leaned forward, trying to spy what was in Rory’s small bag of supplies as she fishing into it.

“Yeah. It’s a little late, I guess, with what happened last night. But it might broaden your fashion choices a bit, considering the circumstances.”

From the bag, she pulled out a long line of blue fabric. Bringing it into the light, Narma saw it was a knitted scarf. “Did you make me this? Girl, you didn’t have to do that.” She knew Rory liked knitting; her grandmother was big into it when she was growing up, and so Rory usually had a couple projects going at any given time. Still, it wasn’t like she had been the one who endowed Narma with magical space powers. She didn’t owe her any sort of apology. So why the gift?

“No big deal. Secretly, I just want my belt back.”

Narma knew she was joking. She wrapped the scarf around her neck, covering the area uncovered by her prior uniform. “I’ll get it back to you then. Thanks.” She looked up from her knew accessory-slash-superpower-disguise. “Hey, what’s your day like? You got work?”

Rory emerged from behind the pipe-rack in plain clothes. Conveniently, it seemed the dirt didn’t transfer. “No. I’m going to be volunteering as an usher for the Hispanic choir concert tonight at school. They give you in-class credit if you sign up for the whole year.”

“Shit, where was I?” She needed as many things on her resume as she could manage if she was going to get into design school. She considered her own evening. “You need any company?”

--

Carmen’s heart was pounding like the broken dryer in their apartment building’s laundry room. She smoothed down the fabric of her choir robe, bright eyes peering blankly into the blackness of backstage left.

It was only a matter of hours now. On the other side of the thick black curtain, she could hear the bottoms of her classmate’s dress shoes tapping over the risers. They needed to run through the set let a few more times, but her mouth kept going dry and sticking together.

On the other side of the curtain, she could hear a passing conversation.

“Any idea where Carmen is?”

“Pfft. You know. Her Majesty is too good to practice with the rest of us.”

“Right? Like, you’re not the only one annoyed, zorra. Get over yourself. And you don’t see the rest
of us needing time away from the group. We’re trying to get work done.”

_Those same girls._ She had to ignore it; she had bigger problems.

Carmen flexed her fingers, curling them into fists. She had to calm down. Forcing herself to move, she exited backstage into the rear hallway, moving into the bathroom. Her black robe ruffled around her.

_Even after the other performances this year, you think I’d be used to this._ She cupped a palm beneath the faucet, taking a drink. She had to try and breathe. She leaned on the sink’s rim, the bathroom echoing the sound of her breathing. It was bad enough all those other times, but now…

She peered up at herself in the mirror. Sink water glistened at the edges of her mouth; she could see where she’d been sweating under the stage lights. The concealer under her eyes had smeared, revealing the dark circles beneath. She looked like a wreck.

She wiped her hand on the back of her mouth. If he was finally going to be there in the audience, she couldn’t afford to let herself mess up. But it had to be the one time she had a solo, didn’t it? Her father had never care before about her performances.

She couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said to her the previous night.

“Now, Carmen,” He father smiled at her from the other side of the dinner table, still wearing his full suit from work. She was heading up to her room; she hadn’t expected anything more than the usual pleasantries. “I know you have one of your little performances tomorrow. I’ve invited some of my associates to the concert with me; I couldn’t help bragging about how talented my daughter was, I’m afraid. I’m excited to finally see you on stage. Be sure to look for us in the audience.”

_But Carmen’s stomach had dropped into her feet._ “I…I’ll be happy to see you there.”

She’d finally been getting used to singing in front of people—it’s why she’d gone for the solo. Why did he have to throw this at her now, of all times? She could feel a shake in her fingers. There had to be some way out of this.

“She’d finally been getting used to singing in front of people—it’s why she’d gone for the solo. Why did he have to throw this at her now, of all times? She could feel a shake in her fingers. There had to be some way out of this.

“B-but I’m surprised, that is, such men of business would be interested in something as trivial as a high school choir concert. Are you sure they’ll enjoy it?”

He grinned. “Oh, darling. Something as wholesome as a relative’s performance is sure to endear them to our family. It’s the exact thing I need to convince them to close on our current deal. You’ll be perfect, my dearest.” He patted her shoulder. “Don’t let me down.”

She held her hand to her mouth; she was going to be sick.

No. She drew a hand back, smacking herself in the face. The impact was grounding; her hand stung. _No, Carmen, you cannot afford to fall apart here. Get it together._ There was too much at stake.

She took another drink from the sink, before heading back out.

As she re-entered the stage, she heard the Mrs. Lenora call out to her. “Come to join the group, Ms. Rodriguez?”

“I just need some air, just a minute,” she called back, completely bypassing the stage and heading for the stage-side exit.
“Oh, my god—”

Carmen burst through the exit. The fresh air was a blessing after the stifling heat of the auditorium stage; the difference it made in her breathing was like coming up from water. Ignoring the shame of having to continue interrupting practice, she listened to the muffled sound of her choirmates continuing to work on their own parts inside while she waited for her heart to stop pounding so hard.

Down the block outside, commuters bustled down the sidewalk. The noise was a good distraction. The one thing she could be thankful for was her stomach bug on Wednesday—she couldn’t imagine how fried her nerves would be if she’d have been here during a terrorist attack.

It was a scary thought, that they’d gotten in so easily. Who’s to say they couldn’t get in again? She’d never thought of Seattle as a big target city.

She shuddered. Crazy world.

“Excuse me?”

She jumped as a voice came from behind her. Turning, she found a man, bright blue eyes and a strong jaw. “Oh, uh, hi. Did you…need something?”

The man smiled. She had to admit, he had a handsome face, but she had learned long ago that attractiveness didn’t equal trustworthiness. “I’m sorry,” he said, slicking a hand back over his ponytail. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” He gestured to the auditorium. “I just wanted to make sure I was in the right place. There’s going to be a big event here tonight. Is that correct?”

A “big event.” Nerves fluttered in her belly. And she was just calming down, too. “I wouldn’t say a big event—just a choir concert from us students in the Hispanic Chorus. We’ve had a pretty good turn out, though, for previous shows, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The man clasped his hands together. “Oh, good. That was exactly what I needed to know. And this is the building?”

She nodded. She could handle directions. “Yeah, we’re singing here tonight.”

“Thank you. That’s perfect.” He took a step forward, “So…you’re a part of this choir?”

Something about the tone of his voice gave her a feeling she couldn’t identify. She shifted her feet. “Y-yes. I’ll be there.”

“Excellent.”

She felt her face heat up when the man placed a hand on her cheek, grinning.

“I’ll look forward to seeing such pure beauty again.”

Before she could respond, the man turned and walked away.

She brought a hand to her cheek, unsure how to feel. She shook her head. She needed to get inside.

It was only two hours until the performance.
Rory adjusted the collar of her shirt. The choir teacher Mrs. Lenora wasn’t super specific on what they had to wear as ushers; just collars and dark pants. Still, she usually didn’t wear things so stiff. “Alright everybody!” She grinned, taking tickets from any folks that passed her going into the auditorium doors. “Just need your tickets. Have a great time!”

She flagged Narma down as she saw her come in the door. “Hey. Got your guest ticket right here.” She fished behind the ticket counter, pulling out the pre-punched ticket.

Narma placed a hand on her hip. Rory was a bit flattered to see her wearing the scarf she made. It must not have been that bad after all; she’d ended up rushing to finish it last night. “You gonna be stuck back here all night?”

“Nah. I just have to finish up with tickets until showtime. Then they close the doors. We just have to clean up afterward.”

“Cool.” Narma shot her finger guns before proceeding past the double doors. “I’ll save you a seat, lady.”

“You’re incredible,” Rory joked before resuming her place at the door.

She kept waiting for the flood of people to trickle out, but they just kept coming. Man. And I thought the crowd for the jazz choir was big. There must have been some big fans of Latin music in Seattle.

Just out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of a patterned shirt. Her brow wrinkled as she turned to examine the crowd at the other door. Huh. I don’t see it anymore. Why did it look familiar?

From the door in front of her, a girl suddenly emerged from inside the room. Rory recognized her, though she knew more of her than really knew her: Carmen Rodriguez, resident prettiest girl in school. Kind of quiet, though. Apparently, her dad was some kind of corporate bigshot. She was loaded. Is she in the choir?

But right at that moment, girl looked stressed. She brushed her light brown hair back, eyes scanning the lobby before landing on Rory. “Excuse me. Is there—I need to make sure there will be tickets. It’s a party, five or six people. Can I put it under Rodriguez?” She was out of breath.

Rory looked down at the remaining tickets, before her eyes caught an entry on the call-in list. “Actually, I’ve already got six tickets reserved under Rodriguez. Phone number ending in 1213? Sound right?”

The girl slumped visibly. “Yes, okay, yes. I just wanted to make sure…” Her gaze still searched the lobby, jittery.

Rory lowered her clipboard. Was nervousness contagious? Her stomach hurt just looking at her. “Girl, you’re good. Do you need a bottled water, or…? She gestured to the open pack behind her.

“No,” Carmen breathed. “No. Thank you.” She nodded at her before disappearing back into the auditorium.

Rory frowned. Weird.

Regardless of the chaos, the auditorium was full by six o’ clock. Rory closed up the ticket booth, entering to find Narma in the crowd. She handed over the water when she took her seat. “I miss anything?”
Narma shook her head. “No, the teacher’s still giving her introduction.”

“Cool.” Not surprising. Mrs. Lenora was usually long-winded.

“Now,” the woman called from the stage, “without further ado, the Garfield High School Hispanic Choir.” She stood back.

The group began to sing.

“Con el vito vito vito, con el vito vito va. Con el vito vito vito, con el vito vito va. Yo no quiero que me miren, que me pongo colorá—”

Rory leaned back in the seat. They sounded pretty good, though she had no idea what they were saying.

Her eyes found Carmen, standing stiffly in the back, her height making her exceptionally visible. If she was still nervous, she was doing a good job of hiding it.

Glancing down near the front, she saw a group of men in suits. Huh. Wouldn’t have expected such a low-profile venue to draw that kind of crowd.

After a few minutes, she felt a tap on her shoulder. The stage manager was standing in the aisle.

“Hey, please go get some more of those water bottles. The AC in the tech booth is broken; they’re getting pretty overheated in there.”

Reluctantly, Rory got up, Narma glancing after her. “Got it.”

She moved back up the aisle, the stage manager nervously watching the performance.

Rory exited back out into the lobby, the sounds from the auditorium immediately hushed. She leaned over the counter, grabbing the water bottles. Here we go.

Her gut gave a sudden twist, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end.

She slapped a hand over the goosebumps. What the heck?

She turned back around with a water bottles, only to nearly drop them when she saw a familiar figure in the window. Oh, you got to be kidding me.

Celene patted insistently at the window pane.

Rory opened the door. “Celene, you better just be here to hang out.”

But Celene immediately burst out, “I’m so glad I found you! I thought you would be without warning again.”

Rory frowned at the distress in the cat’s…voice? Did she actually have a human voice box, or…? “Slow down. What’s going on?”

Celene panted. The cat had clearly run here, and Rory thought it was a long walk even at her size. “There is a great disturbance in his area. I believe the pithos may be nearby.”

Rory eyed the door to the loaded auditorium. “Makes sense. There’s a huge crowd here. Any idea where they’re coming from?”

The cat sat back. “I’m afraid not. But you and Epsilon had better get ready.”
“Right.”

And with a room packed full of people, it could get nasty quick.

She moved back into the auditorium, handing the bottles off to the stage manager. Moving back to her seat, Rory tugged Narma from the other chair, the woman sitting behind them glaring at the commotion.

The choir was starting on their second number.

“Salías del templo un día, Llorona, cuando al pasar yo te vi; Salías del templo un día, Llorona, Cuando al pasar yo te vi, Hermoso huipil llevabas, Llorona, que la Virgen te creí…”

“Rory, what the hell?” Narma tugged away her arm as they made it through the double doors. Then she spied Celene on the floor. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, we got a problem.”

--

Carmen was about to regurgitate her own guts. It was time.

She’ been relying on the stage lights to blind her from her father’s presence, but there he was, near front and center, surrounded by his entourage of colleagues. She swallowed. Her throat felt like sandpaper as she picked up the next line.

Two lines to go.

Slowly, she moved forward as she’d been instructed, the moment of her solo drawing near. Her stomach clenched—please, Lord, don’t let me get sick on this stage.

The panic painted spots in her vision, the heat of the overhead lights blaring down on her. One line to go.

Cue.

She opened her mouth, wincing internally at the tacky feeling. She sang.

“Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona, porque no me ven llorar;”

The sound warbled out of her. She knew the words; that had never been the concern. But her hands shook. She. She just had to push through it.

“Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona, porque no me—”

Carmen suddenly flinched back as figures dropped down from the lighting rack above. This isn’t part the show. It looked like the tech crew, but…

What was all over them?

When two of the techies leapt out into the crowd, the screaming started. Her choirmates scattered, but she had nowhere to go. Carmen stepped back from the third, hitting her heel and falling back against the risers. The thing leapt at her—it had claws. Gasping, she rolled away, falling from the risers and bolting down the hall.

Or, that was the plan. The creature whipped his arm out, missing her, but catching in the heavy
black curtain. The weight of it whipped against her and she yelped, falling to the floor.

“Hold it, creep!”

Carmen shook her head, trying to clear the stars from her eyes as the shadow of the creature moved away from her. Peering from behind the curtain, her eyes widened at the figure onstage. She wore a uniform decorated with bows and frills, and there was a tiara on her forehead. Like the creatures, something seemed to be a little off with her face, though not in the same frightening way. It was as if her skin was overlaid with some dark, holographic filter.

The creature growled. “Star Soul detected.”

Carmen hid in the curtain. The figure thrust out her hand, which was clutching something. The figure straightened. “Hey. You’re not a lion.”

The creature howled. Leaping forward, the weird shadowy overlay on its legs flared. It slammed back down to stage; it felt like the room was shaking. The figure jolted out of the way, hopping down from the risers.

Suddenly, a second figure darted up the aisle, another of the former techies close behind. Bizarrely, a cat ran up next to her. “These things are fast!” She called out, one of the wolf-like creatures close behind her. “Also, the Typhoon? Not super effective.”

But wait. Where was the third one? She’d been sure there were three.

“Some of these aren’t what I fought yesterday. Duck,” said the figure, thrusting her arm back out towards the monster coming up the aisle. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

Wind like the night sky swept down the aisle, knocking the techie back. Carmen stared, a little fascinated but mostly horrified. Was this some kind of magic or something?

Then, she saw the third monster, (definitely more lion-like,) turning its attention to her.

It said, “Star Soul Detected.”

--

Rory didn’t know what to think. *Why do these guys look different?* One thing was for sure: the strategy she’d used on the lion pithos was not going to work on these new guys. She cursed under her breath. She needed to get rid of the devil she knew so she could deal with the ones that she didn’t. At least that weren’t invulnerable. The one in the aisle was still struggling to get up.

Where had the big guy gone?

Sailor Beta shielded her eyes, the eruption of bright light bursting in her periphery. *What the...?* She squinted to find the light source.

That girl, Carmen—the lion pithos had her. The more alarming part was the crystal formations slowly being vacuumed from Carmen’s chest. “Celene!” She cried out. “She’s one of us!” She threw her hand out, shouting. “Dire stellar gust!”

The pithos raised its hackles in discomfort, but turned away as it was, the attack was ineffectual. *No—now is not the time to fail—*

“The Typhoon Strikedown!”
The surge of water forced the lion to the floor, drenched. Carmen fell backwards against the risers, the crystal slowly sinking back into her chest as she looked on, petrified.

The crowd scrambled to escape, but they weren’t in danger anymore. There were three beacons now, calling the monsters away.

Sailor Epsilon climbed back up the stage, trying to get some distance from the wolf. “These things are rough.”

“Not ideal,” Rory agreed.

Narma took a step past her. “So, wait,”

Celene used her crescent-shaped pocket dimension, summoning a new scepter. Beta barely got a look at it before the wolf was right in front of her. The typhoon’d pithos was getting up too.

But the symbol—it looked like an upside-down L, like $\Gamma$. Was that…gamma?

She and Epsilon stood back-to-back.

“You know my shit has to recharge,” Epsilon said as the wolf pithos neared.

She stared down the lion pithos, which looked ready to roar. “You think you can do one geyser?”

“Mm. Maybe.”

“We got to protect the new girl—” Beta could see the tell-tale flash of transformation in her periphery, the monsters flinching, “—until she can fight.”

Epsilon said, “What do you suggest?”

Beta planted her feet. “One three, try one more. I have an idea.”

“You funeral.”

Rory pointed the scepter towards the pithos before her, approximating the distance between them. “One.”

She’d done this before. She could do it again. “Two.”

“Okay.” She could see Epsilon holding her arms outward, ready attack. The lion roared, pushing her back as its maw came towards her.

“Three!”

They called the attacks simultaneously: “Dire Stellar Gust / Typhoon Strikedown!”

She heard the deluge fall behind her, and she concentrated on directing the Dire Gust around them. The wind picked up some of the downpour, but the majority feel to the tapped black floor. The creatures grunted, otherwise unharmed.

Beta’s eyes widened. “NO, it failed—” She shouted it as if to warn them that the monsters were still coming, but there was no time to move. Rory braced herself, waiting for the shadowy jaw of the pithos to close down on her.

“M-mesmeric Pacification!”
A note rang through the air as light flashed over the pithos. Rory watched as the creatures seized for a moment, before slumping to the floor. Smoke rose off of them like steam. Beta’s eyes darted in the direction of the cry.

Carmen (Gamma?) stood with her arms in an x-formation before herself, looking as surprised as they were. She stepped forward, out into the middle of the stage where the stagehand was collapsed on the floor. “Wha…what just…?”

“Let me through!”

The yell rung out from the crowd congregating back inside, the former audience seeming to realize the threat was suddenly gone. A heavy-set latino man in a suit, maybe one of the businessmen Rory had spied earlier, pushed through the crowd, trying to get to the stage.

Carmen looked petrified—they needed to get her out of there, so they could explain, well, everything. Before they could say anything, though, the man made it to the front.

The wrinkles on his forehead deepened, and he grasped the edge of the stage. “Please. My daughter was right there when those things attacked. I can’t find her. You have to help me!”

Carmen’s mouth dropped open.

Luckily, Narma was faster than either of them. “Don’t worry, sir; we will locate your daughter. All of the assailants have been disarmed, so she is no longer in danger. She probably just went to hide.”

“Y-yeah,” Rory added as they shuffled Carmen off stage. “We will have her come to the lobby once we find where she went. Don’t worry. Give us just a few minutes.”

Sweat beaded on the man’s brow. “Ah—alright.”

Narma took Carmen through the thick black curtain. They had a lot to talk about.

Near the back of the auditorium, two men sat shadowed and in quiet conversation.

“That was a disaster,” Fastosus bit out, watching the drama place out of the auditorium stage. The Sailor Soldiers had more power than they had expected; even their forces were taken down.

From beside him, Lupido’s blue eyes darkened with amusement. There was always something about that guy that made you feel like he thought he was better than you; Fastosus wasn’t going to stand for that. He was eager to win this little manger. Lupido said, “Yes, it is true we may have underestimated them. Even so. I appreciate a long game.”

Fastosus sneered, tapping his deep brown fingers over the back of the theater seat. “Perhaps it’s time for a more hands-on approach.”
Carmen was shuffled off stage, where her father was anxiously ringing his hands, walking back towards the exit. Why hadn’t he recognized her? What was happening her? And now these two strange girls were carting her off somewhere she had no way of knowing. And she was…just letting them?? Because she wasn’t sure what else to do.

Except, now, they weren’t so strange as they had been a moment before. Now, somehow, their faces were clear. She didn’t know them, but she recognized them: they went to this school as well. She had never spoken to them before.

“Stop,” she forced herself to say eventually, when they were in the process of moving her through the arts building. They didn’t seem to have a definitive direction; she suspected not even they knew where they were going. “Stop. Where are we going?”

The Indian girl with the nose ring turned to her. “Someone’s bound to have called the police. They’ll be here any second. We need to find somewhere to hide so we can talk.”

Okay, so they did want to explain. Well, she wanted answers. “The costume closet,” she shot back, steering them back towards a room closer to the auditorium. “It locks from the inside.”

The little cat padded along behind them. She remembered that, moments ago, that cat had spoken to her.

“You must embrace your power! Pick up the scepter and say, Crystal Power Gamma, Make-up!”

What did that mean?

They turned in as she opened the entrance to the costume closet. They really didn’t use it in the choir, but Carmen had seen the theater students open it a hundred times during rehearsals.

She shut the door, closing the interior latch. There was something comforting about locking herself in to such a small space.

(She got like that, sometimes. Sometimes, she wanted to curl up and hide.)

She took a breath, her heartbeat slowing down. Still, the residual hurt at her own father failing to recognize her quivered in her bones.

The Indian girl muttered from behind her. “Why does a closet need an inside lock?”

Carmen turned around. Pooling her courage, she clenched her jaw and addressed the girls in uniform. “Alright. We’re alone. Now, I want answers.” But no sooner were the words out of her mouth than she caught sight of her own reflection in the closet’s standing mirror. Her mouth dropped open.

She had felt something change, when she cried out that phrase the cat had spoon-fed her, but she hadn’t realized how much. Now, somehow, she was wearing the same uniform, dark grey leotard and skirt. The only differences were the colors, the skirt’s second layer a tawny brown, the bow
and ascents a light gray. Was that supposed to mean something? For that matter, how had she changed at all? She smoothed a hand over her black tights—what happened to her choir robe?

She recognized the black girl as someone she’d had a bio class with at the start of middle school, but that had been so long ago. Apparently reading her confusion, the girl granted her a mercy. “Okay, first of all, I’m Rory. This is Narma.”

Narma waved. “Hey.”

Rory’s expression grew more serious. “Basically, you are a superhero who draws your powers from another planet. Because of this, you have a crystal inside that lets you access that power. Those monsters, the pithos, want the crystals. You following?”

“That’s insane,” Carmen shot back immediately. Because there was no other option—they were insane.

Rory crossed her arms. “You just shot magic out of your hands. It’s not that crazy.”

Carmen peered down at her hands. It sort of scared her, that suddenly she didn’t know the capabilities of her own body. She glanced back towards the door.

“Your father didn’t you recognize you,” Narma cut in, apparently anticipating her next question, “only because you’re wearing the uniform. It’s not permanent. As soon as you turn back, you’ll look like you again.”

A part of her relaxed, but her mind was abuzz with questions. “This… I don’t understand. How do we have this power? How can we access it?”

The other two looked at each other. The cat stepped forward. “I’m afraid we don’t have answers to those questions.”

Carmen said, “Why can you talk.”

“I am a guide for Sailor Soldiers under my jurisdiction. Unfortunately, something is interfering with my memory, and I only recall bits and pieces of my mission. As I explained to the others, I expect that we may remember more as your squadron gains more experience with your abilities.”

That didn’t make sense. “Remember how? How are we supposed to remember something from another planet?”

Silence hung in the air. Rory and Narma looked…troubled.

This was too much. Carmen pushed down the stress reflex that wanted her to cry, crossing her arms. “I just…really don’t get all this.”

Rory bit her lip. “I know it’s a lot to take in. For now, it might be better to get you back out there so you can decompress.”

“Hm.” Carmen’s gaze remained on the door, focusing on the musty smell of costumes to ground her.

“Here,” said Narma. “I’ll show you how to turn back.”

Narma walked her through the process to turn back, and then she was standing in the prop closet in her choir robe. The all exchanged numbers, assuring Carmen that they would talk more later.
Carmen had no idea if she could trust these girls, but she supposed she had no choice.

At least now, she could go home. Not that she felt particularly comfortable at home, but she could at least get work done she needed for class. And sleep.

“We’ll text you,” said Narma.

Carmen nodded, moving to leave.

“Carmen.” A hand caught her wrist.

She looked behind, were Rory stared back with a serious expression. “It’s really important that you not tell anyone.” She pursed her lips. “It could be dangerous if anyone knew.”

Slowly, Carmen nodded. “I won’t.”

They let her go.

Rory frowned. The inside of the costume closet was lit with yellow fluorescents; it made everything seem dingey.

*Remember how?*

Narma strode up, crossing her arms. “Well, that could’ve gone better.”

“Yeah.” Rory slowly opened the room door again, now that Carmen had had a chance to go. Peering both ways, there didn’t seem to be anyone who could see them. She scooted out. “We should probably leave.”

They made their way out the exit by the auditorium’s back classrooms. The sound of police sirens squalled somewhere in the background, but it was starting to get dark. She needed to head home. Peering back around the other side of the building, Rory spotted Carmen walking away with her father. At that moment, the girl looked back, meeting Rory’s gaze.

Rory’s stomach sunk, in a different way than when the pithos had been around. She hadn’t expected her to react like that. She didn’t even have a guide, like Rory did when she had first discovered her powers. She was just going off alone.

She turned her attention back to Narma. “Can you get home alright?”

Narma waved her off. “Yeah, girl. I walked here in the first place.”

“Oh yeah.” Rory stuck her hands in her pockets. The evening was cool, the sound of street cars the only noise in the quiet. She scuffed her shoe against the sidewalk. “You think she’s gonna be okay?”

Narma eyed her. “Who? Carmen?” She waved a hand. “She’ll be fine. She just needs to adjust.”

Rory wasn’t so sure, but if Narma wanted to offer another possibility, she was going to take it. “Maybe.” She waved as they came to the fork she knew was Narma’s turn. “We’ll talk about it later. Be safe getting home.”

“See ya.”
Rory made it home and ate dinner with their family without very much commotion—it seemed her mama hadn’t heard about the events of the school yet, and she wasn’t going to bring up.

Her mama did seem bothered by something, though. She kept staring at her over the table when she thought Rory wasn’t looking. Even so, she didn’t mention it.

Rory went to her room, and boy was she wiped. These new pithos were no joke, bigger and more resilient than the bear-claw ones had been. She flopped back onto her mattress.

She saw Celene standing in the window, but, for the first time, she was hesitant to let her in. She ignored her for several minutes, pretending she didn’t see her, until finally she gave in and let the cat inside. “Hey.”

“Aurora,” Celene ruffled her whole body, moving to settle in Rory’s bean bag chair. “I have some concerns about our latest ally.”

Rory let out a breath. “Girl, you’re not the only one.” Though, probably not for the same reasons.

“So you noticed her reluctance as well?” Celene’s ears perked up.

Rory rolled over to look at her. “It would have been hard not to. She seemed really freaked out by it.” She peered out the window, where, being on the upper floor, she could just catch a glimpse of the city. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Yes,” Celene whipped her tail anxiously. “I understand is an adjustment for you and your human lives, but it could be exceedingly bad if she tries to deny her powers.”

Mind going in ten directions, Rory sat up, restless. “Chill, Celene. She probably just needs some time to think.”

“Perhaps.” The sound of crickets called outside.

But actually, Rory didn’t think so. Carmen had really had more of a normal reaction to her powers than they had, but she hoped the girl would be able to come to terms with what happened. Even so…she couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d said.

Remember how?

How were they supposed to “remember” things about the star system their powers came from? That was a darn good question. Celene always used that word, “remember.” But how can they remember something they’ve never experienced?

Something felt weird about the whole situation. She had never questioned Celene before, but really—what assurance did she have that Celene was telling the truth?

The cat watched her from the bean bag.

Rory bit her lip. The thing was, she wanted to trust her. It was just a feeling in her gut.

She sighed, pulling over her laptop. She still had work to get done.

The following afternoon, she threw her purse back on the bed, striping off her jacket from church and changing back into her casual clothes. Her gaze caught on her open laptop, where an e-mail was blinking.
Curious, she pulled up her inbox and clicked on the orange, highlighted message.

It was from Carmen. They gave each other their emails, but Rory had expected a text first. The subject line read *Um……*

She read the message.

*So there may be an issue with that “no one can know” thing.*

Below the line, there were a trio of videos linked. The logo in the corner read *King5*. She pressed play on the first video.

A man was speaking into a microphone. “Yeah, I was just waking up when I saw these girls standing over me in uniform. I don’t know—I guess they chased the monsters away? It was crazy. I thought the uniform looked familiar.”

It was the punk rocker. From the aquarium. Alarms rising, she clicked on the next link.

It was a woman exquisitely dressed, fidgeting with the name badge on her shirt. Rory recognized the white walls of the museum in the background. “T-these creatures, they came down from the ceiling. Then, this girl came out of nowhere, using—there’s no other way to describe it; it looked like a wand.”

The clip ended. Rory immediately clicked on the third link—it seemed longer than the others. She was met with a cheerleader in her school uniform. *She would have been in the auditorium that day.* “There were these monsters appearing all over the place. Then these girls started fighting them? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

A voiceover cut in. “All over Seattle, reports are rolling in regarding superheroes, appearing to battle monsters. We asked the local authorities what they had to say about these reports.” The clip cut to a burly police officer rubbing his hands together, standing before a storefront. “What is your take on the ongoing sightings of superheroes in Seattle?”

The officer leaned into the mic. “I believe that people cope with fear in many ways. It seems like some folks are handling the recent attacks by creating stories about heroes and monsters—and that’s fine. I just don’t want anyone to forget there is actual danger here.”

“Despite the police’s skepticism, dozens of people are corroborating reports of uniformed women battling creatures all over the city. One source drew a startling comparison—that these “heroes” are highly reminiscent of Japan’s Sailor Moon.

“The most recent incident, the disturbance of a choir concert at Garfield high school, is being described by police as a prank by a group of students. What do you believe? With King5 news, this is Laura Washington, signing off.”

When the clip finished, she forwarded the e-mail to Narma, subject *Narma OMG*.

She pulled out her phone. Now was as good a time as any to talk.

*Carmen, this is Rory*

>You saw the email?

yeah, I saw it. people are going to see us, that’s inevitable.
we’re just going to have to hope no one snoops into the identities of those “superheroes”

Still, it was a lot of attention. The openness of the news coverage made her heart pound.

you know how people get about things they don’t understand.

For now, I want to understand.

What can you tell me?

Rory sat back. Really, what did she actually know?

What do you know about Sailor Moon?

--

Fastosus watched from the rooftop as the girl he was tracking entered the building. The building was fronted with an illuminated sign that read Southside Skate Rink. So, this was the young woman Lupido had taken an interest in. Truth, there were few that Lupido didn’t “take an interest in,” but this human…

Fastosus could only think that the other agent suspected her of being one of Them. His theory had been evident even since their previous attempt at the singing event.

Fastosus grinned, jumping down from the roof to land in the alley. Lupido had shown his hand. He should have known better than to make a wager with the greatest of Purity’s Agents.

It was time to make a move.

--

Carmen didn’t know about Sailor Moon. She was a figure she could vaguely recall hearing news stories about, but at the same time, the stories had seemed ridiculous. She had had greater concerns, like keeping up with school, and trying not to be an embarrassment to her father.

Now, she was Sailor Moon.

Well, not exactly. She had powers, powers she didn’t understand.

And these things are attracted to us?

yeah. they want our souls.

Carmen shuddered. She remembered the sucking of the…pithos’s? Breath. She could feel something being pulled out of her. Behind it, there was a cold, empty feeling she’d never felt before. It was indescribable. Inside, even the tiniest amount, she had felt a coldness ever since.

She needed to get her mind off it.

She pushed open the door, entering the skating rink. It was a dying breed, but this business had taken the initiative to modernize everything. Neon lights flashed from the ceiling. Radio music played through the speakers, and the slushy machine could make could make twenty kinds of slushies. It looked like the inside of a space ship, if space ships were made for partying.
The rink was large and packed full. Skaters sped by, blurred by the motion. Taking a breath, air heavy with the smell of plastic and pizza, Carmen pulled on her skates and headed out to the rink.

There was something enthralling about skating in a circle. Someone might look at it and think it was boring, but the pounding of the music through her body while she focused on making turns for several hours was almost meditative. Except for the rampant leg cramps.

She probably should have eaten something more that day; after only twenty minutes, even her stomach was starting to cramp. She slowly glided to the wall, working her way to the exit with a self-conscious awareness of how much younger most of the other skaters were. She made her way to the snack bar, where a girl with curly blond hair waved from the counter.

“Hey,” Alyssa grinned when she got up to the counter.

“Hey,” Carmen panted, leaning on the counter. “A water, please?”

Alyssa was one of the few people she really felt like she could relax around. They’d met when she’d gotten the job at the rink, and Carmen, a frequent flyer, gravitated towards her down-to-earth personality.

Alyssa waved her wallet away when she tried to pull the cash out of her pocket. “Eh, don’t bother. These things only cost us 99 cents, But, anyway, I’m surprised you made it out here, with everything that’s been going on. It’s crazy!”

And Carmen realized her plan to distract herself was doomed to fail. “Yeah,” she sighed. “This is the second time the police have been called to the school this week.”

“Terrorists, huh?” Alyssa shook her head, wide eyed. “Crazy world.”

“Yeah. Terrorists.” Though, now, she knew that wasn’t true.

“Alright, everyone,” the DJ called out over the com system. “We got black-out skate coming up at five, and the speed-skating contest at six. It’s shaping up to be a good one! Stick around. In the mean time, as always, we’re accepting requests here at the music booth, so if there’s a particular song you’d like to skate to, come on by!”

Black-out skate was one of her favorites—there was something comforting about no one being able to see your face. She had better get back out, soon.

“…honestly, I’m just trying to get my mind off it.”

Alyssa covered her mouth. “Right! Sorry, I wasn’t thinking, Of course you would have been stressing over it. I’ll shut up about it now.”

Carmen said, “No, you’re fine. Trust me, everyone’s got questions they can’t answer.” Wasn’t that the truth.

Alyssa glanced behind the counter. “Nah, I’ll drop it. Tell you what—drop back by here after the black-out skate, and I’ll give you a free piece of pizza. Sound good?”

“Cool. I’ll be back then.” Nodding, she took a swig from the water bottle and heading back towards the rink.

She did her rounds, but even under the pounding of the music her mind kept wandering.
It just seemed sort of backwards that they were supposed to be the city’s protectors, and the monsters were attracted to them.

“Alright guys! Black out skate for the next hour. After that, we got the speed skaters. Get ready for some excitement!”

In a matter of moments, the lights went off, and the black light came on. The white skates glowed in the darkness, everyone’s feet becoming white streaks. Carmen could see several couples skating in little circles, or pulling each other along one behind the other. It was a more intimate feel.

Following a whim, she took the opportunity to do some little weaving moves in the center. She was no expert, and probably wouldn’t having stood in the middle of things in broad daylight, but it was fun to try some of the more complicated moves. The disco ball turned overhead.

A bright shape moving in and out of her vision caught her attention, and she pulled her eyes away from her feet.

A man was skating along side her. He had dark skin, and a head full of wild dreads loosely pulled back. His bright white button-up was a beacon under the blacklight, the same whiteness shining from his teeth. He smiled wide as their met one another’s gaze.

He skated idly, not saying anything to her as she followed his path around her with her eyes, but her stomach gave a sharp twist. It was stupid, she knew, but there was just something about him that reminded her of a lion.

She had to stop letting this get to her. The incident at the auditorium was going to keep following her everywhere if she let it.

He finally skated off, moving to another part of the rink. She let herself relax. She wanted to skate some loops again, but she didn’t want to risk running into him again, and so she retired from the black-out skate fifteen minutes early.

She glanced back towards the snack counter, and saw a sign posted at the desk. On break! Back in fifteen! Glancing back out on the floor, she spotted Alyssa’a long blond mane; she must have come out for the end of the black-out. Taking a breath, she moved into a dim corner of the rink’s side seating. She was just going to have to wait.

Above, the black lights were blaring, illuminating the rank of bright white. At that moment, Carmen became aware of a hum in the air. It almost sounded like the buzz of fluorescents, but lower. And the fluorescents were off, so what…?

On the floor, a trio of skaters suddenly fell all at once. Normally, if a person lost their balance and fell, it would make aloud smack as the wheels ripped off from the linoleum. This time, the three seemed to simply sink to the ground.

Weird. Carmen stood, peering over into the rink. Are they sick or something?

The DJ sounded off from the booth, spectators stopping to stare at the floored skaters. “Hey! Those guys okay? Do we need an ambulance?”

Suddenly, the skaters cried out, and, somewhere, smoke started erupting. No—the smoke was erupting from the skaters.

Oh no. Here? That looked way too familiar.
“No need to panic, everyone,” that same guy with the dreds turned smoothly into the center of the blackened rink. “We’re only here for the purest among you. Surrender! You don’t stand a chance.”

Carmen pressed herself back against the wall. This guy—he was one of them. But he was speaking? Was he their leader or something?

She didn’t think he saw her. Subtly, taking in the pithos standing near the doors, she reached into her pocket and felt for the scepter. Her hands shook.

She needed to get somewhere no one would see her. Her eyes flicked towards the restroom. She’d have to go past two pithos to get to them. Her gaze darted across the room, searching for another option.

She abandoned the skates, crouching to the floor. There were those weird round seats every few feet between her spot in the corner and the restrooms. Maybe she could…she had no choice.

Double-triple checking she had her scepter and her phone in her pocket, she lowered herself to the floor, crawling along the wall.

Those lion things, the pithos, were going mad. The flung their claws at anyone who passed them, their wicked breath sucking like tornados at anyone they captured. If nothing happened, they were discarded like old trash. Carmen ducked behind another round, watching to make sure the lions had their attention elsewhere before crawling to the next.

Marveling that she made it so far, Carmen peered across at the restroom door, the pithos blocking the exit beside it. *How am I going to get out there without that thing seeing me?* It was vigilant, and, unlike the others, it seemed determined not to leave the door. If she could distract it…maybe.

An idea struck her. She grit her teeth. Pulling out her phone, she punched two contacts in her list, typing a message.

*Need help asap! Pithos at southside roller rink!*

Seconds later she got two responses.

*On my way.*

*oh shit. be right there.*

Resigned, she pulled her arm back and lobbed her phone in the opposite direction. It landed with a thud.

The pithos’s head whipped to the origin of the noise.

Nerves screaming, Carmen darted over to and through the door.

She locked the door behind her. Panting, she moved to the furthest stall, calling out the phrase the cat (bizarre!) had given her the previous day.

“Crystal Power Gamma, make-up!”

Pithos. Apparently, you can’t go a day without them.

Geez.
Rory pounded down the stairs, snagging a hand in her backpack strap and shooting for the door.

“Where are you going in a hurry?”

Rory skid to a halt, peering back to where her mama stood at the counter, kneading a loaf of bread. “I-I left something at school. I’m going to get it.”

Her mama gave her a squint eye. “Isn’t the school closed on a Sunday?”

Rory scrambled for an excuse. She usually didn’t lie. She hated lying! “There’s a game on tonight, so it’ll be open a little while longer.”

Her mama stared for another moment, putting her hand on her hip. “Well, dinners in an hour. Can’t you get it tomorrow?”

“No,” Rory said. “I need it tonight. I’ll be quick.”

Mama frowned. “Alright. Don’t be out too late.”

“Okay.” Rory moved for the door.

She took off, feet pounding on the sidewalk as the shape of Celene ran up beside her. “You sensed it too, Aurora?”

The cat’s voice echoed up to her as she reached a climbing point. She wall-climbed, propelling herself up to catch the roof’s edge. “No,” said Rory as the cat leapt up the fire escape. “Carmen’s in trouble.”

Rory flew through the city, rooftops skipped and leapt across under her feet. She knew where the skate rink was, though, she had only been there once. She hoped she could make it in time.

Stopping for a second, she pulled out her phone.

Eta?

I can be there in 10

OK

Rory glanced around, then pulled out the scepter. “Crystal Power Beta, make-up!”

Ribbons of dark light fell over her.

Sailor Beta picked up the pace; Carmen’s message was so vague, there was no telling what she might be up against.

She climbed down at the rink, Celene not far behind. She could see an amorphous shape on the other side of the door. She remembered the pithos blocking the exit to the gymnasium before. Couldn’t make this easy on me, could you? On impulse, she turned the handle and threw herself into the door, plowing into the pithos beyond. The pithos roared, falling to the ground as she muscled her way in.

It was bad in here. She could see at least four pithos, and one guy in the middle who was conspicuously unafraid of the creatures. Could he be another one of those Agents? Who were they?

The pithos stood. The beast stared at her from its place before the door, growled, “Star Soul detected,” and opened its jaws, inhaling.
Beta was caught off-guard by a sucking sensation in her chest—*that’s right; this thing can suck out my soul.* Quickly, she thrust the scepter out. “Dire Stellar Gust!” The glass swept through the pithos’s shadowy appendages, tearing them to smithers to reveal the scratched up face of the boy beneath.

He collapsed. *Sorry, guy.*

She looked up. Suddenly, she had the room’s attention, every pithos turned to face her. That was… actually a lot of creatures.

“Mesmeric pacification!” The shout came from the other side of the room. Rory turned to see Carmen, Sailor Gamma, standing at the far end of the rink. The same bright cast fell over the pithos as Beta had seen the previous evening. The creatures tensed for a moment, then shook off the light, which harmlessly dissipated. Gamma’s mouth dropped open.

Beta rushed down to her side. “Thanks for calling us. Epsilon is on her way.” She gave Carmen a look, hoping she understood she was referring to Narma.

“It failed,” Carmen said, peering down at her hands.

Rory bit her lip. “The pithos yesterday were really weak when you hit them. Maybe we just need to weaken them first.”

Carmen’s eyes were wide. “But that’s the only attack I have!”

“It was rather ineffectual.”

Sailor Beta turned to look at the guy in the middle as he spoke up. “Who are you supposed to be?”

The blacklight flashed over him, and he bowed. “I am the greatest Agent of Purity. My name is not yours to know.” He pointed a finger to them. *Wow, this guy is dramatic.* “What you should know is that I won’t stop until we have the Star Souls. And that means you.”

Rory crouched, ready to go in. On all sides, she could see the pithos gathering, ready to strike. He must not have wanted them in interrupt his monologue. “We dusted one of you guys already—we can dust another.”

The man held up a hand. “Enough talking.” The man raised his hands in the air, and Beta watched with fascination as smoke gathered in his hair and around his throat, coalescing into a mane of shadows. His grin widened impossibly. “Your souls are already mine!”

The door burst open. Sailor Epsilon stood in the doorway. “Surprise, bitch! Typhoon Strikedown!”

Water gushed from the ceiling. It crashed into the closet pithos to the door, and into the Agent, who held his hands over this head trying to catch the brunt of the attack. The deluge ended, and the closet pithos stood, trying to shake off the attack.

Chaos.

The two pithos closest to Epsilon went charging in her direction. It must have been like Christmas to these guys, the number of star souls in the room. Carmen peered over at Rory uncertainly. “Just follow my lead, until we knock these guys down enough.”
From the middle of the rink, the Agent straightened, his lion-esque silhouette casting an enormous shadow into the dark rink. He opened his mouth.

*Raaaggh.*

They stumbled back as the roar hit them like a sonic wave. Rory grounded her feet into the linoleum. There was a ringing in her ears. "Rude."

He charged at them. Even so, he seemed to forget he was wearing skates, and he didn't get very far. Changing positions, he pushed off, gliding towards them.

*Now that's just unfair. Not like either us them have skates.*

"That was a cute trick," the Agent said, wiping moisture from his eyes as he slid to a stop in front of them. "Don't expect to take me off guard so easily again."

Beta watched his wheels spin. She said, "Bet I can. Dire stellar gust!"

The force of the wind blew him back, his skate-laden feet unprepared to stop him before he collided with the back wall. Still, he didn't seem injured. Darn. "Fine," he growled. "This doesn't get to be fun anymore."

As he surged forward, Gamma fell back, dodging a swipe of his massive, clawed arm.

In an instant, his skates evaporated from his feet. *Must have changed his mind.* Skaters around the outside of the rink cowered as his bared his shadowy maw. Unlimited by the skates, he stomped towards them.

Beta flipped back onto the wall as Gamma scrambled to get out of range. "We need to lead him away from the civilians."

"We've got another problem," Gamma gestured behind them.

Two other pithos—crap, there must have been five, not four—had found their way onto the floor.

Narma lead the two pithos in circles, finding positions they couldn't get into and staying there to keep them distracted. But they were apparently getting sick of the roundabout. Their attention was slowly turning back to the battle in the rink.

"No, you don't," Epsilon kicked out at the pithos above her, the creature sucking in air as it clawed at her position in the play house. She glanced at the rink: there were two pithos out there now, plus the leader guy. *I need to get back out there quick. But I need to deal with these guys first.*

She leapt away from the play house, getting the pithos’s attention back on her. “Hey, cats. Got what you want right here—a nice tasty soul."

Did they actually eat the souls? Their goals were sort of a mystery. Regardless, they followed her away from the play area, She thought it had probably been long enough that her Strikedown would work again, but from experience she knew that that was only sure to take down the one she had already hit. She needed to get rid of both of them. It would be helpful if they were closer together. But how could she do that?

Nearby, close behind her, she spotted the door for the maintenance closet. “Hey,” she said, backing
up against it. “You’d better not try and attack me now; I am tired.”

It was a ridiculous thing to say, but whether the pithos could understand it or not, they were always ready to fight. She reached a hand back for the knob. *I have to time this just right…*

As the pithos swarmed on her, she opened the door, dropping down to the floor beneath her. The pithos, still charging, were mostly in the closet before they realized she’d moved. Throwing her full body weight against the door, she shoved the remainder left out inside. She locked the door.

The door shook, racking with the furious roars of the pithos behind. *Hope this works.* Concentrating, Narma directed a large gush of water directly to the other side of the door: closer than usual, so potentially more powerful. She heard it crash.

Silence.

Carefully, opening the door, Epsilon stepped back as two unconscious, regular human beings fell forward out of the closet. “Nice.”

Narma’s gaze moved to the rink. She could see Carmen and Rory fighting the agent, Carmen waiting for an opportune need to use her attack while Rory threw out a sporadic dire gust.

She hopped over the wall, moving to flank Rory’s other side. “You look like you could use some help.”

Rory laughed. “No kidding.”

The agent snapped shadowy jaws at them, and they all scattered in different directions. The two other pithos in the rink eagerly chased after them. They were fast, for being so big. Narma turned her focus down a leading the pithos away. “Alright, come at me.”

Behind, the agent was inhaling to blast them with the air again (or maybe he was trying to suck out their souls; hard to judge the guys intentions. ) Getting an idea, Narma stepped back, where the pithos charged after her.

At that exact moment, the Agent released his gale force roar. Narma dropped to the floor, but the wind hit the pithos head on, and it screamed under the assault.

“Hey!” The agent screamed. “Clever to use my power against me, but consider it a one off.”

Narma rolled her eyes. If this guy were smart, he would stop talking and start fighting.

The agent threw himself at them, standing over her before she had the chance to stand up. She rolled to avoid him, the wooden floor burning her elbows.

“Mesmeric Pacification!”

The light haze fell over the wind blasted pithos. It seemed the roar had done enough damage; the creature collapsed to the ground, smoke fading.

“Hey!” The agent shouted again, his face contorting into obvious rage. Then, a smile stretched across it.

Alarm bells ringing, Narma looked up to see the other pithos standing behind Carmen, claw raised to strike.

“Watch out!”
The voice was one Narma didn’t recognize, but when she turned in its direction she saw a blond girl barrel into the pithos which, reacting to the yell, violently swung its arm out.

The clawed limb slammed into the bystander, throwing her back into the wall of the rink with a crack.

From her position, Beta heard Gamma—no, Carmen—scream. “Alyssa!” Carmen ran to where the girl had crumpled to the floor, crouching beside her.

Beta was hit with a mix of shock and anger. No civilian had been injured that badly while she was fighting these creatures before. “Alright, that’s it. Epsilon, this guy has to go.”

Narma maneuvered to her side. “No joke. What do you want to do?”

The agent struck out at them. His two massive paw swept right past Beta’s face, but she scrambled back, as did Epsilon.

Even so, Rory could feel an odd sensation in her fingertips. Peering over to Narma, she said, “You know that thing we tried yesterday? I think we should try it again.”

“Oh,” said Epsilon. “We got it this time. I can feel it.”

The agent inhaled, both of them struggling to keep their footing against the vacuum. She could feel it in her chest, how to do this. The show was over.

“Ready?” Beta called. Epsilon didn’t reply aloud, but she knew that she was.

Rory heard the words clearly in her mind.

They spoke them at the same time: “Extreme Slashing Vortex!”

Synchrony. Beta’s wind caught Epsilon’s geysers, picking them up into a swirling maelstrom of air and water. The room shook, the neon lights flickering as the cyclone overtook the agent, the gust’s shards and the typhoon’s immense pressure enveloping him all at once.

The agent screamed, the vortex spinning unrelentingly. The vortex had captured the other pithos as well, and when the vortex dropped, only an unconscious shoe seller and a much worse for wear agent remained.

The agent’s shadowy vestments were entirely gone, and his shoulder was leaking dust. Before any of them could react, he bolted for the door, jumping the rink wall and then he was gone. Rory was just about to go after him, when she remembered Carmen.

Carmen was still by the girl's side, checking her over for injuries. "I can’t get her to wake up, but she's still breathing." The girl looked panicked, the same sort of jittery anxiousness Rory had seen from her coming out the auditorium door that first night. But this...this was serious.

Carmen’s hands hovered just over the surface of the girl’s body.

"It must have knocked her unconscious." She raised her gaze to the rink proper. "...you go change. We'll call an ambulance. There's a lot of injured people here."

Carmen hesitated, before getting up and heading for the restroom.
Epsilon, no, Narma, stared towards the door. "Should we go after him?"

Beta, no, Rory, shook her head. "Nah. Dude was leaking dust. He's toast."

Narma crossed her arms, staring around at the wrecked rink. "Guy should have watched his damn hubris."

Nearby, Fastosus limped away, trying to hold in the smoke and dust that poured from his limbs. With the last of his strength, he dragged himself to the rooftop. He needed to leave a message. Those Sailor Soldiers would regret messing with the Agents of Purity.

Fastosus stopped when he noticed a figure at the far end of the roof, peering off into the horizon. “Lupido. Quick, we must contact the Moving Palace. These Sailor Soldiers are not to be underestimated. Now that they are three, they pose a much greater threat. Pull up the coordinates map.”

But Lupido didn’t move. His gaze did not waver from the sunset. Did he not hear him? Fastosus grit his teeth, the dust still pouring. “Lupido, didn’t you hear me? We must—”

“You lost.”

Fastosus cut himself off. He must have misheard him. “What?”

Lupido turned in his direction. He smiled. “I’m afraid you’ve lost, Fastosus.”

He gaped. Lupido couldn’t be serious. His strength waivered; he fell to his knee. “Lupido, this is serious! We have to tell Lady Pandorana—”

“Oh, I’ll tell her.” Lupido turned, sauntering over to his side of the roof. He kept his hands in his pockets, making no move to assist him. He stared down at him. “It’s a shame you were too pathetic to complete our mission.”

Understanding set in—Lupido had no intention of trying to help. Body giving in, Fastosus crumbled. He just managed to hear Lupido’s final words of parting:

“Don’t worry. The mission is safe in my hands.”

Fastosus’s dust wisped off the rooftop, carried by the evening breeze. It was a shame—Lupido had been looking forward to putting the Agent in his place beneath him. Oh well.

He punched in the coordinates to the Moving Palace, watching the communication go through.

The image appeared: Lady Pandorana, as always, was seated on the throne, Elpis watching Lupido carefully through the feed. “Lupido, I’m glad to see you call in,” his Lady grinned with a gaze that felt as if it were piercing through him. “I was beginning to believe all of our disciples had forgotten about me.”

He bowed his head. “I apologize, my Lady. I’m afraid I come with unfortunate news. While scoping out my strategy against the Sailor Soldiers, I came across Fastosus’s remains. It seems he was defeated.”

From his spot beside the throne, Elpis squinted at him. He pursed his lips.
Lady Pandorana crossed her arms. “Those Sailor Soldiers have taken out another one of my Agents? And after he had utilized so many of my precious pithos? I’m beginning to think my capable forces are not so capable after all.”

Lupido pushed down the smirk that so desperately wanted to rise to the surface. As far as the Lady was concerned, all of the pithos deployed over the past few days had been Fastosus’s; exactly as planned. He put a hand over his chest. “Not to worry, my Lady. I believe I can finish this mission with only the barest of resources.”

Her eyes brightened. “Oh?”

“Yes. I’m employing another strategy—my work is more hands-on. You should expect to receive a Star Soul in the next few days.”

In the background of the Palace, the unmistakable bright shape of the Host star shined. From within it, a great shadow writhed. It wouldn’t be much longer now until that place could be made pure. Then, they could begin anew.

With certainty, he gazed into the projection. “The Great Beast will be fed.”

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Carmen shuffled restlessly from foot to foot. The sound of the heart monitor was stark in the little white room, Alyssa still unconscious in the bed. The nurse looked up from the chart. “We’ve contacted her parents,” he said softly. “They should be here anytime.”

Carmen drew her gaze from her friend’s face. “Thank you.”

The hospital was quiet. They hadn’t yet been able to determine the damage done, but she hadn’t shown any sign of awareness.

Just a couple of hours ago, Alyssa had been fine, laughing and commiserating about how out of control things had gotten in just a matter of days.

Now, she was here. The IV stood out against her skin like a machine wire, purple standing under her eyes.

“Crazy world.”

Subconsciously, Carmen brought her hand up to her chest. Under her fingers, an energy pulsed—she could feel it.

“I just—” her feet pulled her towards the exit. “I just need a moment.”

The nurse regarded her quietly. “Of course.”

Carmen fled the room. Mind unfocused, she moved down the hall almost trance-like, until she came to a supply closet.

She pulled herself into the closet. Sliding down against the wall, she put her hands over her eyes, hoping that, eventually, the shaking would stop.
Chapter 7

Episode 7: Trouble At King5!—Or, the Sailor Scouts, Appearing and Disappearing!

Carmen stuffed the bag with shirts, shoes, snacks, and the last of her allowance. With her phone completely destroyed, she had to print off the map, which she stuffed into the bottom of her bag. She didn’t want anyone to see it if they happen to see her on the way out. Her father had already left for work, meaning the house was painfully quiet. On the refrigerator’s sticky pad, she left the note. Then she just left.

--

Invidia moseyed into the throne room of the Moving Palace, arms crossed. Lupido was such a smug piece of solid waste. Peering over, she saw the wide plates of her Lady’s eyes glimmering. Why did he have to get all the attention in this cult? Other people were working hard too. She was working hard.

Lady Pandorana sat back. “That one seems to have his own agenda.”

“I noticed as well, my lady,” said Elpis. Such a suck up. “He didn’t seem too upset that his fellow agent had died.”

He was right about that. Lupido may have believed he was slick, but anyone could see through his “this is so sad” act.

Lady Pandorana slowly turned her head to Elpis. “I’m not sure how much we can trust him anymore. I believe we may be in need of a backup plan.”

Invidia’s not-heart leapt when her Lady’s attention turned to her. She straightened, saluting. “Invidia, why don’t you head out there as well? I know you’ve been searching for a way to prove yourself.”

Invidia couldn’t believe her luck. Lupido had better watch out—he wouldn’t be hogging the spotlight anymore.

“I would be honored, my Lady. I’ll get started right away.”

Invidia thought they were going about this all wrong, anyways. She had a new strategy for locating those Sailor Soldiers, one she was sure would bear fruit.

--

Rory trod down the street, slowly making her way to school. She was more tired than she usually was, even for a Monday morning; she didn’t even attempt a free run. Even with everything that had gone on the previous evening, nothing felt resolved. Maybe we should have gone after that guy after all. It was morbid, but she felt as though she would have felt better if she had actually seen him turn to dust.

Celene padded alongside her. “These attacks are getting more and more sporadic.”

“Yeah,” said Rory. “I remember when we were getting these things only a couple times a week.”
Getting an odd look from a passerby, she brought her hand up to her ear. “It seems like it’s everyday, now.” Rory frowned. “I just wish we knew what they wanted the crystals for. Maybe that would help us anticipate their moves.”

It was early enough that birds were singing, but the edges of the sky were still dark blue where the sun hadn’t yet reached.

Celene glanced up to her. “The Star Souls are incredibly powerful. If they’re seeking them, I would assume they need that power for some reason. To fuel something, or for some spell? It’s hard to tell.”

Rory turned the corner. “What we really need is to get one of those guys in a captive area. We could take them in for questioning.” If only they could get the police involved in this. They didn’t exactly have any kind of cell in which to keep a hostage. Or any way to capture them. Whelp.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, she shot Narma a text.

*You heard from Carmen this morning*

**Nope. Not a word.**

*I emailed her, but she hasn’t responded*

**Her friend did get hurt. Maybe she’d still at the hospital?**

*She’s*

**Stfu**

Rory frowned. Maybe. They needed to try and get together soon. They still had a lot to talk about.

She came up on the electronics store. The news was on as she passed; she slowed down to watch. She had a few minutes.

“And we, of course, invite everyone to join in with the Ronald McDonald House charity fundraiser this afternoon, taking place just outside King5 station headquarters. Dozens of venders have signed up to sell baked goods, crafts, and host games, with all proceeds going to the Ronald McDonald House. If you have some time, please stop by to support this great cause. We look forward to hearing from you.”

**That’s nice.** Maybe she’d stop by; it would be good to get her mind off of things for a bit. She began walking again.

“In other news, scientists continue to monitor the tumultuous activity in the Trappist-1 star. There are major concerns that the star may be going through a similar shift to the one seen in star HR 8832, whose disappearance has baffled—”

Rory froze.

She slowly turned to look at the image playing on screen through the shop window. There was a red-tinted star, which wasn’t especially interesting; it just looked like a star. In the same image, though, there was a macaroni yellow planet, just in-frame.

Covered in red-orange peaks, like spots.

“Celene.” Rory stopped, and the orange tabby, who was still going, turned back to look at her. She
pointed to the image on the screen. “Look at that.”

Celene followed her pointing finger. “Aurora?”

“I think that’s it,” Rory said. She stared at the planet on screen, even as the image shifted to show different angles of the star. “I think that’s my planet.”

Her gaze drifted down to the tagline:

**SOLAR UNREST IN TRAPPIST-1?**

During her bridge class, she managed to convince her teacher to let her go to the computer lab. Yes, she could have waited until she got home, but this felt too bag to wait. And a smartphone for research like this? Not ideal. She needed to print this ish out. She needed a dang folder.

Initial searches on Trappist-1 yielded a surprising amount of information. The star system was 39.6 lightyears away from their solar system—Rory didn’t really have a concept for how far away that was. It had several earth-sized planets, and, according to all knowledge, no moons anywhere.

This…was all interesting, and Rory was glad she had discovered where they were getting their powers from, but it wasn’t really helpful. It didn’t answer most of the questions she had had before about how they were accessing their powers, or what the “Agents” wanted, things like that. It didn’t even answer the first question she’d ever asked.

Scientifically speaking, the planet she identified as her own was named “Trappist-1 B,” A, she guessed, being the star. It was just like Celene suggested: the planets had not yet been given a name by the scientists there on Earth. She slumped in her computer chair. She’d thought before that if she just knew what her planet was, maybe she would be able to do some of that “remembering” Celene was always talking about, however that worked. But no dice. Maybe the others would remember something.

She needed to talk to Celene about this. Maybe she would be able to tell her more. That morning, they hadn’t really gotten the chance to talk about it before she’d had to get on to school.

Rory printed the web pages she had found and logged out of the computer. She really needed to figure some of this out. The last pithos attack had resulted in some major injuries, to several people. They had to be stopped.

“What cha’ looking at?”

Rory jumped, before turning around in her chair. There stood Eddie—she hadn’t seen the guy in person since the pep rally. She was sure he was busy with the newspaper, given everything that had happened at the school over the past couple weeks. “Oh, hey Eddie.” She turned back to the screen, which was now black, but the papers in her hands had some up-front-and-center shots of Trappist-1B. She stuffed them in her backpack, then felt stupid. What was he going to learn just from seeing some science articles? “Just doing some research for my astronomy class. How bout you? Your article raised quite a stir in the school the other day.” She grinned, cringing internally. *Just don’t look to far into that vein, Eddie.*

His eyes lit up. “Yeah! It got a lot of attention. I’ve actually got some bigger companies interested in my article, so that’s cool.”

He rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah. Sorry if this seems weird. I just never got to check on you after the attack in the gym. Did you find your friend?”

Rory’s tension softened. “Yeah! Yeah, I did. No worries, we both made it out fine.”

“That’s good.” He looked away, out the computer lab, vaguely in the direction she knew the auditorium to be. “Things just keep getting crazier and crazier.” His eyebrowed raised, as if he were just remembering something. “Hey, I’m letting people know—there’s a fundraiser downtown today, outside King5. It’s going to be a lot of fun. The Garfield Times is volunteering. You should stop by.”

Huh, Sometimes, Seattle actually felt pretty small. “Yeah, I was actually already planning on going.”

Eddie shot her a finger-gun. “Then I suppose I’ll see you there.”

She laughed, grabbing up her backpack. It was just about time for her next class, so she needed to get going. She winked. “Well, maybe you will.”

He grinned. “Cool. See you then!”

Even with everything going on, she couldn’t help but be a little excited.

--

Invidia touched down in the city. Unlike the other Agents, this was her first time being down on Earth—she’d seen things through the monitoring system, the tracking logs, but she couldn’t have imagined what it would be like in person. She stood in the middle of the intersection, taking in the busy noise on all sides. The buildings stood enormous all sides, shining with a reflective material. Lights shown from every structure, with screens displaying pictures and videos. Even so, greenery hung from each the highest points in the space. Such a complex environment, for creatures so inherently tainted.

“Hey, move it lady!”

Invidia’s attention shot to the space in front of her, where one of the humans sat in one of its arcane vehicles.

“You’re blocking the road!”

She hissed at him, stomping off to the street side. She had other places to be, anyways.

Now, to employ her strategy. Observing the space around, she took in images these humans seemed to covet most. There were strange glass bottles with humans in compromising positions, human food glistening in unnatural splendor. It seems they will admire anything. Internally, she seethed. It should be us they are praising. We are the ones transforming the universe into something beautiful, even in all its decay!

Her eyes caught on two similar images—peering back and forth, she discovered it was the same human. The human had large teeth and hair that stood up like some sort of crown. Tune in to Laura Washington, with the King5 Evening Report. (Annual fundraiser, Monday, April 6, outside King5 studio.)

This human—the others seemed to have iconized them. Surely, a human of such renown would be the perfect suspect for a Sailor Soldier.
A human passed her; she grasped their arm. “Hey!”

“Tell me,” Invidia narrowed her eyes. “Where can I find this ‘Laura Washington?’”

The human’s face scrunched. “I don’t know what your deal is, Lady, but if you’re looking for Laura Washington, I think she’s going to be at that fundraiser tonight.”

“The ‘fundraiser’…is that some sort of…event?” She could use context clues.

The man’s irritated expression flattened out. “Yeah. Over on 1st street this afternoon.”

1st street. She could surely find this place. “Understood.” Releasing the man, she marched down the street, ready to find this ‘fundraiser.’ She could find these Sailor Soldiers without anyone’s help, she was sure of it. Then, they would be one step closer to purifying the galaxy.

It was too bad, really, that they couldn’t get to this star system sooner. It seemed rife with corruption.

One thing at a time.

--

I know you’re upset. There’s more I can tell you, if that would make you feel better!

I just found out something BIG.

No response. Rory had tried contacting Carmen several times throughout the day, but she hadn’t had any luck. Either she didn’t want to talk to them, or her friend was still on the hospital. Neither was good news. She shot Narma a text.

Anything?

Nothing.

I think we should check on her. I’m probably going to her house after the King5 fundraiser. Are you going?

Nah, I got work.

Rory peered down to the phone’s screen, moving aside for the other pedestrians on the sidewalk.

You got a new job? When?

I’m back at the aquarium. I figure I keep running into these things all over the place anyways. The aquarium wasn’t even that bad, the bruises are almost gone.

Rory frowned. She knew that first attack had affected Narma more than she wanted to admit. Girl got aggressive when she was upset, and the last two times she had ravaged those pithos.

I mean, hey, I might as well get paid.

Meet you at the crossing after?

Deal.

Rory peered up from her phone, resuming her walk towards 1st avenue. Even though it was getting
late, the sky was still bright blue. Weird that a place could look so normal, and be filled with monsters and girls with superpowers.

As she moved down the block, she heard the commotion of partiers laughing and chattering. The street outside the news station was laden with balloons and stands where people were selling all sorts of things. Wow, there’s a lot of people here. Folks were jammed in along the road like a bunch of crayons in a Crayola box.

It seemed some people had volunteered to perform: a band played up on the little stage as the crowd gathered in. They were playing an imperfect cover of some kind of rock—not Rory’s cup of tea, but any kind of music was infectious in a crowd. Looks like a pretty good turnout.

As she neared the event, an operator came up to her, holding a basket. “Admission is free, but we are accepting donations from anyone who attends.”

Rory fished in her pocket. “Yeah, hold on.” She pulled out a five and deposited it in the basket, and then entered the event.

There were stalls of all kinds, and Rory immediately gravitated towards a baked good stand selling brownies. She peered back at the crowd behind her as she paid for her snack. “It’s really gotten crowded out here. I’m surprised there aren’t more people in line for the stands.”

“Yes,” the baker woman pressed the brownie into her hand. “The news team is supposed to be joining the event soon; I think some people are hoping to be on TV.”

“Thanks.” That made sense. Their local news didn’t do stuff like this too often, so she wouldn’t be surprised if there were some photo bombers waiting in the wings. Rory pulled open the plastic wrap, taking a bite. Man, she needed to bake at home more often. Cake mixes were only like a dollar, right?

Peering around, she slowly finished off the brownie. She wondered how many of these folks had seen their news clips? It was kind of cool to think that some of these strangers might know who she was (even if they didn’t really know,) especially considering how well-known Sailor Moon was. At the same time, it made her kind of nervous. The more people knew about them, the more careful she was going to need to be not to give anything away.

She balled up the plastic, tossing it in a nearby recycling bin. She wondered how Lisa was doing? She would have to check in with her sometime. All of the exposure might tempt her to say something.

“Hey, Rory!”

Rory turned to see a familiar sandy-haired guy running in her direction. “Hey Eddie. How goes it?” How involved was he here, actually? He hadn’t really told her much.

“Great.” He sounded out of breath. “You know. Just getting some shots.” He gave her a thumbs-up. “A good reporter never rests.”

She laughed. He really was a goofy guy. She had to admire how passionate he was, even so. Wish I had any idea what I wanted to do with my life. “Yeah, okay.” Though, I guess what I do now is fight monsters. Doesn’t exactly pay the bills. She couldn’t keep working at Conrad’s forever. The commotion behind them in the crowd seemed to pick up. Everyone seemed to be coming together.

“Any idea what they’re so excited about?”

He leaned back against the stall. “Yeah. Some of the reporters are going to be out to speak any
minute now.” He paused, pulling his camera from the strap around his neck. “This is a pretty good angle, actually. Oop, wait, here they come.”

A trio of hosts climbed up onto the make-shift stage, the band giving them the space back. “And a big thank you, to the Polor Shifts.” The audience clapped. Rory recognized the woman speaking as the main local news host, Laura Washington. “Thank you all for coming today. We aim to have a lot of fun and, most of all, raise money for an excellent cause. I didn’t grow up in the most stable situation, and the Ronald McDonald House was there for me and my family when my sister was in need of medical care. So this cause is one particularly dear to my heart. I hope you enjoy this beautiful evening; we’ll be stopping in throughout the event to cover the night’s proceedings. But before that, we have a representative from the Ronald McDonald House here to say a few words.”

Rory clapped. It was good to see so many people getting together just to help out other people. It almost distracted her from the fact that one of her fellow Soldiers had yet to answer any of their texts.

Almost.

Maybe, if she was being honest with herself, she was feeling a little bit guilty. Her stomach twisting in on itself. That was silly, she knew; she hadn’t asked for these powers, hadn’t given them to Carmen. Even so, she wished she could apologize for Carmen’s friend’s injury. She wished she could have stayed around to help.

She just needed to put it aside for now—she would talk to Carmen later, with Narma, and they would try to make some of this better.

--

Invidia lurked in the backroom of the station. It had taken her forever to locate this place; all of these human structures looked the same to her. They were all nothing compared to the Moving Palace.

From her dark spot in the corner, she waited for her target to come back into the building. It seemed like every human alive had congregated outside. What was so great out there? She needed to get work done.

She listened. Some time had passed—she watched the human time-telling device turn from 5 to 6—but still, she could be patient. Eventually, her patience was rewarded, and the loud clambering of something came from the front of the studio. “Ow, dammit,” she heard the exclamation.

Creeping forward from her dark spot, she was thrilled to see her target walking into the room, lit on one side by the light from the screens behind. Perfect.

Waiting a moment to make sure no other humans were behind her, Invidia crept up close enough to get the human’s attention. “You.”

The woman turned, the click-clack of her heeled shoe missing a beat. “Excuse me?”

She didn’t get to speak further before Invidia shoved her hand into the woman’s chest, the appendage leaking smoke. A star soul would be resistant to the summoning; this will be my definitive proof. “Appear, now! Show me your corruption!”

A burst of black wisps erupted from the origin point of her soul. Invidia scowled, defeated—this was not a star soul. The purple-black smoke writhed, twisting up to overtake the woman’s head. The shape elongated into the air like a long coil, a second head emerging at the end.
Invidia yanked her hand back out, flicking the wisps away. “Disappointing.”

“—Laura? Are you—oh my god!” Invidia’s eyes shot to the two suited humans who had entered the room. Blast. She had to make herself a path. ‘

Extending her hand out, the two humans seized, falling as the corruption took hold in their chest. The same serpentine growths engulfed their heads. Time to get out of here.

--

The crowd clapped as the most recent band left the stage. Down at the end of the street, someone in a Ronald Mcdonald costume was handing out balloons to kids.

Eddie turned to her. “After all the bad press moving through this city, it’ll be nice for the people to get something nice like this in their news feed.”

Rory scratched her shoulder, where the bandage from the first Agent’s stabbing was finally becoming unnecessary. “Yeah, no kidding.” She eyed his camera. “You getting a lot of good footage?”

He’s faced brightened, peering down at the screen. “Oh, yeah. I’m planning to upload it to the paper’s webpage, for anyone who couldn’t make it.”

*Jeez, I didn’t know they had a webpage, either. They need better advertising.*

Eddie fiddled with some sort of setting on the lens. “Honestly, I should probably get out there—try and get some more varied shots.” He squinted his eye, pulling out $2.00. “But before that…I bet I could beat you at the bean bag toss.”

She narrowed her eyes. *You’re dealing with a superhero here, bub.* “Oh, you’re on.”

Eddie grinned.

There was a scream, a little ways off. Eddie stopped smiling. “What was that?”

Rory tensed, hand moving down to the scepter in her pocket. *Guess we spoke too soon.*

They emerge from the news building. They looked like people from shoulders down, but above that a gruesome snake grew out of where their heads should be. Their bodies were as thick as a human neck, their wide heads bobbing several feet above the bodies they inhabited. *What the heck?*

“Holy crap!” Eddie backed away, but held onto his camera. “I’ve got to get a better shot of this!”

Rory eyed him, before scanning the crowd. *Dang it, Eddie.*

The crowd was charging away from the event at what probably would have been top speed, but they were so clumped in together that they weren’t really getting anywhere. Rory was quickly squished into the fleeing mass. *I have to find a way out. But where can I go?*

“Out of the way!” One person cried, pushing through the mass of other bodies towards the exit, the only way out of the other end of the street.

Eddie was being swept away, carried by the horrified mosh in the other direction. Nearby, Rory could see the snake pithos lashing out into the crowd. She…couldn’t see the effects of their attack; she almost didn’t want to. They moved through the sea of the crowd, coming closer and closer.
Behind all of them, the news station stood abandoned. *Maybe if I could get in there*—her heart pounded as the shadow of the beast had moved over the crowd like a target. If she stayed still, she would be a sitting duck. She knew how those things got when they were near a star soul.

Pushing more forcefully through the crowd, Rory ducked as the creature’s neck swung over head. She shoved her shoulder into the hip of anyone who was in the way and managed to work her way through the crowd.

Another shadow passed nearby and, gritting her teeth, Rory managed to maneuver past it. With a whoosh of free air, she fell out into the open space and crouched again, crab walking along the news station steps.

She could hear a gradually loudening hissing as she finally made it through the front door. The screaming of the crowd was immediately muffled, and she hurried into the darkened space, looking for the first secluded space so she could transform.

“Star soul detected,” the woman’s gravelly voice came from across the room. Rory froze. Slowly turning, she saw the familiar suit jacket of one Laura Washington, the woman’s head totally subsumed by snake body.

*Oh no.* The creature stared her down, the limp body of the reporter almost dangling from the new appendage. Rory didn’t move. *What’s the chance that this thing is motion detecting and it won’t see me if I stand still?*

The pithos struck out. She shrieked, diving to the side to avoid its enormous shadowy jaw. What would happen if you got bitten by one of those things? She really didn’t want to find out.

Not to mention that she was still decked in her civilian clothes. She couldn’t do jack like this. She needed an opportunity to transform. If the light didn’t blind this thing, like it sometimes did with the others, she would be serving herself up on a platter.

The creature struck again. It was like the reporter wasn’t even walking; her body just jolted forward as the creature stuck out. *Freaky.*

Rory spotted what looked like a movie star’s dressing room. Maybe this is were the reporting staff got ready for their takes? Regardless, it was somewhere to go. Book it for the room, she slipped along the tile, falling into the room as she slammed it behind her with her foot. She heard the pithos smack into it, and held her breath, expecting it to bust in any second. But it just kept slamming.

*These guys must not have super good motor control.* It explained why this one hadn’t joined her other companions outside in assaulting the crowd. They must have followed someone out.

Breathing hard, she saw her opportunity—she pulled the Beta scepter from her pocket, lifting it to the air. “Crystal Power Beta, Make-up!”

She felt the uniform close around her.

Sailor Beta opened her eyes, examining the door.

The pithos couldn’t open it. If she opened it straight out, though, it was absolutely going to bite her. She spied some thread on the countertop—someone’s jacket must have ripped—and a heavy-duty trashcan in the corner.
She could get creative.

Carefully, she tied the string around the door’s handle, and she stepped back, pulling the liner out of the can and placing the bin over her arm. *Worse come to worse, it’s going to have a heard time getting to me.* She stepped back to the corner of the room, ducked down, and pulled the string.

The door opened.

The snake barreled in. It was immediately smacked in the face by a big metal trashcan. Beta darted back out into the studio, knowing she needed room.

Disoriented, the snake followed. Beta held her scepter out, seeing her chance. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The wind swept into the pithos, the shards assaulting the limp host as the serpent closed its eyes. The wind died and it opened its eyes, hissing.

Beta’s eyes widened.

It struck. She dove behind one of the studio’s small partitions. Why hadn’t it worked? Was it like the lion pithos, and it was resistant? There was nobody else here!

She saw the shadow looming and she jumped back, onto the desk near the front. It approached, and she watched the shadows shift in its coil. *Of course!*

From the top of the desk, she pointed the scepter again with both hands, but higher this time, at the snake’s self-propelling head. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

This time, the snake hissed, but the wind chipped away at the solid mass as if it were losing scales. It evaporated, Laura Washington slumping to the ground.

“What—” Laura squinted her eyes, as though her head ached. *Whoops, probably my bad.* Rory was pretty surprised the woman was still conscious. “What happened?”

The reported opened her eyes and immediately gasped.

“Don’t worry,” Beta said, holding a hand out. “Someone will be in to help you in a few minutes. There are more outside.” No time to be courteous, Beta left out the door and re-entered the crowded street, wondering how long it would take her to catch up to them.

No long, because apparently one of the snakey guys had pulled the old “I’m gonna’ trap you” maneuver, and herded the crowd into the space just outside the studio.

Beta ran out into the street, the creatures not noticing her right away, still distracted by the crowd. “Hey!” She shouted out to them. “Big, dark, and scaly!”

The pithos stopped moving, then abruptly swiveled in her direction. “Star soul detected,” it hissed.

“No dip,” Rory shot back.

The crowd yelped, shuddering as the snakes abandoned them to their new target. Beta shifted on her feet, getting ready. *Good; they’re moving away from the civilians.* “That’s right—come at me.”

The serpents jolted towards her in their unnatural lurch, and she leapt back. She heard exclamations from the crowd, and tried to ignore them. She’d never been made such an obvious spectacle before.
Regardless, she needed to get somewhere the pithos couldn’t reach her easily.

Quickly she scanned the space. She spied a fence outside of the news building. If they wanted to get to her there, they’d have to skewer themselves. She ran for the gate.

In the background, she heard a Midwestern drone began over the crowd. “This is Alice Tan with King5 news, here at the annual King5 fundraiser, where visitors stand in shock and awe as, at this very moment, monsters have invaded the event—only to be driven away by a woman in uniform—”

Beta gritted her teeth, leaping behind the fence before the pithos clanged against it. Their heads were too large to fit through the bars, and they couldn’t open the gate. “Eat this!” She fired a Dire Gust out through the bars, the shard’s metal scrape making a horrible grinding noise. The pithos screeched, the attack smacking both of them in the face, where they began to disintegrate.

Whoa. Either the attack had gotten stronger, or their heads were more of a weak point than she had realized.

The bodies of the newscasters collapsed to the pavement. As she turned back around, clapping erupted. Beta froze, turning to the crowd as she moved from behind the fence.

She had the crowd’s full attention. In the background, the broadcasting newscaster was still speaking: “—some sort of magical attack, apparently freeing the newscast which had been somehow affected. This is unprecedented. A medic is being called as we speak—”

She couldn’t really blame them. She probably would have reacted the same way if she had seen someone perform real magic a few months ago. Still, she had no idea what to do.

Calm down, she told herself. You don’t look like you. But then she just wondered who was speaking, inside her mind.

“What’s your name?” someone yelled from the crowd. But…she had nothing to tell them.

Her planet had never been named.

At a loss, she said, “I don’t have one.”

Turning, she fled, free running up onto the top of the building just as the ambulance sirens began to ring out over the crowd.

She didn’t go far. At least, from the ground, anyone from the event wouldn’t be able to see her, so she just found a nearby rooftop. She needed a few moments to breathe. She hadn’t imagined being in front of a crowd like that would be so nerve-wracking.

Not to mention those new pithos. She had never seen ones that looked like snakes before, Did that mean there was someone else controlling them? That seemed to be the theme, from what she had seen so far. And what about those wolf pithos from before? She hadn’t seen them since.

They may not have been very difficult to defeat, but those snake pithos was the most disturbing of all the ones she’d fought by far. It actually looked like the parasite it was. The others had been able to feign being a normal human, back at the aquarium. What was the difference?

Rory sighed—it was a lot to think about. And it just added one more thing onto the list of things she needed to explain once she saw the others again.
She had told Epsilon—no, Narma, what the heck? That she would probably be leaving the event at around 7. Judging by what the clocks had said inside the studio, she probably had a few more minutes before she needed to go meet her. She peered out over the cityscape. Man. Seattle was such a pretty city, but was it ever gonna be peaceful again?

She heard a clamber beside her, and she stood. Was there a pithos she’d missed? She hovered her hand over the scepter in her waist-sash, ready to fire off another gust.

But then she was treated to the particularly de-ja-vu-y sight of Eddie, clambering over the roof’s edge where the fire escape began. *Eddie? How did you follow me here?*

“Excuse me,” he said, sounding out of breath. “Ms. Superhero. I was hoping I could speak to you for a few minutes.”

Beta had to admire his persistence. This boy was really gonna get to the bottom of this whole superhero thing, huh? She straightened. Still, somehow, she couldn’t find it in her heart to shoot him down. “What did you need?

He settled his footing, now fully on the roof. “I was honestly just hoping to meet you! A lot of people are trying to act like you don’t exist, but I knew I had seen something that day.”

Beta narrowed her eyes. “Do you…remember? What happened that day?”

Eddie shifted, rubbing his hands together. “I…I guess I do now. I was like one of those reporters back there, right? One of those monsters…was it controlling me?”

So he did remember. That was certainly a little different from the account he’d written in the paper.

Then again, she couldn’t mention the paper, or he would know they went to the same school. “Yes,” she said. “I think you were the first one in this city.”

Eddie frowned. “What are they? Why are they here?”

Beta kept her distance. She wanted to stay close to the roof’s opposite edge just in case she should need to flee. “I can’t answer that. Not because I don’t want to, we’re…still trying to figure that out.”

“So you don’t know.” Eddie peered away from the roof top. This interview was probably not going the way he hoped. “Well…what can you tell me about you?”

Beta smiled. Of course, he would just go for it. “Now that, I just can’t tell you.”

“But you’re like Sailor Moon, right?”

Would could it hurt to share that much? Not like the guy knew any more than she did. They’d both probably seen the same videos from Japan. “Yes. We are Sailor Soldiers.”

Eddie gave a fist pump. “Yes! I knew it!”

Rory eyed him. “What I can tell you, I guess, is that those things are dangerous, but we’re working to get rid of them. People should know at least that much. You got it?”

Eddie saluted her. “Yes ma’am!”

*Whoa, weird.* Though, she guessed he was technically correct? What was the etiquette for addressing space soldiers versus earth soldiers? Didn’t really matter, even so. She was just
beginning to learn this stuff. She saluted back, satisfied with what she had given him. That should give him something special for his next article. She turned to leave, positioning herself to leapt to the next rooftop.

“Wait!”

Beta paused, glancing back to him.

Eddie stared across the rooftop with hopeful eyes. “Will I see you again?”

Rory had often been accused of being soft-hearted. Her lip twitched upward. “Maybe we’ll run into one another again sometime.”

She took off.

Once she had found a place to turn back, she climbed down and walked the rest of the way to the crossing of Easton and Pike, between the news station and the aquarium where Rory had routinely met with Narma after work. She wondered where Celene was? She hadn’t seen her during the attack. Maybe it was too far away from her house. It was a long walk.

Narma walked up after a few minutes of waiting. “Hey. I heard people saying something happened at the fundraiser. What’s going on?”

“More pithos,” Rory sighed. “They weren’t like any of the ones we’ve seen before. Big ugly things that looked like snakes. It was a mess.”

Narma stuffed her hands in her pockets, looking unnerved. “These things just keep coming out of the woodwork. You should have called me; I would have found an excuse to leave early.”

Rory shook her head, pulling out her phone. “Nah, there was no time. It happened really fast.” She pulled up Google Live Maps. “Were you able to get Carmen’s address?”

“Yeah,” Narma sidled up beside her, pulling a scrap of paper out of her pocket. “I told the nurse I had a headache, and found her contacts in the computer while she was getting me in icepack.”

“Incredible,” Rory joked. Peering at the paper, she plugged the address in, and began walking in the direction it pointed them in. “Hey, I found something big today.”

“Yeah?”

Rory eyed her. “I think I know what our planets are.”

Narma stopped walking. “You’re shitting me. How?”

Rory licked her lip. Was there a way to explain this without sounding weird? “Do you ever…have dreams? Like, about another universe?”

Narma leaned in. “No! Why, do you?” She jerked her head back when Rory nodded. “And you’re just sharing with the class now?”

Rory shrugged, continuing to walk. “Girl, I didn’t know it meant anything! I thought I was just having weird dreams because of everything that’s been happening lately.” She thought back to the news broadcast. “But then, this morning, I saw the planet I’ve been dreaming about on a live broadcast in the news. It’s in a star system called Trappist-1.”

Narma held her arms out like *are you serious?* She sighed. “Well, shit.”

Rory grimaced. “They don’t have names.”

Narma laughed. “Of course not.”

They turned the corner.

Narma put a hand to her chin. “You know, I think that even sounds familiar. They’ve been talking about it in the news a lot. The star has been doing some crazy stuff. They don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

Actually, now that Narma mentioned it, that had been what the broadcast had been about, hadn’t it? She’d been so focused on identifying the planet that she hadn’t paid attention to that particular news piece. *Dang. Should have looked it up.*

Rory bit her lip, having to stop herself from reaching into her pocket to make sure the scepter was there. “That’s got to have something to do with it, right? This star gets in the news, and suddenly we’re getting a bunch of powers? That can’t be a coincidence.”

Narma pointed out the house a ways off. It was huge and impeccably white, hedges on all sides and a large security camera catching their motion from the porch, turning to look at them. “It is weird. We should probably ask your cat.”

Rory gave her a look. “She’s not my cat.” *She’s more like a space cat spirit guide.*

They moved up the walkway, ringing the doorbell when they reached the mat. Rory couldn’t help but feel out of place, and honestly a little embarrassed by how different this was from her own neighborhood. She’d never even been to a friend’s house that was this nice. Her eyes fell to her vintage Goodwill jacket and her worn-in Walmart jeans. She felt underdressed.

No reason to be so fancy all the time, anyways. After a point, it just got extra. At least Carmen wasn’t as pretentious as this house was.

…she needed to stop being so judgmental.

There was the sound of footsteps, then the door opened.

It was Carmen’s father, not wearing the suit anymore, but a white button-up and black slacks. There were bags under his eyes. “Yes? Can I help you?”

Narma spoke up. “Yes, sir. We’re friends of Carmen. She didn’t come to school today, and we wanted to make sure she was okay. Is she here right now?”

Mr. Rodriguez frowned. “I see. Well, I’m afraid you’ve missed her. Actually, I would appreciate it if you could check on her. Here. Step inside for a moment.”

The morning was dark, the starlight pinpoints off in the distance.

It had turned out that the main reason Celene had not come rushing to the attack was that she was trapped in Rory’s room. Rory hadn’t seen her at the window when she’d gone home from school before heading to the fundraiser, and so she’d assumed she wasn’t there. In reality, Celene had slipped in behind her and had gone for a nap under her bed, sleeping through Rory leaving again.
She felt bad for locking her in, even though it wasn’t really her fault. It seemed to make Celene really anxious when she couldn’t be there for a fight. Out on the porch, she stroked Celene’s fur, drinking her tea. “Did you want to come with us? I know Narma wants to talk to you. I need to ask you some things too, once we’re altogether again.”

Celene idly whipped her tail, peering sleepily out into the yard. “If you don’t think I would slow you down.”

She scratched between her ears. “You’re a fast cat. You’ll be fine.”

She emptied out her backpack. Inside, she put a change of clothes, some snacks, her phone, and the scepter, just in case. She placed the books under her bed, where they wouldn’t be seen.

“Meet me out front,” she told Celene. “Don’t let my mom see you.”

As morning rose and the sun was just peaking, Rory grabbed some toast and headed for the door.

“A little late for you, isn’t it?”

Her mama was standing in the hall in her night robe. Her eyes were still squinted with sleepiness.

“Yeah, I think I’m taking the bus today,” Rory made up on the fly. Though, not untrue. “I’m feeling a little sore today.”

Her mama frowned. “Well, I could drive you.”

Her heart thumped. “No, no, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Mama blinked slowly, a coffee mug steaming in her hand.

“By the way,” Rory said, “there’s an after school event today, so I might be a little late coming home.”

“…okay.” He mama apparently bought it, turning back to the hall. “Have a good day.”

Time to go.

She left the house, crouching to let Celene jump into her backpack. She walked to the bus stop, standing with Narma as they waited for their ride.

“You get everything you need?” Rory adjusted her strap. Subtly, she opened her bag and let Narma see Celene blink from within.

“Yeah, Hey, here it comes,” Narma gestured the city bus rolling up to the line.

“This afternoon, I found a note from her saying she’s gone to our cabin in the woods,” Carmen’s father told them, exhaustion in his brow. “She’s no longer in the city.”
Chapter 8

Episode 8: Isolation—or, The Devious Plot of the Big Bad Wolf!

Carmen shuffled into the store, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. She felt so stupid. The whole point of coming out here was to be away from other people; how had she forgotten something like this? She knew she got headaches.

Moving quickly through the store, her eyes caught on a bottle of painkillers. Breathing a sigh of relief, she picked up the bottle and moved to the counter.

The old man eyed her fingers, tapping over the counter. He scanned the medicine. “You find everything okay?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Thank you.” She just needed to get out of here as soon as possible.

She passed the money over, when suddenly a box of stock fell down in the corner. “Oh, sorry. Should have stacked that better. Good thing no one was standing there.”

Carmen’s mind flashed back to Alyssa’s body hitting the skate rink wall, the horrible crack. Her heart rate jumped. “No,” she said, “it’s fine.”

She took her change and the bottle of painkillers, quickly walking out of the shop. Alyssa would be fine if it weren’t for her. If she hadn’t been at that rink, the pithos never would have sniffed her out there, and all those people would have been okay.

She was worried about her—Alyssa hadn’t woken up by the time she left the city. But she only would’ve been putting her in more danger by staying around.

The cool mountain air met her as she moved outside. The number of people bustling around the exterior of the shop made her nervous, and she took to the path. It wasn’t entirely isolated, but the cabin was the only place she could think of that was mostly without people. It was a short climb back up to the cabin. Hikers were walking the trails, but after a certain turn, their walk up became private.

Even so, she knew this was only a temporary solution. She would have to go back to school, head back into the city.

She collided with someone. She stumbled, momentarily panicking when the pill bottle fell to the trail, but she found it immediately. “I’m so sorry,” she stuffed the bottle back in the bag. “I was so distracted, I didn’t even see you—” Straightening, she stopped.

It was the same guy, the one from the concert. Dark hair slicked back into a pony tail, very blue
eyes. What were the chances?

He grinned. “Hey there.”

The bus clanked down the street, seeming to hit every pothole on the way. Celene’s green eyes glared from inside of the backpack, clearly realizing she was getting the raw end here.

“Sorry, girl,” Rory murmured. “I doubt they would have let me on the bus if they had known I had a cat on me.”

“It’s fine,” Celene huffed, sinking down further into the pack.

Across from her, Narma crossed her arms. “So, what’s the plan, here? Are we just going to show up at her cabin and tell her she needs to come home? I doubt she’s going to want to come with us, after everything that’s happened.”

Rory sunk further into the cracking leather of the bus seat. “It’s just weird. Like, I could tell that she was nervous, right? It was obvious. I just didn’t think she’d be the type to run away. Especially with her friend still hurt.”

Narma snorted. “Yeah. I don’t know why she thought this would help, either. Not like the pithos haven’t shown up everywhere in the city already.”

Rory put a finger to her chin. “Well, maybe that’s why she’s getting out of the city. We haven’t actually seen the pithos shown up in the wild before. Probably because there aren’t many people.”

Celene spoke up, though her voice was comically muffled. “Our main concern should be making sure she’s not planning to continue this avoidant behavior. Now that we are discovering more about our squadron, it is more important than ever that you stick together as a team to develop your abilities.”

Narma peered out the window. “By which you mean we need her here to fight now that these pithos are getting feisty.”

Celene ruffled her hair. “Well, yes. That too.”

The bus chugged to a stop at the base of the mountain. Rory hadn’t been climbing since she started working at Clarke’s Convenience, but she knew it was going to have some high traffic this time of year. Most people were probably coming here to experience the lush bunches of spring flowers dotting the mountain. Not to escape.

“This is our stop,” Rory warned, giving Celene a minute to get back in the bag. They loaded off the bus, peering up to the hiking train that overtook the mountain, weaving pathways through the landscape like the lines of a crop circle.

Narma hopped her backpack further up her shoulder. “I guess now, we’ve just got to find the cabin.”

Rory lowered her bag to the ground, letting Celene climb out. She pulled out her phone, pulling up the saved navigation request. “All of the trails are marked. The one Mr. Rodriguez gave us is just off of Eastwind Trail. We should just be able to follow it.”

“Alright. Let’s get going, then.”
They got a pretty good start of it. There were ways to drive up, but most of the roads were prohibited to civilians. They just had to try and find this place on foot. After about an hour, they stopped to rest, drinking from their water bottles and watching very carefully for anyone who might be passing nearby while they talked.

“So,” said Rory, waiting patiently as Narma examined the diagram of Trappist-1 on her phone. “Anything look familiar?”

“…nah,” Narma handed the phone back. “It just looks like space to me. Hey—look up those articles from the news. See what they are saying about the sun.”

“The sun?” Celene sat up abruptly, ears shooting straight. “What’s happening with the sun?”

Rory scanned the article as it came up. “It’s been having all sorts of weird activity. Solar flares, massive solar windstorms. They don’t know what’s causing it.” She read through the article, recognizing it as the one that had been on-screen when she’d seen it the previous morning. “Apparently, there’s another star that just totally vanished in another star system they’d been monitoring, so they’re worried it’s the same thing.”

Wait—she remembered now. She’d seen an article like this, that very first day. Course, at the time, she hadn’t thought it had anything to do with her.

She turned to Celene, where the cat was bathing in the warm light on a rock. “What do you think about this? Mean anything to you?”

The cat folded her paws, gaze far away. “It’s very concerning that the sun is showing signs of instability. I agree, I don’t believe it could be a coincidence. Still. What could be the connection between the Agent’s desire for the star souls and the erratic behavior of this sun? There are some vital puzzle pieces that are missing here.”

Rory petted Celene along her back. She was still a cat. “Girl, we don’t even know which puzzle we’re making. If you think of anything, you let us know.”

They started walking again. A little ways up the trail, they came upon a rustic little convenience store selling essentials. As they neared the area, Celene bristled, puffing up in a way that would have been funny if Rory’s stomach wasn’t starting to hurt as well. “Aurora, I’m sensing a terrible presence in this area.”

“Yeah, cramp city,” Narma clenched a hand in her shirt.

Rory looked around—no one looked particularly out of place, but she’d been taken by surprise before. “Where? All the way up here?”

Celene squinted. “No it’s…here? But not here. Somewhere close by.”

Narma shrugged. “So much for Carmen’s vacation.”

Rory bit her lip. “It must really be something nasty, if we’re sensing it from this far off.”

Narma looked at her. “But Carmen’s up here somewhere, right? We should try and get her ready, if this thing’s going to hit soon.”

Rory pulled out her phone. “…the trail is kind of confusing from here.” She gestured to the convenience store. “I bet these guys know where it is.”
“Yeah.” Narma pointed a finger back at her. “If she walked up like us, she probably passed by this place at some point, right? And Mr. Rodriguez said they used to come up here all the time.”

They hurried over to the convenience store, Rory paranoid with every second that the pithos were going to come out of the literal wood work. A bell rung as they moved inside.

The shop owner must have seen the confusion on their faces, that because she paused wiping off the counter to speak to them. “Can I help you girls?”

Narma stepped up. “Yeah, have you seen a tall latina girl with light brown hair? A pixie cut? Kind of nervous looking?”

“Narma,” Rory frowned at her. Rude, girl.

“We’re just looking for the cabin up off of East Wind. The map online is a little confusing. Any idea where we can find it?”

The man leaned across the counter, pointing out the door. “Oh, sure. The cabin is two trail markers up, then you take the next two branches left. It’s a long path; you just have to keep going. If you’re looking for that girl, though, she was just here. Left with some fella I’ve never seen before.”

Rory and Narma looked at each other. “What did this guy look like?” Narma asked.

The man wrinkled his nose. “He had dark hair, slicked back like some kind of smooth operator. Really bright eyes, too. Weird color.”

Rory squinted, frowning at the image that rose to her mind. “Were they blue?”

“Huh?” The man said.

“Were his eyes blue?”

The man’s eyes widened. “Yeah, I think they were, a matter of fact.”

Narma peered over her. “Rory?”

“That sounds like Lukas.” She met Narma’s gaze, explaining. “He’s this guy that I met the day of the museum. I hadn’t seen him since. It’s just a weird coincidence.”

Narma pursed her lips. “Unless it’s not.”

They both straightened at the same time. Turning, they moved for the door. “Thank you,” Rory called back to the befuddled store clerk.

“Anytime,” she heard him say. “Hey, what’s going on? Is that girl in trouble?”

Celene jumped down from her rock perch as they burst outside. “What did you find out—mreow!”

Celene leapt back as a biker came careening down the path.

“She just left with someone,” Narma shot out, keeping up the pace as Celene caught up with them.

Rory peered over to her friend. “You think he might be one of them?”

“It would explain all is funky energy.”

Celene spoke up. “If Gamma is with an agent, we have to hurry! She could be in grave danger!”

Narma shook her head. “Sometimes, you really are stating the obvious.”
Several Moments Earlier

“You!” Carmen took a step back. “What are you doing up here?”

He grinned. A smile seemed to be one permanent fixture of his face, even if the rest of him had been thus far unpredictable. “It’s a free mountain,” he shrugged. “But no. As you probably expected, I do have another reason for being here.” He leaned in. “We need to have a very important conversation.”

Carmen took a step back. “I don’t even know who you are.” The feelings of unease that had peeked up before were only getting worse. Had this guy come all the way up the mountain looking for her? How did he even know she was there? Had he been stalking her? A hundred scenarios popped into her head, each worst that the next. And Alyssa says I’m too paranoid.

Her heart sunk. Alyssa.

The man lifted his hands. “I promise, I mean no harm. I merely wished to talk to you about certain…changes you may have become aware of.”

She wrinkled her brow. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He stared at her. Slowly, he whispered, “I know what you are.”

Panic rattled through her. There was only one thing he could have been talking about. But how could he know? She didn’t look like herself when she transformed!

He said, “And I can help.”

The part of her brain that had just been telling her to run ground to a halt. She lowered her hands, subconsciously raised before her like a shield. “Wha-what?”

He held his hand out, as if he wanted her to take it. “I know about your abilities, and I believe I can help you. You came out here for a reason, didn’t you?”

Nervously, she smoothed the creases in her shirt. “Y-yes. But how could you possibly…?”

“Well’s walk.” He gestured to the path, beginning to walk.

“…who are you?” She asked when he didn’t immediately continue.

“My name is Lukas,” he said. “I am part of an organization that seeks to eliminate the threat of the star souls. Don’t worry—that sounds worse than it is.” He glanced back to her. “I’m sure you’ve noticed things that didn’t seem to be quite right about the star soul’s mission.”

If he knew that much, she might as well speak to it. Honestly, she’d been feeling that way since the beginning. I’d better keep Rory and Narma’s names out of it, though. Mentioning them may only put them in more danger. “…there are these creatures. They seem to be drawn to them. I don’t know; it just doesn’t make sense to me why you would stay somewhere knowing you’re putting people in danger.”

He nodded. “I see. It does seem odd that those who say they are meant to defend do nothing to stop
“these things from happening in the first place, doesn’t it?”

She bit her lip, clutching the plastic bag tighter. “Right.”

“Not only that,” he flared a wrist, “but the star souls themselves can be dangerous. If such power remains within a single spot for too long, it will eventually grow out of control.” Some hikers passed them. The smile on his face momentarily flattened. “Come. Let’s find somewhere more private to talk.”

She hesitated. She wasn’t comfortable being alone with a stranger, but he seemed to have some vital information? She’d been agonizing all day trying to think up a way out of the situation she was in, and if he had more information… “I know somewhere we can go.”

They stayed outside the cabin. In the back of her mind, she may have known she was making some bad decisions here, and so she at least gave her self enough room to run if need be. Or scream.

…and she was just making it worse.

“I appreciate your cooperation,” Lukas said, peering around at the clearing surrounding their cabin.

She rubbed at her arm, watching him. “I probably would have been more willing to cooperate in the first place if you hadn’t acted so shady.” She took an additional step away. “And tried to make a move on me, I think.”

“I apologize for my lack of professionalism,” he winked. “At the time, I wasn’t sure you were one of the ones we were looking for. But now that I do know, and, seeing your apprehensions about the star soul’s power, it felt safe to approach you.” He paused. “I wanted to tell you, first of all, that you were right to be suspicious of them. Those other Soldiers are not as righteous as they would have you believe.”

He took a seat on the porch. She turned to face him, crossing her arms before her chest. “What do you mean?”

He lowered his voice; she had to tune out everything else in order to hear him. “They’re motivated by their own lust for power. The more monsters they fight, the more powerful their abilities become. And thus, eventually, they could become the masters of this world. They are corrupt.”

Carmen stared. He could be lying. But Celene had almost confirmed as much when they’d spoken before—they were going to get stronger if they kept fighting. She shook her head. “Why would they lie to me?”

Lukas laid his head in his hands. “I can see you, soldier. You have a good heart. A pure heart. As long as you have these abilities intact, you will continue to draw those creatures. They’re using you as bait, I’m afraid.”

No. Carmen may have been paranoid, but that was too much to believe. “No, they’re just…” She almost said, they’re just some kids, but that felt like saying too much.

At the same time, why would he lie to her? Why go out of the way to tell her this? She’d been worried when he’d asked to see her alone, but if he were dangerous, if he were like those creatures, he would have attacked her by now, right?

She narrowed her eyes, her heart twinging. “How are you so sure?”
He sighed. “At the last attack—we’ve been observing the sites of and frequency of the attacks. They left the scene pretty quickly once they’d gotten what they wanted, didn’t they? They didn’t care that your friend was hurt. They don’t care about you.”

She was brought back to the fact that she didn’t really know these girls at all. She wanted to trust them, but…how could she? How could they possibly be so okay with this?

Was it possible he was right?

It felt as if something were festering in her chest. She had never felt in control of her life, but the one thing she had had control over was her body. Even if she was falling apart on the inside, she had control of her body, knew what to do to make it look like she had everything together.

In the span of two days, ever since these powers had appeared in her, that had all gone down the drain. She knew she looked a shamble. Now, even her very presence was enough to put her loved ones in danger. She had to get some semblance of control.

“…are you alright, Miss Soldier?”

She forced her breathing to come back to normal, bringing her hand up to her mouth. “Yes,” she coughed out. “What is it,” she said, “that you can do for me?”

He folded his hands together. “We have a way to repress the star soul’s power. It would be the way it was before it ever awakened.”

It couldn’t be that simple. “You…can do that?”

His eyes glimmered. “The star soul would become undetectable to the creatures. We can’t eliminate that power—it’s too strong—but we can make them think we did.”

God, that was all that she wanted, to go back to the way that things were. Even now, she was imagining a million ways things could get worse from there: what if her father got hurt? Could she ever go back to school again without those things in the halls, waiting to steal her now alien soul? She may not have been able to predict what Rory and Narma would do, but she could decide what she wanted.

“It’s actually a very simple process, one we’ve been perfecting for a long time.” He held up a hand. “All I would need to do is feel for the energy in order to place the repressant.”

Carmen placed a hand over the center of her chest, feeling that weird foreign energy. “And it would be permanent?”

He stood, pushing up from his knees. “We may need to repeat the process a few times over the next few years, but it has a lasting effect.”

I could go back home. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. She honed her awareness in on the weight her pocket, the scepter with an Π she had kept on her person out of sheer paranoia. The right thing to do, whether it’s what I want or not, would be to stop being a beacon for monsters.

This seemed too good to be true, which probably meant that it was. Even so, she had to try. It was the right thing to do. The presence of monsters had thrown off the balance of what was already a chaotic city. She needed to restore the balance.

…that was an odd though. She was caught off guard for a moment from how different the thought sounded to her normal musings. Even so, though she’d never thought of things in those terms
before, it made sense to her.

She looked to him, where he stood on the other side of the walkway. “If you can do what you say you can…” she clenched her fist, discarding the plastic bag of painkillers into the grass, “then I want to try it.”

Lukas held his arms out like now, we’re getting somewhere. “I’m so glad to hear that, my dear.” He held his hands out, and hesitantly, she took them. “I promise,” he said, lowering his voice, “you won’t regret his decision.”

Lupido considered himself an artist. Sure, he could have reached into this girl’s chest anytime and taken what he wanted. But wasn’t it so much more gratifying to have her surrender it to him willingly? Like a present? Just the idea made him shiver.

“So.” Her wide, dark eyes examined their clasped hands. “How is this supposed to work?”

He held back the laugh in his throat with all his might. “I just need a feel for the energy to repress it. Is it all right if…?” he hovered a hand over the center of her chest. He could practically feel the power radiating off of her. But still, he wasn’t close enough. In another situation, he might have been embarrassed. He was practically drooling. Still, he couldn’t be. He was so close.

She paused, sighed. Then she said, “Alright. Go ahead.”

Yes.

He placed his hand in the space between her collar bones. There—he could feel the star soul’s radiant light against his palm. “Just stay still for a moment.”

Suddenly, a scream rung out from across the clearing.

Too human girls stood on the path, belongings dropped to the grass. A cat came up beside them, of all things. “Carmen!” The girl in the bright jacket screamed. “He’s one of them!”

She looked back to him, eyes wide.

Strange, but he got this feeling…just for a second.

*You already knew, didn’t you? Somewhere, deep inside yourself, you already knew.*

He plunged his hand into her chest.

Carmen gave a wheeze as Lukas’s—a no, the Agent’s hand pierced her chest.

“No!” Rory screamed across the clearing, rushing towards the pair as she fumbled the scepter from her pocket.

“Aurora, be careful!” Celene called out.

“Shit—” Narma searched for her scepter, fast behind her.

She didn’t have time to transform before she got to them. Winging it, Rory turned sideways, throwing herself into the agent’s side.
Before she could follow through, the agent whipped around and smacked her with the back of his now fully canine shadow-paw.

Rory winced, rolling to land on her back. *Thank you, parkour, for teaching me how to take a fall."

“That’s cute,” ’Lukas’ smiled. “Don’t worry, gorgeous; you’ll get your turn.”

Carmen screamed, the hand still gripping inside her chest.

Rory scowled, face burning with anger. How had she ever thought this guy was cute? He was repulsive.

She saw Narma rise up beside them in uniform. She saw the Typhoon crash down just as she raised her own scepter to the air. “Crystal Power Beta, Make-up!”

Power enveloped her. Beta straightened, assessing the situation.

“Nice try,” the Agent growled, legs shaking from the onslaught of rain, but he was not yet unlogged from his hold on Carmen. “But nothing will stop me from having it.”

As Beta watched, the Agent continued to transform. His teeth were given shadowy extensions, and, most dramatically, the shadows reshaped his legs until they were large and muscular, and backward bending. *So he’s where those wolves came from, Rory realized.*

Carmen clung to the arm gripping her if only to stop the change in size from tearing the soul out of her chest.

“Don’t worry,” Beta glared. “We’ve got plenty more to offer.” On instinct, she held both hands out in front of her. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

*WHAM.* The gust slammed into him, ripping him away from Carmen and forcing him back in the field as he dug his claws in the dirt.

“No,” he growled, getting back up immediately and marching over.

“Hold him back,” Epsilon yelled over to her, kneeling on the ground beside their third.

Carmen’s star soul was visible, the crystal formation almost entirely outside of her. If they had gotten there just a few minutes later…

Breathing hard, she saw the girl begin to pull it back inside before the Agent was right in front of her. “Dire Stellar Gust!” She called, taking a swipe of wind at him like a scythe made of shrapnel. The Agent staggered back, dodging the swipe with a ducking motion. Using the momentum, Beta didn’t stop, pulling the wind from side to side,

“Come on,” she heard Narma say, “You need to get up now. We need your help.”

“Wait,” the agent said as the Dire Gust finally died. “I remember now. Rory, isn’t it?” The inhuman smile was back on his face. “And I thought we were getting along so well.”

“You’re disgusting,” Beta shot back.

He snarled as, anger rising, Beta reared her arm back and just punched him clear in the face. “Way to ruin the moment.” He shot back. “If that’s the way you want to play, I can play rough too.”

She stepped back as suddenly, he whipped his head back and howled.
She looked around, expecting something to happen, but she didn’t see anything,

Still, he had that horrible grin again.

“C-crystal Power Gamma, Make-up!”

The blinding light broke across the field as Carmen transformed. Then she was standing there in her muted uniform.

Beta pointed to the beast. “Doesn’t matter how rough you want to get—you hurt our friend, and now you’re going to pay for it.”

“Yeah,” Epsilon said, coming up beside her with Gamma in tow. “You’re outnumbered, sicko.”

There was a rustling noise from the trees—he said, “You may want to count again.”

From the trees, three wolf pithos were emerging.

“You know, I didn’t want it to come to this,” He said as they re-arranged their positions, getting ready for the fight to become a lot harder. “I only tapped into these folks in case things didn’t go as smoothly as I’d hoped. Just in case. There’s no art to just…ripping your souls out and your bodies to pieces. But YOU.” He wagged a finger. “You had to push.”

“Epsilon?” Beta called back.


“What do we do?” Carmen still sounded out of breath.

The agent said. “I think this is when you die.”

A hiss interrupted their panicked breathing, and then the Agent was thrashing. “What the…?!”

Celene had jumped onto his back, digging her claws in and biting at every opportunity. “Quickly, girls!” She yowled as he clawed back, trying to reach her. “Now’s the time for a strategy!”

“I’m sorry,” Gamma cried out as the wolf pithos closed in. “I didn’t know what to do! I just wanted to stop putting people in danger, and now—”

They dove as the three pithos leapt towards them. They had beefed up shadow legs. Rory got the feeling it was going to be hard to avoid these guys. “It’s okay,” she panted. “It’s these guys that don’t know when to quit. Dire Stellar Gust!”

The two wolves she hit flinched, cowering before recovering, and coming again.

Carmen said, “But I can’t even help here! I just have to wait while you guys protect me!”

Lukas, meanwhile, had decided he wanted to get involved again, having shaken off Celene. He leapt into the air, landing hard between them.

As he moved to strike out at Beta, Epsilon struck him in the back of the head with her scepter. “Hey, maybe these things are good for more than aesthetics.”

To Gamma, Beta said, “Maybe you just need help.”

She’d been able to perform a combination attack with Epsilon. There had to be others, right? This
was certainly less than ideal—Carmen had been in three fights in the past four days, and she’d still
had little opportunity to learn anything about her powers. Would attempting something even work?
But no. When she and Epsilon had been able to summon their combo attack. They at least had in
mind what they were going for. In this case, Beta wasn’t even sure what Gamma’s powers were. No, they’d have to think of something else.

Gamma stood by, maintaining a zig-zag pattern as the pithos tried to pin her down. Seemed speed
wasn’t everything. “How do you figure?”

“We’ll think of something.” said Epsilon. “In the meantime, we’ll knock ’em down, you take them
out.”

From her position, Carmen nodded. “I’ll try.”

They regrouped, giving Gamma space away from the creatures until the moment was right. They
were facing really bad numbers here, really. The wolves were faster than the lions or the bears, and
they didn’t have the advantage of a confined space to make it more difficult for the creatures to get
to them. It was wide open.

The Agent was getting irritated that his pets hadn’t seized their prizes yet, apparently, because he
came after Beta next. In the background, she heard the gratifying sound of the Typhoons going off
again, but she knew those wolves weren’t especially susceptible to the water. Even so, she had
other things to worry about.

The shadow of Lukas loomed over her, and she back away, extending the scepter. “You just don’t
know when to quit, huh Lukas? If that is your real name.”

“It’s Lupido, actually.” He shielded himself with his arms as she fired off another Dire Gust in his
direction. Beta panted. She may not have been limited on her use of the gusts the way that Epsilon
was, but she had to admit, she was starting to get winded.

“You’re getting pretty fancy with those powers, aren’t you?” He leapt up and terrifyingly over her,
landing on her other side as she rolled away. He purred, “Your soul will make an especially
delicious meal for the Great Beast.”

Beta’s eyes widened. “‘The Great Beast?’” This was the first time she heard none refer to The
Beast, Singular. New information. “You feed them to something?”

“Oh ah ah.” he wagged one clawed finger. “Afraid you’re not getting more than that; merely a slip
of the tongue.”

She yelped as his claw sunk into the earth beside her, gouging out chunks of the dirt. Better the dirt
then her, though.

He growled, “Don’t worry. You’ll get to meet him in person soon enough.”

This guy was tough. The Gusts merely seemed to the slow him down, rather than hurting him. At
least the gust still hurt the pithos.

Rory stared for a second to the other soldiers. Narma and Carmen were just having to wait around.
There had to be a better way to do this.

Gamma caught her gaze. A silent conversation seemed to pass between them, acknowledging the
same thing: this isn’t working.
Beta jumped back as the Agent’s paw came towards her in the corner of her vision.

“Getting distracted?” Lucas—*Lupido* bared more of his impossible teeth at her. “Good thing I’m not the jealous type.”

“Hey!” Carmen’s voice called from her position in the clearing. Beta and Lupido peered back—she gasped at the bright light erupting from the girl’s chest.

Her face was hard, though her hands trembled where they guarded the crystal beneath. “This is what you want, right?”

Epsilon whipped around her, ducking to avoid a blow to the head. “Girl, what are you doing?”

“Well here it is,” Carmen ignored her.

Betas heart pounded. He had to have to have noticed that Gamma hadn’t fired any attacks by now. She was a much easier target. And he was still listening.

Gamma said, “then come get it.”

Beta shouted, “No—”

Of course, Lupido followed as Carmen took off for the cabin.

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“I’ll be fine,” she called back to them as her feet pounded through the grass. “Get the pithos.”

She could hear him. His paws tore through the field behind her, and she rushed into the cabin.

Her heart was bruising her ribs. The cedar smell burst in around her. It was more cramped in here, and he would have a harder time getting to her.

She just needed to keep him out of the fight long enough for the others to deal with his minions. Then, they could take him out together.

She moved to the corner as the hulking form invaded the doorway, putting as many obstacles between them as possible. She felt the wood behind her and mapped out an alternate route around the cabin to stay out of his grasp.

“No don’t be a tease,” he growled, knocking aside the dinner table. She backed up. “You should be grateful! We’re going to make this worthless galaxy pure again.”

Carmen didn’t even know what that *meant*; it was overwhelming, trying to avoid him but also trying to listen for anything that might make sense of everything that was happening to her. To the city.

To this planet? “Galaxy?” She backed into the kitchen, quickly sliding to the other side as he pursued her. “Actual galaxy? So, not just this star system?”

He laughed. “Honey, this star system isn’t even on our radar yet.”

She cried out as he apparently grew tired of the cat and mouse game, leaping recklessly across the cabin to pin her against the back wall.

She struggled, but she was trapped by the inhuman bulk of the wolf legs, and one paw.
Quietly, he whispered, “Why do you think we needed you?”

A split-second. She knew what was coming; a repeat of the same terrifying moment from only moments before, his claw poised above her soul. She felt the energy flutter anxiously within her chest.

Then, she heard it, echoing from inside her head. It couldn’t be ignored. It was clear, like a windchime in absolute silence.

As her attacker’s hand moved to dive into her chest, she managed to bring her two pointer fingers up and cry, “Harmonious Bellicosus!”

Light exploded into being, ribbons like the lines in a score of music. The ribbons pushed ‘Lukas’ back, a melody ringing out whose notes were denoted by flashes of light.

The being yelled, clutching his body in the places the music had struck. Hissing, he turned and left the cabin. She watched him stagger out the door before he vanished, the tall grass billowing where he had once stood.

There was a notable difference in the atmosphere, somehow. It was a non-specific, chest-centered feeling, like the satisfaction of completing a puzzle, or the acknowledgement of finishing a task. The world felt more…balanced, suddenly.

Carmen panted. Slowly, she laid a hand over her chest. She’d actually defeated him? How was that possible?

Bright daylight poured in the windows. Rory and Narma were still out there fighting. She needed to get out there.

Just as she was getting outside, she saw Rory deliver a blow with her Gust attack that sent the remaining two wolves into an active disintegration, the smoky material over them blowing away in the wind as the former hosts slumped to the grass.

Turning, they saw her approach. “Hey,” Rory called out, “where’s the Agent?”

She shook her head. “He’s…he ran away.”

Narma’s eyes widened. “Whoa, wait a minute. Did you defeat him? Way to go, Gamma.”

Surprising herself, Carmen couldn’t resist the smile the peaked across her lips, the sensation in her chest turning bubbly. Her hand rose subconsciously to hide it. “Oh, um. Thanks.” Everything felt lighter, all the sudden.

Rory scratched her neck, not inconspicuously checking her over for injuries. “You okay? That guy was nasty.”

“Yes,” she said, “I think it was a new attack. It seemed to scare him off.”

Narma punched her in the shoulder. “Dealing some damage! Yes, girl.”

The guilt from earlier seeped back in. “I…I’m sorry about all this.”

It was all her fault, again. Why had she listened to that guy? He was saying everything she wanted to hear, and she knew you could never trust that.

(If she were being honest with herself, deep down, she hadn’t really cared if she were putting
herself in danger. The thought that something could happen to her didn’t matter. But she hadn’t meant to drag Rory and Narma into another fight. And she’d so easily accepted they were lying to her! She was terrible, actually.) Her smiled waivered.

Rory’s eyes were round. “Don’t worry about it. That guy was tricky. He approached me too, a while back. Had me totally fooled.” She gestured behind them, and Carmen peered back to the cabin. Even from the outside, you could tell there’d been a struggle. How was she going to explain the damage to her father? That ‘Agent’ had made a mess. Rory said, “Let’s get inside, and we can talk some more.”

They moved back to the cabin. They didn’t make any immediate efforts to right the upturned room, taking a seat on whatever side of whatever furniture was the nearest to them. Narma took a seat on the forward-facing side of the couch’s arm. Carmen sat on the un-lamped end table. Rory took an upright kitchen stool. Celene laid in a pool of sunlight drifting in through the kitchen window.

Slowly, Carmen tried to explain. “He made up this big elaborate story about being able to suppress these powers.” She stared down at her own hands. “I think on some level I knew it seemed fishy, but…I’m not exactly taking this well.”

Rory raised an eyebrow. “Girl, you almost got your soul sucked out for the third time. I’m not sure there is a good way to take that.” She bit her lip. “He was talking about something called The Great Beast. Have you heard that before?”

She and Narma looked to each other. “No,” said Narma. “There’d better not be a Great Beast—those things are hard enough.” She pointed outside, to where the hikers were still passed out on her lawn.

Rory fiddled with her zipper. She didn’t usually look so nervous. “He said that it eats them. The crystals, I mean.”

Carmen shuddered, remembering his words to her. “And I think he needs us, specifically. He said “this star system” wasn’t even on their radar yet. I...don’t know what that means.”

Narma straightened. “Because our powers aren’t from this star system.” She pulled over Rory’s cat wasn’t this bag, and while Carmen’s mind reeled trying to understand what she meant, the girl pulled out some papers, handing them to Carmen. “This is the star system our powers come from. Rory found it. Anything look familiar?”

Carmen examined the page, the top of which was labeled Trappist-1. She didn’t “remember” anything as she looked over the page. “No, sorry,” she said.

But, oddly, as her gaze lingered over one particular sphere, something fell right. Still, it was just a feeling.

“How did you find it?”

Rory rubbed the back of her neck. “I just get these dreams sometimes.”

Celene stood, shaking out her fur. “There’s also this nasty business with the system’s star.” She twitched her whiskers.

“The star?” Carmen asked.

Narma said, “It’s been acting really volatile. It just seems like a weird coincidence.”
They all looked to each other, wishing they had the knowledge to connect all of this.

Rory huffed, folding her arms as she leaned back against the island. “I just wish we knew what this was all for. It’s just frustrating.”

“We still have time,” Narma fiddled with her nose ring. “We still have those snake guys to deal with.”

“More pithos,” Rory said at Carmen’s alarmed expression. She…didn’t like snakes, especially.

“Great,” Carmen said, glancing around at the destruction the last Agent had caused. “There’s more of them.”

Narma waved a hand at her, scooting back more securely onto the upturned couch. “Eh, we’ll deal with that when we come to it.”

Rory glanced out the window. “I just hope that guy’s not coming back. He was the worst.”

Carmen’s stomach squirmed. She hadn’t thought about that.

Rory turned back to her. Standing from her place on the stool, her voiced softened. “Are you coming with us back down the mountain? We probably need to be back down at the bus stop by 5:00.”

Carmen folded her hands in her lap. She didn’t know what she wanted. Sure, Lupido was gone for now, but it seemed like no matter where she went, those pithos were going to find her. If she went back she would just be putting everyone in more danger. Of course, the other two girls were going to be going anyways.

Something occurred to her. “Wait. How did you guys get up here, anyways? Isn’t it a school day?” She paused. “How did you guys even know I was out here?”

“Your father told us,” Narma said. “We wanted to check on you, after the skating rink. We know your friend got pretty hurt.”

“Yeah,” Rory said, rubbing a hand over the back of her neck. “Our parents don’t know we’re here.”

Carmen couldn’t fathom that. These two had just met her. They were obviously very close. But why did they care about her? She’d never even spoken to them before the theatre. “I don’t understand you,” she said quietly, eyes glued to her hands. “You went out of your way to come up here, and we only met two days ago. Why? You don’t even know me.”

Expression hard to read, Narma seemed to defer to Rory with a gesture of the hand, who frowned. Carmen instinctively wanted to back away when she moved closer, and she wished that wasn’t her natural reaction. She felt like she was having to be cautious about everything; her therapist was going to have some new material the next time she went in.

“I know you don’t exactly know us, either,” Rory said. “But you’ve got to understand…we’re just learning about all of this stuff too. We don’t know what we’re doing. Right now? The best we can do is stick together.”

“Yeah,” Narma had visibly relaxed, “we’re not just going to ditch you when you’re just finding out about your space-superpowers. That’s a dick move. Besides, honestly, we probably need all the help we can get.”
“Not to mention you took out that guy by yourself today!” Rory’s eyes lit up. She gave Carmen a thumbs-up. “Seems like you’re going to be a pretty good addition to the team.”

Carmen placed a hand to her mouth, stifling the nervous giggle that bubbled up.

She knew that had been a fluke. She hadn’t tapped into anything; the magic had just spilled out of her like water in an over-boiled pot. Even so, she had to admit that even when she had been at her most apprehensive about these girls, this—the powers, the uniform—secretly made her feel kind of…special. Maybe it was childish to be in wonder of the magic, but come on. It was magic.

“Well,” she said after a moment of deliberation, “I guess my plan to avoid drawing in those monsters didn’t exactly work out. I suppose there’s not really a reason for me to stay up here.”

*Even if it still feels wrong to be exposing the people I love to the risk of…my existence, I guess.*

Rory smiled, though it wasn’t entirely happy. “We’ll figure something, girl. For now, let’s just try to keep livin.’”

There was a pang in Carmen’s chest. Rory probably didn’t realize how grave a statement that was. “Right. Okay.”

These guys had to run out of monsters eventually, right?

From atop a nearby mountain ridge, Lupido looked down on the little cabin, and further out, the city standing bright and unawares. The shine of the mid-day sun on the skyline was mocking.

He clutched the spot on his side, jamming the corruption of the passing hiker into his mouth. The shadows spilled down his chin as the holes in his body slowly began to close up, the trickle of dust slowing.

He grunted, spitting out the residual corruption out towards the man’s body. That clever little lamb. She may have been a morsel he wanted to savor, but she had made a mistake. If those Sailor Soldiers thought that they had had any sort of victory today, they were wrong. If they wanted to play nasty, well, he could play that game too.

Turning away from the overlook, he began to limp away. This was as far as he could get on his current energy, but soon he would be restored enough to make the trip back to the Moving Palace. Then he could make his move.

The moment they let themselves take an easy breath, he’d be there to steal it from their lungs.
Narma slipped in at home, knowing it was actually around the time she usually got home, and that her parents weren’t due to be home for another hour. Paranoid, she sneaked into their bedroom and moved to the answering machine, deleting the blinking message she knew would be there. She sighed. *At least that’s done.*

They’d dropped Carmen off at home before anything, promising to meet up the next day to talk more. Even in the time they spent, there were still more things they hadn’t talked to Carmen about. Really, Narma had a few questions of her own.

Firstly, that Rory had apparently been having some sort of dreams about her planet? And Carmen had just used a second attack! She couldn’t help but feel a little bitter. She’d been working at this, she’d even been doing those training sessions with Rory in the morning when she got the chance. Why did it feel like she was falling behind?

She made some tea, taking it back to her room so she could work on some of her more recent sketches. No reason to get so pissed about it. People probably developed magical powers at different rates. And Rory was allowed to have other friends.

She wasn’t jealous.

Carmen slipped into the hospital room the following morning. She’d managed to convince her father that she just needed one more day out of school, after returning and getting a thorough talking to about taking off without any way to contact, especially with all of the “terrorist” activity that had been going on lately. She was able to grab the bus downtown without much of a fight.

“Oh!” The nurse looked startled when she came in to see her standing there. “You must be a friend of miss Lush here.” The nurse took note of Alyssa’s vitals as she addressed her, moving around to look at the display screen on the end of the bed.

“Yes,” Carmen said, keeping her voice down in the quiet of the early morning hospital. “How’s she been?”

“In and out,” the nurse said.

Carmen’s gaze rose from her friend. “She’s been awake?” Guilt bubbled up again. She should have been there.

“Only for a few minutes, here and there,” The nurse said, un-clicking the end of her pen. “If you stick around for a while, you might catch her awake.”

That’s what she would do, then.

Nearly two hours passed. Carmen spent the time silently recounting everything that had happened
to Alyssa, even though she couldn’t tell her out loud. She was downloading some of her missed homework to her tablet when the figure in the bed stirred.

Carmen stood, placing the tablet in the waiting chair. “Hey,” she said quietly, leaning onto the bed rail before thinking better of it. She watched Alyssa’s eyes flutter, her gaze moving over everything before finding Carmen. Carmen watched her, willing to wait. “How are you feeling?”

Alyssa blinked. For a second, Carmen was afraid Alyssa had amnesia or something and wasn’t going to recognize her. But then the girl smiled, as uncomfortable as it looked. “Oh, Carmen,” she said. She kind of gurgled her words. She still must have been pretty disoriented. “Thanks for coming to see me.”

Carmen’s heart clenched. Alyssa still didn’t know about Carmen’s involvement in her getting hurt —and she never could. “Of course,” she said. “You’ve always been there for me.” She examined the bandages around Alyssa’s forehead. “So. What are they saying?”

“Eh,” she responded, making a weak attempted at a dismissive gesture with her IV’d hand. “I’ve got a pretty bad ‘cussion. Fractured one of my shoulder blades, too, I think. I hadn’t got to talk to the doctor much.” She tapped her temple with the more mobile hand. “‘Cause of the ‘cussion.”

She tried not to grind her teeth. “Yeah. At the skating rink, I saw you get hurt. You looked like you hit that wall pretty hard.”

“Shit was crazy,” she slurred. “Terrorists in my rink? ‘M almost flattered.” At Carmen’s expression, she said, “I’ll be okay. They just got to watch me for a few more days.”

Carmen pursed her lips. She was still calling them terrorists? “Do you…remember? What happened?”

“It’s a little fuzzy,” she said, “But for the most part. I can’t believe superheros are real.”

“Yeah.” Not that we were able to do anything for you in that moment. She lowered her voice. “I’ve been wondering something. Why…did you do it?”

“Huh?”

Carmen leaned forward, poised over the bed. “Why did you throw yourself at that guy? I saw you do it. You could have been killed.”

Alyssa stared up at the ceiling, expression vague. "You know? I dunno, really. I just...you see someone in trouble, right? I couldn't just stand by while one of the people who was protecting us got hurt. I could do something, so I did something."

Like I shouldn't have thought leaving the city was going to fix anything. Maybe Alyssa should have been the super hero. "I didn’t know you were an idealist."

"Meh. I'm jus' an optimist."

The Music Festival was a yearly thing, although Narma didn’t usually end up going. On the whole, her music tastes tended to revolve around Bollywood soundtracks and punk rock, neither of which was especially popular in the city of Seattle. The bands they featured were soft-sounding pop and rock. She could pass.
This was, she believed, the first time she’d attended since moving into the city. Rory thought it would make an inviting, less awkward way to meet up and disengage for a while with all the stress they’d been under. Plus, Carmen had mentioned the desire to go the previous day, and Rory was always one for catering to other people’s wishes.

The bands were already playing when she moved into the park. She saw Rory waving her over as she moved further into the park, the girl having already laid out a picnic blanket in the grass.

Carmen was already there. *Oh, great.* She went to sit down with them, Rory’s eyes glittering when she said, “Carmen brought food!”

Carmen folded her hands in her lap. “They’re just some sandwiches. Rory mentioned you were Hindi last night, so I made sure to have a vegetarian option. These are pimento and cucumber.” She pointed out a little stack of sandwiches, cut in a diagonal and everything. *Well isn’t that sweet.*

Damn, she was feeling pretty hostile, actually. Why was that? It wasn’t like Rory was about to run off and marry this girl, leaving her behind like her jilted ex. She took a breath. She just needed to chill out. “Fixed the usual problem with free food,” she said instead. “Nice.” She didn’t exactly thank her, though.

A lot of people seemed to be taking advantage of the crowds. There was a Girl Scout’s stand and some folks who had brought over their particular junk from Pike Place, hoping to hock it to some hapless festival goers. Free publicity, she guessed. Karen, that mad woman, used to make her come out to things like this all the time and sell discount tickets to the aquarium. Now, there were less experienced employees for that.

Of course, now that she had left and come back, her rank may not have been one she could pull any longer.

They took some sandwiches, "Cut in two and everything," Rory took a large bite of hers. “You didn’t have to do something so fancy for us.”

Carmen stared down at her own sandwich. “Oh. It’s, uh, nothing special. I’m just used to making finger sandwiches for my dad’s business associates when they come over to the house. I usually end up working kitchen duty, so I’m kind of used to it.”

Narma resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *It’s a sandwich; it’s not gourmet.*

Carmen turned to look at her. "Rory told me you like fashion?"

Seemed she'd been talking to Rory rather a lot. Couldn't say she was a fan of that. "Yeah, I do designs. I'm hoping to go to the National Design Institute once I graduate."

"That's so cool!" Carmen smiled. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I want to do after high school. I like singing, but I kind of want to work with animals."

"That's cool," said Rory. "Honestly, I have no idea what I want. And it's even weirder to think about, now that the whole…” she lowered her voice, “Super power thing is a thing.”

Honestly, Narma could have done without that train of thought—it just brought up the fact that, eventually, they would have to make choices after high school, choices that may not allow their lives to continue on the same path.

They finished up their first plates, and Rory spread out some papers they printed off. “So,” she said, “You said they need us a particular, right?”
Carmen nodded, the both of them peering down to the news article with Sailor Moon on the front. “That’s what he said.”

“That explains why our powers activated, I guess,” Narma scratched the back of Celene’s ear as she examined the blurry photograph. “They were only a threat to us, not to her.”

Carmen looked up at them. “So the only reason our powers showed up at all was because of the monsters? Not the other way around?”


“This coincides with the odd behavior from the sun,” Celene murmured without lifting her head. Probably didn’t want anyone to realize they had a talking cat.

“I went back and read more of these articles,” Rory pulled out another bundle of papers from the bottom, taking a bite out of her chicken and cheese, “and you remember that other universe I was talking about?”

“…no, you lost me,” Narma said at the same time Carmen said no, I’m sorry.

Rory’s eyes shined the way they did when she made a revelation. “HR 8832,” she jammed her finger into the photo side-by-side on the paper. One was an orange-red star, and the other looked totally blank. “It. Vanished!”

“Vanished?” Carmen rubbed her hands together.

“That’s impossible,” Narma said.

“For real,” Rory said. “It disappeared. And that’s what NASA is worried is happening to Trappist-1.” She threw her hands out. “What if it’s the same thing?”

Narma wiped her hands on a napkin, leaning back in the grass. “So, what? You think those Agent guys are responsible for it? I don’t buy it.” Those guys are way too incompetent. They couldn’t even beat a few teenage girls. Step your game up, seriously.

Carmen’s large eyes focused on her; Narma shifted uncomfortably. “Maybe it wasn’t just them? He did mention some kind of Great Beast, right?”

Narma scoffed, feeling a bit satisfied by Carmen’s withering expression. “But it’s a sun. How huge would it have to be to do anything to a sun?”

Celene fixed her with a look, her little nose wrinkling. “We have no evidence to the contrary.”

They all went kind of quiet. Rory lowered her second sandwich. “Celene, are you saying there could be a creature that big out there?”

Celene turned her head away. “You know I can’t remember everything I have experienced. But I do know that all manner of creature maybe out there in the universe.”

Well, that’s one more thing to have nightmares about. “So, I guess we’re getting Lovecraftian in here, then.”

Rory and Carmen both looked as uncomfortable as she was. This conversation was a downer on their domestic sunny day picnic. “But he has said that the Beast eats the star souls. What does that have to do with the sun?”
“The sun is a star.”

They both turned to look at Carmen, whose hands had risen to her collar. “What if they don’t just want a star souls,” she said. “What if they want the star?”

“So, what, you’re suggesting this thing’s going to eat the sun?” It sounded ridiculous, then again, a month ago she would’ve thought magical girls in frilly skirts were ridiculous, but, hey, a joke on her, she guessed.

Across from her, Rory pushed the food aside. “That still doesn’t explain why they needed us. Trappist-1 is almost forty light years away from Earth. There are a stupid number of stars between there and here. You’d think the Beast could just eat one of all those.”

Carmen murmured, “It doesn’t make sense.”

Not much they could do but feel bad about it. Narma let her focus relax, peering into the crowd behind them as she spaced out. There, her gaze caught on a pair of binoculars. She blinked for a minute, making sure she was seen correctly, before she frowned and stood up facing the person that had been watching them. “Hey!” she shouted.

The girl startled. Narma took in as many details as she could—navy dyed hair, sunglasses, a hoodie—before the girl took off in the other direction.

Carmen and Rory sat up behind her. “Wait,” Rory said, “what happened?”

“This girl was watching us,” Narma debated with herself over whether not to run after her, but she didn’t have to make the choice after all.

A Few Moments Earlier

Invidia lingered in one of the alleys outside the event. She identified her next target.

The young woman up onstage had the admiration of all the humans in the grass. They sat around, just watching! Disgusting. Surely, a human so admired would have the pure soul she needed.

Still. With so many watching, how could she get close enough? Moving with the utmost stealth to view the space behind the back of the stage, she saw it drop off steeply into the grass.

She’d done some reevaluating. The first attempt to capture a star soul had been such an embarrassment, and the creatures had been so weak. She’d put more work into these, figured out some of their weaknesses. What better opportunity to test their effectiveness?

Formulating a plot, she moved from the market alleyway out towards the stage.

In the Same Park

The creatures had been targeting crowded places. Now that the reports had been coming in nearly every day, their appearances were getting more and more predictable. As this was the most populated event of the week, there could be little doubt that the creatures would make an appearance.

The media was trying to call them terrorists; since when were terrorists covered in weird smoky
fur? Wake up, sheeple. And so, if the media was in denial and law enforcement had been thus far ineffectual, it was her time. Only she had the determination and drive to get behind what was really happening in Seattle.

Cryptids.

There had been sightings of similar beasts all over the world: The Jersey Devil. Sasquatch. Shadow people. Unexplainable beings whose existence were being covered up by science. But apparently, science was slacking in Seattle. And so, she waited.

Mallory unzipped her hoodie. Damn, it was hot today. But that was the sacrifice one made for The Truth. Some kids were screaming behind her, the smell of the overpriced hot dog stand wafting over her shoulder. Poised behind the fiscus, she watched the festival goers, waiting for any sign of something non-human. But she kind of hoped something showed up soon, because she still had geometry homework to take care of.

Someone scoffed as they passed her—she didn’t have to look up, she knew. These binoculars are military-grade, you casual. They mocked her now, but when she went to the government with proof of real monsters, they wouldn’t be laughing. Hey, wait a minute.

Gazing across the park, she caught sight of a trio of girls: one short-haired, long-legged girl with a plate of sandwiches, possibly Latina, a girl with silver-dyed hair, and a dark-skinned girl with purple braids. Them, the latter two, they looked familiar. They’d been at several of the other crime scenes, she realized. They went to that school.

Peering across the green, through the obstruction of the fiscus, she noted a pile of paper between them. Could be homework.

Could be not homework. It seemed like an interesting coincidence that they would be here. She’d for sure seen the purple-braided girl at some of the attacks outside of the school. This warranted further observation.

Damn, she was good.

Glancing at her watch, she logged the time. She subtly clicked the button on her voice recorder. “Subjects spotted in the green of Pike Park. May have connections to anomalous events in the city.”

She wished she could get closer. At her distance, she couldn’t make out what they were saying. In hindsight, the openness of a public park was probably not ideal for reconnaissance.

Hold on. Occasionally, the group would stopped talking and look down to the same spot. Upon further inspection, she noted an orange tabby in the grass.

Someone would speak, then refer to the tabby. Wait. Speak again. Were they talking to the cat?

After a moment of observation, trying to read their lips (a skill with which she needed much improvement), she realized they had stopped talking. The girl she been focusing on, she realized, was now staring right at her.

She stood. “Hey!”

Abort, abort! Mallory closed up her binoculars, making a break for it. She ducked out of sight the moment she had a chance, looking back and realizing the girl had not pursued her. Well that was a clusterfuck.
Wait a minute. Near the stage, she noticed an oddly dressed woman with slick, dark hair. She seemed to be leaving from behind it. But there was nothing there? What was she doing?

There was a wave of noise as the show runner collapsed.

Something was happening to her head.

“Oh, of course!” Narma cried out, gesturing to the snake-headed abomination on the stage. It seemed her bandmates weren’t far behind, either. “We’re trying to have a cutesy picnic here!”

Behind her, she saw Carmen shudder. “God, that’s awful.”

“They’re definitely the creepiest,” Rory abandoned her remaining sandwich half. “Come on! To the alley!”

Figures, they couldn’t even have five seconds.

They found an area where they could change unseen, which was abruptly ruined with a burst of light they threw off from the transformations. Even at this distance, Narma thought she could hear the serpent’s stupid, hissy “Star soul detected.” Learn some new words.

They raced towards the stage, Celene following close behind them. The snakes were already coming to meet them. “Hey!” Narma yelled. “Don’t you guys have anything better to do?”

“Nope, they’re too thirsty,” Rory joked. “They crave that mineral.”

“You guys seem to take this so lightly,” Carmen whispered to them from behind.

“Girl, we’re practically living in a cartoon at this point,” Narma got ready for a Typhoon. “We can’t take ourselves too seriously.”

Fwoom. Water rushed down towards the heads of the serpents. To her surprise, they undulated their creep-o heads out of the way, the deluge falling apparently harmlessly to their shoulders. “Okay, that’s got to be a foul.”

“They are slippery mothers,” Rory said, gesturing for Carmen to take the furthest one over. “Aim for the head.”

“And be careful!” Celene called to them all across the grass. “I don’t know what effect their bite may have, but it can’t be good!”

Narma said, “Yes, avoiding them was the plan.”

Carmen said, “We had a plan?”

Rory shot off one of her gusts, which luckily seemed to do some damage as the creature hissed. But she looked confused. “Someone got tougher.”

Narma dodged, scrambling back away from the thing’s far-reaching neck. She hated having to wait. She moved back behind a tree; might as well make it as difficult as possible for this thing to get her.

“Harmonious Bellicosso!” The cry came from her right, where Carmen stood, musical lines erupting from her extended fingertips. After only a moment, though, the music died, the snake pithos
shaking it off as Carmen shrieked. She turned, and, seeing Narma, rushed towards her. *Oh, great. Now there are going to be two monsters on my butt.*

“It didn’t work!” Carmen cried out,

“Yeah,” Narma said. These things were feisty—she needed a better plan here. *And here comes number two.* “Just saw that.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Carmen said, peering around them, probably looking for some kind of out the way Narma was. “Yesterday, that attack took down the Agent on it’s own!”

“Hmph, no time to ponder on it now. We’ve got to get to it, girl.”

Across the green, Narma spotted a large sun umbrella. “There.” She gestured to it, darting for the cover source. The snake pithos’s heads were long, but not long enough to get through that.

The snakes lurches towards them, the bodies slinking stiffly as if they were just another of the snake’s coils. Narma picked up the umbrella, sweeping it around to scare the pithos back before thrusting it out like a shield. “Alright,” Narma said as Carmen came to join her. “Get behind me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Carmen, and Narma saw her grab the extension pole from the ground, batting the other Pithos away “I don’t know what happened.”

Honestly, she was a little annoyed. But now really wasn’t the time. “R-Beta looks like she’s just about done with hers anyways. Good thing her attack has more of a range.”

Carmen went quiet for a moment. “Do you think that umbrella might be able to deflect water?”

Narma cocked her chin. Actually, that was…a pretty good idea. “Yeah, maybe,” she said. “It’s going to be another minute or something before I am able to fight it off again. Do you think you can hold them off long enough for me to get my shit together?”

“Oh, shit—” Carmen dropped the pole. For just a second, Narma thought she was going to leave her there with those two creatures ready to take a bite out of her, but then the girl called out, “Mesmeric Pacification!”

The light dropped over the creatures. They hissed in a horrible noise that reminded Narma of cicadas in the south, but then they collapsed, large chunks of shadowy scales beginning to sluff off of them.
She dropped the ruined umbrella. Okay. That had been helpful. “Nice move,” she told Carmen, kicking the umbrella’s remains as it rolled away.

“I’m just glad it worked.” Carmen flung the pole away. Peering towards her, she gave Narma an apologetic look. “I hope you don’t mind me sticking with you—you burst in like a badass that time at the rink, and then took on several pithos single-handed. I, well, I thought you were probably a safe bet.”

“Hey now. You can’t go complimenting me. Might actually think you liked me or something.” She…actually hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Must have been the rush of battle muddling her filter or something.

Carmen clenched her jaw, peering away. “Sorry. I know we’re not friends.”

The bluntness of the statement caught Narma off guard. For as much as she had been agonizing over Carmen’s presence, the words felt like a smack to the face. “What makes you say that?”

Carmen glanced back towards her, though her body language was still oriented in a direction away from her. “You guys have had to be babysitting me since the beginning. And, um, I know Rory’s been having to look after me, and I know that’s taking time away from you…I don’t mean to be.” Carmen smoothed down the little hairs on the back of her neck while Narma stared at her in shock because what the fuck. “If I had a choice, I would stay out of your way, I swear.”

Okay, apparently Carmen had been picking up on how she was feeling. Now she just felt like a jerk—she wasn’t trying to make the girl feel like a burden. She knew how disorienting it was when she had first started coming into her powers. And for the longest time, Carmen’s powers hadn’t been super helpful, and that had to suck. Damn. She was an asshole. “Hey, no,” she recovered. “It’s just…a different dynamic, you know? I’m just getting used to it. That doesn’t mean you’re not my friend.”

Carmen’s shoulders loosened. “Really? Because you seemed pretty uncomfortable with me—”

“No, no,” Narma cringed, even though she was spot on. Girl was fucking intuitive. “It’s all good.”

“Hey! You guys did it!” Rory jogged over, Narma having noticed her pithos dust quickly after their own.

“Well done, Sailor Soldiers!” Celene remarked, coming to sit at Rory’s side.

“Celene,” Carmen murmured. “Something’s wrong with my powers. It’s like the Bellicoso didn’t want to work. It was so weak!”

The cat whipped her tail pensively. “…it’s possible the attack packed such a punch in the fight yesterday because you were in such peril facing that Agent. Your distress may have given the attack an extra boost it wouldn’t have had otherwise. If so, it may take time before you are able to give it that power intentionally.”

“Oh. Great.” She giggled anxiously, chewing her lip. “And it had to be snakes.”

Seemed they needed to work her into the training sessions with them as well.

“Those things suck.” Rory eyed the limp body of the band member, lip curling.

“You’re not wrong,” Narma shot back. She peered over at their papers on the ground, the abandoned sandwiches having what looked suspiciously like a footprint through them. “Well, I
guess that sort of wrecks our picnic plan.”

“We could continue in another park, if you guys were feeling up to it. But we should turn back before we go back over there,” Carmen said. “If someone saw us, they would know.”

“Wait a minute, that’s right.” She’d almost forgotten about their stalker. “There was this girl watching us earlier.” She peered around the outside edge of the park, but it was all empty. Everyone had fled when the pithos dropped. The walkways, the stands, the stage, all empty. “Where did she go?”

“Why would someone be watching us?” Carmen asked once they had turned back, and moved to collect their stuff.

“I don’t know.”

She watched Rory examine the area herself as she picked up their papers, the usually care-free expression missing from her face. “…that’s weird,” she heard her mumble. “It’s like there are some pages missing or something.”

Narma discarding the smooshed sandwiches in the garbage, snorting. “Maybe they stuck to the bottom of someone’s shoe.”


Mallory examined the papers she’d grabbed from the picnic sight. Those girls had run away the moment the cryptids made an appearance, which gave her the perfect opportunity to do some snooping.

She peered over the pages, a little disappointed. Were they working on some kind of class project? The articles they had were littered with notes about a star system called Trappist-1. This wasn’t enough to prove anything, and it seemingly had nothing to do with the attacks.

She folded the papers into a square and stuffed them in her hoodie pocket. This would require some additional investigation.

She needed to consult the Society.
Chapter 10

Episode 10: The Sailor Scouts are Ghosts?! -- Or, Rise of the Supernaturalist!

They sat around Rory’s computer, staring collectively the screen. First, they tried “reporters, Seattle.” Then, they tried the more specific “Seattle spy.” No results.

“That was a stretch anyways,” Narma squinted at the screen, the light blinking in her eyes. *I doubt anyone is going to be advertising themselves as a spy.*

They were trying to track down their stalker from the park, but thus far no luck. Sure, things were coming up in the engine, but Narma had yet to pick out the girl’s face she’d seen in the park, as little as she had seen of it.

Rory stared down at the keyboard as if she were willing it to type in a better search term. “I don’t know, girl. We’ve been doing this for an hour.”

“There’s a lot of people in Seattle,” Narma shrugged.

“We should keep trying,” Carmen said from the bed behind them, sipping her tea. “We don’t know what that girl may have been after. If she knows our true identities, as you said yourself, it could be bad.”

Narma nodded. “That’s right. So keep typing, computer drone.”

“Beep boop,” Rory drawled.

“Try ‘investigators.’” Might as well throw as widened as possible, until they had something to go on.

“Honestly, I’m a little worried she may not be listed at all,” Carmen tapped a finger along the side of her cup. “You said she looked about our age, right? If she’s working independently, she may not have a page.”

Rory switched over to images, as they had on the past pages when nothing in the results had really spoken to them.

“Ah,” Narma interjected, placing a finger to the screen. “Ye of little faith. Look there.”

Carmen leaned over her shoulder, and Rory clicked the image, enlarging it. “Is that her?”

Narma said, “It could be. She had blue hair. Rory, what site is that from?”

“Doing it now.” Rory clicked the link, and after couple of further confirmations, what looked like a blog page pulled up. The page was edgelord city, an all-black screen with dramatic text in the headers: The Seattle Society of Paranormal Investigation.

“Oh, you gotta be shitting me.”

Rory shushed her. “No foul language in my Mama’s house,” she glared.

Right. She always forgot about that. Rory had always been weirdly adamant about it. “Sorry.” She
cleared her throat. “If you found this page, you may be wondering what this is. In short, this is a refuge for those in the city of Seattle and beyond who seek the truth.” Wow, not pretentious at all.

Rory frowned at her, but she could tell by the cock of her brow she kind of agreed. She took over. “If you wish to discover the true nature of the world around you, recruitment sessions are held Saturday mornings at the Storybook Café downtown, at 9:30 AM. Meetings are held with the representative pictured above. No photography. No recording equipment.”

Narma sat back once Rory had finished reading. “So, basically, she’s a crack.”

Carmen peered down at her sprawled position. “Well, if we told anyone the things we’ve seen, they would think we were crazy too.”

Narma raised a brow, staring back up. “So, what, we should become—” her eyes flicked back to the screen to confirm the phrasing; she needed to get the facts straight in order to properly talk shit. “—‘paranormal investigators?’”

Carmen’s lip twitched up. “I’m saying,” she stressed, “we don’t know what she knows. What she has. Even if she is incredibly incredible, if she has something, she could be a threat.”

“A threat,” Narma snorted. “So serious, girl. Are you gonna’ take this girl out?”

Carmen balked. “What—no! Of course not! We just shouldn’t let this go, is all I mean.”

Narma turned back to the screen. “You’re cute; I’ll give you that.”

From the computer chair, Rory swiveled around and crossed her arms. “So what should we do, then? If we corner her like the mob, she’ll know something’s up.”

Narma eyed the girl’s photograph on the screen. There was no name, probably out of some sense of confidentiality, but that didn’t matter so much just then. “Well. We have a time and date right there, don’t we?” She gestured to the page. “Maybe one of us does want to join.”

Mallory groaned, the realization coming over her that she had overslept. She rolled out of bed, and, still on the floor, she shook out her hair, a steady stream of noise coming out of her mouth.

From the top bunk across from her, Kyle watched the train wreck like a goddamn sadist. “Don’t you have that meeting thing to do?”

She groaned louder. As she grabbed her flannel from the closet, she heard him say, “I can’t believe my roommate is a hipster.”

“Shut up,” she slammed the door behind her.

There were groans from the other inhabitants of the house. Staring in the hallway mirror, she adjusted her hoodie, combing her fingers through her hair. Might as well look like she was intentionally a mess, instead of someone who’s obsessive scrolling through conspiracy forums last night had caused her to be late to her own recruitment session.

Grabbing her bag, Mallory left the house, grateful it was only about a ten-minute walk to the Storybook Café from the house. She hunched into her jacket, the sun just a little too warm through the thick, dark fabric. Her Saturdays were always a wasted opportunity to sleep in, but you did what you had to do when you had a destiny to fulfill.
And recently, the nature of that destiny had become a bit more transparent.

She reached the café with a few minutes to spare, mostly because she hadn’t showered the way that she normally would have. Out of breath, she moved to the front, where Manuel had her order ready. He said, “You look a bit frazzled today.”

The barista took her money as she forked it over, letting out a particularly labored breath. Damn asthma. “Had a hard night.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Overslept?”

She took the double-shot and the lemon scone. “I admit to nothing.”

Manuel shook his head his dark curls falling in his eyes in a way she was sure was against Company Regulations. “Thank you for your patronage.”

She took her usual seat by the door, pulling out her laptop. The little table didn’t have a lot of room, but it had enough to shove her notes in under the corner of the computer and set her breakfast and her caffeine on either side. Today, the notes were stolen, the notations about a star system called Trappist-1.

These hours usually turned into homework opportunities or a chance to re-read the forum posts she was going to investigate, but regardless she appreciated the quietness of the café in the morning, the meditation of click-clacking on her computer against the white noise of the café’s business.

But this morning, something unexpected happened.

Only about ten minutes had passed when she felt a presence standing over her. Raising her gaze, ready to chew someone out for standing in her light, she was met with a familiar figure. That was both figurative and literal—she had only seen this girl from afar.

“Hey,” Mallory spat out immediately, then realized her mistake. If this girl, Latina, long-legged and pretty, the same girl she’d see in the Garfield group at the park, didn’t know she was the very perpetrator who had been observing them during the last attack, she’d just acknowledged a familiarity. *Quick, you need a save.* “I mean, you’re standing there. Can I help you with something?” Absolutely flawless.

The girl’s hand lingered nervously at her collar. “I, I’m sorry. Maybe I mistook you for someone else. I’m here about an advertisement I saw online? About some…unusual activity in Seattle?”

Rory leaned into her, the girl’s stupid sharp elbow digging into her arm. “Can you see anything?”

Narma shrugged her off, peering through the Walmart binoculars into the café on the other side of the street. “GIRL. Cool your shit! They’re just talking.” She took a breath. “I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

Rory huffed, “You better, I want out of this bush the second I don’t have to be here anymore.”

“Sit tight,” Narma said, adjusting the view. “They just started talking.”

The girl stared up at Carmen from the table, a blank expression on her face. Butterflies kicked up
in her stomach—was it possible she actually did have the wrong person? The girl closed her laptop, gaze unwavering. “You’re here about the Society?”

It took Carmen a second to recall the formal name of the site they’d found a few days ago. She smiled. “Yes, exactly.”

After a while debating the best way to do it, they finally decided that she would be the one to approach the girl who had been spying on them. “She’ll know I was mad,” Narma had argued, “And you have a really unthreatening face.”

“She’ll know I was mad,” Carmen had replied.

“Yeah,” said Narma, “but she also looks like someone who could kick your ass, if she wanted.” Cue Celene and Rory hissing language! at the same time, and then Rory pointing to her free-running muscles in reluctant agreement.

Rory and Narma were outside, watching the exchange. It was actually kind of a shame that they didn’t have any sort of recording equipment, though by the serious expression on the girl’s face, she doubted it would have gone undetected. The girl gestured to the seat across from her. “Sit.”

Carmen did so; no reason not to.

Across from her, the blue haired girl folded her hands. “You have any phones?”

“Ah—”

“Cameras? Any electronic devices?”

Carmen caught up to the rapid questioning. “No,” she said, “I didn’t bring anything.”

The girl seemed to consider her. “Tell me. What prompted you to seek out the Society?”

“Oh, you know.” They really should have prepared for this better. It should have been obvious the girl would ask these kinds of questions. “There’re just so many strange things happening lately. I want to understand what is happening, and thought it might help to consult a—” she lowered her voice. “—professional.”

She could practically see the girl’s eyes light up at the word “professional.” Maybe she had garnered some bs-ing skills from attending to her father’s business dealings. The girl steepled her hands. She had a very intense eyes. “The proceedings of the Society are classified, highly serious business. We do not accept less than the utmost commitment and professionalism. Do you understand?”

Professionalism? She looked over the girl’s rumpled hoodie, her messy blue hair, her indoor sunglasses. She nodded. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good.” As she watched, the girl ate the last bite of her scone and chugged the rest of her still steaming coffee, quickly stuffing the many materials laid out on the café table back into her bag. “Now, get your shit together. We’re going for a walk. We can’t talk here.”

Carmen glanced over her empty side of the table, before hurrying to get up and follow. The girl was already heading out the door.
Mallory marched ahead on the sidewalk, her stomach a mess of anxiousness and excitement. She had no idea what to do with this. It was beyond suspicious that one of the very people she’d been investigating suddenly wanted to join her cause. At the same time, something like this had never happened before. She had to be an idiot to pass up an opportunity like this, to examine one of her subjects up close. That sounded worse than she intended; she just wanted to gauge the girl’s intentions. See if possibly she knew more than she was telling her.

The girl jogged up beside her. “I’m Carmen, by the way.”

“Shh,” she brought a finger to her lips, mind racing. Where was she supposed to go from here? “Not so loud.” A pause. “I’m Mallory.”

The continued on the block until they reached the bus stop outside the wine shop. “Here.” No cameras, no people this time of day early on a Saturday morning. “You may speak.”

The girl cleared her throat. “Oh. Okay. So, have you found anything out about the…” She hesitated. Mallory watched her, waiting for any slip she might make. “…attacks?”

Mallory looked her over. “I have some suspects. There was an unusual character wandering the park at time the attack. Long, dark hair. Strange ensemble. But I’ve yet to identify her identity.”

Carmen’s expression turned troubled, brows drawn and vaguely pleasant smile slipping.

“What is it?”

Carmen’s gaze shot back to her, as if she had momentarily forgotten she was there. “Oh, sorry. I just…I’ve seen similar figures around the city. That is, people oddly dressed, and in places they maybe shouldn’t be.”

Now that was interesting. “Really? Where?” Maybe this route was meant to bear fruit after all. She was truly on her game.

Carmen’s gaze darted away. “Just a few places; you probably know already. The school had an impostor guest speaker at the attack on the gym. There was a guy up on the trails that seemed really shady.” The girl’s posture had changed, her fingers fiddling with a hem of her shirt.

Whoa, wait a minute. “The trails up on Mt. Rainer?” One of the starred the notes in her research document came to mind with an insistence. “There was a hiker killed up on those trails with similar injuries to the other attacks just a few days ago. I hadn’t been able to find the connection yet.”

“Killed?” Carmen squeaked. She suddenly looked a bit green. Yes, most people didn’t have the stomach for this kind of work.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s good information, Carmen. You were right to consult us. Of course, these people are most likely just covering up the conspiracy.”

Carmen blinked at her from her seat on the bus stop bench. “Conspiracy?”

Ah, this poor, naïve girl. Mallory leaned back on the bench, crossing her legs. “The conspiracy to
cover up the presence of those creatures in Seattle. It’s probably the government, not wanting to disrupt local tourism revenue even though there’s fucking cryptids walking the street.” She flared a hand out.

Carmen wrinkled her nose. “What’s a cryptid?”

“A cryptozoological creature. Undocumented by scientists, assumed to be nonexistent by the general population. But we know better.” She paused. She’d reeled her in. Now would be the perfect opportunity bring up the room’s resident elephant. “I have to wonder, though. You and your friends have been at several of the attacks—I know you saw me in the park that day. Why haven’t you mentioned it yet?”

The girl blinked rapidly for a moment. Mallory waited for her to respond, though the fact that she was taking so long to reply was a bad sign. She narrowed her eyes.

But then the girl said, “I mean, that’s why I’m here in the first place.”

Mallory watched her expression for tells. “Elaborate.”

Carmen folded her hands together. “We’ve been trying to figure out what’s going on—why it’s happening around us—but we haven’t had any luck. At first, we were mad you were watching us, but then I wondered if it was because you’d figured something out. The others didn’t think it was a good idea to talk to you, but if there was a chance you could help, I had to try.”

Mallory lowered the pen from her notepad. “So you do think it has something to do with you?”

“I don’t know,” Carmen bit her lip. “Did you find anything that might explain it?”

Mallory squinted. Perhaps she could share what she learned so far, even if it wasn’t much. But not here. “No,” she said before tearing a page out of her notebook, scribbling the time and location. “but we should compare notes. Bring everything you have to this place at the designated time. If you lose that paper, you can find the details on one of our flyers.” Mallory gestured to the black paper on the bus stop wall, tapping it with her knuckles.

Carmen murmured, “Flyers?” She frowned at the paper.

Mallory stood. “Good work so far. If the Society decides to induct you as a member, I’ll let you know. Give me your phone number.” If only she could be so straightforward in all of her social interactions. Still, business was business.

“I—okay.” The girl took the pen, jotting her number on Mallory’s notepad.

“Good.” She closed the notepad, turning to leave. “See you tonight,” she called back. “Don’t be late.”

That had gone so well!

_This is it, Mallory. This is your life taking a turn._ She continued down the sidewalk, new purpose in her stride. _Time for that destiny you have been waiting for to finally get its ass in gear._

Carmen stared down at the paper scrap, reading over the messy scrawl. _The Space Needle. Top floor. 8:30 PM. Don’t be late._
She peered around the intersection, emerging from the cover of the bus shelter. Anywhere a scrap of paper was posted in the square, there was without fail a black flyer somewhere on the board. How have I never noticed these before? Didn’t it sort of defeat the purpose of having a secret society if you advertised on every corner?

She stuck the scrap of paper in her pocket, watching as Narma and Rory marched up from around the corner. Narma said, “What happened? What did she tell you?”

Carmen said, “She doesn’t have anything about us that she can use as evidence. She kept calling the pithos ‘Cryptids.’”

Narma let out a bark of laughter. “So she is a crack. Well, that settles that.”

Carmen shot her a look. She held her hands out. “Now wait a minute. She did have some information—I’m not sure we should just drop this. She may have more information that could be useful to us.” She lowered her voice. “Guys, the day of the attack at the cabin, a hiker was killed nearby.”

Rory peered between them. “Wait, how?”

“Yeah,” said Narma, “maybe he fell off the mountain. And there’s animals up there, right?”

Carmen looked to her. “She said he had similar injuries to the other pithos victims.”

Rory and Narma stared at one another. Rory spoke first. “So what does that mean? I mean, that’s bad, but I’m not sure what to do, you know?”

“Right,” said Carmen, hitting her fist against her palm. “That’s the point. We don’t know everything about with the Agents have been up to.” She turned to Narma, straightening. “This girl has been actively investigating it. She’s been all over the city. Not only that, but she described someone strange she saw in the park at the time of the attack—I bet it was an agent.”

Narma blew out a breath. “Well, shit. What do you want to do, then? You’re the one who’s in her good book right now.”

Carmen chewed her lip, pointing to the flyer behind her. “They’re having some kind of meeting tonight in the Space Needle. I think I should go.”

Now outside of the bus stop shade, the fully risen sun glared down on them. “Maybe she knows something that could confirm our theory about the Great Beast and the sun.”

Rory pumped her fist. “Right! We can’t let the sun be a snack!”

“You two are absolute mad women.”

Even so, Carmen couldn’t help but be a little unnerved by the blatant picture of Trappist-1 on the flyer. She obviously printed them off before Carmen had approached her, just like she obviously took their notes. So why hadn’t she mentioned them?

If this image is significant to you, please call.

Invidia slunk through this city. This was twice now she’d failed—how was she supposed to explain this to Lady Pandorana? There had to be some way to redeem herself. This was supposed to be her
chance.

Folding her arms over her uniform shirt, a notice in the local human language caught her eye, the dark paper standing out amongst a sea of bright notes. She couldn’t read it, but could memorize the combination of foreign symbols. Of course, what really drew her eye that was the depiction of the star system her Lady was currently purifying!

*They’ve given themselves away so blatantly!* She couldn’t keep the smile off her face, her nails digging into the palm of her clenched hand. She recognized the format of a human address. Finally, she had them. She needed to perform every effort. At last, the praise would fall on her, and not those other incompetent Agents of Purity. She took note of the prescribed time. It was time to prepare.

Even the people who didn’t live in Seattle knew about the Space Needle. Especially now that the tower had had its chromatic, futuristic makeover, the Space Needle was a beacon letting everyone in a fifty-mile radius know that Seattle was the place to be. When Carmen and her father had first moved there when she was a little girl, it was the first thing she’d seen, peering out of the rear window.

Rory snapped her fingers. “Wish we had a wire.”

Carmen said, “She would definitely notice a wire.”

Narma put her hands on her hips. “So, what’s the plan here? We’re not going to be able to see you from down here. So what’s the point?”

Celene, sitting on the ground beside them, said, “The point is that if anything should go wrong in Gamma’s endeavor, her fellow soldiers will be there to assist her. We do not know this girl’s intentions. We have to be careful.”

“Yeah, and I mean, we can kind of see the top of the Needle from here.” Rory pointed the bright ring of light emitting from the tower’s upper windows.

Narma gave her a flat look.

“Thanks for coming with me, guys,” She smiled. That same part of her that was always whispering reminded her that one some level she was inconveniencing them, but she pushed it down, vocalizing this is important in her head. “It could be nothing, but I am still not convinced that I’m not going up there to be carted off to a human trafficking ring.”

Rory said, “I don’t think that’s going to happen. But we should see what’s up with this society thing. If you need us, try waving from the window.”

“Got it.” Carmen gave her a thumbs up.

“And if you’re not back by 10:00 PM, we’ll assume you’re dead,” Narma took a sip of her tea.

“Narma!”

“Rory!”

Well, no reason to delay it any longer. Turning, she moved across the street towards the tower, and whatever might be waiting for her there.
The Space Needle had an admission charge. That being said, for a certain price, one could rent out the top room for a certain period of time, with a discount for repeat use. The rate she got the top for every Saturday night an hour before closing wasn’t great, but you did what you had to do. Plus, she loaded the charge on autopay from the House’s expense card, and thus far no one had noticed.

She usually went straight up, but givin the new developments in her current investigation, Mallory decided to wait in the lobby to see if the new girl showed up. If she didn’t make an appearance after ten minutes, she would assume she wasn’t going to show up and head on up.

That being said, her plans seemed inconsequential when, at 8:26, Carmen entered the front door of the Needle’s lobby. “There you are, recruit.” Mallory unfolded her arms. “Good. Did you bring your materials?”

Carmen presented a manila folder with a few pieces of paper inside. “Yes, I’m hoping you guys can help me make sense of it a bit.”

Mallory slapped the folder closed when the girl started to open it, right in the middle of the lobby. There were security cameras, for cripes sake. “No, no—not here. We’ll examine them upstairs.” She saluted the security guard, Marge, at the front desk. “Pleasure doing business with you, as usual.”

Marge sipped her coffee. “Whatever you say, kid.”

“This way.” She led Carmen to the elevator, where they climbed inside and waited to reach the top.

“This is excited,” Carmen whispered from her spot beside her. “I’ve never been to this kind of thing before.” She smiled, but, examined closer, it looked a little strained. “I just hope I don’t say the wrong thing.”

Feeling a swell of confidence in her chest, Mallory pointed a finger at the girl, leaning in what she liked to think was a suave position against the side of the elevator. “Don’t you worry, Carmen. You stick with me, and I’ll take care of everything.” She cleared her throat. “Should the need arise.”

The elevator opened, showing off the circular open space of the top room. The lighting had always been slightly yellow, even after the Needle got its renovations. The walls themselves were entirely blocked out with windows, showing off the pinpoint lights of the city skyline. Even this place had contributed to the green initiative, and she could see the plant-life spilling over the outside rails at the room’s base.

Their footsteps clacked loudly in the space, and Mallory took a seat against the wall. She watched Carmen peer around, body tense with apprehension. “Where is…everyone else?”

“They’ll be here,” Mallory shrugged, cocking a leg up. “If anyone else is coming tonight.”

“Oh,” said Carmen. Slowly, she took a seat against the wall herself, leaving a couple yards between them. That made sense—a newcomer would surely want to mingle with the existing members.

The buzz of the overhead fluorescents filled the silence. “Yeah,” she continued. “Our members are very busy people, so their attendance to these sessions is a little on and off.” She tapped her toe on the floor, peering up to the blankness of the ceiling. “I think they get so inspired, the head off on their own investigations. I can’t blame them. It’s immersive work.”
“Uh…huh.” Carmen clutched her folder to her chest, peering around with large eyes. Yes, it was a lot to take in.

“Should we…should we wait for them?”

“Yeah,” Mallory said. “Let’s give them about ten minutes. After that point, we’ll just go ahead and share what we have so far.”

The girl nodded, and then a silence hung in the air for several minutes. Yes, some other members would be along any minute. Sure, no one had shown up last time, but it was the middle of spring. They probably just needed to do some kind of spring cleaning. She needed to figure out some way to have people sign up for certain meetings online, but she’d been busy. Of course, now there was a present threat that needed to be addressed.

“So…” The girl turned to look at her. “Have you been…doing this…for a while?”

Mallory thought about it. “I’ve been investigating the paranormal for several years, if that’s what you mean. It started off with just visiting haunted hot-spots in the city, but then I discovered the community of cryptid hunters online and realized how much deeper things actually went. Ghosts, poltergeists—they’ve met their fates. We don’t have the technology to do anything about them, we can only hope to capture proof. With cryptids, we have the power to expose those who want to keep them secret. I still go ghost hunting if I get particularly excited by a site, but of course, we have bigger things to worry about right now.” She gestured to the city behind them.

Carmen frowned, turning towards her more directly. “So, you don’t think you can change anything about ghosts? What about, I don’t know, exorcists? Things like that?”

Ah, now, getting into the meat of things. She waved a hand out. “I don’t see the point. If there really are lingering spirits, they’re there for a reason. What would be the point of interfering? Not our business.” She’d rather focus her attention on creatures that were alive, as a rule. That was, she believed, her destiny. Though, time might prove her wrong. Either way, whatever happened was going to happen.

The girl frowned. “So are you some kind of nihilist, then? It doesn’t matter either way?”

Mallory pointed a finger. “Common mistake. It’s the opposite—I’m a determinist. Basically, I believe that whatever happens was always going to happen. There’s no point in agonizing over things that have already happened. There’s nothing anyone could have done.”

Carmen said, “That’s kind of dark, isn’t it? That’s implies that we have no free will.”

_Oh boy._ “You sound like Kyle,” Mallory shook her head. “It’s actually pretty freeing. No stressing about mistakes—it was always going to be the way it is.” She checked her watch. If no one showed up in two minutes, that was it.

“Who’s Kyle?”

“He’s my roommate.”

Carmen’s brow furrowed. “You live on your own?”

“Oh, no.” Mallory’s gaze moved to the window. Damn, that was a slip on her part. Shouldn’t have brought it up. She pretended to check her watch again, knowing that the ten minutes still had time remaining. “Oh, hey, look. It’s time to share notes.”
“Oh.” Peering around at the still empty top room, Carmen scooched closer. “So,” she said. “You explained your theory about the, ah, cryptids. What’s your take on the soldiers people have been seeing around the city?” She placed a fist under her chin, pulling a pen out of her pocket.

Mallory narrowed her eyes. “Soldiers?” She thought for a second; had she heard anything about soldiers? Oh, wait. “You mean the ‘superheroes?’”


Ooh, Mallory’d been hoping they were going to get into this.

Invidia stared up at the tower. It was a truly auspicious structure—the perfect place for her to regain her honor. The pithos groaned from behind her, their forms momentarily repressed. She wanted it to be a surprise.

Entering the building, an old woman sat at the counter. “Sorry, miss.” She stared most enviously at Invidia’s regal attire. “No more admission tonight,” she said. “We close in thirty minutes.”

“No need to be jealous,” Invidia said, the woman yelping as she called on the corruption in her heart, her other creations stumbling into the building. “You, too, may attend the festivities.”

Rory doubled over. “Agh—you feel that?”

Narma winced—“It’s awful.”

Celene bristled, eye squinted. “It seems our presence was not unwarranted. But where…?”

A bright green flash erupted from the Needle’s top room.

Rory’s stomach, already aching, dropped to her feet. “Carmen.”

It felt like so long since she’d gotten to exchange theories with someone. “Okay. So obviously, there’s no such thing as superheroes.”

Carmen’s mouth hung open for a second, before she nodded. “Right.”

“Unless, I guess, the government has been going some kind of experimentation? But organic beings are currently unable to achieve any sort of superhuman abilities. SO, the most likely option seems to be that these ‘superheroes’ are actually ghosts, possibly poltergeists, taking a form that the human population can understand.”

Carmen looked intrigued. “Ghosts.”

“Think about it—that’s why the cameras can’t capture their faces. Spirits, as we have documented, do seem to have some extra human abilities, due to their occupation of multiple planes at once. It’s likely these particular poltergeists are formed from the victims of the cryptid attacks. That’s why they appeared at the same time.”

Carmen clapped her hands, looking satisfied. “Makes sense to me.”
“Yes,” Mallory cried, enthusiasm climbing, “and that’s why—”

The elevator opened. Mallory frowned, turning to the shaft. “This is a private event—Hey!”

It was the woman from the park, and four other people…including the night guard?

They both stood. “Shit!” Mallory hissed. “The jig is up.”

She thought it might end like this someday: taken out by The Man for knowing too much. Even so, she imagined it wasn’t her fate to go down without a fight.

She eyed the fire exit, and started to bolt before a hand caught her shoulder.

“Get back, Mallory.” The girl had taken on a serious expression, but Mallory stomach dropped as one of the strangers blocked to door.

And then it got worse. As she watched, the bodies of everyone except the woman’s shuddered, and in a burst of green, snake-like heads erupted from their shoulders, including Marge. Mallory backed up, her back hitting the wall. Her stomach squirmed at the horrendous sight. “Holy shit.”

You guys pick the worst time to show up. Nowhere to run.

But looking over to her, Carmen wasn’t panicking—she was reaching for her pocket.

They ran for the building, their steps clattering onto the sidewalk. “You think she could have been lying?” Narma panted. “Maybe that girl was the agent.” That sucked for Carmen, getting cornered by an agent twice. They had to stop leaving that girl alone.

From beside her, Rory shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly, Celene picked up the pace, jolting forward ahead of them. “Hey!” Rory called out. “Where are you going?”

But Celene continued towards the revolving doors. That cat needed to be more careful. She was going to get herself hit.

They transformed in the alley, before heading inside. Celene was nowhere to be seen. Inside, the elevator refused to respond. “Well,” Narma turned to the steps beside them. “Guess we’re taking the stairs.”

Carmen pulled out her scepter. She had no choice—it was expose her identity, or watch this girl die. Quickly thrusting the scepter upward, she called out, “Crystal Power Gamma, make-up!”

Light surged around her, and she heard the snake pithos hiss as the uniform materialized its browns, grays, and blacks over her skin. Her heart pounded; she just hoped her power was actually going to work this time. She was way outnumbered.

The light clearing, she saw Mallory press her back to the back wall. “Holy shit!”

Carmen knew what she looked like—that blurry, holographic filter over her features. “Stay low,” she ordered, raising her two pointer fingers. “Harmonious Bellicosso!”

The noise shocked through the small space, the agent’s (she was clearly an agent; tight fitting,
patterned clothing, bright, unnaturally green eyes) covering her ears as the notes struck the beasts, heeding them back. It didn't appear to do any real damage, though. *This is bad.*

To her surprise, the agent let out a shriek of laughter. “I knew it! Finally, my Lady’s praise will be mine!”

The fire escape door burst open. Carmen felt a surge of relief as she heard Celene’s posh voice echo up: “—to get in there!”

The pithos was shoved out of the way as the other two soldiers broke into the room.

Carmen let out a breath. *Thank goodness.*

The Agent’s eyes lit up. “So many star souls in one place! Truly, this strategy was the greatest of all possible plans.”

“Oh great,” Narma said. “She’s a talker. Typhoon Strikedown!” The blast rained down on the Agent and the pithos closest to her, once a young man. Narma shot her a salute. “That’s getting to be my signature move.”

The agent gasped, wiping water out of her eyes.

“No complaints here,” Carmen smiled.

Rory moved from behind Narma, pointing her scepter. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The blast, much like Carmen’s Bellicoso, pushed the creatures back. The one who’d been hit by Narma’s Typhoon collapsed, falling to the ground. One down already. Four more to go.

Rory peered to her from across the room. “We need to—”

But the sentence was interrupted as Celene darted from between them. The crescent on her forehead began to glow.

“Whoa.” The sentiment came from the wall behind her, and, turning back to look at Mallory, she jolted seeing a symbol too glowing on her forehead.

“No way,” Narma said. “Her?”

While they were all frozen in surprise, Celene’s efforts produced a new scepter with the same symbol, like a squiggly, lowercase δ: δ. “Take the scepter and seize your power, Delta!”

Mallory, now standing, pointed down to the cat. “The cat is talking.”

Carmen let out a breath. “That’s what’s weird here for you?”

“Enough of this nonsense!” The Agent held her palms out. “Attack!”

With a prayer on her breath, Carmen focused a Bellicoso towards the agent. The music, mercifully seemed to understand her intention, wrapped around the Agent, keeping her from advancing. She stared at her through the ribbons with hatred. Carmen shuddered under the gaze, but she begged the song not to let up.

The pithos had apparently grown tired of waiting, because they surged forward. Rory fired off another gust, one that kept them from advancing, before a light took over the room. Everyone flinched away.
As the light dimmed, Carma let herself glance over to Mallory. As she had anticipated, the girl now wore a uniform similar to her own, but teal accented with beige. The girl peered back to her. Confusion in her eyes, then recognition when she realized Carmen looked like herself again.

Above the noise. Carmen said, “Hey. Sorry; I lied.”

“THAT’S ENOUGH!”

The agent’s shrill scream shocked through the room, even the pithos flinching away as she broke out of the Bellicoso. Her body glowed green, shadows beginning to gather at her feet. Her face burned red. “This was supposed to be MY moment! You think you can take my victory away from me?”

Mallory lifted her hands. “Lady, I literally have no idea what’s going on.”

Her honesty didn’t seem to soothe the Agent at all. The shadows coalesced into a coil, but instead of forming a single snake above her shoulders, the woman became a regular Medusa, serpents rising in a mass around her shoulders. The shadows at her feet became a tail.

Mallory said, “Okay, that seems a bit of an overreaction.”

“Move!” Carmen lunged towards Mallory as the agent struck out towards her. Carmen kept low, feeling as if she were limboing trying to avoid the far-reaching pithos. Rory seemed to be using her Gusts pretty freely, though they weren’t powerful enough to move the pithos very far. Using so many in a row must have been wearing them out. These monsters were the worst Carmen had seen in terms of fighting within a confined space, and at this point, the room was full.

She turned her attention back to Mallory, making sure to keep the snakes in her periphery. “We need your help,” she told her. “The Agent is much stronger than the monsters, and I don’t want to know what happens if we get bitten.”

She cast the Bellicoso as one pithos neared, the attack wrapping around the creature’s neck and leaving tears in the scales as the notes impacted. They actually did seem to be getting a little easier, but she could feel the fatigue setting in already.

Mallory blinked at her. “What am I supposed to do? I don’t have any extra-human abilities.”

She immediately shot back, “If you’re wearing that uniform, then you do.” Carmen tried to figure out how best to explain it. “You just…kind of have to feel for it. Listen—it should just come to you.”

She gasped, thrown back as the agent’s tail whipped around, hitting her across the torso. The shadowy limb seemed to burn like acid as it touched her, the sting continuing as she hit the back wall. Even through the pain, her stomach dropped when she heard the glass crack under the impact.

“Gamma!” Celene called, pattering over. “Are you alright?”

She hissed against the burn, sitting up. They needed to be especially careful here. If one of them went out that window, superpowers wouldn’t save them from the fall.

Beside, also taken to the ground whether by choice or not, Mallory said, “I don’t know what to do here!”

Carmen said, “You should hear it inside.”
Across the room, Rory thrust the scepter out, calling on her next attack. “Dire stellar—”

The jaw of the pithos latched on to her side.

Carmen’s heart dropped. No no no. “Rory!”

It was as if the girl had tried to scream, but the yelp of pain was cut off midway. Stiffly, she fell over as Carmen watched in shock.

Mallory wasn’t reassured by he horror on Carmen’s face. The other girl, the one with the nose ring, stared down in shock. Abruptly, she turned towards the beast again, yelling, “Typhoon Strikedown!”

A geyser of rain water seemed to form in the ceiling, crashing down on the naga woman and the snake that bit her friend. Serpent–Marge hissed wheezily the as she was cut off, along with the other snake. Mallory pulled herself up. “The serpents resemble the common krait. They’re probably venomous.”

Carmen grimaced. “We have to do something.”

Mallory jolted as snake number three broke free, coming right at her.

Time seemed to slow. There was a cryptid, maybe, right in front of her. She’d already seen it attack the others. What could she do? *Come on, destiny. It’s got to end better than this.*

*Destiny.* She’d thought the word a million times, but somehow, this time, it stuck in her mind. But no, something more than that.

*Destiny Chain.*

She blinked, reality flooding back in. The snake lurched towards her. *Fuck.* On instinct, her hand moved across her body, two fingers like a salute passing over the snakes immediately in front of her—the assailant, and the biter. “Destiny Chain!”

Her eyes shot wide when an actual chain shot out from her fingers, the black metal skewering the bodies of the snakes one after the other. The creatures stiffened for a moment, before the black chain faded, the only evidence of the attack that ‘d’-like symbol that marked the puncture points.

The naga lady laughed.

“Well, that didn’t do shit,” Mallory scrambled to Carmen’s side, the snake back on the advance. The biter, too, lashed out at the other girl.

“Pathetic! I’m surprised our Lady would desire such weak souls in the first place!”

Mallory looked to Carmen. “Souls?”


The one good thing strategically was that the room was small enough that the all the awkward serpents were getting in each other’s way. Desperate, she heard Carmen call her attack again, music erupting in ribbons around her.
They struck the biter and the naga, the biter dissolving. Mallory was hit with understanding as the other snake, the one that had been connected to the biter with the chain, also began to disintegrate. She laughed as the snake haired woman gaped. “Hell yeah!”

The victory didn’t last long, though. No sooner had Mallory freed up some space in the room than Marge stumbled towards her, the snake head hauling her withered body beneath it like a flank of meat in a butchery. “Whoa there,” she held her hands up to the snake. “I’ve always cleaned up after meetings, haven’t I?”

“Afraid you’re gonna have to clean up again this time,” Nose ring girl gritted her teeth, kicking the naga back as she clawed down to reach her. She seemed to be blocking her from the other girl —wait, what?

Mallory dove to the floor, Marge groaning horribly as her new head struck out, trying to catch her. "You mean...?" Mallory pointed up towards the old woman who was now a snake. "Aw, man, really? I don’t want to hurt her."

"Well she wants to hurt you."

Point. Reluctantly, Mallory gave a sweeping salute from the floor, trying to catch the naga in the path. "Destiny chain!"

Nothing happened.

*Shit!* Mallory pathetically rolled away as the snake continued its pursuit, lugging around the security guard who really had no business doing this kind of physical activity. She yelled, "It didn't work!"

"Surrender your souls to the great beast," the naga hissed. Her hands had closed around nose ring girls throat, hair snakes snapping in a halo of pain.

"I’ll pass,” The girl grunted. “Carmen, can you take care of the granny?”

Carmen stood from the bitten girl’s side. “You got it. Sorry, Miss. Harmonious Bellicoso!” The music surrounded Marge, the notes hitting like enormous sparks. At the same time, Carmen flung her arms forward, her conductor’s stance seeming to force them both back. It seemed, just then, the best strategy was ‘don’t get too close.’

Marge mercifully slumped. Then, it was just the three of them standing, the naga, and the unmoving girl on the ground. Nosering girl rubbed her neck. “Thanks. I was hoping to not get more handprints any time soon.”

The naga glanced around at them. As horrifying as she was to look at, compared to her snake-headed minions, she actually didn’t seem to be that tough. “This—” her words were barely discernible anymore, her voice giving way more and more to the snake-like hissing. Mallory guessed that smoke wasn’t just for show. “—this wasn’t how this was supposed to go!”

Whelp, now she was just asking for it. She’d stepped herself directly into Mallory’s wheelhouse, and her attack may have been useless against her, but she was accomplished at making people feel stupid. “Sorry, lady. That’s not how destiny works.” She leaned forward. “This is *exactly* how things were *always* going to go."

The woman’s face became feral, bearing her shadowy fangs. “Agh!”

Nosering girl and Carmen stood side-to-side. The girl in blue said, “You remember what me and
Rory did back in the skating rink?"

“My sentiments exactly,” Carmen’s open expression had hardened, lips pursed. “There’s an imbalance here that needs to be righted.”

“That’s cool,” Nosering girl said, “but we’re going to take her out, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then lets do it.”

“No!” The naga women screamed defiantly.

Carmen held her palms up while the other thrust hers down, before meeting in the middle. "Punishing Cascade!"

It was like the geyser attack, but worse, both more violent and elegant. It reminded Mallory of those fountain shows in the park—the water burst up then down in three rounds, each strike precise and terrible. Mallory may not have known what was going on, but this was cool shit.

Then something slammed into her.

She didn’t see exactly what happened. One second, the naga was thrashing in the center of the room, and then a weight collided with her from the knees up, tossing her bodily across the room.

She felt the glass give way against her back. Then, she noticed it was black outside, and she was falling.

There was a second or two of shock, the sound of glass breaking and the final wail of the Agent. For an instant, Narma’s mind blanked, watching the girl get flung through the window by the Agent’s death flails.

A beat.

"Dire gust!"

The words were shrieked from the floor, and the wind rushed into the air, blowing out the remainder of the glass and bursting into the night.

Pulse pounding, she and Carmen ran to the window. Staring down to the street, Narma’s mind tried to make sense of it—the girl’s body against a canvas of black.

But then she noticed the starlight dotting the blackness, the girl’s uniform fluttering in the wind as she stared back up at them, in equal shock.

Narma collapsed to her knees. “Aye Krishna.” She’d caught her. Scared the shit out of me.

Carmen’s gaze flew back. “Rory!”

Narma looked back too—the girl’s eye was squint, and she seemed to be struggling just to sit up enough to raise the scepter. “I need to bring her back in,” she forced out, her arm shaking. “Get ready to catch her—I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold her.”

The stood under the window as instructed, catching the frazzled conspiracy theorist when Rory’s
wind powers inevitably dissipated.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Celene fretted from the floor, hovering around their feet, trying to get a look at the soldier she’d just inducted in, Narma guessed.

The girl, in as much as she had proven herself so far to be a chatterbox according to Carmen, immediately spoke. “So, I’d just like to start off by saying, what the fuck.” She took a breath, brushing glass off her shoulder as they lowered her to the floor. “And also thanks for saving me, I guess, but mostly what the fuck.”

Carmen immediately went to Rory’s side while Narma cautiously watched the new girl. Couldn’t have her running off. “You okay?” She heard Carmen ask, helping Rory to her feet.

“Yeah,” Rory said. “The paralysis started fading once that pithos was dusted. Sorry to leave you guys hanging.”

“I hope that wasn’t a joke,” said the theorist.

“Just don’t do it again,” Narma teased, looking her friend over. There were still two massive puncture wounds, blood seeping slowly into the fabric of her uniform. “You sure you don’t need the hospital or something? Those looked pretty deep.”

“Nah, but I need to stop by the CVS.” Leaning over, she unapologetically tore a hunk out of one of the former pithos’s shirts. “I’m sure he’ll understand,” she said at Carmen’s look. She pressed the fabric to the top hole.

“Still here,” said the new girl. “Almost died.”

“Sorry,” Carmen ran a hand over her face. Narma didn’t know what she was apologizing for—this girl was a stranger. Rory took precedent. “You should probably sit down,”

“No, not here,” Rory straightened, Narma moving to hook an arm behind her back. Stubborn girl. “Someone’s going to notice that the window in the Space Needle’s been busted out. The cops will be along any minute, and I don’t want to be the ones to explain this. We should get going.”

“Avoiding the authorities. Got it.” The girl stalked for the door. “And we need supplies for wind girl’s wound.”

“It’s Rory,” Rory called forward as they moved for the elevator.

“Mallory,” the girl responded.

“Narma,” she said herself. “Now let’s hurry up before Rory bleeds out.”

Celene fretted, “Goodness!”

They awkwardly dressed Rory’s wound in the CVS bathroom, flanking her like English guards so that the store clerk wouldn’t ask any inconvenience questions.

Afterwards, they moved outside, gathering in the alley nearby. It was flanked on either side by troughs of planted trees and, most importantly, no cameras.

Celene, more than maybe any of them, had been worrying. She occupied the space at Rory’s side with a steel determination, perhaps unconsciously nosing at the wounds. “Aurora, are you sure
"you’re well?"

She girl scratched behind her ear. “Yes, Celene, I’m sure.”

The new girl leaned on her knees, her sunglasses stowed away in the pocket of her hoodie. “So,” she looked to Carmen. “You knew what was going on the whole time, huh?”

Carmen smiled apologetically. “Yes, I’m sorry. We had to know what you knew.”

The girl shook her head. Pulling down her hood, she brushed her hair back. “Well, you did a good job. It takes a lot to fool a professional.”

Narma resisted the urge to roll her eyes, narrowing them instead. Mallory. She’d almost forgotten she told them her name back at the needle. She’d sort of been distracted, considering her best friend had a gaping hole in her chest. “So. What are you guys?”

They looked at each other. “We’re human,” said Rory. “We just got some kind of super powers from a star system called Trappist 1. Honestly, we don’t really understand ourselves.”

Mallory pointed out Celene. “And the cat?”

“I am a guide for the sailor soldiers of the Trappist-1 star system, but my memories have been compromised. I wish I had more to tell you.” The cat curled up on herself.

Narma addressed the girl directly. “Basically, there are these agents who want to feed our souls to a monster called The Great Beast, who may or may not be as big as the sun. Those monsters are their lackeys. They’re called the pithos. We fight them, they turn to smoke, and that’s a day.”

“And that’s all we know.” Mallory rubbed her chin. So quickly, she seemed to integrate herself into the group.

“Yeah, for now,” said Carmen. “But if you have powers like us, that’s just more information we have.”

Narma raised her arm. “Question. You do those meetings on the regular, right?”

Mallory’s brown eyes blinked at her. “Affirmative.”

“That’s the security guard lady knows you. You’re definitely going to have the cops looking for you.”

The girl didn’t flinch. “I use an alias. I would never host a top-secret rendezvous using my real name. What kind of amateur do you take me for?”

Point taken.

Carmen closed her eyes. “Honestly, I feel as though something has changed. On a fundamental level, I mean. Like some disorder has been made right. Do you know what I mean?”

“Maybe it’s because we dusted the snake lady?” Narma shrugged.

It sounded a bit idealistic for Narma’s tastes, but, as she checked in with herself, she couldn’t say the girl was wrong. She hadn’t noticed it before, but sitting on the outskirts of the CVS parking lot, the group of them seeing by the light of the flickering streetlight, something did feel different. It was like when she completed the last sketch in a series she’d been working on. A full set.
Mallory slapped her hands down on her knees, setting up. “Alright. Then I guess that’s it. We continue the investigation tomorrow.”

Narma turned to Rory like are you hearing this? They began to stand, collectively taken aback. Guess the meeting’s over. “What? Just like that?”

The girl turned to look back at them all, her face fully visible in the light of the fluorescents. Her eyes shone with an almost manic anticipation, expression one of someone who was just barely holding themselves back. “I’ve been waiting for a moment like this my entire life.” Her lip twitched, not quite smiling, but something almost scary. “I wouldn’t dare to waste a minute of a destiny like this.”

They watched her leave. After a moment, Carmen spoke up. “She was…intense.”

Narma said, “That’s one word for her.”

Carmen phone dinged, and she flipped it on with a couple quick taps. “She says we can use that café as a recon spot.”

Narma stretched. “Well tell her I’m not getting up as early tomorrow. She can forget it.”

Suddenly, Carmen giggled. “You have to admit, she’s got an enthusiasm.”

A pause. Rory clenched a fist. “Okay, yeah! Now we’ve got a professional investigator on the job! I’m sure we’ll figure this out soon!”

“You guys are way too positive.”

Still. Narma couldn’t help but feel as though they were overlooking something important.

It was unwise for a creature to hunt in the same place twice. The prey would be skittish, and the creature only increased the chances that they would be caught. It was as foolish as it was unartful.

Lupido dropped the human, shaking the uneaten remnants of the corruption from his fingers. The shadowy aura coursed over his arms. Just as the great beast, he would consume to destroy. It was clear to him now—they could outnumber him, even outmaneuver him, but in the end they were merely fawns, still shaking from the birth of their unrealized power. If they came face-to-face with something more than themselves, the weak grasp they had on their magic would falter. He thought it was nearly time.

He tossed a sheet over the empty husk in the alley, her empty gaze towards the sky filling him with anticipation.

Soon.
Chapter 11

Episode 11: Party hard! —or, Something Lurking in the Shadows

Mallory ended up not taking the bus after the attack, which meant for the price of her dramatic exit, she’d been rewarded with a twenty-minute walk.

The moment she opened the door, Doris called her into the kitchen. She was washing dishes, and a couple of the other kids were still at the dinner table: Charlie, Sarah, Dominic. The old woman eyed her over her sudsy plate. “You’re back awful late.”

Mallory wasn’t hungry; not for food, at least. She shrugged. “I was hanging out with some friends downtown.”

The woman looked so taken aback, it gave her the opportunity to escape.

Kyle was fully prepared with the snark. “Hey, you’re alive.”

Mallory immediately went her laptop, opening it and bringing up the incognito tabs she had opened before leaving. “A very important case has come up. Top secret. I wouldn’t expect you to understand the delicacy of this matter.”

Kyle looked amused, his freckled face leering down from the top bunk. “What is it this time? Bigfoot?”

Mallory had her main webpage and all four forums up in different tabs. She began typing: the Trappist-1 lead is a fluke. Soldiers are merely publicity stunts for an upcoming movie—please disregard research for more important matters…

They didn’t end up meeting on Sunday at all. Rory was grateful, in the end—she already had to get up early for church that morning, and she had to be a really creative to disguise her bandages under her church clothes.

Monday morning, though, provided an opportunity for them to meet up again, under much better circumstances. She was sitting outside on the deck with Celene, starlight and the mysterious, unseen presence of Trappist-1 pin-pointed somewhere overhead, when Narma messaged her.

girl did you hear about the house party Kevin Butler is throwing?

I don’t even know Kevin Butler

neither do I

we should crash it

Rory stared down at the screen pensively. It would be nice for them to just hang out, have some down time. She and Narma hadn’t gotten to do that in a while. It might make a good opportunity for them to wind down to after the chaos of the previous days.

yeah, OK.
how would you feel about inviting the others?

There was a long pause with no response. Rory frowned. She knew, in the past, going to parties was something they’d exclusively done together, so she couldn’t exactly blame her if she wanted them to go alone.

We don’t have to.

A second later, Narma shot back, sorry, I was fixing a tea. Yeah, it’s cool. We’ll show the babies how to party

Rory snorted. The babies?

they are our children. Our poor hapless offspring

Narma, no!!

Narma, yes

Celene stared up to her from the deck. “Aurora? Are you alright?” She bristled. “Perhaps the pithos’s venom is still present in your system. We should go to the hospital!”

She’d been like that since the attack in the Needle. Where there such a thing as a hypochondriac-by-proxy? Every time Rory displayed even the vaguest hint of discomfort, Celene was on her, trying to diagnose the problem. What a worry wart. It was kind of sweet, though.

Rory chuckled. “I’m fine, girl. Just thinking.” She patted the cat on the head, the creature looking unamused.

Celene peering up at her, eyes squinted with obvious scrutiny. “If you’re sure.”

Really though, Rory was a bit unsettled. That wasn’t because of the bite, though. It was because of what happened whenever she transformed. It was subtle, a change in the way she thought about the people around her; about herself.

Sometimes, just for a minute…it was like she wasn’t her anymore.

Not in a “this disguise is causing me to develop an alter ego,” way. On a literal level.

Picking up her tea cup, she held the door open for Celene, where the cat hid under her bed. She quietly closed the door behind her.

When she transformed, it was like she stepped out of her body, and someone else stepped in. She’d often have thoughts during a fight that just didn’t sound like her, especially when it came to names. At first, it wasn’t a big deal. But as time went on, it became as if she were having to fight back against the thoughts. She’d think one thing, then there would be this other thought out of nowhere trying to bulldoze her own. It was…concerning. Were these powers, like, turning her into another person or something?

She pushed her stuff into her backpack. She wanted to believe she was making it up; Narma hadn’t mentioned anything like this. Even so, if there was anything to it, there was one way to find out.

She leaned over the side of the bed, peering down to where Celene’s tail was sticking out from under the comforter. “Hey, Celene?”

The cat emerged immediately—if Celene were put in a line with ten regular cats, she would
immediately be singled out due to how agreeable she was. Her tai. “What is it, Aurora?”

Rory leaned back down against her comforter. “Is it a normal part of this whole superhero thing for me to start hearing someone else’s thoughts?”

Celene, for her own part, looked completely surprised. “You’ve developed telepathy?”

“No, no.” Rory wiped a hand down her face. “That’s not what I mean.”

Celene jumped on the bed. Rory had to admit, it was kind of nice to have someone who would always listen around. Guess that explains why so many people talk to their pets. Though, Celene was more than a pet. “I guess it’s more like, especially when I’m fighting, there’s someone else in there, thinking with me.”

“Uh huh,” Celene’s felines jaw was tight.

“And,” Rory sat up. “Not only that, but…I still get those dreams. And it’s like I’m watching a movie, like the person in the dream isn’t me. You know what I mean?”

Celene stretched, eyeing her, “It is natural to feel a sort of disconnect when you are coming into your powers the way you are. It’s possible your innate power is setting you to a sort of internal autopilot. I…wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

Rory frowned, getting up to pull on her tennis shoe. “I guess.”

There were many things about these powers she didn’t understand. But for now, she just needed to make sure these agent guys stayed in their place. It would be easier to go on journeys of self-discovery when they weren’t fighting off snakes.

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Biology was one of Carmen’s favorite classes, even if it was the first thing she had to deal with on a Monday morning. There was something about the subject that was almost relaxing—not that the class wasn’t hard, but that, conceptually, there was something satisfying about observing systems that were perfectly balanced. Everything in its place, working like clockwork, even in living beings.

Her lab partner was more interested in trying to convince her to share her homework than in actually doing to the work. He was just going to have to suffer. Maybe that will make you realize you should have done it, she huffed subtly.

That being said, she had to admit, he wasn’t the only one distracted. There was just so much going on just then. The fight in the Needle had be brutal, and while they had a forth member now, there was still much about the Agent’s plans they didn’t know. There were so many things they had left to figure out.

The class was currently were covering a unit on energy conversion. She took notes as she peered over the 3-D model in the table-top projection. The cells shifted, absorbing the nutrients in the space, and occasionally one another. The caption read, “Enzymes can enable the body to absorb substances that otherwise may be rejected. Replication of this process artificially has been used to treat lactose intolerance, some allergies, and even major absorption disorders, allowing the subject to utilize the given substance as an energy source—”

The sight of the little cells eating one another sparked something in her mind, and realization struck. “Oh my gosh,” she blurted aloud. She blushed as the class turned to look at her.
The teacher lowered her pointer from her own model. “Something the matter, Ms. Rodriguez?” She raised a hard, white brow.

Carmen raised her hands before herself. “No! Sorry! It’s just so…interesting!”

Maybe she did know why the Agents needed the star souls.

“What’s up with her?”

At lunch, peering up from her sandwich, Rory turned her eyes in the direction Narma was pointing with a fry.

Still unnerved by her lack of control over her own darn brain, Rory went on the offensive as soon as she saw Carmen power-walking towards the lunch table, expression full of purpose. Oh no. Did something happen? “What’s going on?” She shot out immediately.

Freezing, the girl blinked at her. “Wha—? Nothing. Nothing’s happened, Rory.” Her eyes softened, then gained the glimmer of focus. “But, I think I may know what they need the souls for.”

She spread a couple of sheets of paper on the table, and they scooched their lunches over. They were labeled “malabsorption” and “vaccinations.”

“If you’re about to reveal that you’re an anti-vaxer, we’re going to have a problem,” said Narma.

Carmen gave her a frown. “No, of course not. But I think the star souls are supposed to do something similar.” She pointed out a model describing the composition of a vaccine. “With vaccines, a sample the virus is used to help make the receiver immune to the living agent.”

Narma raised an eyebrow. “We know how vaccines work, Carmen.”

“Right, sorry.” She shook her head, pointing to the other picture. “There have also been malabsorption treatments in recent years which in which they use exposure in a similar way. They’re basically teaching the cells how to absorb certain nutrients using enzymes.”

Narma scooted over, letting the girl squeeze in beside her. Rory thought Narma was gradually warming up to the girl—teasing was a classic marker of Narma Friendship.

Carmen raised her eyes from the papers, leaning further on the table. She lowered her voice. “If we’re right about the sun, what if it’s the same thing? It would take an enormous amount of energy to absorb a star. Or, at least, you would think so. And the compositions of different stars can be a wildly different.” She folded her hands together. “We have star souls and from that star system. What if we’re like the dead virus, or the sample nutrients? It needs the star souls to learn how to absorb the star. That’s why they came all the way out here for us.”

“Holy shit,” Narma said, staring down at the spread. “Girl did some homework.”

Carmen blushed. “I mean, this is still just a theory.”

Rory leaned back, crossing her arms behind her head. “Better than what I could come up with.”

Narma said, “It’s the assumption we’ll work off of until something proves us wrong.” She turned to Carmen. “Hey, do you know Kevin Butler?”

Carmen stared back at her, seemingly thrown off by the sudden subject change. “Um. No, I don’t?”
“Good,” said Narma. “We’re crashing his party tonight. You should come.”

Rory appreciated Narma being the one to offer. She felt bad that she been spending so much time with Carmen instead of her. They’d been pretty much an exclusive pair for years. It did feel weird, suddenly having other people in their bubble.

“I—” The girl hesitated. “Okay.” Her lip twitched up, eyes brightening.

Rory leaned back on the table. “You should text Mallory. We can all go together.”

Carmen scratched her cheek. “Somehow, I can’t imagine her at a party. Yeah, give me a minute.”

Mallory got the text when she was on her way home from school. It was a 2-hour early dismissal, a teacher workday, so she was just hoofing it. No reason to waste money on the bus.

_We’re going to a party this afternoon. Want to come?_

Mallory regarded the message, slowing down on the sidewalk. She pictured Carmen’s big-eyed expression. _When was the last time I went to a party? Actually, when’s the last time that I just hung out with other people?_ Outside of a professional sense, of course. Maybe she could use some time to unwind.

As she approached the home, her steps slowed. There was a cop car sitting in from the house.

She stopped. She was torn. Technically, she hadn’t done anything. But depending on what they knew, talking to them could raise some really inconvenient questions.

But then an officer by the cars turned and saw her, and the choice was made for her.

She played it casual. She kept her head down—maybe they didn’t know it was her, specifically. She kept her hands in her hoodie, turning to climb the steps of the home, the officer’s gaze on her back. “Excuse me,” she heard a voice called from behind her, “miss? Are you Mallory Dunbar?”

She froze. _Damn._

Turning, she picked a card. And it was the orphan card. She fired back, “Not if my parents had their say in the matter, I wouldn’t be.” She raised a brow at him.

Immediate discomfort. You could tell the man had been dreading an encounter like this by the way he clutched his belt, glancing down the street. “Miss, we need to ask you some questions.”

She took a breath. “Sure.”

As soon as she entered the house, Doris and two cops were waiting on her. She swallowed—she hadn’t expected so many cops. Immediately, Doris bristled. “Girl, what trouble have you gotten into?”

Doris, her caretaker, wasn’t a bad woman. Stern—you could tell she’d handled a number of bad eggs over the years—but not hateful. A lot of the time, though, they stayed in contention over a number of little things: the evidence she would occasionally leave in the refrigerator, her hours coming in and out of the house, her living allowance. This, for Doris, was new.

Mallory didn’t hold it against her to assume that she’d been the one doing the Bad Thing here. There were three cops in her house. Mallory took a breath. _Keep your cool. This is all going to go_
exactly as it is meant to. “I was told you guys have some questions for me.”

The cops sat her down in the middle of the kitchen. They explained how they’d tracked her down based on the security guard’s description, and the credit card number she’d used to reserve the space. Sloppy. She had to remember to use cash next time. Though, after nearly falling to her death, she wasn’t especially keen on going back to the Space Needle anytime soon.

“The glass in the window was busted out, but no one seems to be able to remember what happened. The cameras were knocked out too. The security guard said you were there that night, and you were the only one unaccounted for when the civilians woke up. What can you tell us about what happened?”

Doris tapped her foot loudly from the kitchen’s entrance, trying to look as if she weren’t watching.

Ah. You’ve shown your hand. ‘The cameras were out.’ The truth was the smartest response here. “It was those monsters.”

“Oh, for cripes sake,” Doris groaned.

But the officer leaned forward, pen poised over his note pad. “Monsters?”

If the cameras were out, they had no way of confirming when she left. “The ones from the news,” she said. “They showed up while I was having my meeting. They seemed to be controlling those people. When I saw them, I booked it down the stairs. I don’t know what happened to the window.” Well, almost the truth.

Damn, though, if she didn’t know what happened to the window. She hadn’t said anything the previous day, because it seemed so minor compared to everyone’s injuries, but the window had cut up her back real nice. She looked like a blind man’s cutting board from behind.

The officer pursed his lips. “You understand this is hard to believe.”

“Maybe they were terrorists,” Mallory said, not breaking eye contact. You had to hold your ground under this kind of pressure. “Maybe some kind of noxious gas is causing everyone to hallucinate. That would be an easier explanation, wouldn’t it? I don’t know why people are seeing these creatures all over town. Unless you can give me a better explanation, that’s all I got for you.”

The officer stared her down. “… Officer Marge mentioned there was another girl with you.”

Probably trying to catch her in a lie. Admittedly, she’d been trying to keep Carmen’s name out of it. “My friend, Carmen. She left the same time I did.” She thought about it, making sure she had her facts straight. “They blocked the elevator, so we both took the stairs.”

The cop stared for a moment more before clicking his pen closed. “We’ll be in touch. If you think of anything else…”

Mallory leaned back in the kitchen chair. “I’ll definitely let you know.” She examined her nails, knowing full well there was nothing to see there. She hoped the action said, “I don’t plan on calling you any time soon.”

The cops stood, beginning to turn away. Then stopped. “One more question, Ms. Dunbar. Why did you make your reservation under an assumed name?”

She put a finger to her lips. “The government isn’t too keen on conspiracy theorists like me. Merely for my own protection.”
The cop said, “…right,” turning to leave again.

Those words, she’d found, were an automatic out when people were taking you too seriously. Her field was widely discredited. *Jokes on you, though. Must be weird, being the one the conspiracy is being hidden from this time.*

Once the cops had gone, she knew what was coming. She immediately got up and moved towards her room.

Doris yelled after her, “Where are you going?”

The hall was full of eavesdropping kids, and she breezed past them. “Don’t worry; I’m going to my room.”

Doris wasn’t done. She could practically hear her jaw clenching. “This isn’t going to happen again. You stay out of trouble!”

Mallory ducked further into her hoodie. The urge to escape only grew by the second. She raised a thumbs up. “You got it, chief,” she said before confining herself to her room.

Kyle wasn’t in. He was going to be pissed he missed the shit show. Moving to her bed, she dumped her backpack on the floor before taking a seat on her mattress.

This was a bit of a miscalculation. She was doubtful Doris was going to let her out at night any time soon without a fight. Not ideal. She couldn’t abandon her work now though, especially now that she was actually a part of something.

Pulling her phone back up, she addressed the unanswered text. She glanced towards her window, cracked open to let in the warm spring air. Considering, she replied:

*Place and time. I’ll be there.*

Narma looked out on the lawn, the expanse of green untouched by anyone but probably a gardener. This place was bigger than Carmen’s, and already, the sun just setting, adolescents were spilling out the front door, red, biodegradable cups in hand. She took a strong sniff of the air. “You smell that?”

From behind, Carmen was fiddling with her nails, peering from one side of the yard to the other as if something was going to jump out at her. Reasonable. She hesitated. “…what…are you smelling?”

Narma turned back to her. “That’s the smell of hormones and junk food. And also fresh-cut grass.” She put her hands on her hips. “It’s a house party.”

Behind them, Narma saw a dark shape fill in the space in the sidewalk. “I have arrived.” Mallory tossed her head back, freeing herself of the hood.

Rory grinned over at her in excitement. “All what are we waiting for?” Throwing both of her arms fully in the air, she ran towards the building as if it were a mirage, and she was a man lost in the desert, screaming “Whooo!”

Without further ado, they unstealthily snuck their way into the house. Once inside, it was a free for all. People were dancing, a table was lined up with drinks, music pounded as a projector shot spots
of light into every corner of the room.

She turned to the other two, shooing them with her hands. “Run wild!”

Carmen and Mallory looked at each other. Carmen said, “Um. Okay?”

“I’m getting a drink,” Mallory said immediately.

“Run wild,” Narma repeated; her expert advice was going to waste here. Scanning the room, she said “There—” pointing to a Just Dance projection at the front of the room. She grabbed Carmen’s hand. “We’re doing that.”

“Really?” The girl was dragged behind her as they gathered at the edge of the crowd.

Narma said, “You first.”

Rory didn’t drink at these things, but she knew how to party. “Whoo!” she yelped, trouncing over to join them. “This place is slammed!” She passed Narma a cup, which, knowing Rory, was probably just full of soda. Narma would have to spring for a Malibu and coke at the first opportunity. Rory toasted her, smiling. “To Kevin Butler!”


Carmen squeaked, forcing herself out onto the empty floor as the song started up.

She and Rory watched for a few minutes, the lights flashing over them as they sipped their drinks. “Hey,” Narma said, “she’s pretty good.”

She felt a warmth in her chest as Rory leaned on her shoulder. Peering over, her best friend had a tranquil expression Narma hadn’t seen in a number of months. Rory grinned her. “This was a great idea,” she said.

Narma straightened. “This is why you never doubt me.”

Rory punched her arm. “Okay, Ms. Big Shot.”

A shape shuffled up from the kitchen. “This place is a disaster zone,” Mallory said. She almost looked like an entirely different person, sunglasses absent, hoodie totally unzipped, hanging off of her like a robe. “It’s great.”

Narma grinned. “And it’s better, because we’re crashing it.”

“That is better,” said Mallory, taking a swig of her beer.

Carmen was facing off with some guy Narma didn’t know, trying to replicate the decidedly not-catchy dance moves on screen as the crowd shouted encouragement around them. “Yeah,” Narma called out. “Crush him!”

Rory turned to her as Carmen won, the two of them clapping enthusiastically as the next challenger approached. Her eyes sparkled. “We should go get in some trouble.”

That was classic Rory code. It meant, let's go pull a prank.

“Sure.” They back up, moving out of the crowd.
The sense of nostalgia that fell over her was powerful. This was tradition: they had to go off and do something mischievous if ever they attended a party. It was half the fun of crashing them. This was their thing. “What did you have in mind?”

Rory launched into her idea. “So they have lawn gnomes outside. I was thinking we could take all of them and put them—”

Mallory watched Carmen come down off the mat—the girl had some moves. She wondered vaguely if she had some sort of dance or gymnastic background, but the alcohol was already beginning the make all her edges pleasantly fuzzy. They were under constant surveillance at the home, so she rarely got the opportunity to let loose. That meant that, embarrassingly, she was a bit of a lightweight.

Carmen grinned at her bashfully as she came out of the gaming area. “That was fun! You should try.”

“Eh. I’m not really the dancing type.” She gestured back towards the kitchen. “Hey. Come with me—I’ll show you where the drinks are.”

The girl followed her through the crowd, her distinctly taller figure clear in her periphery. “Um, I’m not sure if drinking is for me.”

Mallory cleared her throat, leaning what she hoped was smoothly against the kitchen’s island. “I would never condone pressuring anyone to go beyond their limits, but.” Her words were already running together a bit—maybe she could make it seem like a natural part of her more casual persona, rather than a result of her measly single beer. “I think it would do some wonders for that anxiety of yours.” She hadn’t really meant to phrase it like that. Her filter wasn’t the best once drink had been introduced into the equation.

Carmen’s smile slipped, the girl pausing before moving to lean against the bar as well. “…wow, so it’s…pretty obvious, then?”

“No,” she shook her head in what was maybe too much of an exaggerated motion. “Nuh nuh no. You actually hide it pretty well. Just looking at you, I don’t think anyone would be able to tell. I’m just practiced in examining body talk, you know, language. That sort of thing. I figured this is probably out of your comfort zone, though.”

Carmen folded her arms over her chest. Withdrawing. Damn. Again, not ideal. “You’ve got me pegged, huh?”

 Damn. Fuck. Change the subject. She had to figure out a way to turn off her analytical side someday. “But you did come,” Mallory amended, finishing off her beer.

Carmen frowned. “I don’t want to be,” she said. “I don’t want to be like this. I like people. I want to be more open, but. I guess I’ve gotten so used to being brushed off at home…I don’t know. It’s hard for me to feel like I’m important anywhere.”

Okay, well, this took a turn. Even so, Mallory couldn’t help but feel a connection with Carmen’s analysis. “Yeah, I know what that’s like.”

Carmen turned, raising her brows. “Really?”

Mallory shifted, dropping the bottle into a recycling bin near her feet. “Yeah. There are a bunch of
us at home, so sometimes it just feels like we’re…I don’t know how to put it. Expendable? Extraneous? Like everything would be the same, whether we were there or not. But maybe that’s just me. Not that it matters—things are just as they were meant to be, so I have to believe it’s all heading somewhere.”

Carmen’s soft smile returned. “That’s right. A determinist.”

Okay, she was getting rambly. Folks were having to move around them to get to the snacks, the background music peppered with their irritated grumblings. She had to get this back on track somehow. “But, hey,” she swept a hand in Carmen’s direction. “You really stepped up in the tower the other day.”

Carmen frowned. “The…tower?”

“That’s right. The Needle.” Come on, words; you can do it. “You were taking charge and kicking ass.” She gestured herself, watching with satisfaction as the dejected expression on Carmen’s face brightened prettily with pink. “I was impressed. That seems like progress to me.”

The girl giggled. “I guess the whole superpower thing is a bit of a confidence booster. Plus, Rory and Narma are really nice. I guess you could say I was kind of popular in that weird, meaningless high school sense, but I didn’t really have many friends before this.” Lowering her hand from her mouth, she grinned softly. “I was a little worried, but I’m glad you turned out to be nice too.”

Under the yellow kitchen lights, Mallory hoped Carmen thought the heat in her face was from the beer. “Well,” she responded, “if I’m in the good graces of someone as pretty as you, I must be doing something right.”

Carmen’s eyes widened, surprise falling over her features. “Oh. Um?”

That wasn’t smooth at all. Abort, abort! Mallory groaned in her chest, the sound mercifully drowned out by the noise of the crowd. She swung bodily away from the island. “I’m gonna get some air. My head is swimming a little.”

“Oh. Okay?”

She moved through the crowd towards the door. Stupid! Why did she think that was a good idea? She’d known Carmen for like 72 hours; she barely knew anything about her, much less that. Damn you, alcohol! She shuffled out the door into the cool night air, the sounds of the party dampening. She would get some air, sober up, then head back inside as if nothing had happened.

She pulled her hoodie on more firmly, the scepter clunking around in her pocket. Moving around the side of the house, she finally found a spot without any partygoers. She leaned against the wall—leaning was, really, her default stance—and waited. Closing her eyes, she listened to the sound of the music thumping within the house while she chilled out.

She frowned when she heard the crinkling of grass. Of course, why did she think there was anywhere to be alone at a party. She opened her eyes. “Hey, do you mind? I’m trying—”

She stopped short. This guy didn't look like a rowdy teenager—he was just a guy. Dark, slick hair, blue eyes, and a patterned shirt.

Wait a minute.

She recognized that pattern.
Oh fuck.

She got out a short yelp before the man's hand clamped over her mouth.

Rory cheerfully picked up the third gnome, wiping the dirt off in the grass. She passed it off to Narma. "So, this one can go in the washing machine--"  
Narma grunted, re-adjusting the gnomes in her arms. "Hey, you're going to have to carry some of these too, you know."
Rory laughed. "I know, we've still got three more—"

The yell broke across the yard, both of their gazes shooting up to locate the sound.

Anyone passing might think it was commotion from the party. But with the turn their lives had taken, Rory nor Narma were prone to brushing things off recently. They looked at each other. Without speaking, they dropped the gnomes, sprinting towards the other side of the house.
When they turned the corner, Rory's heart stopped. "No!"
Lupido. For a few seconds, she saw the Agent, his arm locked around Mallory, peering over to them in surprise...then gratification.
Then, he thrust his free arm in the air. Something, the only word she could think of was a portal, burst into being. In the blur, she could make out a star scape, an expanse of gray, maybe a building? A huge burning mass in the background—
He stepped back and was gone before they could get to him.
The portal closed behind him.
Chapter 12

Episode 12: The Truth – or, Road Trip to Space Greece, or Somewhere?

Carmen sipped on her root beer, smiling as she saw Rory and Narma hurrying over from outside.

Until she saw their faces.

Carmen held her head in her hands. “She was only gone for a second. She said she was going to get some air.”

Rory frowned, stomach in knots. That guy was a creep, too. Who knew what might be happening to Mallory? Not to mention the 100% certainty that they wanted her soul. “There’s nothing to be gained in blaming ourselves. We’ve got to figure out what to do.”

The party pounded around them, the conversation thankfully concealed by the chaos. Narma tapped her heel aggressively over Kevin Butler’s kitchen tile. “How are we supposed to find them?” She flailed her arms out. “That guy opened a portal. He just vanished.”

The bass groaned ominously around them. Rory raised her head. “We have to get Celene,” she realized. “She knows about these kind of powers. She’ll be able to tell something.” Lord, she hoped. Dread squirmed within her.

Celene was napping in the moonlight, waiting for Aurora to return. These times made her anxious, when she didn’t know where she was, couldn’t watch over her in the lingering possibility of danger. She couldn’t help the feeling that she was failing her, not being there.

In her mind, an image flashed: a spear end, piercing the flesh of a dark uniform—squeezing her eyes shut, she willed the image away, shaking her head.

Logically, though, she knew there was no reason for her to be there, at that party. The girls were having fun. They didn’t need her around. She nestled her head further into the deck wood. She would be home soon.

But then the plodding of many feet echoed in the distance. Her ears perked up. They were getting closer and closer. Rising, Celene moved to the edge of the porch. Celene peered out front, feline eyes tearing through the darkness. In the distance, three figures ran down the sidewalk, flashing like shadows under the streetlights. Even before she made out any features, she recognized the tapping of Rory’s braids whipping up behind her. Her stomach dropped. Why were the running?

Slipping through the bars of the porch, Celene leapt into the grass, running to the front of the yard.

“What’s happened, soldiers?” Auror called, Celene’s suspicions worsening as she saw the distress on the soldier's faces.

“Celene!” Aurora called, Celene’s suspicions worsening as she saw the distress on the soldier's faces.
Moving out of the light, Rory gestured her around to the side of the house, where they could speak unseen. “Lupido,” she panted. “That agent. He showed up—there were no pithos or anything—he took Mallory.”

Oh no.

Gamma spoke up. “He went through some kind of portal.”

Celene furrowed her furred brow. “A portal?” She turned to Aurora. “Did you see anything? Where the portal might have been leading?”

Rory sat up, looking away. “I don’t know. I saw stars, everywhere. There was what could have been a temple? The Grecian kind. Somewhere gray.”

Oh, this was bad. Celene bristled, feeling her fur stand on end. “Soldiers. From the conclusions we’ve reached so far, I can only believe that this man would have taken her to one place;” She took a breath. “Trappist-1.”

It was as if a shock had gone through the group. “That’s it, then.” Epsilon threw her arms up, sounding breathless. “If he took her to space, she’s done for. Her hoodie is not going to protect her from no oxygen.” Narma dragged her hands down her face. “What am I saying? Even if it could, we have no way to get to her! Unless either of you have secret connections in NASA.”

The others stayed damningly silent, although Aurora nodded her head a little.

She always knew this day would come. There was a possibility they could save Delta, but in order to do that she would have to reveal the truth. “That’s…” she said slowly, “not necessarily true.”

The three stopped, turning to look at her. Aurora straightened—Celene’s heart clenched at the distinct glimmer of mistrust in her eye. “Celene? What is it?”

She took a shaky breath. She usually felt helpless in this form, but this was a mess of her own doing. “It’s true that my memories are muddled. Many of the details are fuzzy, and there are blocks of time that are missing completely. But…”

They stared.

She continued. “You do have the ability to transport yourselves to Trappist-1. Breathing may not be an issue either. If it is, your magic should be able to compensate you for the absence.”

Epsilon—that is, Narma, looked over to Aurora with disbelief before turning back to stare her down. “May not be an issue? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Even Ga—Carmen’s expression had become stern. “Celene. If you’re keeping something from us, you need to tell us.”

Now she was the one being scolded. Stealing herself, she said, “It’s possible you would have these abilities for the same reason you ‘remember’ your attacks. It’s why you ‘remember’ Trappist-1.”

Her heart was pounding. “Because you once would have lived there.”

Silence.

Aurora narrowed her eyes. “I don’t understand. Are you implying we’re aliens or somethin’?”

Oh. She struggled with herself. “No.” Perhaps it would be better just to blurt it out. “Your previous
reincarnations lived in that star system.”

Narma laughed, loud and sudden.

Rory balked. “You gotta’ be kidding me!”

“No.” She lowered her voice. “You were the princesses of those planets. The sworn Guardians of the Trappist-1 star-system.”

She watched Carmen raise her hands to her head. “I have so many questions.”

Aurora peered down to her. The girl’s lips were pursed. “Why…didn’t you tell us?”

Celene curled her tail around herself. “There are many things that happened back then that I don’t believe you are ready to hear. And truthfully…” She lowered her head. “There are things, as well, I did not want to remember. I thought these were memories which would only complicate your lives further, here, where you have other paths. Other families.”

Aurora’s gaze avoided her. “That’s…a lot to accept, Celene.” She straightened. “But you should have told us.”

“I know,” she admitted.

Carmen placed a finger to her chin. “Is there more that you remember?”

“Yes,” she forced out. “But there’s no time. If we don’t hurry, the Agent Lupido may indeed seize Delta’s soul. It’s obvious that if this Great Beast consumes the sun, the star system of Trappist-1 will be no more. I fear if the system is destroyed, your powers and your memories will be lost forever.” She peered up to the stars. Aurora had often said she could see the star, but to Celene, nothing registered in the image but the cold, dense expanse of space. “Even more, I doubt their plans stop with the Trappist-1 system, whatever their motives.”

The soldiers looked to each other. Narma was the first to speak. “So. How does this work?”

The soldiers gathered together as Celene finished her explanation. There was much she would be held accountable for, but for now, the primary concern was Delta’s safety. “Using all of your powers combined with mine, we should be able to generate enough energy to cast a teleportation spell. In order to do so successfully, we must be able to picture the place in mind. Even one of us should be able to guide us to the location, given the right factors.”

Carmen said, “But what if there are multiple places in the universe that look similar?”

They were all stopped by the question. “…if we do not have a location to look upon, coordinates would be the most ideal result.”

Narma put a fist on her hip. “What coordinates? We don’t want to end up in the sun, or something. I doubt even our powers would save us from burning to death.”

Celine sat back in the grass. “Ideally, the coordinates for wherever the agent’s main base is. If we don’t have them, we can still try, but we may end up wasting time trying to locate them.”

Narma blew out a breath. “How are we supposed to know that? Do you have some kind of sensing ability?”

Celine shook her head. They were likely going to be forced to guess. She just hoped that Delta
could hold out that long.

“No.” they all turned to Aurora as she spoke up. She held her chin pensively. “No, I might know a way to get those coordinates.”

Lisa Nguyen was a girl who believed in a good night’s sleep. She worked hard during the day, and sometimes the only thing stopping her from burning out was ASMR and a cool pillow. She shut down the simulation, closing her laptop, face washed and ready for bed.

The rest of the house was already quiet. She was usually the last one awake, despite everything.

As she laid down, her gaze drifted over the walls. Several of her posters once featuring other anime had recently been replaced by promotional materials from Japan. A certain Sailor Moon. Admittedly, she'd become a bit obsessive.

Her regular research had gained a fantastical slant. Each new body she encountered in space sent her into daydreams: what sort of powers? What would this Sailor look like? She wasn't even sure how it worked, but she wanted to know. She had even entertained the idea of herself possessing those powers, though she knew that would never happen.

She was just drifting off when she noticed a shape at her curtain, a silhouette shifting in the cream fabric as it fluttered with the air from the vent. In a swift motion, she sat up. As she kept staring, she could make out splotches of color, the glimmer of something reflecting the streetlight. Orange and marigold.

Perhaps the presence of someone at her window should have been alarming, but she recognized the shape in the curtain right away. Oh my gosh.

After a brief moment of examination, there was a soft knock at the pane. She whipped the comforter back, flying to the window, pulling it back. She registered additional shadows just before the image behind was revealed.

Her heart pounded. There stood the girl from her school—the city’s Sailor Moon. She was in full uniform, and Lisa was stunned to see two other figures behind her. There’s more of them! She’d heard of multiple in the news, but this was her first proof. She clicked the latch, shoving her window open. “You!”

The light-masked figure—that queer, holographic overlay—stepped a foot up to her window seal, black tights rendering her limb almost invisible in the darkness. She spoke, the two behind her staying silent. “I read online that you have an internship with NASA. Is that true?”

Lisa swallowed, trying to keep her composure even though fascination prompted a thousand questions at the sight of her: why that particular uniform? How did their powers work? How many of them were there? “Yes,” she forced out finally. “That’s true.”

The superhero(!) narrowed her gaze. “You’re making models for the ARC project?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “They’re just stationary maps off the radar; it’s really more to build my portfolio with the company than anything—”

She blew out a breath. “I need your help.”

Lisa said, “What can I do?” No hesitation. There were infinite possibilities about what this might
be about, and she didn’t care which one it was! She realized they were just standing exposed on her lawn. Stepping back, she gestured them forward. “Come in, come in.”

The Sailor Senshi (the title the Japanese media had given them, anyways,) stepped carefully through her window, crowding into her rather small bedroom. She appreciated its coziness, but the lack of space was not for the best at that moment. The one she knew (her name was Rory West, but somehow, it just didn’t feel right to think of her that way just then) gestured to the other two. “I know you know who I am—in uniform, I’m Sailor Beta. These are Sailors Gamma and Epsilon. Kinda’ stand-in titles, for now.” She re-focused. “If I needed to find the coordinates for a body in space, would you be able to find it for me?”

Lisa thought about it. “How big of a body?” That mattered. The larger the object, the easier it would be to find. “Also, the more parameters I have, the better the chance I have of locating it.”

Beta (she wondered where the name came from) peered back to her two companions. “We don’t know,” she said solemnly. “We at least know it’s in Trappist-1, between b and the star.”

“We could probably tell you more if we could see it,” the one referred to as Epsilon offered.

Lisa nodded, gesturing them over to her computer, where her feed of the radar was brought up after it’s streaming load-up. “The radar simulation is real-time, but it doesn’t offer a lot of detail. But I can try.” Her hands shook with the adrenaline of her current situation. She’d never been this energized working with a computer program before. She cricked her neck, examining the read-out as it came up. *Yikes.* “I should warn you, that’s almost two million miles of open space to cover. What am I looking for?”

Beta shifted uncomfortably. She couldn’t blame her; these were not favorable parameters. “Would we be able to see what the star would look like from different distances, seen from B? That would help.”

Lisa’s fingers paused on the keys, before continuing. “Yes, I think there’s a scaling tool. Hold on.” The fastest way to hone in on any locations would be fractionally. She set the reading to one million miles from the star. “How about this?” The planet and star were shown beside one another, their size difference more obvious. She resisted the urge to pry--what were they looking for?

Beta examined the black-and white simulation. “Further out,” she said. “Closer to b.”

She made the adjustment.

Beta shook her head again. “No, still too far. Try closer.”

She cut the feed a quarter million closer. When she did, an object registered at the acute detection level. She narrowed her eyes. “That’s strange.”

The one called Gamma leaned forward. “What is it?”

“There’s something here. It looks like an asteroid, but anything this close to the sun should have gotten caught in its orbit and burned up. Or Trappist-b’s orbit, I suppose, but it appears stationary. It’s moving with the planet’s revolution, but it’s not orbiting it.” She tagged the body, zooming in as the coordinates came up on screen. *This behavior is bizarre…*

“Can you show the view of Trappist-1 from that object?”

“Yes,” she said slowly, making the adjustment.
“That’s it.” Beta jammed a finger to the screen. “That’s what I saw. Lisa, we need the coordinates for that object.”

“Got it.” On a sticky note nearby, she jotted the location, though her mind was racing to fill in the gaps she didn’t have answers to. What she saw? What did that mean?

She handed over the paper. Beta took it, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you. You may have just saved that entire star system.”

“You’re assuming we’re going to win,” Epsilon said dryly.

Lisa wanted to scream. What on earth was happening?

“I am assuming that,” Beta shot back. “I have no choice but to assume that.”

There was a decidedly heavy silence. They started heading for the window again, and Lisa closed the simulation, watching them. She wanted to ask every question, but she got the sense they didn’t have much time.

With an out-of-body sensation, she watched them climb back out the window. At the last moment, Beta leaned back in the window, giving her a final smile. “Thanks again Lisa. I hope I see you at school tomorrow.” She said the words as if she might never appear in those hallways again.

Lisa wanted to feel success, gratification, maybe awe. But all she could feel, fingers poised helplessly over her keyboard as she watched the curtain’s empty flutter, cold and sudden, was fear.

Rory had done some research on Lisa after she’d found out her true identity, wanted an idea about who she was dealing with. Now, she was glad she did—without her help, they’d be just shooting themselves into space blindly.

Regardless, they were still shooting themselves into space.

They quickly decided on a spot—the closed off road nearby, where no one should have been at this time of night. Her mind was racing. They were about to teleport to Trappist-1, not even knowing if they would survive there. But they apparently had at some point, so…?

They had to try. Mallory, who’d just come into her powers, was trapped there. If there was any chance of bringing her back to Earth, they needed to do it. Not to mention what could happen if the Star System was actually destroyed.

“Alright,” Celene told them, their sprint stopping abruptly in the center of the road. “This is as good a place as any. You have the coordinates?”

Rory held them up, glancing to the others. “We all saw the map, right? That’s where we’re shooting for.”

What if she never came back? What if she never saw her Mama or Tyrell again? She wished the circumstances weren’t so rushed—she wanted to say goodbye better than the measly text she’d shot them leaving Lisa’s.

“Form a circle, Soldiers,” Celene instructed, climbing up to Rory’s shoulder. “And link hands.”

Gamma—agh, Carmen!—gave a shaky breath, taking her hand. “I’ve got to be honest, guys, I’m
freaking out a little.”

Narma cocked her head. “You ain’t alone there, girl.”

She thought about this being her last time her feet touched Seattle. She thought about the city—Sailor Moon had to face down threats all the time; what would happen if they were no longer there to defend it, now that this series of events had been set in motion?

She thought about the voice in her head. It was slowly dawning on her exactly what it was. If she was truly reincarnated from some princess in Trappist-1, wasn’t it her duty to defend it? There were so many blanks left to fill.

This was what she needed to do. She took a breath.

From her shoulder, she felt Celene tense. “Do not let go of one another! Concentrate on where you want to go! Then, on three, say, Sailor Teleport! One, two, three!”

The spoke it together. “Sailor Teleport—!”

The street was empty.

Elsewhere…

The blackness faded gradually. She groaned—apparently, she’d been out long enough to get a hangover. Or maybe she’d hit her head on something, hard to tell.

Mallory shifted. Something felt different. She couldn’t pin-point what it was, except that it wasn’t something physical. It was more like the atmosphere had changed. It was hot, a dry heat, too much for her heavy black hoodie. She could tell she was on the floor; inside, outside, hard to distinguish as her vision swum in and out. There was a particularly violent throb behind her eyes, and she spit out, “Fuck, my head.”

“Glad to see you survived the transport.”

There was someone nearby. She needed to assess her situation. Memories popping back in of her abduction, she changed strategies, opening one eye and squeezing the other closed in an effort to see. It did make things a little clearer.

A pant leg. A rather boring first reveal. She forced her gaze up and saw a guy with a dark ponytail, facing away from her. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t one-hundred percent certain you were one of them. It would have been difficult to get a good look inside that tower. But the fact that you’re still alive proves that I was correct. I have to appreciate a plan which falls so willfully into place.”

Damn. His shirt. That’s right—he had to be one of those Agent guys. Cover absolutely blown. Swallowing the dry air in her throat, she spoke. “Yep. You got the baby. Great accomplishment.” Fuck, the drink was still in her system. Must not have been that long. “I have to wonder, though, why you haven’t ripped my soul out of my chest yet. That’s your thing, right?”

As she generated more banter to keep him busy, she examined the place around them—she could see gray columns holding up a gray stone building, and around that, the night sky. Not a lot to go off of. Though she couldn’t think of anywhere in Seattle to get this good a view of the stars. Too
much light pollution.

“Mm.” He chuckled, low in his throat. Disturbingly sensual sounding. Yikes. “Don’t worry—that pure soul will be harvested in time. It just gives your friends more incentive to come for you if you’re still living.”

She said, “That’s fucked up.” Rolling to look around, her existing trains of thought derailed as she saw the night sky continue down, and down, until it met slate-like, rocky terrain. Oh, and there was a giant sun, burning bright red nearby. That should be decimating her corneas, but it didn’t. Okay, she took a breath, mind deciding between amazement and horror. I’m not on Earth anymore.

Okay, she had several questions. Why could she breathe? Why wasn’t she burning up this close to the sun? She couldn’t smell...anything, actually.

Above, she heard an electronic beep as a what looked like some kind of projected screen appeared in front of the guy. He kneeled. “Lady Pandorana.”

From her position, she couldn’t actually see the person he was talking to. Now would be the perfect time to be disruptive and cause some trouble for him, there was more to be gained out of listening. The more information she could gather, the better chance she had of getting out of here.

“Lupido!” A high-pitched voice called out from the communication. “After your silence the past week, I was starting to think you had abandoned our cause!” The voice was just a little too cheery.

He remained low. “On the contrary, my Lady. I have brought for our Great Beast an offering—the star soul of a Sailor Soldier.”

“Really?” The voice cooed.

“That’s right; the others thought that it was going to eat the sun. Turning back over, she looked towards the star, and gained an additional level of alarm when she realized there was something moving inside it. Holy shit. How could there possibly be a living creature so big? How did they ever think they were going to beat that?

There was enthusiastic clapping. “Excellent work, Lupido! I’ll admit, I had my doubts when you vanished on us, but this seems cause for a reevaluation. How soon can you be to the Temple?”

Mallory could practically hear the smug grinned on this guy’s smug face. “A matter of hours, my Lady.”

She heard the voice say, “My pet will eagerly await you, then,” before a parallel bloop turned the transmission off.

Mallory re-adjusted her position. She could tell, now, her hands were the only things tied, but the binding made her feel exceedingly unbalanced. “Hate to break it to you, buddy,” she grunted, pulling herself up. Her core muscles really needed some work, ouch, “but if you’re expecting the others to come here to get me, you’re out of luck. They have no way to get here.”

He didn’t look down at her—apparently, she wasn’t worth his time or something, which was a little insulting, honestly. “Oh, I believe you are mistaken about that.”
Turning towards her, she yelped as whatever was binding her hands (and she shuddered as she realized it had to be the shadowy material clinging to his arms) pulled backward, her arms sticking to the column behind her. *Oh, come on.*

He wiped his hands as if he were brushing off dust. “You may as well get comfortable,” he grinned. “These are the final moments of your life, after all.”

*What a dramatist.* “I’ll try not to get too wild.” She limply lifted her arms, which didn’t go much of anywhere.

He turned to leave. Wait, was he actually just going to leave her there? This guy was cocky.

But it was *hot,* and she would rather not be stuck here metaphorically and almost literally a hundred feet from the sun. Before he left though, he turned back. “I’m just going to make sure your friends will head in the right direction. I will be back.”

*I’m SO afraid.* She rolled her eyes.

The sound of his boots pattered away, Mallory focusing on the distance in the echo. When it was at its faintest, she sprang into action. Or, as well as one could tied to a Grecian column. *Alright, there’s got to be some way out of this.*

She was trained (self-trained, of course,) in escaping a number of survival situations. This was a bit different than the other scenarios she’d practiced, seeing as she was in space. She was still wearing her hoodie, and the scepter was in her pocket. Maybe if she could get to it, there was a better chance she could get out of this mess.

She didn’t know if magic had any relationship to science. But their uniform seemed to materialize from nowhere. If there was some sort of disassembly and reassembly happening on a molecular level, transforming might give her enough permeability to pass through the already immaterial binds.

Using her feet, she scooched back to the column. That didn’t exactly work (her arms were in the way,) but getting her arms closer to her was sort of the point anyway. Sweat dripped down her temple. *Damn, it was hot.*

With the increased slack in the shadowy binds (she was glad it had worked—she’d been concerned that ropes made of shadowy magic would just adjust automatically, but apparently not) she twisted her arms to the side, trying to reach down with the tips of her fingers. Clenching her jaw, she arched her back, eliminating more of the space between her pocket and her hands. *Should have taken that yoga class, Mallory.* Finally, the stretch in her fingers beginning to cramp, she reached inside—

It was empty.

Her pulse jumped. Did he find it when she was out? She’d been so sure he’d overlooked it. Maybe she was about to be stuck in this temple for the next few hours until her soul was eaten—

Her eyes caught on a navy shape on the other side of the central column. There it was, the scepter. She let herself breathe, scooting away again from the pillar. After only a foot away, the binding went taught again. She cursed under her breath. She eyed her outstretched legs—would that even work? She didn’t know how close to the device you had to get to activate it. Pushing her body out, she carefully slid across the stone, the tip of her sneaker getting farther and father. *Come on…one wrong move and I might kick this thing.*
Mallory flopped to the side, grimacing as her already sore shoulder smacked down onto the stone. She lifted her leg, worried the vibration would cause her foot to smack the wand.

But refocusing on the position of her foot, she could at least see that it was still in place. *Whew. Just a little bit further.* Her spine popping, she stretched out the tip of her toes, the edge of the sneaker finally touching the wand. *Got it!*

Nothing left to do but test her theory, she called out, “Crystal power Delta, Make-up!”

The light overtook her. The way it had before, the light enveloped her body, exchanging her ratty hoodie for her frilled uniform.

She sat up as the light faded. Looking behind her, she saw the shadow binds writhing, no longing having a hold on anything. She stood, quickly getting some distance from it. *Fuck yeah, science!*

She retrieved her scepter. It was odd—she could immediately feel a difference in the way the heat affected her, and the ache in her head was gone. *Instant hangover cure. Good to know.*

She peered out into the landscape. It was stony and covered in dust, craters dotting the surface. No sign of that guy. She’d better head out. She needed to either find that others, if what the Agent was saying was true, or find a way out of here.

They touched down, wind flying away from under their feet. It had been an odd feeling, more like the world had moved than they had.

And they *had* moved.

Narma opened her eyes. She hadn’t realized she’d closed them, though it had been bright. She had expected to be more disoriented than she was. Even so, they stood in their circle for several seconds simply staring at one another, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. Slowly, their hands came apart and Narma found equilibrium enough to look around.

The air disappeared from her lungs at the sight around them. Cratered stone on all sides, fields of dust…

And the sun.

Not their sun, apparently. The sun of Trappist-1. Rather than feeling relieved that they had made the trip, Narma’s stomach turned. They were in a totally alien star system. They were lightyears away from their homes, and, let’s face it—they had no idea what they were doing. The gravity of their situation was staggering.

Though, from what Celene had said, they actually had been there before.

Narma had always been curious about her previous reincarnations. Knowing that her last had been a princess from another planet was more than a little outside her imaginings.

Rory, as Beta, was the first to speak. “I think it’s safe to say we’re here.”

Celene hopped down from her shoulder. Really, the cat was the most reckless of all of them, only her claws to hold on when they’d traveled. *Daredevil cat.*

“Oh my god,” Carmen blurted out. Girl wasn’t even checking the view, just peering down at the
space around them. *Me too, girl.*

Narma’s eyes, still struggling to take everything in, fell on a shape in the distance. “Hey guys.” She pointed it’s position out on the horizon, the others following her finger. “That looks pretty spot on to me.”

Rory’s eyes lit up when they seemingly found the temple she’d seen. It really was Grecian looking, a sloping roof held up by thick stone pillars. “Yes! That could be what I saw in the portal.”

Celene shook the dust out of her fur. What about this landscape even caused the dust? Weird. “Then we better get going, Soldiers! Delta may not have much time!”

Narma wished they could have come in a little closer. Walking wasn’t one of the things she’d counting on while coming to the rescue.

They headed towards the structure. The more she thought about it, the more Narma started to think that they should have thought this through more thoroughly. Not that she wanted to just leave Mallory to rot, but they had kind of put themselves in a bad position. This was presumably where all those agent guys had come from, right? They had no idea what they were walking into here! Not to mention that if they did end up in trouble, they had no safe place to go. She wasn’t stupid—there was only one reason she could think of that Lupido would have taken the Mallory alive, instead of just ripping her soul out and dipping out: the girl was bait.

Seemed she wasn’t the only one feeling unnerved. Beside her, Carmen’s gaze kept flicking from one side of the wasteland to the other. “I really don’t like how exposed we are out here.”

She shot the girl a raised brow. “What, you don’t like having a target on your back?”

From the ground, Celene twitched her whiskers. The poor little cat had to squint against the dusty atmosphere near their feet. “I know this isn’t ideal, soldiers, but we’re going to have to do our best given the circumstances. But we should proceed with caution.”

Suddenly, Rory threw her arms out, stopping all of them short. “It might be too late for that, guys. Look!” She pointed above them, and Narma tensed at the sight of three figures hovering above. *Now that’s just unfair.* She braced herself, ready for a fight. “Hey! You guys! What you want?”

The stocky figure with bristly hair laughed. “What do we want? Why, girlie, you’re on our territory.”

The man with curly, dark hair and eyes like stoplights narrowed his eyes of them. “We don’t take kindly to your ilk dragging your corruption into our home.”

The last of the trio, a slender girl with big eyes and red hair, looked almost excited. “It works out better for us, though. We can have all of your star souls for ourselves!” The other two shot her a look. She raised her hands. “For the Great Beast, of course! In order to create a new pure galaxy! *Stars.*” She said the word like a curse, but Narma was more focused on what she just said.

‘To create a new galaxy?’ *Is that what they’re after?* Everything suddenly made a little more sense. *In order to build something new, you have to clear the lot first, I guess.* “So that’s your thing, then?” She voiced her thoughts as the other two turned to look at her. “Wipe out about this impure galaxy, and replace it with your own?”

The girl grinned. “That’s right!” Her grin widened, and Narma balled her fists as she saw a familiar dark smoke bubble into being around her hands, and along her spine. *This is bad.* The girl said, “And you get to be a part of it!”
The others following the example, the three of them crashed to the ground before Narma, more of the viscous smoke collecting over their bodies.

“Be careful, soldiers!” Celene screeched from behind them, voice strained.

_No reason to give them a head start._ She thrust her arms out. “Typhoon Strikedown!” They’d been arrogant to get so close. The torrent crashed down on all three of their heads, the Agents flinching away from it. But that didn’t last long. Narma barely had a chance to move as the girl, shadows now resolved into paws and a tail, came running at full speed. Narma dropped, rolling out of the way as she heard Rory fire a Dire Gust, and Carmen fumbling through a Harmonious Bellicoso. She stood again as fast as she could, eyes searching for the fox-like girl as chaos erupted around her.

There. Even without her legs having any sort of shadowy enhancement, she ran at her inhumanly fast. As she got close, Narma prepared to dodge, but then the girl opened her mouth and _screamed._

The noise wracked through her, sending a shock down through her toes. She was stunned, and when the fox-girl reached her, she was too rattled to prevent her from knocking her to the ground. The cacophony around her was reduced to a ringing noise. Hand-to-hand, she battled the agent whose hand was going for the glowing spot in her chest. She was determined, moving faster and more precisely than Narma could in her disorientation.

The girl’s hand grasped at the center of her chest, where a growing light was intensifying. Narma gasped, trying to get air in under the assault, but she couldn’t think straight—

“Harmonious Bellicoso!”

The musical notes rang out as they closed around the agent, the girl writhing long enough for Narma to wriggle back and out of her grasp. Nearby, she heard heavy footsteps and the sound of an impact, only to catch Rory flying past her, landing to curl defensively on the ground. The big guy chuckled (now donning some angular fists and two huge tusks) stomping towards her. “Heh.”

“Thanks,” Narma panted as the fox girl shook it off, standing back up.

Carmen was grasping her side, where Narma could already see blood leaking from a wound. Wincing still, she said, “Don’t mention it.”

Nearby, Rory managed to get back up, but her Dire Stellar Gusts didn’t seem to be doing anything against the big guy’s massive bulk.

“Switch,” Narma shouted, gesturing Rory towards the weakened fox girl. Maybe a water attack would do that one guy better.

But then something seared past her arm, burning the skin and getting gradually worse. She yelled, turning to see the red-eyed guy having gained a snout, shooting balls of black shadow with the consistently of fire in all directions. _Fuck!_

Rory had already taken the cue, though, Carmen dodging fireballs in the background as she fired off a gust that made the fox-girl even madder.

Turning her hand, she felt enough energy returned to her from earlier to fire again. Carmen turned to look at her, and they both saw their opportunity. They took the positions. They shouted, “Punishing Cascade!”
The fountains caught the boar and the dragon guy in their rounds of assault, the boar seemingly brushing it off but the dragon’s fire momentarily quenched. “Yeah!” Rory cried, the gust she’d summoned and had been using like blades finally dissipating. She hadn’t seen the attack before, but in the way she grinned, Narma thought her belief in them winning might have just gotten a bit more optimistic.

But then the big guy straightened. In his rumble of a voice, he said, “You get these two. I’ve got the weakling.”

Narma’s heart jumped in alarm as the massive agent charged right for Carmen. The girl yelped as he slammed into her—

--and they disappeared.

“Carmen!” Rory yelped as Narma blinked at the spot they’d just been in.

She grit her teeth. “No time,” she yelled, backing out of the way as the dragon guy’s nostrils leaked smoke. “We’ve got to take these guys out.”

She just hoped that Carmen was going to be able to handle that guy by herself.

Wherever they were.
Chapter 13

Episode 13: A True Monster—or, An Impromptu Meeting with The Lady of the House!

At first, Carmen was unsure what had happened. She saw the boar-like agent charge in towards her, felt a yank on her arm strong enough she feared it would pop free from the socket. She was thrown forward, skidding along the stone as the dust scratched her skin. But when she looked up, there was just an expanse of wasteland as far as she could see. Wait—far, far in the distance, could that have been the same temple? She stared, dumbfounded.

Until she heard the shuffling behind her. She turned, getting up into a crouch. There was the boar agent, his massive bulk looming over her. He crossed his arms, the sharp tusks sticking out of his cheeks like giant thorns. “It’s just you and me, girlie.”

They turned their attention away from that place Carmen had disappeared. The fox girl bristled. “Damn it, Edacitas! That star soul was supposed to be mine!” Pause. “Ours!”

The fire balls were still flying. Narma knew the pithos had their weaknesses—she had to assume the agents were the same way. Her geysers had to have made a dent, right? Rory’s gusts didn’t seem ideal for either of these guys. Not to mention fox girl. She’d been hit so many times, she had to be getting weak by now. Still, as Narma frantically weaved, trying not to get burned again, fox girl stayed right on her heels.

Wait. That gave her an idea.

“You’re pretty fast,” she called back, “but it looks like you’re just not fast enough to catch me twice.”

The dragon guy spoke, seething. “Yes, Avaritia, what are you doing? Hurry up and catch them!”

The girl whined, “Don’t fuss at me, Ira! Help!”

Dragon guy stepped up his game, the spheres of dark fire coming faster and faster from his shadowy maw. He grit out, “Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

Narma caught Rory’s eyes, who seemed to understand her play. “Missed me,” Narma snarked as the girl screamed again, and she ducked under sphere of influence. She took a sharp left towards Rory, who was at least battling the fire away admirably with her gusts, but who moved suddenly out of the way as the agent Avaritia reached her.

The wind dissipated. In his anger, the agent Ira had resorted to a constantly roaring flame attack, more like he was actually breathing fire than before. The shield gone, the attack hit the other Agent dead on.

She screamed. For a second, Narma almost regretted doing it, before she remembered these guys were actively trying to steal their souls.

When Ira realized what had happened, she could see him try to cut the assault, but it was too late. In the afterimage of where Avaritia had been standing there, her figure turned to dust.
He took a breath, and then also screamed, no damage in the yell but to let them know just how pissed he was. “You would turn our attacks against our own comrades? You are truly deplorable.” It was only a second before the onslaught continued, the flames cutting a line across Rory’s chest.

“Rory!” Narma yelled, watching as she directed the lingering gust to bat the flames away. Still, she could see it had gotten her good—the arm which had been blocking the attack was pock-marked with ugly blisters.

“Aurora!” Celene cried from behind them.

Rory said, grimacing, “I’m okay,” Before unleashing a forceful blast that knocked the agent back.

“We have to finish this. You up for a combo?”

“Anytime,” Narma shot back as the agent regained his bearings.

“Now!” She yelled.

They called out, “Extreme Slashing Vortex!”

The shrapnel-ridden whirlpool surrounded the agent, who roared against the assault.

“Close him in!” Narma said, and Rory nodded, shrinking the diameter of the vortex, giving the Agent nowhere to run. Even in the vacuum of noise it created, she could hear his furious yells, fire shooting desperately from the Cyclone’s eye. Water filled in the gap, leaving the Agent to endure both a lack of air and the flurry of slices from all sides. Finally, there was the burst of light then disintegration as the Agent’s form collapsed.

They backed off. The two of them panted, the energy needed to hold the cyclone’s form when her usual attack was so simplistic making her weak in the knees. “I really hate these guys,” Narma said, wiping sweat from her brow that had nothing to do with the enormous sun right in front of them.

Rory peered out the landscape, before her eyes came back to land on the temple in the distance.

The three of them—Rory, Celene, and herself—looked to each other, debating over the best thing to do in this situation.

The had no idea where Carmen was.

They had no idea where Mallory was.

From here, they could only see the temple.

“We have to keep going.” Rory looked back to her with pursed lips. They were both aware of how grim their situation was. “This asteroid is huge. We could look for them for days and never find them.” She pointed to the structure. “But we know that’s something. We saw columns in the portal.”

Narma didn’t like it either, but at this point, it was their best option. “When you’re right, girl, you’re right.” She just hoped the others could survive until they found them again.

Carmen stood. She cursed to herself—she had to stop getting in these situations! It seemed like she was getting cornered alone more than anyone else, time after time.

“I’ll get the weak one.”
The weak one. This zealot had gotten one look at them, and had immediately pointed her out as the weak link. And he was right—compared to Rory and Narma, her powers were much less developed, and she was much less comfortable in battle than they were.

She couldn’t deny it stung. Her brain said, *Even a stranger knows you’re not good enough.*

*No.* She shook her head. She couldn’t let herself fall back into that line of thinking, especially not when her friend’s life was on the line. *Focus on the fight. Drown it out.*

Carmen narrowed her eyes, the Agent at the same moment lowering his jaw, ready to charge. She’d done gymnastics as a girl, but she’d stopped when her mother passed. She wondered if there was any muscle memory left from that time? Her heart clenched, the image of her mother greeting her at the sidelines as she finished her first junior competition.

She could only hope. Evasion seemed key here.

He took off, lumbering towards her, the spears of his tusks glinting in the light of Trappist-1. She let him come, swallowing until at the last second she leapt, pivoting to face him again as he missed her. As he turned, (an effort, it seemed, at his girth,) she shouted “Harmonious Bellicoso!” The attack swept around him, his solid body making him an easy target. The notes flashed against him, his figure momentarily tensing as he took the brunt of the attack head-on.

She noted the burn-like marks on his flesh. It had obviously done something, but not enough. This was usually the part where one of the others would make a move, but she had to fill in her own gaps here. That was bad. The more familiar the Agent became with her attacks, the more likely he was to be able to avoid them. She would just have to be strategic, catch him by surprise.

He turned. He wasn’t even trying to run this time, but even his pounding footsteps coming towards her were intimidating. “Now, that was just rude.”

Reaching around to his side, she watched him reach for a bottle on his belt, which he opened up. The substance inside had the same consistency as the smoke. Holding it up to his mouth, he chugged.

She hadn’t mean to say anything out loud, but the disgust that shuddered through her made her blurt out, “What *is* that?”

“Corruption, girlie.” He swallowed. She gulped as the shadows coursed over his skin, making the muscles of his arms bulge. He wiped his mouth as she backed away. “The pithos have to leave something behind. You didn’t think it just disappeared, did ya?”

He turned towards her, but she wasn’t far away enough yet. In a burst of speed, he surged forward. She managed to avoid the tusks, but his fist connected firmly with her jaw. Pain erupted, and she knew she was going to fall, but she managed to flip back instead.

He charged at her again, sweeping his tusks—she rolled behind him. “We wouldn’t usually eat it; not good for the temple, you know.” He patted his stomach. “I guess you could say,” he said, “It gives us a bit of a boost.”

She glared. “Consuming corruption? If you’re benefiting from it, doesn’t that make you just as bad as them?”

“You watch your tone,” he grumbled. He stumbled towards her, a moving wall of flesh. His fists struck out while his tusks thrust forward. One hit her in the side, and she winced, ducking quickly out of the way of more damage. At least it was her left side this time—her right was still burning...
from her hit with a fireball, not to mention that the snake Agent had struck her in the same spot several days before.

Still, the new wound seeped lazily into the fabric of her uniform. *I can’t keep taking hits like this. I’ve got to do something.*

The Agent seemed to be getting more irritated. He growled. “This was supposed to be quick.” Grumbling, he reached around for another bottle of that odd liquid.

Wait—it was a liquid. Didn’t her Bellicoso spark?

As he opened the bottle and poured the fluid in, she fired the attack—directly towards his open mouth. “Harmonious Bellicoso!”

The music burst into being. As she had hoped, the notes sparked around him, then seemed to catch—his body convulsed with light as the attack hit him from the inside.

He screamed, a horrible gurgle filling the air. She was struck with a sense of pity, but reminded herself of the stakes. *This is life or death, Carmen.*

He didn’t fade. The energy reverberated around him. “You’re going to regret that,” he managed to spit out, looking ready to move towards her again.

Panic coursed through her. With finality, she prayed and called out, “Mesmeric Pacification!”

The light descended over him. He fell to one knee, his all-over-tremble letting her know how difficult it was for him to stay upright. “Okay,” he huffed. “You got me.” As she watched, dust began to leak out from his shoulder, steadily more and more at a time. “Looks like I made the wrong call here.”

She balled her fist, feeling sick at the sight of his just slowly wasting away. “Where’s my friend?”

“Couldn’t tell ya,” he smiled grimly. “But your friends won’t find her heading that direction. If she just got brought here, it’s impossible to transport directly into the temple.”

Her eyes widened. Then that couldn’t have been what Rory saw in the portal! She had to tell her!

Her eyes scanned the horizon, then stopped. In the distance, not too far away, she could see a much smaller structure with the same architecture, those pillars. She glanced back towards the temple. She could go and get the others first, but if she did, what assurance did she have that she would find it again?

Hesitating, she left the Agent behind, boots stomping through the layer of grit the stones had accumulated. She should at least check and see if there was anything there or not.

Beta and Epsilon reached the temple without further interference. After the three Agents had attacked them upon their arrival, Beta had expected more of a defense system than this, but they tromped up the temple steps in absolute silence.

“It’s eerie here,” Epsilon hopped off the last step rubbing her arms, though there was no way she was cold. Even with the protection provided to them via their uniforms, the sweltering dry heat hung over them from behind. On the up side, they were all going to get killer tans.
Celene padded up the steps behind them. “Just be careful, Soldiers! We don’t know what may lie inside this fortress.”

It was dead quiet. They needed to find Mallory, but unfortunately, the sun could have been seen from just about anywhere in the temple given its size. Beta—agh! She was doing it again! Rory wished she could have seen something more helpful in the portal. She should have been paying closer attention.

As they rounded the side of the temple walk, over the hill, where they could see over the crux. "Hey," Narma nudged her. "Look there."

But she was already looking. In the distance, farther away than it had been in her imagination, Rory could see a yellow and orange planet. Its red peaks rose from the atmosphere like meringue. As she looked on at the planet, she knew it had to be Trappist-1b. She did feel something, like a resonance. Inside, she could also hear something, like a word—the same way she sometimes did when remembering attacks.

Bora--

Boea--?

She shook her head. It was right there, but just...not there. "Yeah," she said quietly. She glanced to Narma’s face, which held an unreadable expression. She felt kind of bad, knowing that she was able to see hers and Trappist-1e was much further away. "We should keep going."

They moved further into the temple. As they moved past the windows, the stars reflected in from outside were beautiful. It was hard to believe this was the base of the group who wanted to steal souls and destroy the universe.

As they neared a particular doorway, Narma suddenly hushed her, crouching down to snatch up Celene as she crossed the doorway. The cat thrashed for a moment before Narma pointed for them to check the room. Rory held her breath, listening.

"—would have thought he would have checked back in by now, with how adamant he was about his success." It was a high-pitched voice, though something about it made Rory's skin crawl.

"Perhaps he was right about the other Sailor Soldiers coming after their comrade. If he's taking longer, perhaps we will gain more than expected."

She and Epsilon turned to look at one another with wide eyes. This had to be their leader. They’d just come here for Mallory, but if they had the chance to take out the leader, shouldn’t they?

“Celene,” Rory hissed. “You see anyone else in there?” She watched the cat’s eyes survey the space.

“Just one man,” she whispered, “and whoever’s on the throne.”

Rory bit her lip. The downside was that they didn’t know how strong these guys were. If Mallory wasn’t there, and they didn’t know where Carmen was, they should at least look for them before they tried to engage. If there was a chance of getting a numbers advantage here, they needed to take it.

But then, the archway she braced against gave way beneath her palm. As she watched, stomach clenching with tension, the rubble splashed the floor, and there was a sharp silence as their impact echoed into the throne room.
Rory’s body locked in place, trying to pretend that didn’t happen. She and Narma stared at one another, frozen. Celene’s fur puffed up into a huge orange ball.

“Come out,” a deep voice barked from inside, “We know you’re there.”

Rory and Narma silently debated what to do. Slowly, they stood up, before proceeding into the throne room. They were busted—might as well see what they were dealing with.

In a burst of speed, the rushed into the room. Beta didn’t want to give them a chance to spring any traps. The more even the playing field, the better. There was the sharp *shing* of a blade being pulled from a scabbard. She wasn’t sure where she recognized the noise from; a show on television, or some far-off memory?

She turned, getting her bearings on their enemies before them. There was a man—his uniform as more colorful than any of the agents white clothing, though his burgundy uniform shirt and emerald green pants bore the same symbols as the agents had. He had a coif of teal hair and tan skin. He sword splayed out in a defensive position, blocking their access to the person on the throne, who was…

Rory’s eyes widened.

*It’s a kid.*

Carmen forced her boots through the dust, which only seemed to get deeper, almost sand like, the further she went out. Internally, something said *you’re wasting time*, but she ignored it. She hadn’t even been able to see in the second structure from where they had first landed. It was smart and check this place first. *What if you can’t find your way back? What if you choke on the dust? Keep going.*

She crested an outcropping of stone, not having realized there was a gap in the terrain before. *This kind of wasteland really plays tricks on your eyes.* As she lowered herself into the valley, boots wanting to slip on the smooth stone, she noticed a shape against the gray expanse. She recognized the teal boots and navy hair as she touched down in the basin. She ran over. “Mallory!”

“Hey.” The girl shot her a salute. She looked lost and uncomfortable, dust in the creases of her uniform and sweat sitting on her temple. Weird, it actually didn’t seem that bad to her, but it must be, right? The sun’s right there. Maybe it was something about the uniform? Mallory wouldn’t have been wearing when she first got there. “Got to admit, I’m happy to see a familiar face.”

Carmen leaned on her knees, slightly out of breath and needing a stretch after all the walking. “It’s not all good news, I’m afraid. This place is swarming with the agents. We already ran into three on the way in.” She straightened—that’s right, though. Mallory hadn’t been in ideal circumstances either. “But you were here with that Lupido guy, weren’t you? Are you alright?” He made her shudder just thinking about him.

Mallory brushed her hair behind her ear. “Eh, I was mostly still drunk, so it wasn’t that bad. But I think he got what he wanted, though. Sorry.”

The girl seemed nonchalant, but Carmen got the feeling she really did blame herself by the way she averted her eyes. *She’s probably embarrassed. She does consider herself somewhat of an expert, after all.*

She waved a hand, surveying the land around them. It was going to be a trial getting back up that
hill; she could hardly see over it anymore. “Don’t blame herself. That guy’s a major creep. He
seems to come out of nowhere sometimes…” She trailed off. She didn’t like how quiet it was here.

“Oh perhaps my arrival was so anticipated, you were merely inviting the surprise?”

Carmen’s heart jolted as she whipped around to see Lupido standing at the opposite crest. His
hands were folded as he stepped into visibility, and she swallowed. *This is not the time to panic.*

“How can’t you just leave us alone?” She stepped back, Mallory stepping back too.

He stared down at them out of the corner of his eye. “That’s a little unfair, isn’t it? After you’ve
been such a tease.”

Her skin was trying to escape her body. How had she ever thought anything was charming about
this man? She moved to brush down the goose bumps on her arm. She hated the way he leered
down on them, the way he spoke to her. It was repulsive.

She knew what kind of man this was—slimy, like the ones who attended her father’s parties, and
said disgusting things to her when her father was turned away. She brought her hands up as a
warning as he slid down the hill. “Get back,” she shouted.

He kept smiling—he was always smiling. “Just admit it. You were going to give it up because you
know you’re not worth their time.” He shook his head. “The last time we parted? That was a fluke.
Even your most powerful attack couldn’t kill me. What could you possibly think could do any
better?”

Unintentionally, she brought her hand her chest, where the star soul lay beneath. She could feel its
subtle pulse beneath her fingers as the dust wisped around them.

He was right—she had been willing to put herself at risk before. And yes, there were still those
moments when the internal voices wanted to pull her back into that old spiral, the mantra of ways
she didn’t deserve to be there, with them, or anywhere.

Mallory peered over to her, puzzled. “Carmen? What’s he talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she snapped, eyes narrowing at the agent at the opposite end of the gully.
Inside, something surged up in her, whether out of bravery or pure exasperation. “Whatever
happened before, we’re going to defeat you just the way I was able to before. It doesn’t matter if it
takes longer or what different combination of attacks it’s going to take.” She thrust a finger in his
direction. “This is the last time I’m going to see your face!”

“Holy shit, Carmen,” Mallory’s eyebrows lifted to her hairline.

He whistled. “Whoo. Where’d that come from? I was definitely right about this being the best way
to go.” He shook his head. Then one eye focused in on her. “But.”

Something about the look put her all the way on guard, “Be careful, Mallory. This is the guy we
were fighting up on Mt. Rainer.”

“Oh, shit,” Mallory’s report of the dead hiker was becoming more and more suspect by the second.

“What you don’t know,” he said, “is that I’ve had a bit of an upgrade since the last time we
fought.” Black poured over his limbs, more than he had had before for sure. Something about the
way it pulsed though looked familiar.
She thought about the boar Agent. “You’ve eaten corruption,” she realized. She ground her feet into the dust. “I just beat another guy who’d done the same thing.”

He laughed. “You must mean Edacitas. He always was a glutton for the stuff. But I’m afraid you’re mistaken. Yes, this is corruption—” Black leaked over his face, his canine maw coming into form leaving his words with an inhuman slur, “—but not the watered down gunk left behind by the pithos. No, this is corruption harvested right from the source.”

The people? It struck her—they always transformed the pithos from people. “You killed them,” she said. “You ate the sin inside them.”

“Okay, I am not following this,” Mallory interjected from behind her.

He chuckled. His legs were disfiguring into that backwards hook the way they had before. The claws on both his arms were massive. The jaw had become larger than anything he could have actually supported on his body, almost cartoonish. It infected his muscles like a steroid, and they bulged in bizarre patterns all over his body. “Sin, corruption—same thing. I’m getting rid of it one way or another. And once I’ve gotten rid of you, I can follow up with entire rest of this universe. Ha! I might as well be the next Great Beast!”

She swallowed at the unnatural anatomy of the creature he’d become. “Be careful,” she told Mallory. “I don’t think he’ll stop at just taking the star souls anymore.”

The misshapen figure lurched towards them, gaining sudden speed as its enormous jaw came snapping at them. They scrambled out of the way in opposite directions. The creature—was he even a person anymore? Had he ever been?—Left a trail of shadows behind him that cut through the dust. The edge of the wisps brushed Carmen’s calf, burning her through her tights.

“You can run as much as you like,” Lupido said, though his voice had distorted to a growl. “It just makes it more fun for me.”

Carmen raised her fingers, heart pounding as he turned back towards her. “Harmonious Bellicosos!” She screamed. The music flowed away from her, wrapping around the agent like a rope or a ribbon. The melody rung out loud in the shear isolation, the shadowy black abomination undulating wildly as the notes blasted against his flesh. Carmen stumbled out of the way as the agent broke free, the oversized head snapping its jaws together, swinging them side-to-side.

Mallory had fallen to the ground at some point. Across the basin, she made a short circular motion with her hand, calling out, “Destiny Chain!” before aiming for the beast.

Before her, Carmen watched the chain’s spear-end burst through the creature’s chest, the wind marked with a glowing δ. The agent stared down at the skewering for a moment before raising his head, turning towards Mallory. “Barely a tickle,” he rumbled, and Mallory’s eyes gained a distinct spark of ‘oh, shit,’ before she booked it out of the way.

Carmen eyed the two, trying to decide where to go from here. She cursed silently to herself—Mallory didn’t have any other attacks. She acknowledged the irony; she’d been in his exact same position not too long ago. She darted for Lupido—she had to distract him.

As she ran towards him, the wind was knocked from her body as his paw came swinging back. She crashed back into the stone, stars dancing in her vision as she struggled to regain her footing. Even with her vision blurred, she could see the black mass of shadows moving towards her. **Come on. Just like last time, you have to strategize.** She threw herself in the dirt, still trying to recover as he raked his claws shrilly down the stone. Concentrate.
“Hey!”

She could see Lupido’s attention turn as Mallory’s voice echoed from down across the field.

“How ‘bout you tango with me, fuck-o?”

Her vision clearing, she could see Mallory holding a firm stance before the creature. Even after his transformation, Carmen could still make out the slimy grin as it stretched across his too long face. “I appreciate this one’s fire.”

As he turned to her, she heard Mallory fire off her attack several times, but she knew it had a turn time like Narma’s. Another chain weakly shot out to stab Lupido through the chest, but it didn’t seem to make a difference. He snatched up the other soldier like some sort of pest, burying his massive claws into her chest without hesitation.

Mallory choked, and Carmen forced herself up, staggering into a run as the monster brought her up to his face, where its wicked jaw was dripping ichor.

“Let her go!” Carmen yelled before firing a Bellicoso up at his jaw. Mercifully doing what she wanted, the ribbons surrounded the monster’s maw, stopping him at least from opening. Struggling, he relinquished his grip on Mallory.

Her heart stopped as she saw a familiar bright light in his grip. Her eyes flew to Mallory, who was still on the ground, turned away—she couldn’t see the state of her chest after the claws had been ripped away.

She looked back to the light.

There it was. It looked like a mass of crystal, like some kind of quartz deposit in a cave, clutched in between his claws. It glowed incessantly, the central crystal a deep blue-green color, a fact she could barely see through the brightness. It was shaped almost like a flower.

He shook his head, grinding his teeth together. After a moment, as if they were something more physical, the ribbons snapped away from him, dissipating into light as they fell towards the ground.

Then, before she had a chance to intervene, the claws came up to the mouth. They passed between the teeth—

--and he swallowed.

The light abruptly vanished. In a moment of numbness, she heard Lupido victoriously cry, “I am the beast!”

She was horrified, the whole scene playing out like a train wreck though it only lasted a few seconds. Mallory—was Mallory dead? That was her soul. Could a person even survive if their soul was outside their body? He’d eaten it!

Her distraction cost her. She shrieked as he snatched her up instead. “You’re cute,” he grumbled, “but I’m starting to think you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

Her heart thudded as she neared the massive teeth—she’d been worried about her soul being ripped out, but being chewed to pieces hadn’t even been on her radar. She stretched down, jammed her boot into the hinge of his jaw. There had to be some way to stop. She grit her teeth. “No--!”

And he grunted as the shadow jaw was wrenched to the side with her struggle.
“Hold, agh, still!” He seemed done with games, trying to force her into the proximity of his jaw by sheer will alone.

Wriggling enough to bring her arms together before herself, she managed to bring her two pointer fingers up, which she jammed unapologetically down the beast’s throat. “Harmonious Bellicoso!” He thrashed and choked as the attack flowed down his throat, and despite himself, he dropped her. She writhed away, crawling on her elbows through the sand until she could bring herself back up to stand.

Shadowy gunk fell to the ground on all sides, as if the beast were melting. He was falling to pieces, but only slowly. There, though—in the mass of shadowy flesh, she caught sight of a familiar light. The star soul!

She crawled towards it, reaching into the muck even as it burned through her gloves. There, the crystal looked almost untouched, an aura of light surrounding it that gave the artifact an untouchable quality. She dislodged it. It was like holding magnets of the same poles. She had to lock her hands around it to make it stay still.

She ran to Mallory. While there was no physical wound, shadowy black marks like tattoos covered her torso. The star soul, as if she had finally found the right magnetic field, locked into a certain spot on Mallory’s chest—she pressed inward.

It sunk.

“Ugh.” Even such a simple exhalation carried when the voice delivering it had become so distorted. Carmen staggered up. Turning to the beast, her stomach turned. Lupido had become like a creature made of tar, dripping shadows over the landscape, where they sizzled. “Can’t say I appreciate your acting out,” he gurgled. Under the immense pile of shadowy remains, she could see his human face beneath, eyes disguised by drippage and perpetual smile slipping into something bone-chilling. “It’s a turn-off.”

She gritted her teeth. Not over yet.

“Down here!” Carmen’s eyes darted over to see the place where Mallory was gesturing from the ground. She’d managed to pull herself up to one knee, the soul no longer visible. Reaching an arm down, she hauled the girl up, where her stance still seemed unsteady. Still, their proximity, or maybe it was the exertion, seemed to call up something in her mind. She knew this feeling—could she call upon it again? Maybe just this once. She felt the presence of her scepter in her skirt’s sash. I need some help here.

With a surge of confidence, Carmen straightened, arms still supporting Mallory at her side. “Toying with the hearts of young girls for your own sick gratification? How dare you accuse others of corruption!”

Mallory snorted. “Not to mention you’re a murderer.”

Carmen thrust her finger out, stomach churning as the mass of shadows continued to advance on them. “For your crimes, you can’t be allowed to take one more step. Delta, can you hear it?”

She wasn’t sure where the urge to refer to her that way had come from, but the girl seemed to understand that she was talking to her. “I’m picking up what you’re putting down, Sarge.”
As the shadow of the beast loomed over them, Mallory got her hands together into a V formation as Carmen did the same.

They shouted the phrase that was ringing through Carmen’s mind, had to be ringing in Mallory’s too: “Piercing Rectification!”

The chain, larger than normal and singing a tone like a tuning fork, shone bright as it shot through the air towards the agent. In ricocheted off the ground and above the beast until the links had almost formed a cage around it, before abruptly sinking.

The creature roared, dust bursting in the air as they shielded themselves away from it. Eventually, the tone faded, and the air slowed back to its dry waves of heat. Carmen lowered her arms, brushing black dust like soot off where it had gathered in the creases of her gloves.

Out in the ditch before them, they were scorch-like marks in the stone where the chain had finally broken through to the ground. “We did it,” Mallory said, tone flat.

It was as if a physical weight had been lifted, knowing he was gone. But there was, in truth, a part of her that felt dirty, being grateful over someone else’s death. Even so, this wasn’t her personal vendetta on the table here—it was a matter of preserving this universe. Now, at least, the universe was closer to re-achieving the balance of power.

Still. Her eyes turned to the looming, red sun, the star whose body writhed with an awful parasite. There was still one thing.

She turned, looking over to Mallory. The girl looked exhausted, bangs sticking to her forehead. “Are you alright? We’ve never had a star soul that far separated before.”


Carmen took a breath. *I’m a little surprised she’s handling it so well.* Carmen brushed down the hairs on the nape of her neck, disturbed by the wind. “You missed kind of a lot, honestly. I can tell you on the way.”

Mallory kicked a stray stone. “I’m a teenage girl with super powers from another galaxy, fighting to stop a monster that’s going to eat the sun. How much more complicated could it get?”

“You’d be surprised.” She peered back to the crest of the basin. “If you’re okay to move, we need to get going. Rory and Narma were heading towards this huge temple when an agent zapped me out here, and I’m betting it’s the agent’s main base. They’re going to need our help.”

They began climbing their way out of the dip, back in the direction of their friends.

“Also, if the sun could not be eaten, that would be great.”

Rory’s heartbeat pounded, unsure what to do with this information.

*It's just a little kid.*

She was a little girl, tan skin and wavy brown hair. She had a lilac gown that could have been styled after the lead in a Disney princess movie—actually, it was pretty spot-on for the one that girl from Hercules wore? She sat up in the throne, and her legs hanging down didn’t even touch the floor. She couldn’t have been more than seven or eight. “It’s really nice of you,” she said, “to
bring the star souls to us instead of making us look for them anymore. My pet was getting really hungry.” She gestured behind them.

Rory glanced behind—from the throne room’s foremost plateau, the sun was in full view. Inside, through the brightness, Rory could just catch glimpses of a shadow moving within. The Great Beast! It’s in the sun?

She turned back. The girl’s wide-eyed smile was laser-focused, dissecting them from across the room. It didn’t change as she said, “Unless that’s not why you’re here.”

“Lady Pandorana.” The Guard-looking guy didn’t take his eyes off of them, moving cautiously towards them with his sword extended. “I believe these intruders mean to do you harm. Permission to engage.”

Rory closed her hand around the scepter, narrowing her eyes. Lady Pandorana—some of the agents referred to a ‘Lady.’ So she is the one in charge.

Celene hissed.

Narma, ever a woman to get to the point, had apparently gotten sick of them just staring at each other. “Hey Shakespeare.” She jabbed a gloved hand in the guard’s direction. “You and Polly Pocket need to call off the Beast. We kind of need this universe.”

Well, that was one way to say that, Rory sighed. That was a way. “Yeah,” she backed her up regardless. “You and those Agents might think you’re spreading purity or something, but everywhere those guys show up, things only get ugly.”

The girl didn’t bat an eye. She giggled, expression unchanging. “Oh, those agents. They might think they’re pure, but they don’t realize they’re just larger vessels for the corruption. They’re no different than the pithos. But we needed some method for filtering out the corruption—something to seal it away. Do excuse them.”

Narma thrust an arm out. “They’re not excused!”

Rory sighed. Oh, boy.

The guard guy lowered her stance, gripping his blade tighter.

“Now, now, Elpis,” the little girl tutted. “Don’t be rude to our guests. I want to hear them try to defend themselves before we call judgement.” She kicked her legs. “We are a fair and just people.”

“My Lady…” The guard, (Elpis, she guessed,) held the position in reluctance, before bringing the blade back up to his side. “Of course.” His eye passed over them, scrunched in distrust.

Rory grit her teeth. What did they expect them to say? “Look,” she said, “I don’t know why you want to rebuild the universe, but your ideas about eliminating the corruption in this world are never going to work! Everyone makes mistakes, and everyone has made bad decisions. There’s a little bit of darkness in everyone—that’s just a part of being alive!” They couldn’t expect everyone to be perfect and, ugh, ‘pure’ all the time, it just wasn’t realistic! “It’s in choosing to overcome those dark parts of yourself that goodness is able to exist!”

“You’re wrong.”

Beta stopped talking. In Pandorana’s face, the smile had grown tense, as if she were struggling to keep it up.
She said, “Corruption is the force that destroys worlds. You have not seen the extent of its influence, but I have. The corruption would become more than your world could handle, until the only option becomes for that world to be swallowed whole.” Her eyes were cold, looking on Rory and Narma as if she were staring through, not at them.

Narma took a step forward. “You mean the same way you’ve been destroying worlds?”

The girl looked stricken. Her small hands tensed on the throne. “No, no, no! What we do is a mercy—salvaging those worlds so that they may be reborn. If you’d rather be eaten, so be it. Elpis. Get her.”

The knight surged forward. Narma was fast, though—she booked it out of the room. “I got this guy,” she yelled back.

Rory’s eyes flew between them, unsure which way to go.

The guy stalled too, saying, “My lady—”

“Get her. I’ll be fine.” Raising her hand, a dozen shadows appeared around Rory.

They looked like—she couldn’t even describe it. There weren’t like any creatures she had seen before, just writhing masses with mouths. Like something between a lion and a squid. She raised the scepter, ready to fight back. She fired off a Dire Gust, dusting several of them instantly. *They must not be as strong without a person to hold on to.*

As the next round moved forward, she made another plea to the girl on the throne. “Your Agents are hurting and killing people. That’s not fixing any corruption. You’re only making it worse!”

There was a shift—the girl’s face twisted. “Liar! You just want our treasure! But you’re corrupt, you’ll never get it!”

Rory’s brow furrowed as she shoved the air into another pithos, disintegrating it. *Their treasure?*

Then, a change came over the girl. It was as if the edges of her features were melting, leaking black ichor. She rose up from the throne, lifted by a myriad of shadowy black arms like an octopus protruding from her back. It was like when the Agent’s had gained their own shadowy enhancements, but somehow, these look more solid.

She looked like a nightmare. When she spoke, her distorted voice sent a chill up Rory’s spine:

“YOU CAN’T HAVE IT. I’LL TAKE THE STAR SOUL MYSELF YOU’LL REGRET BEING A LIAR.”
Narma bolted through the halls of the Temple, glancing back every few seconds as she struggled not to trip over fallen architecture in the way as that Elpis guard bounded after her. Her boot heels smacked over the stone. He leapt over the stay debris with ease, as though he had navigated the rubble a million times. If he really lived here, maybe he actually had.

Behind them further back, she could see Rory coming into the hallway too, a wave of pithos-looking creatures flooding in behind her. Then, at the top of the archway, she saw the kid peek through, flanked on all sides by slimy-looking black arms and dripping black ooze. *What the hell?*

No time, though. The guard’s sword, now coated in its own aura of shadow, crashed down above her head, but she kept running. There were other outcroppings around the outside of the temple—they’d seen them on the way in. She needed to get to a bigger space. She’d been trying to give Rory some room, just one person to deal with, but apparently that plan had backfired and now they were both being chased down in the hall.

“*Halt,*” the guard commanded.

Did he think she was stupid? Hell no was she going to stop. “*No can do, fellow,*” she said, aiming her arm back, before hesitating. She couldn’t fire anything that was going to interfere with Rory’s ability to get through; she was just going to have to wait until they were in a more open area. She yanked her arm back to avoid getting sliced. “*Missed me.*”

Then, the temple opened up before them. The hallway they were traveling split in two, the two of them going down one hallway and Rory and Pandorana going down the other.

The man’s face was determined, brow narrowed. “I can’t allow you to harm the Lady Pandorana. We must proceed with the purification of this star system.”

“I don’t understand how you think you’re going to be creating anything,” Narma snapped, gaining some distance in the newly opened space before turning around. “From what I’ve seen of the last star system you guys got your hands on, it doesn’t exactly look like any new universes are growing there.”

The guy winced.

Narma narrowed her eyes, examining him as she dodged another blow from the sword. “*Unless,*” she said, “*you know* that nothing’s going to grow there.”

The guy swallowed. He straightened his shoulders, regaining his composure. “What our motivations are is none of your concern,”

If they had truly been monarchs in their past lives, he was about to get a rude awakening. “It’s kind of our star system, buddy.” She held her arms out. “*Typhoon Strikedown!*”

Rory heard the water crash down in the other corridor, but she was a little preoccupied. This little
girl was some kind of abomination—she frantically dodged as the tentacle arms swiped out at her, too many of them to avoid all together. In all the tussle she’d happily managed to fire off at most of the pithos, though a few lingered in the hall behind them. They almost seemed to be hanging back intentionally. Like they were as scared of Pandorana as she was.

And she was. Scared, that is.

She wasn’t sure exactly how she wanted this to go. Was she supposed to kill this kid then go home? How could she do that? And it wasn’t as if she was just some sort of monster—that was plain enough by the way she had spoken about the agents. She was something else. Her guard too, probably. But what did that mean? Were they aliens? Human?

Something was obviously wrong, though—normal people didn’t bleed ichor from their eyes.

She thrust her arms out. “Dire Stellar Gust!”

The wind moved right through the girl, but her extra limbs seemed to take some kind of effect from them. The blast hit one, and as she concentrated on keeping the wind going, the limb undulated in the air before vanishing. She knew, though, once the girl had had the chance to recover, the limb would be coming right back. She dodged, another limb swiping into her cheek. She felt something hot drip down her face, saw red in the periphery of her vision. One hit from those things was enough to do damage. How am I supposed to get rid of this girl?

The hallway behind them opened up into a broken plateau. Beyond, the awesome light of Trappist-1 blazed down on her shoulders.

“How am I supposed to get rid of this girl?”

Rory only got the warning a few seconds before Narma came bolting from the left, the guard following behind her. She groaned, grateful to have that child’s attention diverted but suddenly having a shadow-gilded sword coming at her. “You gotta quit doing that, girl.”

The guard didn’t let up on his assaults, though. His blade soared towards her, and she swept under the blow, sweat beading on her temple as she felt air pass the top of her head—the proximity of the blade.

Chest heaving with exertion, she called on a gust and held it out like a shield, surging forward and holding the wind wall firm. With a push, he stumbled back. She panted, meeting his defiant expression.

She still wasn’t sure what to do here. Was she supposed to kill him? Her stomach squirmed. A monster was one thing, and the agents were obviously not human but this…this felt different. “I don’t want to hurt you guys,” she frowned, the muscles in her legs burning as she braced the wind against the guard’s renewed assault. “I just can’t allow you to destroy this world. If you would just leave this place…”

The man’s expression hardened. “You say these things as if you have any idea what you ask of us.”

There was a wince-inducing slam as the room shook beneath their feet. Rory dared to glance behind and saw that Narma was struggling just as much as she had been. She didn’t have her shield-like powers; it seemed she’d found a piece of rubble and was trying to fight of the limbs Pandorana had generated. But the creature had her pinned—the black liquid dripped to the floor as the limbs forced the stone fragment like a pillar against her throat.

Rory jolted. Dang, I have to do something—
There was the sharp, sudden patter of boots from the back of the room. “Hey freakshow!” Something came flying at Pandorana from behind, whacking her in the back of the head. “Pick on someone your own—” the voice broke off, seeming to reevaluate the words. “—size?”

Rory’s gaze flew to the figures in the doorway, relief flowing through her. There stood Gamma and Delta Carmen and Mallory, peering at the wreckage of the room.

“It’s a child,” Carmen breathed, dark eyes showing stunned.

Elpis seemed just as alarmed at their appearance, as it was enough to distract him from his move-lock with Rory. Letting the wind drop, she summoned another gust and pushed. The force was enough to blast Elpis back, where he struck the column beyond with a crack as the stellar shards serrated his skin.

At the same moment, a scream broke through the room, conveying something Rory didn’t know how to describe. All eyes turn to the Lady Pandorana, whose entire face was nearly coated in the black ichor, where the unholy noise was still streaming.

Narma had apparently lost her interest. She stumbled away, eyes wide as they all looked on the screaming child.

It was like oil was leaking from her, forming huge bubbles at her back that erupted, larger, more powerful limbs flopping to the ground as the mass grew. Rory’s stomach lurched. It was as if the girl was wearing a huge backpack made of dark flesh. She’d gone from a 4-foot-high little girl to a towering ten-foot-high behemoth.

When she opened her mouth, Rory recognized the distorted tone she had spoken to her in before, but somehow, it had gotten worse. It was like it had additional layers. “THE STAR SOULS,” she gurgled too loudly, “GIVE THEM TO ME THEY ARE FOR ME LET THEM BE MY SUSTAINANCE.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Mallory cursed. “I didn’t sign up for this! What kind of eldritch—”

Surprising all of them, the guard, Elpis, still struggling to stand up straight after the blow she’d dealt, guarded against the beast. “Let her go,” he held his blade towards the creature as Rory straightened and got out of the way.

Suddenly, the monster’s face changed entirely. Some of the stray ichor dripped away and the little girl stared at him eyes big and bright. She may as well have been staring through a mask of oil. “Elpis? We must collect their souls! You know we have to remake the universe.” Her voice was as bright and facetiously cheery as it had been the first time Rory had heard it.

The guard grimaced, slowly lowering his blade. “O—...of course, my Lady.”

Rory glanced wildly between them. Okay, what the hell. This child needs Jesus!

The ichor resumed its position dripping down the girl’s face. Whatever was happening, it wasn’t over—they backed away as the ground gained clouds of shadow that bubbled and roiled, and then in an instant a second pair of the dark appendages thunked out onto the ground. Rory eyed them, still feeling sick but more alarmed. There wasn’t going to be anywhere to get away from those things!

And then the pithos came.

The noise level rose in the room the moment she and the others saw the vague shadows gathering
in the room’s corners. It was like a switch had been flipped. They scattered—she and Epsilon locked eyes, but she shook her head, gesturing to Gamma. They needed to take out the girl—obviously, she could summon as many of these things as she wanted, and the smart thing would be to take her out as soon as possible. It decreased the chance of additional injuries. Gamma and Epsilon’s combination attack would stand a better chance of incapacitating the girl without killing her.

For now, though, they needed to deal with the immediate threat. That was the pithos, and Elpis. Whatever role he played in this, he was still resigned to fight them. She raised her arms, even though the effect of using her powers so consistently was wearing on her. Even the air in her lungs came with difficulty.

Delta hit first. She heard the soldier cry “Destiny Chain,” the attack spearing through Elpis and a line of pithos, who dissolved on impact. The chain hit the black mass on Pandorana’s back, but it didn’t puncture.

“She’s not the same,” Beta called out to Delta, whose face had dropped. “She’s too powerful.”

Beta turned on Elpis. The man was nearly lost in the sea of creatures, but refocused when he met Beta’s eyes again. She stomped toward him, calling on the gust as a force before her, though as more than her shield. Gripping his blade, he looked ready to resume their battle again. “Stand down,” she shouted, sustaining the rush of sharp air as she forced him back. She was the only one who could keep up their attack consistently.

It was happening again, not feeling like herself. She could acknowledge that. But this time, she didn’t immediately move to force down those thoughts. They were just her, after all. In some time and place, she was here, or close to here. If there was anything she could call on…

*Come on, me. Give me something to work with here.* She took a breath, the noise in the room ringing in her ears as Elpis pushed back against her, forcing her closer to his Lady. *I need your help.*

Then a feeling. Like seeing a far-away star.

No, not a far-away star.

A star right there. Inside her. She couldn’t see the glow, not like when they Agents tried to steal it from her, but she could feel it, burning inside. It sang something new—

*Boreas—*

Carmen called out, “Mesmeric Pacification!” She’d tried it on a whim at first, but these pithos were so weak it was taking out flanks of them at a time. The light descended over them. Dust.

Of course, they weren’t the problem. She yelped, leaping back as one of the child’s arms whipped from the ground at her. It didn’t smack, but grabbed on, its flesh burning her through her cloths as it maneuvered towards her chest.

“Typhoon Strikedown!”

Narma’s call didn’t destroy the limb, but it created enough space as it crashed down for her to wiggle free. The wound in her side had only worsened, blood dripping freely to the floor. These things were incredibly dexterous. The girl yelped, the smaller limbs covering her head as the water
fell over her.

She peered out to the balcony beyond them—Carmen grimaced, seeing the edge of the temple’s overlook coming nearer and neared. That had to be on purpose. The girl was fully grounded, the extra limbs keeping her suctioned to the floor when she wasn’t trying to grab them up. If she could bring them to the edge, their ability to come at her was limited if they wanted to avoid being thrown over.

She peered back where Rory was further away. She was taking on the guard herself. She had to be tired. Please, hang in there.

“STOP. RESISTING.” The girl howled, voice completely inhuman.

Carmen gasped as hands grabbed around her, the lion-like mouths of the pithos calling up memories from the skate rink. She felt teeth sink into her shoulder blade and a familiar suction—like the lions breathing in, she felt the tug on her soul. She threw her elbow back, heart pounding, and rapidly fired off another Pacification. The wave of pithos behind her dissipated. Across from her Narma caught her gaze. “Hey!” She called. “We should—”

An appendage smacked her across the front. Carmen shoved through the pithos as the force knocked Narma to the floor, where the other limbs where just waiting to retrieve their prize.

No! She ran over, spastically dodging the other larger limbs. They just keep coming! There has to be something we can do—

Inside, something burned, gradual, but getting stronger—

Concordia—

She nearly missed it, distracted trying to aid her friend. The burning didn’t stop.

The limb was pierced—the creature-girl screamed as the limb fell limp, then turned to shadows. Her Destiny Chain dissipated, and Mallory sighed. Just a patch. It will be back.

Narma was hit bad. She kicked back away from the beast and Mallory saw Carmen rush to her side. Mallory yelled after them. “She alright?”

Narma groaned painfully. “Hurts, but. I can deal with it.”

She saw Carmen’s brows furrow, helping their comrade to her feet. It must have been pretty bad.

Mallory’s mind spun. They were in the fucking trench here.

The creature loomed over them. She didn’t like how close to the edge they were getting, paranoid that Lovecraft the Kid was going to get her minions to shove them over. She was just going to have to be vigilant.

She had discovered her Destiny Chain was a good knock-out for the goons. Not as good as Carmen’s, nothing else was as good as that Pacification thing, but she was making her moves count. The kid could just regenerate the arms, so it was most beneficial for her to try and keep the pithos off. “I’ll hold off the creatures. You get the kid,” Mallory called over.

“Roger,” Narma bit out, she and Carmen struggling to keep out of range.
Turning back to the pithos, determination burned through her. It almost felt physical.

She could almost hear it, syllables she didn’t know how to interpret—

*Decima*—

Narma was struggling to hold herself up at that point. No point denying it. Her teammates knew it. Right now, they were all on the brink of destruction.

That…thing must have somehow sensed they were uping their guns, because it reared up, inhaling with what seemed like its full body. They struggled to keep their footing under the force, but Narma had the advantage of being practically dead weight at the moment. Ha, she could hold both of them down. “Rory wants us to do the fountain thing.”

Carmen narrowed her eyes. “When did she tell you that?”

Narma gave a non-committal head wag, realizing she didn’t have an answer for that. “She just did.”

Behind them, Mallory yelled back to them. “Guys, if you’re going to make a move, now would be the time. These guys may be peanuts, but my Chain can’t take many more goes.”

Right. “Now, then.” Narma thrust her arms down as Carmen brought hers up, and they cried, “Punishing Cascade!”

The attack was dodged at first, and Narma felt dread creep in, but then the other two bursts hit the girl dead-on. She squalled, blubbering black ooze through the onslaught.

The black liquid itself seemed to have an effect, because when a large majority of it was essentially washed away, the outer limbs limpened, whipping agitatedly near the ground. As the thought came into Narma’s mind, ‘*it did something, but not enough,*’ Carmen suddenly straightened back up, raising her two pointer fingers. Narma’s eyes widened. “You’re up for that?”

“The combo attacks,” Carmen said quickly, “don’t really seem to affect me.”

From the other side of the room, where Rory was doing a hell of a job holding that Elpis guy off while they took on his leader, she heard the moment he realized the battle had taken a turn. “My Lady—!”

The creature, the girl, in a last-ditch effort had reached out a long limb for Mallory. The Delta soldier gasped as the large limb tossed Mallory backward.

For one horrible second, Narma was sure they were going to have a repeat of the Needle incident and Mallory was going to be flung into the cold (or hot, in this case) vacuum of space to die. But then Pandorana’s smaller tentacle arms wrapped firmly around her throat. She wasted no time, Narma hearing a horrifying crunch as they squeezed the life out of her, Mallory’s face turning blue.

Carmen froze, Narma too lost on what to do. *There has to be something*—anxiety burned in her chest, stronger with more seconds of watching her friend choke. Frustration bubbled inside of her as no options arose. *Come on!*

Then something did begin to arise, she heard just the bare edge of it—

*Egeria*—
The entity began to ooze at the crown again, saying, “I WILL HAVE THEM YOU CAN’T STOP ME FROM HAVING THEM—”

Then, before they could realize what happened, a spear-ended chain surged up between them. Pandorana made a horrible noise as the chain’s blade soared right through the grasping smaller limbs, severing them. Mallory dropped to the ground, rolling out of the way of the dying tentacles. Narma gaped. How had she summoned that?

Immediately, “*Harmonious Bellicosos!*”

Carmen screamed the words. The music flowed from her fingers, the notes a war cry, and they burst against Pandorana’s skin.

It was like every instance of electrocution she’d seen on television—the girl convulsed, sparks dancing over her skin. There was a high-pitched noise before the flow of the attack ended and she slumped. The tentacles from the ground were dead. She looked dazed, but awake, the formation formerly on her back beginning to sluff off onto the ground.

Narma surged forward on pure power of will. If nothing else, she would always be stubborn. She grasped the mad child by the back of the neck, expanding on her earlier musings and thrusting her immediately out towards the edge.

There was the clatter of metal on stone. “Stop! Please!”

Narma turned her head. The guard had abandoned his weapon, kneeling on the ground as Rory stared taken aback behind him, still in the stance of their battle. He breathed. “I beg you, don’t do it. She has no star soul; she will burn up and die if she goes beyond the barrier of this asteroid.”

Narma stared at the guy, then the kid caught in her grip. Pandorana didn’t respond to their exchange, maybe still stunned from the shock. Her large eye twitched between them. The black was practically gone.

Elpis moved forward on the ground, hands out. He ducked his head, not moving his gaze from Narma. “Please.”

The room was tense as Narma held Pandorana out to the barrier. Rory stared at the guard, kneeling on the ground before them. She didn’t know what to think—this battle had taken a turn.

She acknowledged the pulsing awareness in her chest. Something had changed. The word was still there, just kind of floating—*Boreas*. She’d never heard it before. Was it some kind of attack? That was the only thing that had ever come to her like this.

Weirdly, the compulsion to think of her teammates by their designations was gone. Rory didn’t know what that meant.

Slowly, Narma brought the girl back to the ground. She seemed pretty out of it. They all glanced around to each other, unsure what to do, and Mallory had a hand on her throat where something was obviously wrong. At least she wasn’t blue anymore—it seemed she could breathe again.

Carmen stepped forward, towards the Lady. She raised a hand.

Elpis spoke up. “Please, she can’t take much more—”
“It’s okay,” said Carmen. “I’m just incapacitating her.”

She murmured her Pacification attack and as the light passed over her the girl slumped. She breathed slowly, seemingly just unconscious.

Immediately, Carmen moved to Mallory, speaking to her in low tones.

“Soldiers,” Rory heard from behind her, and turned.

“Celene,” she sighed, the little cat running over from the outskirts of the room. “You’re okay. Everything got so chaotic, I didn’t know where you went.”

“There were too many creatures,” she said, ducking her head. “Without being able to defend myself, I had to get out of range.”

She reached down, stroking her fur. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

The pithos were gone. Elpis stood, moving towards Pandorana. Narma raised a hand as he got closer. “Don’t try to escape. One wrong move, and I’ll have to blast both of you.”

“I will not,” he said solemnly. Rory stepped forward as they watched him kneel, scooping her up. She looked impossibly peaceful like this, as if she’d hadn’t just been a horrible monster trying to kill all of them.

“You need to explain what’s going on here,” Rory demanded, and pursed her lips. “You keep giving us that excuse about purifying the universe, but it’s not true, is it? You’re not trying to purify anything.”

Slowly, Elpis nodded. “Yes. If this battle will cease, I can explain everything.”

Rory met the other’s eyes. Narma and Carmen both gave her nods, mouths twisted reluctantly. Mallory was in too bad of shape to respond—they really needed to get her home quickly.

Elpis brought them back to the throne room. There, he sat cradling the unconscious Pandorana, though the rest of them were too anxious to sit down and instead stood on-their-guard around him.

Rory had approached Carmen and Mallory as they moved from the barrier. “How is she?”

“My throat hurts like a bitch,” Mallory spoke surprising her, her voice almost a squawk, “But I think it was my collar that broke.” She twitched her right arm and winced. “Hurts when I move my arm.”

Rory bit her lip. “We need to get this taken care of as fast as we can. You need a hospital.”

Mallory groaned.

Narma wasn’t doing great either, the slice down her front nasty-looking. “I think it’s stopped bleeding,” she said. She peered back to Rory, eyes as serious as her own. “I think we heal faster when we’re transformed than we would normally.”

“Let me know if anything changes,” she said, Narma nodding.

Rory stood before Elpis once they were settled in. “Alright. You said you would explain.”
“Yes,” Elpis sighed, gaze fixed on his Lady. “I couldn’t explain while she was listening—while…it was listening, but I suspect it is incapacitated at the moment.”

Rory’s brow furrowed. “What is incapacitated?”

“It would be easiest to start from the beginning.”

*He could hardly remember what it felt like to be one of Ambrosia. Their’s were a peaceful people, pure in their pursuit of knowledge, gathering from all corners of the cosmos. With this knowledge, their technology was constantly progressing, the majority of their energy spent keeping their world flourishing and full of life even in the windfall of their advances.*

When his Lady had been born, a daughter of the high counsel and thus destined to join their ranks with age, he found joy in watching her wisdom grow. He’d been sure, in his heart, she would make a wonderful ruler someday. As the first child of the counsel’s patrons, she was much beloved by their people and spent much time amongst them.

There was one other strain of research constantly ongoing, however. How could they bring their thriving civilization to other worlds? Elpis would sit in the back vigilantly watching over Pandorana as the researchers she was consulting with pointed out the prevalent decay. In any place they looked, every civilization would eventually crumble, prone to war, sin, and rampant self-interest. Why did this happen?

Their researchers developed a theory. Each world was imbued with its own essence, its own soul. In some systems, this was also referred to as a seed, and was sometimes carried by a guardian. Regardless of the guardian, these souls, as the very essence of the world, must be the key to spreading their purification. Such an act had been attempted before, in far-away systems under the reign of the Silver Crystal. Could such a power be replicated?

After several fruitless attempts, a suggestion was purposed: that the soul of their own world be infused into those of the impure. In this way, their purity might spread. Trials were conducted, and it worked: in each trial, the world’s simpler civilizations experienced a renaissance of sorts, something fundamentally changed in the way the inhabitants interacted. They conducted two more trials successfully.

But then.

“Elpis!”

Though many of his memories had muddled, he could recall that day to the most minute detail. He heard the Lady Pandorana’s sandaled feet patting down the hall to him, and he turned. Nearing, she smiled up to him, arms full of the bright season’s newest flowers. “My Lady.”

“I picked these for the counsel room,” she beamed, exceedingly proud of herself. “I thought they would make the meetings less stuffy.” Light filtered down on them from between the columns of the counsel building.

He repressed a grin. “You may be right about that, my Lady.”

“Come.” She primly deposited half the pile into his arms. “We must deliver them, then.”

They turned towards the main veranda and had only moved a few steps when a girl burst out of building’s main door, eyes blind with panic as she sped towards them and away from the building.
He halted her flight, holding a hand up. “Why do you run? What’s happened?”

Her eyes met his for a moment, and he recognized her as an assistant from the research sector, but she ground her teeth and merely continued past him, panting with breathlessness.

**Boom.**

The corridor’s stone overhang cracked and sputtered dust as a force rocked the area. His Lady screamed, and he knelt to cover her, eyes searching for the source.

He straightened as the tremors continued, eyes glued to the sky.

In the distance above the labs a black mass accumulated, like a smooth, round storm. It pulled on the air with immense force, lightning wracking down on the land. There had never been a storm like this in Ambrosia.

The Lady was crying, eyes wide with panic as greenery caught fire and throngs of birds from the conservatory fled free into the sky, hurrying away from the storm. They were quickly swept up—it was only growing. “My Lady, we have to hide,” he pulled her to her feet, and she ran behind him too slow. He scooped her up, abandoning the flowers in his arms. “We need to find shelter.”

But there was nowhere to go. The sturdy stone of the labs had been consumed. The edges of the counsel building were crumbling, rushing towards the mouth of the storm. Larger and larger, the ground shook as chunks of earth like mountains were dislodged, fed to the black maw.

A cold certainty took root: the world was ending. Elpis clutched his Lady to his chest.

They had to get off this planet.

There was an observatory, located on an asteroid of a nearby planet’s belt. The transportation hub was nearby, though the station had been abandoned for years. Pandorana sometimes liked to go there, to see the stars up close. It was one of many small provisions he had made for her happiness. Perhaps they would be safe there.

He acted in selfishness. His soul’s duty was to Pandorana. He wasted no time trying to find others to save. He rushed to the teleportation bunker, and the light whisked them away from Ambrosia.

Either others did not know of the bunker, or they never made it in time. From 600,000 miles away, they watched Ambrosia be consumed.

As they waited out the destruction, there was a moment when he peered around the observatory and suddenly couldn’t find her. It seemed the Lady Pandorana had wandered off. He thought that she may have gotten restless in the observatory’s viewing room, and he left to retrieve her.

Perhaps she had left the building? Hurrying to bring her in, not trusting the barrier around the facility to protect her, he moved outside to the asteroid proper. In his search, he began to hear… whispering. Perhaps someone else had found their way? That was his Lady’s voice. Who was she talking to?

He spotted her at the outer edge near the barrier, appearing to speak to thin air. She merely faced the blackened star scape, voice carrying across to him, though he couldn’t understand what she was saying. He stepped forward. “My Lady?”

He froze.
As she turned, he was startled to realize that the sky was not empty. The blacker than black shape, too large to even comprehend, blended into the sky beyond without the lightening to illuminate its form. But it was no storm. He could hear the sound of breathing. It was alive.

“Elpis.” His Lady regarded him, voice cheerful. Still, her eyes, once bright and fully of hope were leaking black fluid like tears. Around her, he could begin to see wisps of shadow, encircling as if to grab her. Terror iced his veins. “I understand now! Ambrosia was not pure enough to handle the power we sought—to purify worlds. These worlds—they will never be pure enough. But we can make them.” She grinned at him.

Any second, that…that great beast could crush her into pieces, could devour her, could drag her into space to freeze or burn. He held his own hands out, silently pleading for the creature not to act on his horrific imaginings.

At once, he understood. The force she had been speaking with had a use for them. And if they resisted—it would be the end. His one mission, his soul’s purpose was to protect her. If he were to loose her...

She said, eyes wide with promise as black ichor trickled down her cheeks. “We can make them anew.”

The man stared down at the girl in his lap as the rest of them looked on, mutually disturbed. “After that, she began invent narratives about how we were chosen to purify the universe, crafting plots to bring the creature to one place after another. Over time, the quickest way to the universe’s destruction proved to be the consumption of their stars, and the Agents were created from the harvested corruption to extend the creature’s reach to multiple systems at once.

“In all the time, my Lady never understood it was the creature the corruption was coming from—from my people’s own hubris. It is like she is unable to understand. Like it is preventing her from absorbing that knowledge. Likewise, she never aged. It seemed to wish to keep her as its pawn.” His voice broke, and he clenched his hands into the fabric of Pandorana’s dress. He took a breath. “I’ve tried to explain, but each time I begin to speak of it, she begins to convulse. It’s a threat, I know it. If we truly rebelled, she would not survive it.”

Rory peered down on them, mind battling for a solution. These people were her enemies. Heck, they’d been trying to kill her for months. But even so, she couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. Really, they were just as trapped as the citizens the pithos had latched onto back on Earth. The situation wasn’t that different.

Eventually, Narma spoke up. “So what do we do, then? If we try to leave, that thing will just go after some other star. We can’t fight it; it’s too big!”

They all stood around uncomfortably. Narma was right. They had trouble taking on the Agents, much less something the size of a star.

Carmen placed a finger to her chin. “And we need to sever whatever connection may exist between Pandorana and the beast.”

Mallory raised a finger, coughing before she was able to speak. “This child is an eldritch abomination. Is her safety the highest priority here?”

Carmen pursed her lips, eyes boring down to Mallory. “She may have attacked us, but she’s under
that creature’s control. She’s a victim. If there’s a chance to rid her of its influence, we should take it.”

Rory nodded. “I agree. She’s right.”

Narma blew out a breath. “Alright. But where do we start? I don’t even know if we could get it out of the star now that it’s in there. Has that ever happened before?” She turned her head to Elpis.

He shook his head. “No, it has not. I’m sorry.”

The group of them slumped, lost looks passing between them.

But Rory couldn’t draw her own attention from the sun. Trappist-1. Not their home, but their domain. The cool red light poured over them, the Beast’s shadow shivering underneath. She watched its writhing, frowning at the unnerving movement. It was like it was within a giant egg, trying to hatch.

Her eyes widened slightly. “What if we didn’t have to?”

Narma squint her eyes. “Didn’t have to…?”

Rory turned towards the star. “Didn’t have to remove it.”

The others looked confused, but Celene perked up from the floor with interest.

Narma crossed her arms. “How do you mean?”

She examined the star. The beast couldn’t absorb it without their star souls, right? “What if we could trap it inside? Or, maybe use the star against it? Remember what Carmen said about it adapting? It hasn’t done that yet.” She turned to Celene, peering down at her guide. “Celene. Elpis said that purification has been done with star souls before. Could we do something like that to get the corruption out of her?”

The cat stood, pacing shortly along the stone. “It’s possible. The connection is merely to the girl.” Rory got the impression that if Celene had a more human face, she would have been pursing her lips. Her eyes came up to focus on her. “There is an attack. It’s one all Sailor Soldiers can perform, via the combination of at least four star soul’s abilities. It’s possible that such an attack might be able to push the corruption out and return it to the source. In terms of the Beast…” Her tail flicked in the air, Rory holding her breath as she awaited her verdict. “It’s worth a shot!” She ducked her head, backing down a bit. “But it will take an immense amount of power.”

Rory turned to her teammates. “What do you guys think?”

Mallory still perched on the floor, but one by one, they all nodded. “Not like we have any better ideas.”

The stars shone above them as they gathered at the edge of the barrier.

It wasn’t as secure as the throne room seemed, but it was closer to Trappist-1, and that’s what they needed.

Celene insisted Elpis stand behind at the edge of the temple steps—or, the observatory, Rory guessed—and he watched anxiously from a distance. They formed a circle, sat up on their knees. In
the middle lay the child. Before them, the beast in the sun.

They joined hands, Carmen gingerly taking Mallory’s as not to exacerbate her broken collar. There was barely enough space between them to fit the girl, but they made it work. Inside, Rory found that same buzzing energy rising with renewed vigor. “Do you feel that, guys?”

“I feel something,” Carmen said, peering across to her.

“Yeah,” said Mallory.

Narma’s mouth twitched. “Something’s going on.”

But Rory had been feeling it since their battle began. Was it the same for them?

“Now,” Celene called from behind them. “Concentrate within. Feel for that power—listen!”

Rory did listen. Energy hummed through her veins, and there was something else. In her mind, that word—there it was again. Was it what they needed? “Everyone ready?”

“Yes,” her teammates answered. She felt Narma and Carmen’s hands tighten in hers.

Between them, a shape began to form: a circle, lights crisscrossing to form a star in the middle. She was unnerved by how demonic it looked, her Christian air-siren going off, but she recognized the symbols around the outside as their own and felt safe.

She closed her eyes. She waited for the words, as they had come so many times before. “On the count of three. One.”

_Boreas._

What? That was it? She swallowed, frustration bubbling inside her. It felt as though any second something within her was going to explode. “Two.”

_Boreas._

She pushed back against the thought. _What is that?_ It was time—now or never. She could feel all of their hearts beating as one, even through her anxiety. “Three—”

_It’s your name._

Rory gasped, understanding flowing into her, and she knew what to do. She shouted, “_Boreas Planet Power!_”

Carmen, following without a shred of hesitation—“_Concordia Planet Power!_”

Mallory, forcing the words out: “_Decima Planet Power!_”

And Narma, determined to make this work, “_Egeria Planet Power!_”

They opened their eyes, the girl the middle of them encompassed in a ring of power. All at once, the phrase came to them. They shouted, “_Sailor Planet Attack!_”

It was like she’d been shot. Her vision was assaulted by bursts of color.
They’re attacking.

What are we supposed to do about it?

You know it’s a mutual decision between all of us, we can’t decide this without—

That kind of power can’t be left to one person. We have to try—

She folded her hands on a table.

She saw Narma, hurrying over in a long dress but something was different—

She saw red bloom on her own dress.

That’s right, she thought: Boreas. Her planet, her domain. What happened? Everything was so scattered.

Then she remembered what she’d been doing.

Celene watched as her soldier’s powers congregated. She almost couldn’t understand their cries over the noise of the building energy, but then she understood, and her stomach dropped.

The beam burst upward.

Celene couldn’t remember if she’d seen the attack before, but something about it struck her as too manic, too colorful. She balked as, within the beam, she began to see images, flashes of faces and places, only for brief seconds. They had to call on their planets for this attack. This could only mean one thing.

She backed up, eyeing the beam. The question was, how much would they remember?

It passed through the girl, and she sat up and screamed as if she had woken from a bad dream. The light carried through her towards the sun, arching until it vanished. The girl slumped back into the center of the circle, once again incapacitated.

The light faded. The soldiers blinked at one another, and then quickly stood, all attention focused on the star of Trappist-1. They watched the star, collectively holding their breath as they waited to see what would happen.

“It’s just a seal,” she heard Aurora murmur, eyes locked on the sun, only their powers protecting them from the incredible heat and light.

Celene called forward to them. “The power may not be visible any longer, but it’s still yours! Concentrate on what you need it to do.”

“Trap that thing inside,” Narma said.

“Wonder how hot that thing can stand,” Mallory mused.

“We need to be careful not to mess with the chemical composition of the star,” Carmen said, “But just holding it in—it will be like a huge meteor. Burn up.”

The energy buzzed up around their feet, lingering.
Please, she pleaded internally. Let this work.

They all jumped as the dark shape within the star suddenly writhed wildly. They stared to one another as a roar broke over them, silent. But even Celene, so close to the ground, could feel it shake the observatory.

“What’s happening?” Mallory croaked as they gazed on the sun in alarm.

“It didn’t work,” Carmen yelped, gritting her teeth as the vibrations intensified. “It’s going to break free! We failed.”

Aurora’s arm shot out. “No, look!”

They all seemed to see it at the exact same moment, by the echo of their inhalations. Around the sun, a ring was forming. It rounded the circumference of the star, glowing all the while, until Celene couldn’t see it anymore. After another moment of watching the band spread, it glowed particularly bright.

Then faded.

Rory watched the light go out with a fickle anticipation, unsure whether to rejoice or despair. “Did we do it?”

“Guys,” Narma said sharply. As she turned to look at her, she looked to where her friend was pointing.

In all corners of the observatory, the ruins of the shadows were fleeing. When they’d fought the pithos, and Pandorana, remnants of the black corruption had stained every crevasse of the stone. It was evaporating.

Elpis brought them back to the throne room, Pandorana resting in his lap. “I can feel the shadows retreating, even the corrupted aura of this place. It has been...so long.” He peered up to them. “I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done. I never dreamed that we might be rid of that beast’s influence.”

Narma crossed her arms. “You can thank us by not trying to destroy our universe anymore. That’s a dick move, guy.”

Elpis kept his eyes on his charge, a wry smile crossing his lips. “I believe those are acceptable terms.”

Rory watched the two of them with a frown. She couldn’t bring herself to agree with Elpis’s actions—he’d basically left his people to die for the sake of one girl. Still, it was hard to imagine what she might have done in such a situation. What if it were Narma who needed saving, and then a bunch of strangers? Or what about her mama, or Tyrell? It was hard to call judgement on another man’s actions knowing she hadn’t been in a similar position.

Still, the sight of him holding Pandorana so tenderly did cause a twinge in her chest. Elpis smoothed a hand over her hair. Rory got the feeling she was like a daughter to him. It was very parental, “…My Lady used to believe that if we ‘cleansed’ enough of the galaxy, we might become one day be pure enough to restore what there is left of Ambrosia. Perhaps now, there is hope that
that may happen.”

She and the others glanced to one another. With the assurance that the immediate threat had been neutralized, they didn’t have the luxury of sticking around any longer than necessary. Several of them needed medical attention. Not to mention they had a lot to talk about, if the others had had a similar experience to her. Rory took a step forward. “We wish you the best with that mission. But for now, we’ve stuck around too long. We need to return to our home,”

Elpis tilted his head back, giving her a considering look. “I can’t understand the desire to make a home of a world that is so far removed from your own. But I wish you safe passage regardless.”

Rory took a step back. A world far removed from your own. She couldn’t help but be unnerved by the reality of the statement. They weren’t from Earth, it was true. Peering out into the stretch of sky beyond them, she found that yellow-orange world, with its wispy red peaks. Boreas. At one time, could that truly have been her kingdom? Something in her chest ached. She wished she could look on it with more familiarity than the brief flashes of a life she’d been granted during the attack.

There were many things they needed to come to terms with, but for now, they knew what needed to be done. “Thank you.”

They moved outside the range of the observatory, resuming their circle formation. It was time, finally, for this to be over.

After a murmured, synchronous spell, the atmosphere shifted around them once again, and they were gone.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Episode 15: Cosmic Revelations – or, Opportunities for Drama in the 11th Hour!**

When they arrived back in Seattle, day was just breaking. Mallory’s eyes shot around the morning street, paranoid that someone might have seen them in the pale light. But the street was empty.

They moved to a side alley and un-transformed, an odd atmosphere between them. Immediately, the pain of her broken collarbone intensified. Carmen leaned against her side, as if to support her in case she needed it. She didn’t; she thought that putting her other arm in a raised position might only exacerbate her injury. Still. She wasn’t complaining about the closeness.

Even so, it was time to face the music. She lived closest, and so it was unanimously decided that she would be brought home first. She needed medical attention, and that meant Doris was going to have to know about it. As they marched up the path, teen party clothes hilariously casual after the insanity they just endured, Carmen spoke up. “Do you really think it’s over?”

Rory peered back to her. “That’s what that Elpis guy seemed to think.”

“Hey,” Narma grabbed their attention, waving a hand in the air. “Hey uh, during that last attack, did you guys see some kind of freaky images, or…?”

Celene, who had been decidedly quiet since their battle, pattered up faster to join the group. “It wasn’t just you,” she stated. “I believe you recived flashes of your old memories.”

Holy shit, that was right—Carmen had explained the whole ‘reincarnation’ thing on their way to the temple. That was unbelievable. Mallory had kind of always thought that when she died, that was it. She would either ascend to some sort of afterlife, or disintegrate into the void depending. Still, she supposed this made a fucking solid case for her destiny theory.

“What does that mean, though?” Carmen murmured. She kept facing forward, not wanting to draw any more attention to them than being four incredibly beat-up teenagers already would. She would make a good agent. She had a good anxious energy about her. “Celene, you said we weren’t aliens. But we kind of are. Or, were.”

Celene’s reply was mumbled. “I suppose…”

Carmen breathed. “I don’t know what to do with that information.”

Mallory reached over, patting her on the shoulder. “We should recon later. Right now, I just want to get patched up and sleep.”

They turned the corner onto her street, and it was like a messed up deja vu. She saw the cop cars parked in front of the home, and this time Doris was out on the street, actively speaking with them. It was about at this moment she realized her teammates didn’t actually know what her home was, and bringing them in front of a giant house with a sign labeled WEDDINGER TRANSITIONARY FOSTER HOME was going to be a dead giveaway.
They were unfortunately a spectacle. When Doris glanced down the street, she saw them immediately, and she thumped down the street in her house gown and slippers towards them. With their hands balled at her sides, Mallory could tell she was angry. But she slowed as she got closer, eyes examining her from a distance as her gray brows furrowed. “Jesus, girl, what happened to you?” Her steps picked up and the others backed off as she grabbed her face.

“Oh,” Mallory answered flatly, the jolting agitating her broken collar. “Yeah, my collar bone is broken. I’m going to need an ER.”

Doris’s brows rose in alarm, but she apparently wasn’t done. “Where were you?”

Was that what this was about? Calling the police over a late night seemed a little extreme—

“You’ve been gone for two days!”

Two…?

She flicked her gaze to the girls beside her, whose eyes were wide as they glanced between one another.

Two days?

They had to answer questions for the police. The story they came up with was that they’d gone up into the mountains that evening near Carmen’s cabin and had gotten trapped by a landslide. Carmen had come up with it on the fly; she was a surprisingly effective liar. It explained their injuries, not being able to call (“no service,”) and why it took them so long to get home. It was kind of genius.

There were many questions, but luckily the police lost interest once they put the blame on themselves.

But it had been two days.

Celene explained that space travel via Sailor abilities might not line up exactly with the linear progression of time on Earth. Hence, more time had passed than it had actually felt like when they were out in space. “It’s an unforeseen side-effect.”

When Rory got home, her mother opened the door with a sob of relief and pulled her into an enormous hug. She’s gotten a call from the police. “I was so worried, baby girl. I can’t believe my baby got stuck in a landslide,” she sniffed. “You’re grounded.”

Rory let herself be enveloped in the warmth of the hug—it was good to have, after everything she’d been through in the past couple days, real-time. She squeezed back. “I’m alright, mama.” Briefly, her mind wandered into the territory of what would have happened if she hadn’t come back. That was a dark, dark place, though, and she figuratively backed out almost immediately.

She ended up staying home all day. It was Wednesday now, but she was glad to have the recovery time. She knew the others were worse off than her. And she had no idea what Mallory’s situation was. The building she’d led them to the previous day was obviously not some regular house. Even so, Rory didn’t want to pry. She got the feeling, after seeing the deer-in-headlights expression on Mallory’s face that the reveal hadn’t been intentional. She could tell them when she was ready.
Thoughts preoccupied, Rory crashed in her bed, more than exhausted.

She woke several hours later, in the mid-afternoon, and Celene was waiting at the window.

Rory let her in. “So. There are some conversations that need had.” She laid back down on the bed. She felt like she could sleep for twelve more hours, but right now, she needed answers more than she needed sleep.

“Y-yes,” Celene responded to her. The cat leapt up on the bed, taking a seat. “What…do you wish to know?” Before she could answer her, the cat said, “I’ve honestly been wondering to myself exactly how much you remember.”

Rory thought back to the images she’d seen. Outside, there was a firefly buzzing at the window from the backyard. She didn’t know how to feel now. She was happy that the pithos were gone, but what now? Would there be more enemies? From Sailor Moon’s track record, she thought it was unlikely they’d be left alone. Still, she couldn’t imagine going back to her day-to-day life as if nothing had happened, now that she knew what she knew.

Then there were the memories.

“I remember being on some kind of counsel with the others. And I remember there was a huge battle that broke out at some point, but I don’t remember what it was about. It’s all still really vague.” There was one image that stuck out in her mind—the red bloom on a dress. She frowned. “Celene. Did I…die? During that battle?” The thought chilled her, even though she knew that, even if that was the case, she was alive now. “I think I got stabbed.”

Celene’s ears folded back. “Y-yes. You were killed during that battle, if it’s the one I believe you are referring to.”

“What…happened? How did any of this happen?”

Celene took a breath. “I have remembered more as well. I suppose I can explain that much. You’re correct that you were on a council with the others. ‘Kingdom’ is actually a bit of a misnomer—simply a way to designate different parts of the universe as being under the control of differing parties. Our Kingdom was actually more of an oligarchy. You all shared equal power. There was no one ruler.” There was a long pause. “We…were at war, with another Kingdom. The reasons are…fuzzy. But they had invaded our palace.” Her tail flipped erratically as Rory turned on her side to look at her. “During that final battle, they got through our defenses before we even had the chance to react. Our squadron was struck down. I was charged with guiding you, but I…couldn’t protect you.”

Rory sat up, folding her hands together. “Is…that why you get so nervous when I’m off by myself?” She had sort of brushed off Celene’s anxiety as her being a worrywart, but this was…guilt swept over her. She hadn’t realized Celene’s fears stemmed from such a dark place. She let out a hard breath. “Girl…”

“I wasn’t there,” said Celene. “I was supposed to be watching over you, but when the others invaded, I wasn’t there to warn you. If it weren’t for me…” She broke off. The little cat’s eyes were watery. “I failed you. I promised myself, once I found you, once I regained my memories, I would never let that happen again. But now each time you are away, I can’t help but feel like you’re in constant danger. I’ll admit, I remembered this much before our excursion to the Ambrosia Observatory.” She hugged her tail tight to her body. “I was afraid, if you knew the truth, you would lose all faith in me. But I couldn’t risk you sending me away. I…I’m sorry, Aurora.”
Rory’s heart clenched, and she pulled Celene into a hug. She stroked the soft fur under her hands, the little cat folding her hand against her chest. “No, I’m sorry, girl. If I would have known you were dealing with that guilt, I wouldn’t have brushed you off like I did. That was wrong.” She pulled back, looking down at her guide, her words softening. “But hey—now we get a chance to start over. Those pithos are gone, and we both know more now. We can support each other while we try to figure all this stuff out!”

The cat sniffed, rubbing a paw over her eyes.

Rory said, “I think that’s a pretty good outcome. Don’t you?”

It was another moment before Celene spoke. “Yes, I suppose it is. You are right. We can…we can figure it out!”

Rory punched a fist in the air. “Yeah!”

Celene cleared her throat, standing up and turning away from her on the mattress. “Yes, well. Aurora, there is one more thing you need to be aware of.”

Rory tracked Celene’s movements. What was she doing? “Yeah? What’s that?”

The cat’s voice sharpened. “While I have lost the details of the conflict with the other kingdom, I do remember what they wanted. What we needed to protect. I suspect it’s why we were sent so far away from our home.”

Rory’s brows furrowed. “Whoa, really?”

Celene said, “Yes. I don’t know it’s significance, but I probably should have brought it up earlier. Whatever it contains, I still have it. I also suspect it may be how Pandorana was able to track us so far.” The crescent on her forehead began to glow. As she watched, eyes wincing from the light, an object materialized on the bed—rectangular, shiny, maybe as big as her backpack.

As the light dimmed, she took in the details. It was a chest, extravagantly detailed in gold crowning and designs like the ones from their Planet Attack circle. These weren’t their symbols, though. These she didn’t recognize.

On the top, there was a mirror and emblem like a star. The box had little gold feet, and a lock. The lock was shaped like a crescent moon. Rory stared at the gold and jewel tones of the bow with a sense of wonder. She’d never seen a box so elegant before. “What is it?”

Celene narrowed her eyes. “It’s the Cosmos Treasure Box. It’s an artifact of incredible power, imbued with the upmost protection. Whatever is inside, it would have to be incredibly important.”

Rory pursed her lips. “Important enough for others to come after it?”

Celene lowered her head, and Rory knew the answer before she said it. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

Just like that. They had overcome one foe, but the risk of others was just on the horizon. Rory felt a determined pulse inside her chest, and knew it was the star soul. Or star seed, apparently. The part of her that was older than herself resisted the urge to distinguish the difference. Semantics.

Regardless, this was her home—Earth, Seattle, and now the planet Boreas of Trappist-1. She felt the connection to both places at once. Going forward, and perhaps all of her life leading up to this moment, it was her duty to defend any threat that may befall them.
She knew what she had to do. She turned her eyes to Celene, ready for whatever was about to come. “We need to tell the others.”

Storyville Coffee wasn’t too busy at 6:00 in the evening, but it was still busier than it had been when Carmen had met Mallory there for the first time. Outside, the sky was still light with the turn of the season, still an hour and a half before the sun would drop behind the mountain (singular). Until then, Carmen could see the light casting over the water, a bright sheen off of the pier. It was good to be back in the city.

It was only a moment past the hour when Mallory came to join her at the table bench. She was surprised the girl was able to get out at all after her injuries, but she now had her arm in a sling and had quickly replied when Rory had sent them a group text to meet at the café. “Hey,” she murmured as the girl took a hard seat on the bench, and then looked as if she immediately regretted it. “How are you holding up?”

She could smell the hot tea in the girl’s cup as opposed to her usual coffee as she sat down. Must be for her throat. “Oh, you know,” said Mallory. “They can’t bandage the collar, but this thing is supposed to impede movement.”

She gazed to the dark marks around Mallory’s neck, just visible under the edge of her hoodie hood. She knew they matched the one ugly wound stretching around Carmen’s side. “You sound better,” she said.

“Meh. I’m drugged up, so it’s just totally numb back there.” Mallory gestured to her own throat. “You?”

“I’m okay,” she reassured her. “My father was a bit upset I had left without talking to him again, but I said I was going to call him when I arrived but then we found out we had no signal. He seemed to accept it. He had a meeting tonight anyways.”

Mallory slowly nodded.

Carmen wondered how the girl was dealing with all this. She’d had more thrown at her over the past few days than any of them had. Honestly, Carmen was a little surprised she hadn’t taken off running the moment they’d touched back down on Earth. Carmen knew she had wanted to at one time.

The girl turned to look at her more directly. She was wearing her glasses again—she had pretty eyes, and though the sunglasses were a good look for her, she didn’t need them. Carmen wondered if she could convince her not to wear them sometimes. Mallory asked, “Any idea what we’re here for?”

“No, not really. Rory was really vague about what she needed. I only know as much as was in the group text.”

Mallory blew her hair out of her face. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough, then.”

Carmen hesitated. They were alone for now…if she was going to ask the questions that had been lingering in her mind since the early morning, now would be the time. She quietly cleared her throat. “Mallory.”

She could practically see the dread in the other girl’s brow, even though her expression remained impassive. She was obviously trying really hard to seem casual, scrawled in the café bench even
with her arm awkwardly fastened to her chest. Carmen felt a little guilty about bringing the subject up when Mallory wanted to dodge it, but she also thought it was important to make her own feelings clear. “The place that you brought us to this morning…it didn’t seem like it was just a house.”

Mallory completely ignored her, as if she hadn’t spoken it all.

Carmen pursed her lips. “You seemed sort of nervous about it. I… I saw the sign.” She went quiet for a moment, hoping for a response. Come on. Talk to me.

Mallory actually whistled. The action was such an outrageous parody of nonchalant-ness that Carmen would have found it funny if the girl didn’t look so tense.

Carmen crossed her arms over her chest. “Mallory.”

The girl dropped the facade, shifting to face her even though her expression stayed flat. “Okay. What about it? You can read. It’s not a big deal.”

Carmen sat back in her seat. I would have a much easier time of believing that if you weren’t so defensive about it.

At least she seemed like she might actually engage in the conversation now. She relaxed. “So. That woman. Was she your foster mom, or…?”

Once again, there it was—Mallory’s mouse-brown eyes darted away from her. She huffed. “Not really. Weddinger’s is,” a breath, “a transitional home. Basically, when you get to be my age, the chances of you getting adopted get kind of slim. Some of us opt out of the system after too many failed takes, you know? The home just kind of gives us a place to stay until we turn eighteen and prove we can support ourselves. And then we’re out.” She waved her hand, as if to brush the subject off. But…but?

Carmen was hit with a tightness in her chest. “So…you don’t have a…?”

Mallory cut in. “Family? No.”

Carmen knew her expression was giving away her sinking heart, and Mallory sneered. “Hey, don’t look at me like that.” She drummed her usable fingers over the table. “See, this is why I don’t go blabbing it off to anyone. I hate that expression.”

So she has just…given up on having a family? Sure, her own home life wasn’t perfect, but to be at a point where you just never believed you would have one…she couldn’t imagine what that felt like. It seemed indescribably sad.

She grabbed her hand. Mallory’s gaze flew to the spot, and then back to her face. “I’m not judging you. I—I know I had a bit of a reaction there—” Her own gaze fell, hand rising unconsciously to her shirt collar, smoothing it to push down her own anxiety. “But you seemed so uncomfortable when we went there. I just don’t want you to feel embarrassed, or something. That—that discomfort. Whatever you were feeling in that moment.” She focused her eyes back on her friend’s again. “That’s an expression I want to avoid seeing again.”

They stared at one another in mutual seriousness for another moment before Mallory broke and cracked a grin. “You’re pretty cool, Carmen.”

Carmen snorted, covering her mouth. "To be honest, I try very hard."

“Hey, guys.”
They both looked up as Narma approached, waving to them before taking a seat in the opposite bench. “Hey. You know what we’re here for?”

“Nope,” Mallory shot back. “We’re in the dark.”

Narma tucked her arms behind her head. “I’m just glad this whole pithos thing is done. That was stress, girl.”

Carmen nodded. “Me too.” She placed a hand over her chest. “Even the world feels better. Does that make sense? It finally feels like things are back in balance.”

Mallory took a sip of her tea. “That’s some jedi-mind shit right there.”

Carmen laughed. “Yeah, I think it does have something to do with our powers.” Having all these new thoughts—memories? Ideas of memories was really strange. This sense was just another side effect, she was sure. It had just taken root much earlier. She would have to ask Rory.

Narma sat up. “Speaking of powers, you were really kicking ass back on that asteroid. What happened? I’ve never seen you fire off attacks like that.”

Mallory tipped her tea cup up. “You should have seen the big boss she took out in the desert. A real freak. Some guy named Lupido?”

Narma’s eyes widened. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, the bell above the café’s door rung. They turned to look.

There was Rory. She stood in the doorway, and they could see Celene peeking out from within the tote bag on her hip, hidden away. Rory looked like she had something to tell them.

Whatever it was, Carmen knew they would be ready to face it. There was a harmony between them now; even Mallory, as recent as it seemed they had met her.

The new soldiers of Seattle and the universe looked to their leader, ready for whenever was going to come next.

[END SEASON ONE]
From opposite ends of the city, two moving vans pulled into the Seattle area. In the eastern van, a young woman navigated her way through the new streets, her companion half-asleep in the passenger seat. “We’re almost there,” she hushed as the girl stirred, emerging from the cocoon of her blanket against the car door. She took a deep breath—it had been a long time since she had felt this hopeful.

The news reports in this area were almost too convenient to be true, but she was willing to take the gamble.

She peered over into the other seat as they came to a light. “I really think this could be it. What do you think?”

Chapter End Notes

So! This is the end of the first season. I hope you enjoyed! I have three more seasons planned, so keep an eye out for the continuation.
Thanks for reading!

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