Dreamland University Redux

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Summary

Kirby's college plans include learning about art, making best friends (who hopefully don't care about his secret magical powers), and growing as a person.

Meta Knight's plans include avoiding his tyrannical father, ensuring that Dedede doesn't cause irreparable harm to the family name, and if there's time, learning a thing or two about astrophysics.

Dedede's plans include ruffling Meta Knight's feathers and trying to find a way to save his impoverished noble house without the arranged marriage to a wealthy lady.

Bandanna Dee has no plans and just wants everyone to be friends and get along.

None of their plans include waging war against the forces of evil, but Nova doesn't seem to care.

Notes

Many moons ago, I wrote a fic called "Dreamland University," and while I felt that I had a
good idea, I realized that I seriously messed up with the plot and thought I could do better. So here is my attempt to do better.

As an aside, if you're reading for pairings, most of them are going to develop further on (with the exception of Queen Sectonia/Taranza). Also, Kirby dates a couple of people, which is relevant to his character development but not the plot. I didn't include them in the tags, though, because I don't want people to be disappointed with the shipping. Or to read several chapters for Kirby/Ribbon and have Kirby and Ribbon decide just to be best friends.
Dreamland University was very different from the idyllic paradise that the brochures and commercials promised. While all the advertisements displayed lush gardens, Neo-Classical architecture, and a stunning library, the reality was half-dead hydrangeas, construction, and a library covered in plywood, where the windows had been busted out during the spring semester and never replaced. Kirby, as he stood on the sidewalk, noticed none of this. He was too enamored by the small lake, sitting innocently between the library and the humanities building. It was a very pretty lake, with a large, sprawling tree beside it.

Kirby pulled his backpack strap up higher onto his shoulders and continued past the library. The visual arts building, his destination, was somewhere over there—past the instructional laboratory building. Or was it the math building? Surely, it couldn't be too difficult to find, could it? Kirby had thirty minutes, after all. Maybe twenty-five, after pausing in front of the tree. Kirby glanced at his pink watch, even though he knew the battery was long dead. The watch was cute and had stars on it, though, so Kirby wore it anyway.

With a spring in his step, Kirby headed towards the cluster of buildings. He'd lost his map and hoped that the buildings would be labeled in some way, but that didn't seem to be the case. It was a bit puzzling since the chemistry building had been labeled; he'd almost walked in there by mistake before seeing the sign. The building to his right had a mural of the ocean, so he assumed it was for marine biology or something like that. That would make sense.

Kirby wandered on, pausing haphazardly in the middle of the cracked sidewalk to admire the blush-pink azaleas.

He continued walking until he reached a parking lot. It was labeled as North lot, which Kirby vaguely recalled as being at the bottom of his map. He was certain the visual arts building had been somewhere in the upper left corner. With a frown, he turned around and looped back. There was another building. He approached it, put his hand on the door handle, and noted that there was a paper sign advertising math tutoring. Probably not the visual arts building. Okay.

Kirby turned around and trekked back towards what he had dubbed as the ocean-mural-probably-science-building. From the other direction, he could see through the front, glass doors, and it became apparent that there was some sort of fossil collection inside. Definitely not the visual arts building. Geology, maybe? With a sigh, Kirby admitted that he was lost and would have to ask for directions if he wanted to find his class in any reasonable time.

Fortunately, there were many people around to ask for directions. Unfortunately, after asking three different people—none of whom seemed to know where they were going either—Kirby was beginning to wonder if he’d make it to class at all, much less on time. Hopefully, his art professor
would be in a charitable mood with it being the first day of school.

“Excuse me. I couldn’t help but overhear. You said visual arts, didn’t you?”

What a lovely voice! It was dark and elegant like a star-filled night. Kirby turned around to face the speaker and see if the face was as lovely as the voice. He wasn’t disappointed. The man behind Kirby was about his age, maybe a year or two older. His long, blue hair was pulled back at the nape of his neck, and it looked so fine and silky that Kirby felt a spark of envy; his own hair was fluffy, thick, and utterly unmanageable. The man’s skin was the brown-gold shade of moonlight peeking through cloud-cover, and his eyes were a soft, lovely gray. He was possibly the most beautiful person, male or female, that Kirby had ever laid eyes upon. “Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura,” the man said, extending a hand.

There were pale, thin markings on his hand like those left on people who’d been struck by lightning. Kirby wondered how far up those markings went; they disappeared beneath the sleeve of Meta Knight’s long sleeve shirt. “Kirby Stellarum,” he replied, shoving his hands in his pockets.

When Kirby touched people, he copied whatever they were best at, but magic wasn’t something discussed in polite company. If living in a small village had taught Kirby anything, it was that different was synonymous with bad and that his magic was best kept a secret. Magic was deemed acceptable for people like the Great Queen Alera and Crown Princess Sectonia, whose magic was granted by the goddess Nova. It wasn’t appropriate for someone like Kirby, without a drop of royal or noble blood, to have. And even then, someone with Kirby’s common blood shouldn’t have something nearly as powerful as Copy, the power once wielded by the Great King Bikaia.

Meta Knight seemed to take the hint, for he lowered his hand and smiled graciously. “I could walk you there if you like. My Lord is minoring in art history, so he spends a lot of his time over in visual arts. I know right where the building is.”

Kirby’s mind went blank; he’d suddenly forgotten how to speak in light of the unexpected offer. He’d never had friends before. Kirby’s childhood had been very lonely, and Meta Knight’s generosity caught him off-guard. He wanted to accept. They’d have to walk across campus together. Kirby would have to talk to this person. It sounded like a chance to make friends. But what if it was a trick? What if Meta Knight was going to pickpocket him or something? What if he was a serial murderer? Then, again, Meta Knight did have an astrophysics textbook held in one hand; that surely indicated that he was—at least—a fellow student. And he didn't look like a serial murderer. Not that Kirby had met any, but he'd maybe glimpsed a scene or two from a couple of horror movies. And Kirby had to start trusting people if he was going to make friends, right? Besides, Meta Knight was pretty and had blue hair. “Um…yeah. It’s over there. Ah, Professor De la Fuente’s art history class,” Kirby finally said, toying with the strap of his backpack.
“She prefers Drawcia.”

Kirby frowned. “I’m sorry?”

“She prefers her first name. Her students address her as Professor Drawcia,” Meta Knight replied. “My liege took her class last semester. She's fun.”

“Oh. Drawcia. Okay. Um…are you sure you don’t mind showing me, though?”

Meta Knight shook his head. “Of course not. I wouldn’t have made the offer if I minded.”

“Oh. And your lord is…? Sorry, I’ve never met anyone that, um, worked for a lord.”

Meta Knight pulled a thin, silver chain from beneath his shirt. Hanging from it was a large, bejeweled signet ring. It bore the image of a rabbit’s head. “Lord Dedede, Heir of the Stars,” Meta Knight said. “His mother is Duchess Delilah, Lady of the Stars.”

Kirby didn’t follow the aristocracy much, but he knew that the titles of duke and duchess were just beneath those of king, queen, prince, and princess. Meta Knight’s lord must be in very high esteem. “Oh,” Kirby said.

Truly, Kirby’s eloquence knew no bounds.

Meta Knight beckoned for him, and Kirby scrambled awkwardly to follow his newfound acquaintance. Meta Knight wasn’t even really walking very quickly. Kirby just felt over-eager to engage in camaraderie with someone his own age. If Meta Knight noticed anything, he had the grace not to comment. “Meta Knight…um…can I ask you a question?” Kirby asked, wondering if he should break the ice somehow first.

What was the proper etiquette for making friends? Should Kirby just blurt it all out and ask to be Meta Knight’s friend? Was that how it worked? Or was there some sort of time period that had to pass first? Maybe Kirby just needed to show interest, but he didn’t want Meta Knight to think he was asking him out. Dear Nova, this was hard.
“I’m half-Halcandran,” Meta Knight said. “That’s usually the first thing people wonder about. Usually, they’re confused because my skin color and last name indicate I’m Halcandran, but they can’t figure out how I have eyes that aren’t gold or red. It really confused people before I began dyeing my hair.”

“What’s the natural color?”

“Blond,” Meta Knight replied. “The one hair color no one would ever associate with Halcandra.”

“That…wasn’t actually what I wanted to ask,” Kirby said, “Although I did wonder a little. Mostly, I just think you’re very beautiful, though. I mean, you have a gorgeous face, and your symmetry is amazing!”

“My symmetry?”

“In your face,” Kirby explained. “It’s hard to tell, but my left cheekbone is alittle lower than the right one. I mean, most people are a hair uneven. But you—just wow.”

Meta Knight’s smile was bemused, but not unfriendly. “In that case, I apologize for being so presumptive. What did you want to know?”

“How hard was it to dye your hair?” Kirby asked. “I really want to go pink, but I’ve never dyed my hair before. My mom wouldn’t let me, and—dear Nova—I’m rambling. She meant well! She just thought pink was…odd. For a boy. You know.”

Meta Knight hummed and glanced askance at Kirby. “Since your hair is white-blond and short, you shouldn’t have a hard time with the color taking. If you like pink, go for it. I imagine many people will think it’s very…cool on you. Dyed hair is in, after all, since Fluff of Patchland dyed his sky blue.”

Kirby nodded. He had heard of Fluff, heir to the annexed kingdom of Patchland. The prince had vanished from his palatial residence a few months ago and left no trace. Theories were bountiful, ranging from dark and serious to silly and absurd. Some said he’d fled in shame, unable to live with the fact that his father had sold the Patchlandic monarchy to Dreamland. Most Patchlanders, who’d adored their young prince, insisted that he’d been abducted, while others whispered that he’d been assassinated for expressing displeasure with Queen Alera’s treatment of her newly-bought province. The Dreamlandic Enquirer famously insisted that he’d run off with one of the
maids and was living in secret in the Floralia Islands. Whatever the reason, though, every search for the ex-royal had turned up fruitless. “Did you ever meet him?” Kirby asked. “Prince Fluff?”

“Several times, but we never spoke,” Meta Knight replied. “He seemed like a good man. He’d have made a good king. It’s a pity he won’t get the chance to try.”

“Huh. I don’t think I could meet with people like that,” Kirby said. “I’d probably say something embarrassing.”

“It’s something you become accustomed to very quickly. Most of the charm is lost once you spend some time with high society.”

“Not a fan of the royals and nobles, then, huh?”

“I like my liege,” Meta Knight replied, “And his mother. The Crown Princess is…an interesting lady, which is more than I can say for most of them, but no… I’m not overly fond of them.”

“Hm.” Kirby let his gaze wander across the sidewalk and the nearby buildings. “Ever meet the Queen?”

“Yes,” Meta Knight replied, clenching his jaw.

Kirby took the hint and decided to move to safer ground. “So how did you meet your lord?” Kirby asked. “Are you nobility yourself?”

“No, I’m common. I met Dedede… well, he’d escaped his very incompetent bodyguard and wandered somewhere he shouldn’t have. The short version is that someone tried robbing him at knifepoint, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time. He tried to give me a job, then, but I didn’t trust his intentions.”

“But you accepted anyway?”

“He won me over,” Meta Knight replied ambivalently. “It took him two years, but he did it.”
They’d arrived at a small, square building, and Meta Knight stepped forward to hold open the door. “Here you are—”

“Mety Knight! Yo, Mety Knighty!” The voice came from just out of view of the glass doors and sounded like a Kracko spirit roaring in the clouds.


Kirby stepped inside. It wasn’t difficult to find Meta Knight’s lord, as he was the only other person standing in the hallway. Kirby had been expecting Meta Knight’s liege to fit the typical noble profile—pale skin that had never seen sunlight, perfectly groomed hair, lithe muscle, and clothing that cost more money than Kirby would ever see in his life. Kirby’s assumptions were only partly correct. Dedede was, indeed, richly dressed with perfect hair. But his skin was ruddier than expected—unfashionably red across his cheeks and too tanned to meet the high standards set by Queen Alera—and Dedede was quite pudgy. Still, he was an attractive man with stunning eyes and perfect teeth. He was also uncommonly tall, and Kirby had the distinct feeling that Dedede could break him in half with ease. Fortunately, the Heir of the Stars only seemed interested in breaking Meta Knight in half, if the force of his sudden hug was any indication. “Dedede, can you get away from the door, at least?” Meta Knight asked.

Dedede relented, but he still refused to release Meta Knight, resulting in an awkward shuffling and in Meta Knight dropping his astrophysics book on the floor. Kirby considered picking it up, but he didn’t want to risk being stepped on. “Mety Knight!” Dedede boomed. “I cain’t believe you came all the way here just to see me! It’s been forever!”

“I saw you this morning.”

“That ain’t enough!” Dedede peered at Kirby over Meta Knight’s shoulder. “Oh! It’s not about me, is it? So this is how you’re spending your class-free day, Meta? I’m pretty sure I gave you a list of chores, and loafing around with cute boys wasn’t on the list.”

“Your list of chores included buying a thirty-pound bag of scarfy food—Nova knows why when we don’t have a scarfy—and washing your weeks’ worth of laundry from your vacation in Raisin Ruins.”

“So you have read the list! Good for you. Add ‘learning to respect my beloved liege’ to it, won’t you?”
“It wasn’t really his fault,” Kirby said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “I was—um—lost, and he agreed to help me. Please, don’t blame him.”

Meta Knight finally managed to squirm free of Dedede’s hug, or Dedede decided to be merciful and let him; Kirby wasn’t sure. Dedede roared in laughter, while Meta Knight picked up his abused astrophysics book and dusted the cover off. “Aren’t you cute, pipsqueak?” Dedede asked. “Valiantly rushing in to make sure I’m not too hard on poor ol' Mety Knight.”

Kirby was taken aback at being called _pipsqueak_ and even more so by Dedede’s disarming grin. “Don’t worry about him none. Meta’s always been a wayward servant, but I reckon I’m stuck with him,” Dedede said, adding a dramatic sigh.

“He’s being facetious,” Meta Knight offered. “Sometimes, he forgets that not everybody is in on the joke, so to speak.”

Kirby nodded, still confused by the behavior. He’d never really met anyone that…joked like that. Then again, he’d never really met many people his age before. Maybe Meta Knight and Dedede were the normal ones, and Kirby was the odd man out. “So…what exactly is your job, Meta Knight?” Kirby asked.

“He’s my personal assistant,” Dedede answered. “He does anything I tell him to! That includes the list of chores—”

“The list that says I’m supposed to make you a three-tier chocolate cake?” Meta Knight asked, crossing his arms. “I assume you’ve already warned the fire department?”

Dedede blanched. “I forgot about that one. For Nova’s sake, please, don’t bake anything. Okay, so I didn’t really expect you to do all the chores. That was just me trying to ruffle your feathers. But really. Please, do my laundry?” Dedede asked. “I’ve tried before, and you know I’m terrible at it. If you do, I’ll take you out to eat tonight. My treat.”

“Deal. Kirby, do you want to come?” Meta Knight asked. “Dedede’s paying.”

Kirby started. “Um…I guess, if it’s okay. I’ve never really went out before. With friends. I mean…”
“Meta, I didn’t say…” Dedede trailed off.

“I’m doing weeks’ worth of your laundry. I get to bring a friend. You bring friends all the time. When you were dating her, I had to awkwardly third-wheel with you and Fae for ten months. Same thing for when you had that fling with Escargon,” Meta Knight said.

“Pareces inquieto,” Dedede said, giving Kirby an indecipherable look. "¿Qué te molestar, Meta?"

“Te molesta. No se preocupe usted,” Meta Knight replied. “Let me see your phone, Kirby. I’ll put my number in and text you once we finalize plans. It’ll be fun.”

"Are you sure it's okay? I don't want to intrude," Kirby said. Dedede didn't seem to like him very much, after all.

"Yeah, sure," Dedede replied, waving a dismissive hand. "We'll invite Dee, too. Have a guy's night out."

Kirby hastily produced his phone from his coat and awkwardly offered it to Meta Knight. Belatedly, Kirby wondered if he should’ve opened the contacts to make it easier, but Meta Knight seemed to have figured it out.

"So Meta's gonna be an astrophysicist, and I'm studying anthropology with a minor in art history. What’re you majoring in?" Dedede asked, after a beat of silence.

“Studio art,” Kirby said, quickly taking his phone back once Meta Knight was finished.

No one had ever given him a phone number before, and it filled Kirby’s stomach with butterflies. He still wondered vaguely if this was some sort of trick. If it’d turn out that Meta Knight and Dedede were just using him for something. Playing tricks on the naïve university freshman. Kirby had never been able to make friends, and he wanted to so badly. But being lonely had made him too aware and too nervous of everyone else. Still, the chance of having friends was too good to pass up.

“He’s taking Professor Drawcia’s art history class,” Meta Knight said.
"Oh! The one that starts in, like, two minutes? We're classmates, then!" Dedede declared, beaming.

“I thought you might be," Meta Knight replied.

“Yeah! And Bandanna Dee's there, too. He swapped periods, so we could take it at the same time. You oughta register for it, Meta! You know Art History I is all about the Classical era to the Golden Age of Dreamland. You could learn all about my great ancestors," Dedede said, puffing out his chest. “Did he tell you that I’m a descendent of ol' Bikaia, Kirby?"

Nova’s grace. He was descended from Bikaia, himself? Kirby swallowed thickly, suddenly wondering if he should’ve bowed. Meta Knight hadn’t bowed, but maybe it was different because Meta Knight actually worked for Dedede? Or because Dedede had tried to break every single one of Meta Knight’s ribs when he entered the building. “You don’t have to tell that to everyone we meet,” Meta Knight said wryly.

“Hey, all I got is my name, Mety! You know that. But there’s a ton of stuff on Galaxia in this class,” Dedede added.

“Are you interested in Galaxia, Meta Knight?” Kirby asked. “My dad is really interested in the stories about her, too.”

Dedede burst into laughter. “Oh, yeah, he’s real interested in Galaxia,” Dedede said, still stifling chuckles. “That’s one way to put it!”

Kirby smiled even though he didn’t get the joke.

“At any rate,” Meta Knight said, “You both best get going. You’re going to be late to class.”

“Right! See you later, my favoritest pet knight!” Dedede said, heartily clapping Meta Knight on the back.

“Not a word, not your pet, and not a knight,” Meta Knight replied.
“I ain’t got time to argue. I’m gonna be late,” Dedede said. “C’mon, Kirby!”

Dedede didn’t wait to see if Kirby was following. Instead, Dedede simply strode past Meta Knight. Kirby hurried after him, giving Meta Knight a quick wave. “Thanks for the help!”

“Any time.”

Dedede held the door open, and once Kirby stepped inside, a thrill of excitement jolted through him. This was it. He was finally here. This was a place where he could be someone else, someone better. University was going to be the best thing that ever happened to him.
Meta Knight’s phone chimed, heralding the arrival of yet another text. That made ten in the past two hours. Meta Knight hummed and shifted the overflowing laundry basket, so it rested against his hip. He pulled the phone from his coat pocket and swiped his thumb across the screen.

*I assume you have a good reason for interfering in my business.*

*Meta Knight?*

*This isn’t amusing.*

Meta Knight hummed and put his phone back in his pocket. He could probably expect a visit from his father during the night. In hindsight, Meta Knight shouldn’t have been so confrontational with Kirby. Now he had two problems: his father and Dedede. Meta Knight could handle his father, of course, or rather, he could approximate what Nightmare would do. Dedede, however, was another matter. The last thing Meta Knight wanted was for Dedede to be dragged into something involving Meta Knight and another very powerful magic user.

Because Kirby felt very powerful. So powerful it made Meta Knight’s skin crawl, and Nightmare’s apparent interest in Kirby was equally terrifying.

The easy solution was to lie, but coming up with a good lie was difficult. Meta Knight wasn’t exactly altruistic; he wouldn’t just casually walk someone halfway across campus out of kindness, and Dedede knew that. Why, then, would Meta Knight reasonably do such a thing?

*You could just tell Dedede the truth,* Galaxia murmured in Meta Knight’s mind.

“Or you could help me think of a reasonable lie,” Meta Knight replied.
He continued his walk from the shared laundry room to the dorm room he shared with Dedede and Bandanna Dee. Dedede would want to know the truth, Galaxia argued. And you’ll feel very guilty if you lie to him.

“But it’s for his own good. We don’t know what Kirby is yet.”

True, Kirby might be dangerous. However, I think it’s prudent that you—therefore—make Dedede aware of any potential dangers. You’ve watched enough superhero movies to know that this sort of plan never works.

“I wasn’t aware you paid attention to those,” Meta Knight replied.

Amusement. You derive pleasure from watching them. Of course, I pay attention.

“I turned out more boring that you anticipated, didn’t I?” Meta Knight asked. “You could’ve had a champion in the A.M.B.E.R., and instead, you have a stereotypical college student.”

I wanted you, though. I still do.

Meta Knight fished his keys out of his pocket, leaning the laundry basket against the wall. He’s here, Galaxia hissed.

“Here? In person?” Meta Knight asked.

Normally, Nightmare settled for haunting Meta Knight’s dreams. In-person visits were very rare. Yes, Galaxia replied. He’s wandering around the kitchen and questioning your choice in teas.

Meta Knight sighed. He didn’t need this, but even if he delayed it, Nightmare would find him eventually. The door opened abruptly, seemingly of its own accord. With a frown, Meta Knight stepped inside. The door closed behind him. “Drama queen,” Meta Knight muttered.

Cautiously, Meta Knight peered in the living room. It looked suspiciously benign as he set the laundry basket on the sofa. He felt his father’s presence, dark and cold. It was all a game to Nightmare; he liked to stalk before he attacked. “Gala—”
Nightmare appeared in a burst of light and went for Meta Knight’s throat. The wizard's nails dug into the side of Meta Knight's neck, and there was a bit of magic in it, too. He couldn’t breathe, and it hurt more than it should. The wizard’s powers granted him surprising physical strength, and Meta Knight knew trying to break Nightmare’s grip was pointless. But he was desperate for air and clawed at Nightmare’s wrists, trying anyway. Nightmare was trying to pin him against a wall, and Meta Knight knew he wouldn’t be able to fight, then. He kicked Nightmare in the shin, trying to trip him. “Really, boy?” Nightmare asked. “Is this the best you can do?”

He couldn’t breathe. Meta Knight knew that Nightmare wouldn't kill him. No, but the wizard expected a fight. It would be worse if Meta Knight didn't fight back. But it hurt. Why did it hurt so much? How long was this taking? Seconds or minutes? He panicked, and dimly, he noticed the windows rattle. His control over wind was responding to his need for air, but it wasn’t doing anything helpful. Galaxia arrived in Meta Knight’s hand, her weight light and comforting. Meta Knight, let’s destroy him.

No. Galaxia, please.

Meta Knight swung his arm towards Nightmare’s neck. Galaxia’s blade crackled threateningly against Nightmare’s throat, a hairsbreadth from drawing blood. Abruptly, the wizard loosened his grip, and Meta Knight coughed roughly, desperately trying to inhale air. “I expected better of you,” Nightmare said. “You depend too much on your sword. You should’ve used your dimensional powers or mach tornado; you’d have freed yourself more quickly. What would you have done if Galaxia hadn’t come? She certainly took her time.”

It wasn't her fault. She'd been in another room. Meta Knight glared and tried to reply, but he was breathing too hard and too desperate for air.

“What if I’d been too close to you? What if she deems you unworthy someday? You’ve grown weak and attached to that sword,” Nightmare said. “And because you’ve suddenly decided to become a master swordsman, you’ve wasted all your time on your swordplay. Now your magic is weak, and you’re pathetic.”

The wizard strode away, and Meta Knight tilted his head back and tried to steady his breathing. Tentatively, he stroked his sore throat; that was going to bruise badly. He couldn’t contemplate it long, however. Father awaited him.

How absurd. Take your time, dear heart. It won’t hurt him to wait, Galaxia murmured.
Galaxia’s sacred fire was warm and healing, and after a few minutes, Meta Knight breathed easier. The aches in his throat and his chest faded. “Thank you,” he said.

**Of course, beloved.**

Nightmare idly lounged in the chair that Bandanna Dee normally occupied. He already had the jade and onyx chess set before him. “Who’s responsible for all the disgustingly saccharine photos on the refrigerator?” Nightmare inquired.

“Bandanna Dee.”

“Hm. He likes looking at you.”

“He admires my cheekbones.”

Nightmare smiled wryly. “You inherited those from me,” he said. “Your mother’s face was sadly lacking in definition. She had a very…sweet face. Speaking of your mother, I hear you’re using her last name these days. Was mine not good enough for you? I’m a **lord** now; you know.”

“Yeah, you criticize the noble class at every turn, and then, you turn around and buy a title.”

“Titles are powerful,” Nightmare replied. “At least, I’m not trying to seduce my way into one.”

“Dedede isn’t interested in me like that.”

“Are you **sure**?”

Meta Knight tightened his grip on Galaxia’s hilt. “I was really looking forward to seeing you in my nightmares. Perhaps, you ought to come back tonight. I’m busy now.”

Meta Knight gestured to the laundry basket on the sofa to prove his point. He doubted Nightmare would actually leave. That would be too easy. “Child,” Nightmare said.
Nightmare flicked his wrist. Dedede’s clean clothes rose from the basket and perfectly folded themselves. “Look; you suddenly have free time. Fancy a game of chess?”

“Our chess games always end in fights.”

“Perhaps, they wouldn’t if you’d learn to control your mouth,” Nightmare replied.

“I think your temper is a bigger problem than my mouth.”

Nightmare scowled. “You realize that your refusal has consequences, of course,” Nightmare said pleasantly. “I might have to speak with Dedede about—”

“This has nothing to do with him.”

“Do you truly believe I care?” Nightmare asked. “Play a game with me, and I promise to leave him alone. You know I’m a man of my word. I’m determined to teach you something of strategy.”

He’d hit a weak point, and they both knew it. No matter what, Meta Knight didn’t want Dedede to be in the crossfire between Nightmare and himself. *I’m here if you need me,* Galaxia murmured.

There was no other chair, and sitting on sofa would put Meta Knight right beside his father. Meta Knight ultimately sat on the floor across from Nightmare and placed Galaxia gently beside him. “Don’t you find it a little disrespectful to place a sacred weapon on the floor?” Nightmare asked.

“She doesn’t mind.”

“I see. Well, the first move is yours,” Nightmare said.

It always was. While Nightmare was an amazing chess player, Meta Knight had played against him enough to know that Nightmare had a fondness for queenside play; Nightmare liked to get his queen out as quickly as possible. Meta Knight moved the pawn in front of his queen; Nightmare’s opening move was the same.
The first few turns went in silence. Meta Knight captured one of Nightmare’s bishops but lost one of his knights. “I’m disappointed,” Nightmare said, breaking the silence. “I thought I’d taught you to be independent, but here you are happily being the lapdog for a royal brat.”

Nightmare hadn’t went for the obvious—the real reason he’d decided to visit—but then, he rarely finished his business quickly. “I have as much Dreamlandic blood as he does,” Meta Knight said, his gaze focused on the chessboard.

Nightmare abruptly hooked a finger underneath Meta Knight’s chin and drew his gaze upwards. Nightmare wore the same dark, reflective sunglasses he always did, and Meta Knight was relieved to see that his reflection was calm and composed. “You know that isn’t what I mean, pet. Yes, your blood is Dreamlandic, but that isn’t good enough. Dedede’s blood comes from King Bikaia’s own bloodline. He is the heir of a thousand-year dynasty, but you? You’re nothing but common. And it must hurt. You’re cleverer and more talented than him, yet you’ll always be second—”

“Are you quite finished?”

“Someday, Dedede will realize that. You’ll be a threat to him. He’ll abandon you, and that will break you, won’t it? Because you like him. Didn’t I teach you that affection is a weakness? And you didn’t even find a wealthy brat! You chose a third-tier impoverished nobleman! His only chance at being anything is to marry some wealthy, common tramp, and you—”

Meta Knight jerked away and glared at Nightmare. “And whose fault is it that my blood isn’t good enough, Father?”

“Whose fault is it that you chose to be a servant to a poor, desperate noble?” Nightmare snapped. “If you hadn’t been so selfish—”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t have been so selfish if you’d been a better father.”

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t been such a cold, unlovable child—”

“Since you hate Dedede so much, maybe you’d feel better if I went back to pickpocketing people with Magolor and Marx.”
“Just because you look like trash doesn’t mean you also need to act like it. What are you thinking, boy? You look like I could buy you with pocket change.”

“Please, you couldn’t afford me.”

Nightmare scowled, and Meta Knight absentmindedly moved a pawn. He half-expected Nightmare to reach across the chessboard and back-hand him. “You still make the same careless mistakes. I hope you’re better at protecting your precious liege than you are at protecting your king. Check,” Nightmare said, moving his bishop. “Haven’t I taught you anything?”

Meta Knight took Nightmare’s bishop with his queen. “You taught me to hate you.”

“ Hate me?” Nightmare laughed. “Stupid creature, you don’t know what it is to hate.”

“Strange how you claim to know everything about me. You were hardly ever around when I was a kid, and when you were, you just liked to tell me how badly I was fucking everything up.”

“Language, boy.”

“Fuck you.”

Nightmare slammed his fist on the table, shattering the jade chess board. Meta Knight grabbed Galaxia and scrambled to his feet. He moved into a fighting stance as Nightmare slowly stood, his fists clenched. “Do you derive some sort of pleasure from upsetting me? Do you want us to fight?”

Meta Knight had no hope of winning. When he was a teenager, Nightmare’s occasional visits always ended in fights, and Meta Knight was always out-matched. But he wanted to fight. It wasn’t in his nature to back down from a challenge. “What do you want with Kirby?” Meta Knight asked.

The wizard sighed deeply. “You tire me,” Nightmare said, sinking into his chair. “I’m just trying to look out for you. I don’t want Dedede to hurt you. I don’t want anyone to hurt you, but you must know what people say about you. If this ends badly, you’ll carry the blame, dear one.”

It wouldn’t hurt so much if Meta Knight didn’t secretly fear that—someday—Dedede would no
longer want him. But once Meta Knight thought of it, he couldn’t stop. Even Galaxia’s soft, reassuring nudges weren’t enough to assuage his doubts. “And now I’ve upset you,” Nightmare said. “I’m sorry, pet.”

“I’m fine.”

Nightmare nodded slowly. “Yes, of course. You’ve always been strong.” He paused, deliberating something. “Kirby Stellarum has great power, but he’s a very weak boy. Too open and affectionate. He interests me, though.”

“So you’re spying on him?” Meta Knight asked.

“I was until you thought it’d be funny to teleport one of my employees halfway across your campus,” Nightmare replied.

Meta Knight cautiously perched on the sofa arm and let Galaxia rest across his knees. “You shouldn’t spy on people,” Meta Knight replied, “And you agreed that Dreamland University was my…territory. You agreed not to set foot there.”

“I’ll admit that my enthusiasm may have gotten the best of me, but I’ll counter that you should’ve asked for permission before deciding to associate with Kirby. How did you know I’d allow such a thing?”

Meta Knight bristled at the insinuation that he needed Nightmare’s permission, but there was something else unsettling about it. Nightmare had given ground far too easily. If he’d really been upset, he wouldn’t have given Meta Knight…permission. He’d have threatened. They’d have had a full-fledged brawl, and Meta Knight would’ve been left with far more than a few bruises. This was too easy. “This is a trick of some sort,” Meta Knight said.

“A trick?” Nightmare said. “No. I think Kirby is weak and unworthy of your attention, but I won’t forbid you from befriending him. It’s understandable that Dedede is unfulfilling as a friend, so you desire company elsewhere.”

“That’s not—”

“But I will not tolerate your petty interference. I’ll stay out of your business, and you stay out of
mine. If you interfere again, I won’t be nearly as merciful as I was this time. But go ahead. Befriend that weak boy. Maybe you can figure out why I’m so interested.”

Meta Knight took a steadying breath, and Galaxia offered a gentle, consoling nudge. She, at least, wasn’t disappointed in him. “Thank you, Father,” he said.

“Anything for you, dear,” Nightmare replied, smiling wryly. “You’re going to have some spectacular bruises, aren’t you? I’m sorry. Your lord will be upset with you, but then, no one likes people damaging their property.”

“That’s not why it angers him. It’s because—”

But Nightmare had already vanished with a burst of star-like lights.

When Dedede entered, Meta Knight was polishing Galaxia’s blade. She didn’t require such upkeep, but she did—a bit guiltily—enjoy the attention. Her previous champions hadn’t cared much for her as a companion, and Meta Knight took a sort of satisfaction in being different.

“Honey, I’m home!” Dedede declared, tossing his backpack onto the floor.

“So I see.”

Dedede closed the door behind him and paused at the chair—occupied by Nightmare an hour before. “Hey, Galaxia,” Dedede said, bowing. “Keeping your champion in line?”

Without waiting for an answer, Dedede plopped onto the sofa beside Meta Knight. “We need to talk, pretty-boy,” Dedede said, nudging Meta Knight’s shoulder.

“About?”
“You know what about,” Dedede answered. “What’s your deal with Kirby?”

“I was—”

“And for Nova’s sake, don’t give me some half-baked lie about how you were just trying to be a nice person or something. I could see you giving someone directions, but walking way outta your way to help? That’s pretty altruistic of you.”

Meta Knight inwardly winced. “Because I’m not allowed to attempt to be a better person?” he asked evenly.

Dedede sighed. “No, it’s because I know you’ve probably spent the past three hours trying to come up with some lie to tell me. Because you never want to tell me anything! You insist on handling everything yourself, and you know you ain’t gotta. And then, because you won’t tell me, I end up getting caught off-guard when your dad shows up to my Introduction to Archaeology final, and—”

Dedede knew him far too well. “I told him to leave you out of this one,” Meta Knight replied. “He knows you didn’t have anything to do with it. This doesn’t concern you.”

Meta Knight realized his mistake immediately after he said it. He placed Galaxia on the table before him, feigning an absurd amount of concentration in performing the small action. “Your dad’s involved in this?” Dedede asked. “What did he do to you? Are you hurt?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Meta—”

“Please, we’ve had this argument before, Dedede,” Meta Knight replied. “There’s nothing we can do about it—”

“But he hurts you! For Nova’s sake, last time he visited you, you were limping for almost a week! That’s proof that—dreams or no—he’s assaulting you, and that’s illegal! I cain’t understand why you still don’t wanna do something about it!”
“Dedede, my father is possibly the most powerful wizard in all of Dreamland and the CEO of Holy Nightmare Corporation. Do you honestly think we’d be able to do anything about it? I’ll tell you exactly what would happen. We’d be involved in a long, expensive court case. I don’t have the resources to fund that, and neither do you. Let it go.”

“And just let him get away with this?” Dedede asked.

“He’s been doing this sort of thing my entire life. I’m used to it by now.”

“You shouldn’t be used to being abused, Meta Knight.”

“And I see him maybe once or twice a year. I’m fine. Quit worrying. It’s my job to worry over you—not the other way around.”

“Yeah. As your lord and employer, it ain’t my job to worry about you. But as your friend, Meta Knight—”

“You’re my friend, so I shouldn’t burden you with my problems.”

“Because I’m your friend, you should burden me with your problems,” Dedede retorted. “It’s what I signed up for.”

Meta Knight sighed. “You signed up for having to deal with my vents about classes and relationship drama. You didn’t sign up for my father or my magic or—”

“I did sign up for your magic,” Dedede interrupted. “I knew you had powers when I invited you to work for me, and I knew that they were really weird powers.”

“But you were repaying a debt, so you did the noble thing.”

Dedede cupped Meta Knight’s cheek, catching him off-guard with the gesture. “Let me finish,” Dedede insisted. “Kay?”
“Sure.”

Dedede furrowed his brow. “Look. First of all, I wasn’t doing the noble thing. Mom said I oughta do something to repay my debt to you, so I offered you a job. And I was really mad when you turned me down. I decided I was gonna knock you down a few pegs if it killed me.”

“Really?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yeah. I never told you that? Couldn’t remember if I had or not. But anyway, that’s what my plan was. Because I was so upset that some brat living on the streets dared tell me no. And yeah, in hindsight, it was petty and awful, and I shouldn’t have felt that way. Fortunately, you knocked me down a couple of pegs. You changed the entire way I saw the world, Mety Knight.”

“Dedede…”

“And the more I got to know you, the more I really liked you. The more I really wanted to repay your kindness to me,” Dedede said, “So when you came to my house in the middle of the night all beat up from your fight with Mark—”

“Marx,” Meta Knight corrected softly.

“Well, anyway,” Dedede said. “It was then that I really realized that you didn’t have anyone you could go to, and I decided that I was gonna be that person for you. If I didn’t want to be that person, I’d have torn up our contract long ago and hired someone in your place. You know I ain’t subtle, Meta.”

Meta Knight ducked his head; Dedede’s sincerity and affection had a way of getting to him. “Thank you,” Meta Knight muttered.

Dedede ran a thumb over Meta Knight’s choker. Meta Knight sighed. He’d been trying to hide the bruises Nightmare had left, but Dedede had to notice, didn’t he? “Did you know that in Old Dreamlandic a nightmare referred to a female demon that would cause the feeling of suffocation in sleepers?”

“You noticed that, hm?”
“When it’s you, I always notice,” Dedede answered. “You weren’t wearing it this morning.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Besides, I heal quickly; you know that. I probably won’t even have bruises come morning.”

Dedede sighed. “No, I guess not. Will you talk about Kirby? What’s his deal?”

“I recognized one of my father’s employees. At first, I thought he was following me, but it quickly became clear he was following Kirby,” Meta Knight admitted, “So I interfered. I shouldn’t have. I should’ve just observed.”

The confession helped alleviate some of the guilt blooming in Meta Knight’s chest. “ Weird,” Dedede said, flopping over to lay his head in Meta Knight’s lap.

Meta Knight recognized the cue and raised a hand to run his fingers through Dedede’s hair. “It is odd,” Meta Knight said, “And I’d hoped to discover why Father would do that.”

“Huh. Well, Kirbs doesn’t seem like a bad guy,” Dedede offered. “Dee and I sat beside him in class. He’s very energetic. A bit awkward, but nothing really bad about him. He comes from Pupupu Village in the south. His parents never married. He lives with his mom, who’s a baker, and his dad drops by every month or so. Pretty ordinary life. At least, it sounded like it. Maybe he gave me the abridged version. I know someone else that did something like that.”

“Hey, now. I had to think of some excuse for living on the streets with a couple of thieves,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede ran his thumb over the pale scars on Meta Knight’s right wrist; those scars circled all the way up Meta Knight’s arm and spread over his shoulder and halfway across his back. “You told me these markings were a tattoo that a friend gave you,” Dedede said.

“What was I supposed to say? Yes, I know I’m homeless and living with a couple of thieves, but the sacred sword Galaxia marked me as her champion? You’d have never believed me.”

“You could’ve warned me about the wings, though! I nearly had a heart attack the first time I came
home, and you just had them out.”

“You should’ve knocked. I wasn’t dressed.”

“When were you going to tell me about them, though?” Dedede asked.

Meta Knight hummed and offered a one-shouldered shrug. “I’m sure you’d have dragged it out of me eventually,” Meta Knight replied. “Just like this.”

“Well… I cain’t help it if I’m so charismatic,” Dedede replied, exaggeratedly batting his eyelashes. “So what’s our plan, sugar cakes? Be nice to the pipsqueak and try to figure out what his deal is?”

“Essentially.”

“Should we tell Dee?”

“I didn’t really want to tell anyone,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede grinned and ruffled Meta Knight’s hair. “Poor Mety Knight. I say we keep it a secret for now. Dee and Kirby seem like they could be good friends, and Dee's been having so much trouble since his transitioning. I mean, if Kirby turns out to be innocent, I wouldn't wanna taint their friendship with that. 'Sides, there ain't no need to worry. We're gonna figure Kirbs out in a snap!”
At six-sharp, there was a knock on Kirby’s door. Hastily, Kirby smoothed his hair for the fiftieth time and threw open the door. Bandanna Dee greeted him with a bright smile. Kirby thought Bandanna Dee looked rather elfish, for there was something vaguely mischievous about the other boy’s soft features and wide eyes. The other word Kirby would’ve used was warm. Everything about Bandanna Dee was warm brown—from his autumn-brown eyes to the peach-brown freckles spread across his nose and cheeks and his short, auburn hair, held in place by his bright blue bandanna. And unlike Meta Knight and Dedede, who dressed as expected of gentlemen, Bandanna Dee wore black skinny jeans and a soft, comfy-looking pumpkin spice-colored sweater; Kirby felt a bit more comfortable in his jeans and petal pink trench coat. “Ready to go, Kirby?” Bandanna Dee asked. His voice was delicate like spun glass.

“Yeah! I—” Kirby’s jaw dropped. Sitting innocently on the curb was a sleek, red, and very expensive-looking convertible. “—is that a Halberd?”

“Yeah. A Halberd Go DX. Meta Knight can tell you all about it,” Bandanna Dee said. “It’s Dedede’s car, but Meta’s the one that usually drives it.”

Bandanna Dee spun around and walked back to the car, Kirby following. “So he broke our chessboard? That’s been in my family for six generations!” Dedede’s voice boomed across the yard.

“Send him a text about it,” Meta Knight replied, passing Dedede his phone.

“Damn straight I will! What an ass—”

“Oh. Hello, Kirby,” Meta Knight said.

Meta Knight smiled politely from the driver’s seat, and Kirby couldn’t help but gawk. Meta Knight wore silver armor, engraved with elaborate floral designs, and a shimmering, midnight-blue cape. He was like one of the images of Galacta Knight, set in glass and brought to life. The only difference was that Meta Knight had chosen to wear a simple, silver mask with a tinted visor, instead of the traditional helmet; that was probably normal, though. Kirby hadn't followed what was fashionable armor in a long time, but even he knew that the Royal Guard, at least, had transitioned from helmets to decorative masks with protective lenses. Meta Knight’s blue hair had been braided and twisted on the back of his head with evident care and precision.

Dedede had changed, too, donning a scarlet, ermine-trimmed coat. It looked like it cost more
money than Kirby had ever seen in his life. Kirby tugged self-consciously at his pink peacoat that he’d bought on clearance from the women’s rack.

"You look—you look magnificent, Meta Knight!" Kirby said.

Meta Knight smiled wryly, as if he knew just how well armor suited him. "Thank you," he said, while Dedede looked up critically from the passenger side.

“Nice coat,” Dedede added.

Kirby rocked back on his heels. “Oh, um. I like pink, and that’s not usually a color they…you know…”

He’d thought this might happen. People usually thought he was…odd when he wore pink, and his well-meaning mom had tried coaxing him into not being so different from everyone else. He might’ve made more friends, then. “Do you want me to change?” Kirby ventured.

“Oh, no! I wasn’t being mean. I was just gonna say you oughta check out Fae Queen’s new fashion line. Lots of pink in it,” Dedede said. “She’s a…friend of mine.”

Kirby sighed in relief. “Oh.”

Kirby settled in the back beside Bandanna Dee. “So why are you two so dressed up? Is there a duel later?”

“We always do when we go out,” Meta Knight explained. “For appearances. We have to make it look like Dedede’s important enough to need protection.”

“I am important!” Dedede retorted.

“And there are thirty-five people between you and the throne. You wouldn’t be my first choice for assassination,” Meta Knight said. “Besides, you can defend yourself. You don’t even need me. You just get off on ordering me around.”
“You’re right about that,” Dedede said, trailing his knuckles over Meta Knight’s jaw—probably because it was the only part of Meta Knight that wasn’t covered in metal or fabric.

“I’m driving,” Meta Knight said, pulling away from the curb. “Hands to yourself.”

“So where are we going?” Bandanna Dee asked. “Did you two decide?”

“I believe it’s courtesy to let the guest decide,” Meta Knight replied. “Did you have anywhere you wanted to go, Kirby?”

“Have you ever been to the palace?” Kirby asked. “Oh, um…never mind. Of course, you have.”

“Have you been?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby shook his head. “No, this is actually my first time outside of Pupupu Village. It’s…quite a change! I’ve heard Castle Town has lots of really cool things, so…”

“We could go to the palace if you wanted,” Bandanna Dee said slowly. “I haven’t…been in a couple years. We were talking about going anyway. I wanted to look at some of the art for—you know—Professor Drawcia’s big assignment.”

“Big assignment? What big assignment?” Dedede asked. “Did I miss that?”

“No, it’s for her watercolor class. Kirby and I have that class together, too,” Bandanna Dee said. “She wants us to do a big project at the end of the semester based on a Dreamlandic legend. I was contemplating doing mine on the goddess Nova. Say, who’re you thinking about doing, Kirby?”

“Oh, I thought maybe Galacta Knight. It’d be fun to reinterpret him somehow,” Kirby said. “I really liked the legends about him as a kid, and—you know—the university has all that art of him? And in the Nova Center, there’s that entire hall of stained glass picture of him.”

“That’s because the university was originally Bikaia’s castle,” Meta Knight said.
“Okay, but y’know what I never got about that?” Dedede asked. “Why Bikaia made a bunch of art of a guy that he was famous for killing.”

"Because he felt guilty," Kirby supplied.

"Really?” Dedede asked.

Kirby ducked his head, a bit embarrassed. "Yeah, well, I think. It's sort of my pet theory. Most art historians think that King Bikaia did it to remind people of the person he'd vanquished, but I don't think that's the case. Galacta Knight never looks very threatening, does he?"

"I guess not," said Bandana Dee.

"Right, and if Galacta Knight was supposed to be some great evil, wouldn't the artists make him look evil? I think, maybe, Bikaia felt guilty," Kirby said. "I mean…well, it…I don't know. It's just something I thought of. Bikaia did seal someone in a crystal for a millennium; that's pretty horrible."

"If he felt so guilty, why didn't he just break the crystal?" Meta Knight asked. "Simple solution."

Kirby frowned, something tugging at him, but he couldn't quite place what it was. "I can't—I don't know."

"Well, to be fair," Bandana Dee said, "After Galacta Knight was freed, he went on a murder spree across the galaxy."

" Wouldn't you be angry, too?" Meta Knight asked. "After spending a millennium trapped in a crystal, able to see every moment pass before you and unable to move?"

"I always heard he was unconscious," Dedede said.

Meta Knight shrugged. "That's the version I was told," Meta Knight said. "I always heard he was awake."
“That’s probably cause your dad is a terrible person,” Dedede said. “To be honest, I’m surprised he even read you fairy tales.”

“Well, I was a little kid, of course, he did. Children in their formative years need affection and attention. Otherwise—”

“Growing up don’t excuse what he’s done to you,” Dedede said.

Kirby shifted awkwardly, unsure if he ought to be hearing the conversation. Clearly, Meta Knight’s father wasn’t regarded kindly.

“Drop it,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede sighed. “Fine. What were we talking about?”

“Art projects,” Bandanna Dee supplied.

“Right. Artsy stuff. Ain’t Paintra usually the one that teaches watercolors, though?” Dedede asked.

“She’s on sabbatical,” Bandanna Dee answered.

“Huh,” Dedede replied.

Meta Knight pulled into a parking lot just outside the pink marble arches, which marked the entrance to Castle Town. They’d once been a wall capable of withstanding even the harshest of sieges, but they’d been demolished when Queen Alera decided to rebuild the palace and change the image of the capital. And why not? Dreamland hadn’t been to war since the Dreamlandic-Halcandran War centuries before. The palace didn’t look like much in the distance, merely a rose-colored building, like any countless other palatial residences across Dreamland. It was said to be stunning up close.

“Hey, Kirby,” Dedede said, turning around in his seat.
“Yeah?”

Dedede’s smile was sharp. “Meta Knight is my absolute favoritest servant, and if anyone were to hurt him, well, I’d have to tear the still-beating heart from that person’s chest—”

“Will you stop—” Meta Knight began.

“—and present it to my sweet Mety Knight for his Saint Knight’s Day present. I assure you there’s little he’d find more romantic than receiving the bloody remains of his enemies.”

“—telling that to everyone I meet! You sound like a serial killer!”

Kirby gulped. “Um…I would never hurt anyone,” he said.

Dedede boomed in laughter. “Learn to take a joke, Kirbs!”

“It wasn’t a very funny joke, Dedede,” Meta Knight said. “Don’t scare our new friend away.”

“I just wanna protect my Mety Knight,” Dedede said.

“I can protect myself.”

“I know,” Dedede murmured.

“He gave me the same speech,” Bandanna Dee said, “But I think he just said no one would find the body.”

Meta Knight climbed out of the car and retrieved a sword with a golden hilt from the trunk. “Well, he needs to stop,” Meta Knight replied, toying with the sword belt. “It isn’t funny.”
“You’re mad at me,” Dedede said, sounding genuinely apologetic. “I’m sorry, Kirby. Meta’s right. It was in poor taste.”

Kirby laughed nervously. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t. Dedede was terrifying.

Castle Town wasn’t really a town. Instead, the name referred to the area just outside the palace itself. It was a small place, filled to the brim with shops, people, and landmarks. It was everything Kirby had imagined it to be and more. They paused by a jewelry stall; there were little souvenir pendants of Landia and Galaxia, along with charms made of Halcandran lava and miniature sculptures of the goddess Nova and Galacta Knight. Kirby stared at an incredibly expensive replica of King Bikaia’s crown; it was a beautiful feat of metalwork, a gold wreath of roses and vines and set with spinels.

“D’you want me to buy you anything?” Dedede asked.

Kirby blinked in surprise, unsure if the question had been posed to him or one of the other’s. He glanced towards Dedede, and it became quickly clear that it was Meta Knight he’d asked.

“That isn’t in the budget this week,” Meta Knight replied. “We’re saving for St. Knight’s Day, remember?”

“So if we fell short, I’d pawn something off,” Dedede whispered.

Kirby quickly averted his gaze and pretended not to be eavesdropping. Dedede was royalty, though, wasn’t he? Surely, he’d never need to budget or pawn anything, would he? But then, Kirby didn’t know much about royal houses at all.

“Why would you think I’d want something, anyway?” Meta Knight asked.
“Cause you’ve had a hard day,” Dedede said. “I figure you deserve a treat or something.”

“Your presence is a treat in itself, my liege,” Meta Knight replied.

“Are you saying that as my employee or as my friend?”

“A servant is always happy to be in the presence of his lord.”

“Why is it that when you sound all courtly, you sound like the most proper person ever, and when I do it I just kinda sound like an ass?” Dedede asked. “You say stuff like ‘a servant is so whatever’ and it’s great. And then, I’m just like, ‘um…fetch that thing, de Brillante Armadura’.”

Meta Knight laughed, and Dedede looked enchanted. “I’m trying to improve your wit, my Lord,” Meta Knight answered.

“When we met, I was afraid of your sword because you could best anyone with a blade. Now that I know you, I realize I should’ve been afraid of your mouth,” Dedede said.

Bandanna Dee picked up a Galaxia pendant and turned it over in his hand. “What do you think, Kirby? It’s kind of cute.”

“I like the star ones,” Kirby said, nodding to the enamel, star-shaped hairpins.

“They’d look adorable on you,” Bandanna Dee said. “You should buy them. The price isn’t bad, and they’ll look super good when you dye your hair pink.”

Kirby flushed. “How did you know I was planning to?”

“Meta Knight told me,” Bandanna Dee said, putting the Galaxia pendant back. “For the record, I think you’d look great with pink hair.”

In the end, Kirby did buy them, and they continued towards the palace. The palace was, indeed, stunning up close. Light shimmered through the hallways, decorated with crystal windows, and
cast dots of light and color over the pink marble floors. In contrast with the university, which was sturdy and heavy, the palace was light and airy. It must’ve taken countless artists to make such a beautiful place, and Kirby was filled with a wild, sudden urge to spin around and laugh. “Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Bandanna Dee asked, something wistful in his tone. “I haven’t been here in so long…”

Kirby nodded eagerly. They paused by a massive statue of Landia, carved from pink marble. It was as tall as Kirby and three times as wide. The dragon's four heads held their mouths wide, as if flames were ready to spew forth. The wings were phenomenal; the marble was carved so thin that they were translucent. Kirby gawked at it, tempted to touch it in spite of the giant, boldfaced sign warning him not to. "I've always liked this one," Bandanna Dee said.

Bandanna Dee stood beside Kirby and rocked back on his heels. Meta Knight stood on Kirby’s other side with Dedede close beside him; Kirby had quickly discovered the Dedede had little regard for personal space. Or perhaps, it was just Meta Knight’s personal space. "Dragons were magnificent creatures. They had another trick, too. Landia had not only four heads, but four hearts and four minds. Most dragons did, and those dragons could give their life to whoever they wished. As far as we know, they're the only creatures with power over death," Bandanna Dee said. "It's almost…sad that they're gone."

“Wow! You know a lot about dragons,” Kirby said. “That’s really cool!”

Bandanna Dee laughed. "Well, I've learned most of it from our friend Ribbon. She’s taken a few classes in dragonology."

"Oh. Is she a dragonologist?” Kirby asked.

"Geology major,” Meta Knight said, “Because dragon's fire is very important in geology. Dragons were vastly magical creatures, so much so that they would alter their own habitats. You can tell where a dragon has lived because they altered the very earth around them. It's especially obvious in gemstones and metals, though. Dragon fire and dragon blood were both highly prized for forging. They could alter metals, so they'd neither dull nor break, and gems so they could store incredible amounts of energy. The royal family has a lot dragon-forged objects, but it's difficult to get clearance to view them in-person."

"If you're not royal?" A new voice inquired. “How unfortunate. There must be so much we could learn if such things were available to everyone.”

Kirby spun around. The man standing behind them was well-dressed in green, trimmed with gold. His skin was as dark as a starless night, and his eyes were a silvery moon-grey. In contrast, the
man’s hair was as white as snow. He was beautiful and looked unlike any person Kirby had ever seen. Meta Knight bowed deeply. “Your Royal Majesty,” Meta Knight said. “May I present my liege, Lord Dedede, Heir of the Stars, and his companions, Lords Bandanna Dee and Kirby Stellarum.”

Your Royal Majesty? Wasn’t that a title for a prince? No Dreamlandic prince looked like that. Was it a foreign prince? Should he bow? Meta Knight had bowed, but Dedede hadn’t. Neither had Bandanna Dee, but was that because they were nobility? And Meta Knight had introduced them as Lords Bandanna Dee and Kirby. Had he lied about them being nobility? Kirby felt his face warm, unsure about how to react.

“How odd. Aside from the press, you’re the first Dreamlanders to recognize me,” the maybe-prince said.

“My Lord would be remiss if he didn’t recognize Prince Taranza of Floralia,” Meta Knight replied, straightening.

Prince Taranza smiled; his eye teeth were unusually sharp.

“That’s right,” Dedede said, stepping forward. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“I’ve not yet had a chance to explore much of the palace,” Taranza replied. “You were talking about dragon-forged weapons? I believe Moon and Blossom are such, aren’t they?”

"Moon and Blossom?" Kirby asked.

"Permission to speak, my Lord Dedede?” Meta Knight asked.

“Wha—oh. Um…granted, Me—de Brillante Armadura,” Dedede said.

Taranza narrowed his eyes, quiet and observant. “They’re Princess Sectonia's rapiers,” Meta Knight explained. “After the dragon Landia destroyed Halcandra, he turned to destroy Pop Star. The king of Dreamland captured the goddess Nova and made her awaken Bikaia from his eternal slumber. The battle between Bikaia and Landia was great and went on for days, while the dragon's fire burned the city. According to legend, the dragon Landia melted Bikaia's shield. Mace Knight later recovered it and forged two rapiers, Moon and Blossom. She offered them to Bikaia for his
battle with Galacta Knight, but he refused, so she gave them to the royal family. They remained mostly untouched until Princess Sectonia chose to wield them."

"Ah, yes," Taranza said. "He chose Galaxia instead, didn’t he, Meta Knight?"

Meta Knight visibly started. "Yes, he did, Your Royal Majesty."

“I believe this is the sacred Galaxia?” Taranza walked ahead and waved breezily to a nearby painting.

Meta Knight hastily followed at Taranza’s heels; his movements were strangely awkward, his fluid grace suddenly absent. "What?” Dedede muttered.

"Is something wrong?” Bandanna Dee whispered.

“Don’t know,” Dedede replied, clenching his fists, “But if he—”

“Why don’t you join us, my Lord?” Meta Knight inquired, looking over his shoulder.

Kirby moved towards the painting, following Bandanna Dee, who looked as confused as Kirby, and Dedede, whose face was flushed bright scarlet. "How good of you to grace us with your presence, my Lord,” Meta Knight said, his eyes half-closed and glassy.

“Stop it,” Dedede said. “Knock it off.”

“Galaxia,” Meta Knight replied, gesturing towards the painting.

The painting featured a tall, ethereally beautiful woman with pale skin, blonde hair, and striking red eyes. She wore a flowing, gold dress that clung to every curve of her body; it looked as if her clothing had been doused in water in spite of the golden flames around her. It was a common depiction of Galaxia during the Classical era; even a cursory glance through Kirby’s textbook had revealed that.
“I’ve heard,” Taranza said, “That Galaxia would sometimes appear as a beautiful woman to those she deemed worthy. Isn’t that right, Meta Knight?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Did she look like this?” Kirby asked.

“No. She’s incomparably beautiful,” he said.

“Oh, I can see her perfectly,” Bandanna Dee replied with a nervous laugh. “How poetic.”

“That’s enough!” Dedede exclaimed, wedging himself between Meta Knight and Taranza. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but—”

“But you’re not really in a position to argue, are you?” Taranza asked. “Attacking a foreign prince wouldn’t be very acceptable, would it?”

Meta Knight made a strange, choking noise. “She has…skin that is very dark, but she has these freckles across her face that are pale white. It looks like someone took a handful of stars and scattered them across her face, and her hair is thick and white. Her eyes, though. They’re the color of roses or blood. It’s like when she looks at you, she can tell everything you’ve ever done and ever will do.”

“That’s what he thinks,” Dedede said, glaring at Taranza. “It ain’t a fact.”

“What’s going on?” Bandanna Dee asked.

“She’s glorious,” Meta Knight said, his sincere voice at odds with his still-blank face.

“I see you’re very well-versed in Galaxia’s lore,” Taranza said. “Is that a replica you have with you?”

“Of course,” Dedede scoffed. “You know the sacred Galaxia was stolen, right? Surely, you don’t
think someone of my status would be walking around with someone that—"

“Do you honestly believe that the sacred Galaxia would choose your servant for such an honor? How highly you must think of Meta Knight,” Taranza said.

“Although whether or not Galaxia can be stolen if up for debate, ain’t it?” Dedede asked. “Can you really steal a weapon capable of picking her own partner?”

“It’s odd that you say partner. Most would’ve said master,” Taranza replied.

Kirby had a terrible feeling that he was missing some crucial piece of information, that he’d invaded upon a long, ongoing conversation. Meta Knight’s hand shook as he unsheathed his blade. It was the best replica of Galaxia that Kirby had ever seen. It was gold and beautiful, as if the blade had been forged with the thought of fire always in mind. Sacred, indeed. Glorious, undeniably. Kirby’s fingers itched to touch the sword’s mirror-finish.

But there was something more. When Meta Knight unsheathed the blade, the air seemed to shimmer. It was charged with something like fire and starlight. It was something beautiful and sacred, and Kirby couldn’t resist it. It called to him in some strange, beguiling way. That wasn’t a replica. That was Galaxia. The Galaxia. Sacred Galaxia.

Dedede grabbed Meta Knight arm and pulled him back. “Let him go! I don’t care if you’re allowed to do this. It ain’t right. Get out of his head!”

Meta Knight, gasping for breath, suddenly slumped against Dedede. “Did he hurt you?” Dedede asked. “Mety Knight?”

“He’s unharmed,” Taranza said. “I promise—”

“I wasn’t asking you!” Dedede snapped. “I was asking—”

Meta Knight placed his hand on Dedede’s forearm. “I’m fine. What was the point of all this?”

Taranza smiled. “If your father really loved you, Meta Knight, he wouldn’t abuse you.”
Meta Knight flinched. “How absurd. You believe I want his—his love? Love doesn’t really exist. It’s just the name we give a series of chemical reactions—”

How cold. Did Meta Knight really believe that?

“You sound just like him,” Taranza replied.

“Meta Knight is nothing like his father,” Bandanna Dee retorted, “And you’re just—just being a—abhorrent!”

“Careful. I know your secrets, too,” Taranza said.

Bandanna Dee stepped back, looking as if he’d been slapped. “Well, this has all been quite enjoyable,” Taranza said, “But I’ll leave you. I imagine you’ll have much to talk about since you’re all keeping secrets from one another.”

Taranza strode away. And dear Kirby, you needn’t worry about that magic of yours. Meta Knight already knows you have powers.

Kirby jumped at the unexpected voice in his head. Meta Knight…knew? Meta Knight—Meta Knight had Galaxia. The Galaxia. Kirby’s heart was in his throat. He couldn’t breathe. “Y-you stole Galaxia?” he finally managed.

Meta Knight had pulled the sword close and held her against his chest. “She chose me,” he said. “I—she stole me.”

“They’re not gonna do anything to you,” Dedede said. “I promise—”

“I know. Taranza already said that wasn’t his intention when he was inside my thoughts,” Meta Knight said. “He was just…looking.”

“Looking at what?” Dedede asked.
“The past few hours, as far as I can tell,” Meta Knight said. “I don’t know what he hoped to gain.”

“He was in my thoughts, too,” Kirby said, rubbing the back of his neck. “You…you knew I had magic, Meta Knight?”

“How could I not? You’re so powerful,” Meta Knight replied.

So powerful. Meta Knight had felt him. Meta Knight had magic, too. Meta Knight was the wielder of sacred Galaxia. Kirby wasn’t sure whether to run away and scream or bow in respect or try to touch Galaxia again. "And you don't care?" Kirby asked.

"Don't none of us care," Dedede said. "So you've got magical powers. So does Mety Knight."

They didn't care. They didn't think he was creepy or dangerous. They didn't ask if he could read their minds or set them on fire. They didn't ask anything at all. They just accepted him. Kirby's chest was tight. They accepted him. They didn't care.

“I think he was in all our minds,” Bandanna Dee said, nervously tugging on his sweater. “But there’s…nothing we can do, is there?”

“No,” Dedede murmured.

“Especially if Sectonia is involved,” Meta Knight said.

“Why would she be?” Dedede inquired.

“Call it a hunch. It’s interesting that Prince Taranza of Floralia smells like very expensive women’s perfume, isn’t it? Tabloids claim they’ve been together for a while.”

Kirby hadn’t noticed any perfume.
“But why would she be sending Taranza to do her work for her?” Dedede asked. “Why would she even wanna give us a second look?”

“I don’t know,” Meta Knight said.

The hall was suddenly silent and somber. “Let’s go somewhere else,” Meta Knight said, sheathing Galaxia. “I don’t want to stay here.”

Kirby didn’t have a better plan. He didn’t even understand everything that’d happened. They didn’t care. Kirby was...thrilled. Thrilled and confused and lost. But it seemed everyone else was lost, too.

Sectonia, the Crown Princess of Dreamland, lounged on a beautifully embroidered loveseat. She was widely agreed to be the most beautiful woman in Dreamland and more good reason. If Sectonia had any flaws, they weren’t to be found in her large, violet eyes, her shimmering black curls, or her enviable curves. Taranza had been enchanted the moment he’d met her, and Sectonia knew it. She always knew when there was interest. “So what did you think?” she inquired.

Taranza, who sat across from her, smirked. “Meta Knight is an interesting young man, just as you said.”

“*Interesting* isn’t quite the term I’d use for the person prophesized to kill me.”

“He is bonded with Galaxia, though. As we expected,” Taranza said. “Surely, that speaks for his character, doesn’t it? I’ll grant you that he isn’t pure of heart; there’s definitely something cunning about him. But I didn’t sense anything truly malicious.”

“Yes, and I’ll admit I’m puzzled by that. I’ve never directly approached Meta Knight, but I’ve been keeping an eye on him for a while. There’s been some bad things—because he’s common-blood, naturally—but nothing truly awful. His father is a piece of work.”

“I’d gathered. Nightmare paid him a visit today.”
Sectonia took a deep breath and leaned forward. “We need to put a stop to that,” she said.

“But *can* you? Can you honestly force Nightmare Nocturne not to visit his only child? I don’t think Meta Knight would consent to that. Deep down, he *does* want his father’s love and affection. I don’t think he even truly understands that what Nightmare does to him is wrong. And no urging from you or Dedede is going to change his mind.”

“I know.” Sectonia said, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. “But if he *would*, I could have Meta Knight indebted to me. If Galaxia chose him, he must be honorable. It’s so complicated, though! If Mother figures out what I know, she’ll want Meta Knight sealed away. And I can’t do that to some—some innocent boy!”

“She’s only looking out for you, Sectonia,” Taranza said gently.

“I know! But if Meta Knight was truly so monstrous, would he settle for serving a third-tier nobleman who has nothing to offer?”

Sectonia rose and paced across the creamy, plush carpet. “And that’s not even considering how much this would hurt Dedede or his mother. There’s…there’s something about Dedede, too, that I haven’t quite pieced together. I feel as though I have a very…strong bond with him. Something besides our familial relations, obviously.”

“What about Kirby Stellarum?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of him,” Sectonia said. “He’s not registered with A.M.B.E.R.”

“Isn’t that odd? I thought everyone was.”

“They’re supposed to be, but it’s not unheard of for a few to slip through the cracks. But I wonder…if he truly has Copy, is it possible he’s the reincarnation of King Bikaia? I haven’t seen him in my dreams.”

Sectonia crossed her arms and paused in her pacing.
“The Hero of the Lower World,” Taranza said softly. “It’d make sense if Meta Knight really is the reincarnation of Galacta Knight. If history is repeating itself.”

“But I’m not sure history is repeating itself. Not exactly. So we’ll wait. Meta Knight deserves a chance to prove himself, and I won’t take that away from him. As the Crown Princess, I have a duty to protect and serve all the people of Dreamland—including him.”

“And if the worst should happen?”

Sectonia took a deep breath. “Then, we’ll do what we must.”
Chapter Notes

In case anyone is interested in knowing when their favorite characters (game? plotline?) is going to make it in, here’s the working order: Epic Yarn/Canvas Curse, Amazing Mirror, Milky Way Wishes, Triple Deluxe, Revenge of Meta Knight, Kirby’s Adventure, Meta Knightmare, Return to Dreamland, Planet Robobot/Squeak Squad, Dark Matter Trilogy.

*I'm still working on how to incorporate Rainbow Curse.

**If I missed your favorite game or character, you're absolutely free to let me know. I do have a couple things I'm still adjusting past the halfway point, so you're more than welcome to make requests!

The box was large and black with the Holy Nightmare Corporation’s logo emblazoned on the side in silver. It looked strangely foreboding on the pale granite tile of the kitchen counter. Slowly and jerkily, Dedede reached out and prodded the box with a pen.

“Really, Dedede?” Meta Knight asked, crossing his arms. “I doubt even Father would send something that’s going to bite us.”

“I done learned not to underestimate yer old man,” Dedede replied. “Remember that diamond-studded collar he sent? Y’doo realize he had to actually plan out someone to custom make something that he knew was gonna just get sent back to him.”

“Well, Father never does things by halves.”

“It’s freakin’ creepy, Meta.”

"The collar? Hardly. He bought you a life insurance policy."

“He sent you a collar?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight looked over his shoulder as Bandanna Dee entered the room. Bandanna Dee smiled hesitantly and spun around clumsily on his combat boots. “What do you think? I like it.”
adjusted the collar on his orange button-down shirt. “And it doesn’t have that awkward gap over
my chest! See?”

“Is that Meta’s jacket?” Dedede asked.

It was.

“It’s a blazer,” Bandanna Dee said, “And yes. It looks good, right?”

It looked odd because Bandanna Dee never wore black. It was also a little broad in the shoulders,
but Meta Knight doubted anyone else would notice.

“Those are his jeans, too,” Dedede said.

“They make my butt look great. Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Meta Knight said, “But you don’t usually opt for outfits that are so…tight-fitting. What’s
the occasion?”

“Oh. I’m going out with Kirby,” Bandanna Dee answered.

And he felt the need to…dress nice? This was something Bandanna Dee hadn’t done before. Dear
Nova, what if Bandanna Dee had a crush on Kirby? Meta Knight hadn’t considered that there
might be…infatuation when he and Dedede had agreed not to tell Bandanna Dee about
Nightmare’s interest in Kirby. Meta Knight took a steadying breath. This was something that ought
to be approached with tact and care.

“Like a date?” Dedede blurted out.

So much for that.

Bandanna Dee flushed, his auburn hair making it look like his face was on fire. “No, it’s just…
guys hanging out. You know.”
They shouldn’t have tried to keep this a secret, but—but what if Kirby was innocent? What if he and Bandanna Dee were going to be best friends? What if Kirby wasn’t so nice, though? What if he was a monster or something dangerous? And they were just letting Bandanna Dee...hang out. With Kirby.

“But you ain’t gotta dress up like that!” Dedede replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “Don’t y’think—”

_Dear heart, Nightmare spies on you, too, and you’re hardly a monster, _Galaxia murmured. _I don’t think you should judge Kirby so quickly. Your caution is understandable, but Bandanna Dee is a smart boy. He’s been through an ordeal, but he’s no more made of glass than you are._

“Meta Knight dresses up nice when he goes out with you,” Bandanna Dee argued. “I don’t see why I can’t. I mean, maybe I want to try something new.”


Bandanna Dee beamed at him.

“Yeah, of course!” Dedede exclaimed. “I’m just—just concerned. I mean, you don’t really know Kirby that well, and well, I just wanna make sure…you…”

“We worry about you,” Meta Knight said, “And we really needn’t. If you need us, you’ll call, and we’ll be there for you. But you look…nice. You should go out and have fun with Kirby. Remember that jacket is dry clean only, though. Don’t just shove it in the washer with the towels like someone does.”

Dedede scoffed. _You are gettin’ floor scrubbing duty for the next two months._

“You can’t make me scrub your floors. It’s a clause in my contract.”

Bandanna Dee stifled a chuckle, and Meta Knight smirked. Dedede looked utterly baffled. “Did you...did you really put that—is that really in your contract?”
“Yes. Because…you know. Bad experience with cleaning floors,” Meta Knight replied awkwardly.

“Oh. I never…well, I didn’t actually read your contract after you made revisions,” Dedede said. “I just sorta signed it.”

Meta Knight had a lecture ready about that. Dedede was going to lose the very small fortune his family had with that sort of behavior. What else hadn’t he read? “You didn’t read the five-year contract binding another person to you?” Bandanna Dee asked, beating Meta Knight to it.

“I didn’t see the need. I’d have given Meta Knight whatever he wanted,” Dedede said. “I…I liked him. Y’know?”

“You do realize that I was a reformed thief at the time,” Meta Knight said. “You knew the people I used to associate with, and it never occurred to you that I might really rip you off?”

“I didn’t really care,” Dedede said. “I mean, as long as you were happy…”

Meta Knight shook his head and looked away. He didn’t want Dedede to see his face; Meta Knight felt like he was blushing, and such overt emotions were a sign of weakness. Father always said it was important to keep people guessing, and while Meta Knight knew his father’s philosophy was flawed, another small part of him was still embarrassed by his own emotions. Meta Knight tapped the box, drawing attention back to it. “My father has beautiful penmanship.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda creepy,” Dedede said. “So d’you wanna crack this thing open or just return it back to him? It’s kinda heavy.”

“At worst, it’s a gift in really poor taste,” Meta Knight replied.

“Right. He sent you a collar?” Bandanna Dee asked. “As…a joke?”

“More as an insult,” Meta Knight answered.
“Yeah, when we first moved to campus, Nightmare liked to send these really weird care packages,” Dedede said. “Y’know, normal parents send peanut butter and socks. Nightmare sends collars and mousetraps.”

“What did he think you were going to do with mousetraps?” Bandanna Dee asked.

“I think the implication was that our housing would be covered in vermin because of Dedede’s lack of wealth,” Meta Knight replied.

Meta Knight grabbed a kitchen knife, sliced open the box and was greeted by a card and a cloud of bubble wrap. Dedede swiped the card off top. “Dearest Meta Knight,” Dedede scoffed. “He doesn’t treat you like his dearest anything.”

Meta Knight sighed. “Dedede.”

“Hey, now. I can take a hint. Dearest Meta Knight. In hindsight, I realize that I—perhaps—exhibited a small amount of distasteful behavior during my visit. Therefore, I beg your most gracious pardon for having destroyed your chessboard and hope you find the replacement satisfactory. I’d intended this to be a present for the princess’s birthday, but considering the circumstances, I think this gift is better offered to you, my pet. Sincerely, et cetera, Father,” Dedede scoffed. “What sort of weirdo signs off to their own kid like that?”

Meta Knight grabbed a bundle of bubble wrap and picked the tape loose. “You said you wanted a replacement. I wouldn’t complain.”

“Yeah, but he’s giving you Sectonia’s rejected presents? That ain’t nice. Bet it’s expensive, though.”

Meta Knight placed the newly unwrapped queen on the counter. She was elegantly formed of silver and studded with blue diamonds. Expensive didn’t even begin to cover it. “That’s…d’you think they all look like that?” Dedede asked, grabbing another bundle. “Like…holy crap!”

Together, the three of them unwrapped each piece, placing them on the counter. Indeed, all the pieces were as beautiful and as expensive. They were gold and silver and captured the fluorescent lights, their diamonds casting specks of color on the counter and the walls. It was breathtaking and terrible. It probably cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Meta Knight was torn between saying we need to send this back and we could sell this and pay rent for three years, and all the while,
some small, too sentimental part of Meta Knight really wanted to keep it. It was the only nice thing Nightmare had given him in years. Of course, Meta Knight had a lifetime of negative memories associated with the game—matches with Nightmare that devolved into fights and scoldings for being such a pathetic adversary—but there were some very lovely ones, too. Memories of being young and fascinated, while Nightmare gently taught him the rules and coaxed him into playing. Memories of playing with Dedede and making wagers over the little things that’d built their friendship.

“Technically, it was your chessboard,” Meta Knight said. “It’s yours.”

“And somehow, I got the feeling this is a present for you,” Dedede replied. “So you oughta decide what we’re doing with it. Send it back or sell it or whatever.”

“Give it to the crown princess, so we don’t have to buy her a birthday present,” Meta Knight said. “She was the original recipient.”

“I’d just as soon not get her anything. Ain’t like she’d notice,” Dedede mused.

The air hung heavy at the mention of Princess Sectonia. “How’re you feeling, caballerita?” Dedede asked quietly. “After, you know, Taranza yesterday.”

He’d stayed up most of the night thinking about it. “Caballerito,” Meta Knight said, swiping the card from off the counter. He kept all his father’s cards, no matter how insulting. “I’m not a woman, Dedede.”

“Ugh! I screw up the conjugation every time!”

“I’m also neither a knight nor little, but—”

“Meta Knight, you’re five-foot-six,” Dedede replied. “That’s tiny.”

Meta Knight scowled. “Five-seven.”

Six knocks sounded at the door, and Bandanna Dee’s face lit up in delight. “That should be Kirby!”
Indeed, it was. Bandanna Dee ushered Kirby—clad in his pink coat and red pants in. Upon further reflection, Kirby was a peculiarly bright creature for Nightmare to pursue. Even Kirby’s aura was diamond-bright and warm. Everything Nightmare wasn’t. So why?

“Hi, Meta Knight! Dedede!” Kirby paused and bowed awkwardly. “Um…Lord Dedede?”

“The bowing isn’t necessary. It’ll only stroke his ego,” Meta Knight said.

“Hey!” Dedede crossed his arms and stormed across the room. “I cain’t believe you’re insulting me in front of guests! I’m gonna stand over here next to Dee! Least, he’s got some manners.”

Kirby fidgeted with the hem of his coat. A nervous tick, perhaps? Interesting. Meta Knight gazed at the papers lying on the table beside Dedede. Breathe in, wait until he felt the magic, breathe out. Just like Father taught him. The papers burst upwards in Dedede’s face, causing him to sputter. It was so simple! It was natural to call the wind in his mind, to feel the coolness of the air tingling across his skin, and to bend it to his will. Why was it that it was so hard to do when Father was around? Meta Knight really wasn’t that bad with his magic.

*He makes you nervous, dear heart, and it’s harder to focus,* Galaxia murmured.

Because he panicked. Every single time. Even after running away and leaving Nightmare, his father still rendered him so pathetically ineffectual.

*You aren’t to blame for that.*

Yes, he was.

Kirby’s blue eyes were wide, but his face expressed amazement rather than alarm.

“That ain’t fair!” Dedede protested. “And I just want you to know, I ain’t picking these up!”

“Is that a challenge, my Lord?” Meta Knight asked.
Kirby still looked like he’d swallowed a live toad. Evidently, he wasn’t accustomed to such open displays of magic. That would seem to indicate that he didn’t associate with many magical people. Interesting.

Dedede was already picking up the papers. He cast Meta Knight a knowing look; Dedede might not understand precisely, but he clearly understood that Meta Knight had some goal in mind. His lord really was far cleverer than most gave him credit for being. “Y’know. Someday, I’m gonna get tired of you, and you’re gonna have to go out and find another job.”


Kirby was back to picking at his coat, even as he followed Bandanna Dee to the door. Perhaps, conflict made him nervous? What could Nightmare possibly want from someone who was so transparent with their emotions? Father had always emphasized composure over everything else.

“I am being nice. I was just gonna say that I got the perfect job in mind! Mety’s gonna be a sailboat captain!”

Bandanna Dee burst into laughter, gesturing for Kirby to leave before him. “Well, you have fun with that. Kirby and I are going out. Try not to kill each other for me?”

“No promises!” Meta Knight called after them.

He wasn’t sure if his words were lost in the sound of the door closing.

They went shopping on the outskirts of town. It was the busiest district in the capital, second only to Castle Town. Kirby had never seen so many people in his life, and it was overwhelming and wonderful. Bandanna Dee guided Kirby through all the best art shops, where they gawked at the paint selection and debated on the benefits of Prismacolor and Copic markers. They wandered into the historic part of the district and pointed out bits about the architecture, carefully recited for Drawcia’s promised quiz the first week of September.
Overall, it was a fun evening. Bandanna Dee was clever and cheerful, and he knew a lot. They ended up back on campus, where Bandanna Dee rushed them over to the theater. That was when things went downhill very quickly. It wasn't that Kirby was tired or had an irrational hatred of the performing arts. It was that the second he set foot in the drama building, he heard the most awful, piercing ringing in his ears, and it would not stop.

Of course, Bandanna Dee was so excited about the play that Kirby couldn't bring himself to comment on the weird ringing; it was probably just sinuses, anyway. Besides, Kirby didn't want Bandanna Dee to worry, and it'd probably stop anyway. As they sat, Bandanna Dee happily scanned the cast list, commenting on names of a half-dozen people Kirby had never heard of. Kirby forced a smile and tried to listen around the ringing in his ears. By the end of the first act, the ringing had developed into a fierce headache. It was difficult to concentrate. He couldn’t even follow the plot or remember which beautifully dressed lady was Galaxia and which was Nova. Kirby winced. "Hey, I'm going to the bathroom," he whispered.

"Oh, okay," Bandanna Dee said. "Hurry back, though, or you'll miss the good part."

"Sure."

Kirby left his seat and thought he might actually be sick. Okay, definitely not sinuses. Kirby stepped into the bathroom and leaned against the wall. The room spun around him. Okay, Kirby thought. Just take deep breaths. You’re okay, Stellarum.

He tried.

No, I'm dying, he thought.

Slowly, Kirby lowered himself to the ground and closed his eyes. The nausea didn't fade, but at least, the room wasn't moving anymore. Kirby groaned and vainly rubbed his temples. He didn't know how long he sat there, wondering how long has it been I don't want to worry Bandanna Dee dear Nova, why does it still hurt? I need to get up. I need to do something.

Kirby braced a hand against the wall. He felt so hot. Why was everything so hot? It was late August and uncommonly cool for the time of year. It shouldn’t be...hot. Slowly and deliberately, he forced himself up. I need to go home, he thought.

But he didn't know if he could even walk. Surely, Bandanna Dee would come looking for him if
Kirby took too long, wouldn't he? Kirby opened his eyes, and the room seemed to tilt. He hissed between his teeth and leaned his head back against the wall. *It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.*

Kirby blinked back tears; the ringing in his head grew into a symphony. And it *wouldn't* stop. "Hey, are you all right?"

The words seemed to come from another world, and it took Kirby a while to figure out what they meant. Kirby raised his head and met wide, Halcandran-gold eyes. "Just a headache," Kirby said, wincing.

The man smiled sympathetically. Dimly, Kirby noted that the man was probably in his early twenties, had straight, brown hair, and skin that was a few shades darker than Meta Knight’s. "I may have something for headaches; I get them quite a bit myself," the man said, shuffling through his backpack.

Kirby had been told never to take medicine from strangers, but being drugged or poisoned was beginning to seem preferable compared to the pounding in his head. "Wh-who are you?" Kirby asked.

Or tried to. He wasn't entirely sure he said the words right. It was getting hard to think. "Magolor de las Estrella," he said slowly. "And you?"

Magolor pulled a small bottle of medicine from his bag and unscrewed the top. "Kirby Stellarum," he answered.

"Here."

Magolor tipped the bottle over Kirby’s hand and dropped two white pills into it. It looked like Excedrin. "Take those. They should help. Do you want me to get you something to drink?"

Drink? Drink. "No, I'll get the water fountain," Kirby said distantly.

Kirby stumbled up, Magolor looking on anxiously. It was only a few feet to the fountain, and Kirby downed the medicine. He considered dunking his head under the water, too, but he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to stand on his own. He sank to the ground again, and dimly, he noted that Magolor sat beside him. "Y-you don't have to stay around," Kirby said.
"That's okay. I want to."

"Mm. That's nice of you," Kirby mumbled. "Everyone from around here is nice."

"Oh, I'm not! From here, that is. I just transferred here from another university, but I do like it. It's very lovely."

"Oh, what are you studying?" Kirby asked, more to be polite than anything else.

Magolor was probably a very nice guy, but all Kirby wanted to do was crawl somewhere dark and sleep. "I'm double-majoring in engineering and Halcandran studies," Magolor replied.

"Kirby! Are you okay?"

Kirby forced a bright smile and turned his head towards the painfully loud voice. Bandanna Dee evidently had been concerned, and Kirby felt a twinge of guilt for making his friend worry. "Yeah, I will be. I'm just not feeling too well," Kirby said, trying to force a smile.

"Oh! Well, I'll take you home," Bandanna Dee said.

"But I don't want to ruin your evening!"

Bandanna Dee shook his head. "We can hang out tomorrow, too, so don't worry. It's not going to ruin my evening."

"But you wanted to see this play…"

"Yeah, but it's okay. Besides, I think Meta has a copy of it on DVD, so it's not that big of a deal," Bandanna Dee said.

"Ah, well, I can see you're in good hands!" Magolor exclaimed suddenly. "Here's your phone back,
Kirby stared at it for a long moment. When had he given Magolor his phone? Kirby took it, blinking rapidly, as if to ensure that it was his phone. It was pink with stars; of course, it was. But... when had he...? "Call me sometime, though! I really think we'll be great friends!" Magolor exclaimed cheerfully.

Kirby took the phone, a little foggy-headed. Magolor must've left at some point. He wasn't there. "Kirby, who was that?" Bandanna Dee asks.

"Magolor," Kirby muttered, tucking his phone into his pocket.

"Hm."

Bandanna Dee furrowed his brow and went to place his hand against Kirby’s forehead. Kirby tilted his head away. "Um... don't, please,” he said. “It's—ah... my magic?"

“Oh! Okay. No problem."

No judgment at all. How lovely.

"Thank you," Kirby said.

"Maybe you should just spend the night at my place, though. It’s closer than your residence hall, and we’d be around to keep any eye on you. Drive you to the clinic if this gets worse. That sort of thing," Bandanna Dee said.

"I’ll be fine. Just need to sleep," Kirby mumbled.

"Okay, Kirby."

Kirby barely noticed the walk back to Bandanna Dee's apartment. It was like being in a dream, and suddenly, they were at their destination. Bandanna Dee fidgeted with his keys. "Do you want me to
drive you over to the clinic now? I can borrow the—"

The door burst open, revealing Meta Knight. “Wow. Did I make that much noise?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight shook his head, but offered no alternative explanation. “Did you want a ride home, Kirby?” he asked. “It’s dangerous to walk around alone at this hour. It’s almost eleven.”

“He’s spending the night with us,” Bandanna Dee answered. “He’s not feeling well.”

“If it’s okay, of course,” Kirby added hurriedly.

If it was, he really hoped Meta Knight would just move and let him collapse on the couch. “Yes, of course. You can sleep in my bed. Just give me a couple minutes to change the bedding,” Meta Knight said.

“No, I can’t drive you out of your bed. That’s…rude,” Kirby said, rubbing his forehead.

Meta Knight seemed to realize Kirby’s energy was quickly fading, for he stepped aside and ushered them in. “Nonsense. You’re the guest; I couldn’t possibly let you sleep on the sofa or the floor. My father raised a gentleman, if nothing else.”

Bandanna Dee laughed. “Trust me; you’re better off just agreeing.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” Kirby asked.

Why was it so hot?

“If I minded, I wouldn’t have offered,” Meta Knight replied. “Do you want to take something first? We have some things in the medicine cabinet.”

Kirby shook his head. “No, Magolor gave me some.”
“Magolor…yes, he has frequent migraines,” Meta Knight muttered. “It makes sense that he
would.”

Kirby felt like the information should’ve been a revelation somehow, but he just couldn’t…think.
Watching Meta Knight pull sheets and a downy comforter from the linen closet all felt like it was
happening to another Kirby, and somehow, the most surreal thing about it was the fact that Meta
Knight actually kept linens in the linen closet.

"Don’t worry about imposing. We're your friends, Kirby," Bandanna Dee said, with a cheerful
smile. "It's no problem at all."

*Friends!* Lovely, wonderful really. Kirby tried really hard to smile and express his gratitude, but he
couldn't ignore the feeling that something was wrong with him. Something very, very wrong.
The clock in the hallway said midnight. Kirby crept from the bathroom, careful not to wake anyone else. He paused, gazing into the living room, which emitted a soft, blue glow. He needn’t have worried about waking Meta Knight; it seemed he was awake, too. Kirby padded softly into the room. Meta Knight sat on the sofa, curled up between a thick comforter. The glow was from the television, which displayed a castle, flanked by moonlight and lightning. “Kirby,” Meta Knight said, without turning around. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better! No headache,” Kirby said, with a laugh. "Thank you."

"That's good then."

“What are you watching?” Kirby asked, edging closer to the sofa.

“Something about Daydream fighting an army of zombie gordos.”

“Daydream?”

“Yes. Evidently, there is Daydream, and he’s the good counterpart to Dark Matter. Daydream gallivants around in this hideous, pseudo-fantasy armor, and Dark Matter is this creepy wizard-thing that whispers all his lines.”


He didn’t want to say ‘awful’ for fear of hurting Meta Knight’s feelings. “That’s one way to put it. It’s so bad that it, through some miracle, manages to be wonderful. There’s an awkward romance, too, between Daydream and some sort of sorceress warrior-lady. Her name is Pulsar, which is an astronomy term, and I’m not sure if she’s supposed to be some sort of version of Nova or not,” Meta Knight paused. “It’s really bothering me.”

A zombie-gordo screamed in the background. Kirby looked at the television, in time to see the gordo stabbed—with a poorly painted golden sword—through the eye, with a gratuitous amount of blood. “Is…is that meant to be Galaxia?” Kirby asked.
“I think,” Meta Knight answered, sounding uncertain. “Want to join me, since you’re awake?”

“But don’t you need to sleep?” Kirby asked.

“I’m an evil sorcerer,” Meta Knight replied. “I don’t sleep.”

“I really doubt you’re anything evil,” Kirby said.

“You’ve hardly known me long enough to assume anything about my morality.”

“I suppose. I’ve always been like that, though: I try to see the good in everyone. That always worried my mom. She always says I’m too trusting, and I know she just doesn’t want me to get hurt. It’s just…kind of like seeing the best in everyone. You know?”

“I don’t know. I tend to expect the worst from other people.”

Kirby looked at Meta Knight, who kept his gaze focused on the movie. “But I don’t agree with your mother,” Meta Knight added. “People get hurt; that’s just life. If you want to see good in everyone, that’s fine. Just remember to look after yourself, and remember that people don’t really change.”

Kirby felt suddenly shy. Usually, when Kirby said things like that, people told him he was too naïve. “You’re really wonderful, Meta Knight,” Kirby said.

Kirby couldn’t quite name the look that Meta Knight gave him. “Do you always compliment people this much?” asked Meta Knight.

“I suppose,” Kirby said. “Why wouldn’t I compliment you? Compliments make people happy! Besides, you are wonderful. And beautiful. And everything else I said.”

“Oh. Thank you. You’re…ah, very lovely yourself,” Meta Knight replied. “Very cheerful.”

Kirby joined Meta Knight on the couch. Kirby had never spent a night with a friend, and he felt
strangely, wonderfully normal. It wasn’t that Kirby disliked himself, but it was nice to do things that were considered normal. Like have friends over and laugh over stupid movies.

There was an awkward silence, broken only by the screams of dying zombie-gordos. “So…what got you interested in these sorts of movies?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight said nothing for a long moment, and Kirby shifted awkwardly, wondering if he should repeat the question. Maybe Meta Knight hadn’t heard him?

“It began when I was a teenager,” Meta Knight said finally. “My father was away often, but he always promised to come home…Nova, it’s so pathetic.”

“Pathetic?”

Meta Knight sighed. “I hate who I was as a teenager, so don’t hold it against who I am now. But Father always promised to come home for holidays, and he never did. For years, I held out hope that he would, though. I’d stay up all through the night, hoping he’d just come in late or something. These sorts of movies were the only things on that late at night.”

It sounded less pathetic and more like heartbreak to Kirby. “You were lonely,” Kirby said soothingly. “I—I used to wait up for my dad, too, when I knew he was going to visit.”

“And he showed up, didn’t he?”

Kirby winced. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to sound as bitter as it did.”

“Your friends love you,” Kirby said.

He regretted it almost immediately. It wasn’t as if the two were comparable. “Yes, I suppose they do,” Meta Knight replied.
“What about your mom?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight shrugged.

“Oh,” Kirby said, unsure of exactly what the gesture meant. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s fine. It was a normal question. My answer just wasn’t…expected, and you couldn’t have foreseen that.”

The silence was surprisingly more companionable after that. Before long, Kirby understood what Meta Knight meant about the movie. It was the most horrendous thing that Kirby had ever seen. The actors all over-acted, the accents were dreadful, the plot made no sense, and Pulsar, the foreign warrior princess, seemed to be ridiculously inept. However, the movie seemed fully aware of how awful it was. Somehow, that made it ridiculously entertaining. A very busty woman wearing a black, sheer dress appeared, talking to a golden, pronged sword. “No, apparently, that’s Galaxia,” Meta Knight said.

“But who’s the woman?”

“I don’t know,” Meta Knight said. “This is the first time I’ve seen her.”

The woman—who was clearly the villain, if her dark hair, fangs, and cackling were any indication—approached Galaxia’s pedestal. The sword suddenly glowed. “Dark Matter Swordsman—” said an ethereal, echoing voice.

Meta Knight made a choking noise, and Kirby clapped his hands over his mouth to smother his laughter. Galaxia appeared as a tall, blonde woman, surrounded by bright light. Her armor left little to the imagination, and Kirby was beginning to wonder if he was going to be struck down by the technology gods for watching something so horrible.

“Now that is interesting. I wonder if the costume design team thought that one through,” Meta Knight said.

“Thought what through?”
“That Galaxia takes the image of whatever the viewer perceives her as having. Evidently, Dark Matter Swordsman imagines Galaxia of the Sacred Fire as a woman in a chainmail bikini. And I just realized this means someone has imagined Galaxia wearing a chainmail bikini,” Meta Knight said. “That’s... an image I never thought I’d have. I’m beginning to feel vaguely blasphemous.”

Kirby rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. “Mm.”

“Sleepy?” Meta Knight asked.

“A little. I might try going back to sleep. Are you sure you don’t want your bed back?”

“Positive,” Meta Knight replied.

“Well. Good night, evil sorcerer,” Kirby said.

Meta Knight chuckled and sprawled across the sofa that instant that Kirby left his spot. “Good night, Kirby of the Stars,” Meta Knight replied.

Heh. Kirby Stellarum. Kirby of the Stars. He’d never heard it put that way before, but he liked it very much.

The air smelled of pancakes and syrup. It reminded him of his mom. Kirby hummed and got out of bed, shuffling aside the sheets and comforter that had tangled around him.

Meta Knight kept his room eerily neat. It looks like a room from a magazine, everything too pristine and neat. Part of it was because the room, like all the dorm rooms, featured cool grey walls and pale wood-colored flooring. Kirby suspected the other part was because Meta Knight’s room simply had no mess. Kirby was accustomed to his mom’s clutter and scarfy hair blessing every surface. The rest of the room—from Meta Knight’s laptop and the desk it perched on to the bedding—was midnight blue and spotless. The exception was Galaxia, who rested on Meta Knight’s desk, golden and beautiful.

Kirby’s fingers itched to touch the blade, even if he knew it was a terrible idea. She glimmered in
the morning sunlight, warm and ethereal. And sentient.

“Good morning, Galaxia,” Kirby said, bowing awkwardly.

Did she mind Kirby being in the room? He’d only just considered that, perhaps, Galaxia might not want someone that wasn’t her beloved champion around.

Good morning, Kirby. It sounded like sunlight, if the sun had a voice.

Kirby’s eyes widened, and he scrambled from Meta Knight’s bed. Amused laughter rang in Kirby’s ears. “I—I—you spoke to me,” he said. “Dear Nova, you…”

I do occasionally enjoy conversation, she replied.

“Oh.”

He was speaking with Galaxia. The Galaxia. Sacred Galaxia. His head spun. Should he kneel? Should he have used a title? There was a title for sacred people and objects, wasn’t there? He couldn’t remember what it was. She seemed friendly, though. Gracious.

My beloved is wondering whether he ought to wake you. It’s impolite to keep him waiting.

“Be-beloved?”

Meta Knight, dear one. Who else would I mean?

“Sorry! I’ll…um…go see him!”

Kirby left the room with Galaxia’s amusement thick in the air. He wondered vaguely if he might still be dreaming, or if he was somehow imagining everything. Sacred Galaxia. Dad would be astonished.
When Kirby stepped into the kitchen, it became quickly clear that Dedede was responsible for the glorious smell. He stood by the stove, making pancakes. Meta Knight was perched on the kitchen counter, toweling his hair dry. He wore jeans and an undershirt, so for the first time, Kirby saw Meta Knight’s lightning mark clearly. It spanned his entire arm, going from his wrist and curling over his shoulder. “Hey, Meta Knight?” Kirby asked.

“Good morning.”


“She does that,” Meta Knight replied nonchalantly. “What did she sound like?”

Kirby rocked back on his heels. “Uh…sort of light and lilting? Very delicate.”

Meta Knight hummed. “I always thought she sounded more like a haughty noblewoman. Her laugh is a bit like Sectonia’s.”

“I thought she always sounded like you,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight’s expression was bemused. “You realize that Galaxia echoes your perception of her, don’t you?”


“You think my voice is befitting such a sacred weapon?”

“If you ask, I think she’d say your voice suits her just fine,” Dedede replied. “There ain’t no reason to be weird ‘bout it, Meta. You got a nice voice…and everything else. That’s all.”

“Yeah, your arm is really nice,” Kirby said.

Meta Knight frowned, while Dedede burst into laughter. “We’re gonna have to make you wear
long sleeves everywhere you go, Mety! You’re distracting people with your gorgeous biceps!”

Kirby hadn’t really noticed Meta Knight’s biceps. “No, your mark,” Kirby said, vaguely embarrassed. He hadn’t meant to insinuate anything.

“Ah…that, Kirby, is what happens when you touch the sacred,” Meta Knight said. “It’s from Galaxia.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Sure. I thought I was going to die.”

Kirby furrowed his brow. “But…why would Galaxia hurt her chosen wielder?”

“She didn’t know she wanted me until after she judged me, and Galaxia’s judgment always hurts. It isn’t her fault, though. It’s because I’m a mere mortal, and she’s—you know—the sacred Galaxia.”

“Oh.”

What a thoughtful answer. Kirby sighed.

“So how did you sleep?” Meta Knight asked.

“Much better, actually! Your bed sleeps really well…” Kirby trailed off, wondering if Meta Knight had slept that well on the sofa. “I—um—thank you for letting me…um, borrow it. How did you sleep?”

“He slept fine. I, on the other hand, woke up on the freaking floor,” Dedede said, dramatically waving his spatula. “You try to be nice and let your beloved Mety Knight stay in your bed, and he drop-kicks you in the floor. For shame.”

“I was fine on the sofa,” Meta Knight answered. “You really brought this on yourself by waking me up and insisting we share your bed.”
“And then, his alarm went off at six in the morning,” Dedede continued, “Even though he knows I got outta bioarchaeology real late last night.”

“That shouldn’t have surprised you,” Meta Knight replied. “I get up at six every morning.”


“Really? I didn’t think you’d have to.” The words were out of Kirby’s mouth before he’d thought them through.

Meta Knight raised an eyebrow, and Kirby chuckled nervously. “I mean, because of Galaxia…”

“What? You thought she’d imbue me with magical sword-fighting powers?” Meta Knight asked. “No, I have to work for those.”

“Yeah, he goes out working and comes back in, expecting me to have breakfast ready for him. Like I’m his live-in maid or something,” Dedede said, dramatically rolling his eyes.

“Would you prefer I grow lax and let someone run you through?” Meta Knight inquired.

“Go ahead. Kirbs’ll protect me. Say, you ain’t allergic to coconut oil, are you?” Dedede asked, deftly flipping a pancake.

“No.”

“Great. Cause we put that in everything ‘round here,” Dedede answered. “And we’re ‘bout done. Wonder why Dee ain’t graced us with his presence.”

“I’ll fetch him,” Meta Knight said, sliding off the countertop. “He might be having trouble finding clean clothes. I’m behind on laundry.”
But hadn’t Meta Knight agreed to do Dedede’s laundry earlier that week? Maybe he hadn’t done
Bandanna Dee’s? That was a little odd, but what did Kirby know? He didn’t have roommates, so he
certainly didn’t know how three people—one of them a member of the royal family—would
handle their chores.

Several minutes passed, during which Kirby fidgeted, unsure what to say to Dedede, who still
frightened him a little bit. “Should we…go check on them?” Kirby ventured awkwardly.

“What? They’re prolly talking about…uh…I dunno. Nerd stuff,” Dedede said, waving his hand.
“Meta can go on for days about astrophysics. It’s disgusting.”

“You’re really mean to him.”

“Mean? Ain’t you ever picked on your friends like that? I tease him all the time.”

“I’ve never really had friends. They thought I was…weird. Which is true! I mean, they weren’t all
unjustified,” Kirby said. “I am kinda different, and I couldn’t really…be affectionate. And it was a
small village, and everyone knew I had magic, so…”

“And kids can be very cruel. Adults, too. But y’know we don’t care, Kirbs. I mean, I sleep under
the same roof as the man who wields sacred Galaxia, which technically makes him a criminal.”
Dedede furrowed his brow.

“Has the Crown said anything about that?” Kirby asked, shifting uncomfortably.

He didn’t know Meta Knight that well, but he seemed nice. And if Galaxia, the sacred Nova-
blessed weapon, chose him to steal her away, it seemed very un-criminal to Kirby. Surely,
separating the weapon of the sacred flames from her chosen champion was a greater violation than
stealing her in the first place, wasn’t it?

Dedede shrugged. “No, I ain’t heard nothing from them, ‘cept for the invitation to the Crown
Princess’s birthday ball. If they was gonna do something, though, they’d have done it already.
They wouldn’t wait around over something like the theft of Galaxia. But even if they did, you can
be damned sure they wouldn’t do anything to Mety Knight. I’d make sure of that.”
“That’s good.”

“Yeah, but anyway. He can do other stuff, too, and the point I was trying to make was that we really don’t care what sorta magic you got. All that matters is that you’re a decent person, y’know? Long as you ain’t gonna stab one of us in the back someday, you’re fine.”

“I wouldn’t. I like you guys,” Kirby said. “I’ve never had anyone so…accepting of me before.”

Something indecipherable passed across Dedede’s face. Was it guilt? Suspicion? It was gone so quickly that Kirby thought he might’ve imagined it.

“So what is it you do anyway, kiddo?” Dedede asked.

Kirby took a deep breath. “It’s Copy.”

Dedede’s jaw dropped. “Copy. Like—like the ability o—of—Copy?”

“Like King Bikaia?” Meta Knight asked, stepping into the room with Bandanna Dee, who was clad in a bright blue over-sized sweater and loose-fitting pants.

Kirby felt his face warm. “Yeah. Like that. It’s really rare.”

“No kidding,” Dedede said. “So how’s it work? You touch people, and you just get whatever they’re best at?”

“Yes,” Kirby said, “But I mean, no one likes a copycat, and—”

“That’s amazing,” Meta Knight said. “You must be the perfect opponent. Can you copy swordplay?”

Kirby blinked in surprise, taken aback by the enthusiasm. “I have,” he said.
“So if you copied my skills, you’d be just as good as me? I’m in need of a good challenge. It’s hard to find a worthy opponent because most of the really good swordsmen are on Queen’s Guard, which means they’re part of the aristocracy, and they won’t accept my challenges,” Meta Knight explained, “But if you are just as good…”

“But I’m not really a big fan of swordplay,” Kirby said awkwardly. “I’m sorry. I—”

“And I’m pushing this on you,” Meta Knight said. “Please, accept my apology and think nothing more of it.”

He didn’t seem angry, but simply saying no made Kirby feel absolutely abhorrent. He’d never had to refuse a friend before. A small, logical part of Kirby knew that if Meta Knight wouldn’t accept a refusal with grace, he wasn’t a very good friend. Unfortunately, another part of Kirby insisted that he’d already botched their friendship. Or acquaintanceship. They weren’t really even friends, were they?

“I’m gonna get you knighted someday,” Dedede said. “Then, you can fight whoever you want.”

“I don’t want a title I don’t deserve,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede smirked. “Oh, don’t worry your pretty little head, my dearest pet knight.”

“What your pet.”

“Oh, c’mon! You let your dad call you that—”

“He’s my father.”

—and you let my mom call you that!!”

“Maybe I just like her more than you,” Meta Knight answered. “My dear pet liege.”

Dedede stared, dumbfounded. “I will never call you pet again if you never repeat those words. You
sound like a serial killer.”

Meta Knight sort of had, and from the look of mock-offense, Kirby gathered that’d been his intention. “My dad calls me pet, too,” Kirby said. “That’s kind of weird. I thought he was the only one who did that.”

“It’s a regional thing,” Bandanna Dee said. “You usually hear it from people that live close to the Floralian border; pet is just something they say a lot. That’s where Dedede and his mother are from.”

“Meta’s dad ain’t, though. He’s just a possessive, old creep,” Dedede cut in.

“My father isn’t old. He’s only forty.”

Meta Knight didn’t, however, argue that his father wasn’t possessive or a creep. Kirby nervously quelled the anxious laughter wanting to emerge. What did he say to something like that? What could anyone say to something like that? How horrible it must’ve been for Meta Knight growing up…Kirby could scarcely imagine. His own dad hadn’t been around much, but Kirby had never doubted that his dad loved him. He’d never thought his dad was possessive or creepy.

“Anyway,” Dedede said, clearing his throat. “Don’t worry, Mety Knight. If you ever get a title, I’ll make sure you earn it.”

“That sounds like a threat,” Meta Knight said, swiping a piece of bacon off Dedede’s plate.

“Hey! Get your own, you spoiled brat!”

Meta Knight blatantly ignored Dedede and set about preparing a plate of pancakes, topped with a very generous amount of syrup. Kirby immediately sensed a kindred spirit. Anyone with such a fondness sugar was clearly a decent person.

With a laugh, Bandanna Dee joined Meta Knight. Dedede continued to glare daggers at the two, clearly irritated by the lack of rebuttal. “I cain’t believe you,” Dedede said. “Stealing bacon from your own liege.”
“It makes up for you stealing my body wash.”

“That ain’t fair! I was outta mine! If someone was doing the shopping properly…”

“Gentlemen,” Bandanna Dee cut in. “Surely, you ought to resolve your disputes—”

“With a duel to the death!” Dedede declared.

“—when we don’t have a guest present. Really, Dedede?”

“Besides,” Meta Knight said, “We know who’d win.”

Having filled his plate, Meta Knight chose to sit on the kitchen counter rather than joining Dedede and Kirby at the table. It was odd; there were enough chairs for all of them. “Me,” Dedede said. “As my beloved servant, you’re obligated to let me win.”

“As your beloved servant, I’m obligated to give you my best,” Meta Knight replied. “So me. I would win.”

“I love how they’re actually talking about this as if they’d really do it,” Bandanna Dee said, taking a chair beside Kirby.

“Well…jokes aside, I do know one way my sweet, favoritest Mety Knight could make it up to me,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight paused and slowly lowered his fork. “Do I even want to know?”

“Yeah! I mean, we already kinda talked about it! You switching your art classes! It’d be great!”

“You’re going to switch to an art class?” Bandanna Dee asked. “The one we’re all in?”
“I was thinking about it,” Meta Knight said. “I do need an art elective, after all. But this late in the semester, I’d need Professor Drawcia’s approval, and she has no reason to give it—”

“Of course, she would! Late registration ends Friday, so you’re still in the clear! We could have Mety Knight in class with us. Wouldn’t that be great?” Dedede asked.

Kirby nodded enthusiastically. “I can photocopy you the syllabus and everything, Meta Knight! It’ll be really fun to have all my friends in the same class!”

“Wouldn’t it?” Bandanna Dee asked, clapping his hands together. “I’d love to have all of you in class together!”

“Majority rules!” Dedede exclaimed. “You cain’t back out now!”

“Somehow, I don’t feel that this process was entirely fair,” Meta Knight replied.

“But you’ll do it, won’t you?” Dedede asked, exaggeratedly batting his eyelashes.

Meta Knight smiled wryly. “Yes, of course. I’ll stop by and ask her after calculus. It’ll be fun.”

“Sweet! You have calc at three, right? I’ll warm her up to the idea for you!” Dedede declared.

“Now that isn’t necessary,” Meta Knight replied.

“Yeah, don’t sabotage him,” Bandanna Dee joked, “Or he’ll never get in.”

“Besides, it’s Thursday. You don’t even have her class today. It’d be strange to just show up in her office unannounced,” Meta Knight said.

“No, because she has office hours today! That’s what they’re for, sweet Mety Knight! So you can barge in unannounced!” Dedede declared. “How ‘bout I meet you there, then? I can vouch for you! Sides, I gotta print some stuff out for my group project in gemology.”
“You already have group projects?” Bandanna Dee asked. “It’s only the second week of school.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess it’s because it’s an honors class or something. They expect you to work harder. Least, I got Ribbon in my group, so I ain’t gotta worry about my teammates slacking off.”

“Ribbon’s the dragon expert?” Kirby asked, happy to have remembered the name.

“Yes,” Meta Knight answered. “And fine. I’ll meet with Drawcia—alone—and ask, but if this class requires a lot of…creative effort—”

Dedede clambered from his seat and gave Meta Knight a painful-looking hug. Meta Knight rolled his eyes, his fond smile betraying his amusement. “I’ll give you all the help you want!” Dedede declared.

“I hope that includes a chiropractor,” Bandanna Dee whispered.

Kirby stifled a laugh, as Dedede launched into an inspired speech about all the things he had planned to help Meta Knight with art history.

At four o’clock sharp, Meta Knight knocked on Professor Drawcia’s office door and rocked back on his heels, waiting. “Come in!” came the voice from the other side of the door.

Meta Knight opened it and stepped inside. It was a typical professor's office with a desk, chairs, and books everywhere. There were a few paintings on the walls—of various knights, though Meta Knight didn't know enough about art to know who'd painted them or even who they were portraying. Professor Drawcia, herself, sat behind her cluttered desk. While Meta Knight had heard much about her, he’d never seen her in-person.

The professor was Halcandran. Her skin was the same red-brown as foxing on the pages of old books and her eyes as gold as sunlight. Long, loose curls, dyed a soft, soothing blue, tumbled over her shoulders. She was a stunning woman, yet Meta Knight found his gaze drawn only to the massive violet hat she’d perched on her head. Meta Knight knew a witch when he saw one. “Hello,” Drawcia said. “Please, have a seat.”
“Thank you,” Meta Knight said, taking the seat across from her and offering his hand. “Meta Knight.”

Drawcia shook his hand. “Professor Drawcia.”

“I wanted to register for your Art History I class,” Meta Knight replied, “And I need your approval for it.”

“Indeed. And why would you like to be in my class?”

Meta Knight paused. He hadn’t expected that she’d ask. Usually, professors just signed the slips and moved on. He hadn’t anticipated an interview. Galaxia positively cackled. Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.

Damn sword. “Well, I’m very interested in art,” Meta Knight lied, “But because of my inclination towards astrophysics, I’ve never had the opportunity to express my love for art.”

Drawcia smiled. “What sort of art?”

“Galaxia,” Meta Knight said, going for the single piece of art he knew.

Was Galaxia even considered a piece of art? Meta Knight certainly thought so, but what did he know? He didn’t have an artistic bone in his body. Well, except for music. That was only because Nightmare had insisted that a musical outlet was good for a well-rounded individual.

“So Halcandran artifacts?” Drawcia queried.

“Um, yes. As well as the influence of dragons’ fire on various artifacts of the period,” he said, drawing from Ribbon’s pool of knowledge.

Drawcia laughed; it was a sharp, echoing sound. “Are you sure it’s not because you want to be with your friends?”
“My…friends?”

“You could’ve just been honest about it,” Drawcia said. “Did you honestly believe that—in all our classes—Dedede would’ve never mentioned you?”

“Dedede…talks about me?” Meta Knight asked, genuinely confused.

“He finds a way to bring you up almost every class,” Drawcia said.

“He…well, I didn’t think he’d mention me to other people. I’m not—I just work for him.”

“Kirby also mentioned you might drop by,” Drawcia said. “And I don’t know if anyone’s mentioned it, but the two of you look a lot alike. In your face.”

Did they? Meta Knight hadn’t noticed, but if they did, that made Father’s actions very…creepy. Well, creepier. Was Kirby meant to be Meta Knight’s replacement? Some sort of surrogate son? If he was truly proficient in Copy, Kirby was likely Meta Knight’s equal in power. Kirby's appearance shouldn't matter, but Father could be...odd about things like that.

It didn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter until Meta Knight really looked at Kirby’s face and decided whether or not they looked that much alike. For the time being, Meta Knight filed the comment away for further investigation. “They haven’t,” Meta Knight said. “How funny.”

“Hm. Regardless, your reputation proceeds you. Dedede speaks very highly of you, and he’s a very intelligent young man. So I expect great things from you.”

“Thank you.”

Drawcia shrugged and clicked a pen. “I’ll just make a note of it, and you’re good to go. What’s your last name?”

“De Brillante Armadura.”
As he stood, his eyes met Drawcia’s. “De Brillante Armadura?” she asked. “That’s your father’s name, I imagine?”

“Is that relevant?”

“No, sorry. How presumptuous of me. I’ll see you in class on Monday, Meta Knight.”

He wanted to ask more, but he also recognized a dismissal. “What did you mean by it?” Meta Knight asked.

“Close the door behind you, won’t you?” she asked.

He did as she asked, although he had no intention of abandoning his query. It was apparent, however, that Drawcia wasn’t willing to discuss the matter further, and he didn’t know her well enough to know how to persuade her otherwise. At least, he’d accomplished his goal of getting into her class. Besides, he had more important things to worry about—like his father’s interest in Kirby.

His ring tone filled the air. Meta Knight rolled his eyes. It was probably Dedede wanting to know how it’d gone; he couldn’t have just waited until that evening. Meta Knight pulled the phone from his jacket pocket, frowning in confusion when he saw the caller. Ribbon. She never called him.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Meta Knight. Thank Nova.” Ribbon’s voice was loud and anxious. “Is Dedede with you? He isn’t answering his phone.”

What? “He…isn’t. I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“I was hoping he’d be with you. I—I hope he’s just running late. Class began fifteen minutes ago, and he’s—”

Ribbon said something else, but Meta Knight missed it entirely. Something was wrong.
No, it wasn’t. He was panicking. Just panicking. Dedede was probably late—

But he’d never be late to something so important, and he always answered his phone. “Let me try calling him,” Meta Knight said distantly. “Okay, Ribbon?”

He was just assuming the worst. What was the worst, anyway? That Dedede had been in some sort of accident? No, it couldn’t be that. Someone would’ve called already. Meta Knight was Dedede’s emergency contact for everything. Dedede was probably just running late.

Meta Knight hung up and dialed Dedede’s number, waiting for Dedede to answer and allay all his absurd fears.

“The phone number you are calling is out of the range of service. Please—”

How? Everywhere on campus was in range of every major cellular company, and Dedede had never had a problem with his phone not receiving a signal. But if Dedede wasn’t on campus, where was he?

Meta Knight stared at his phone a long moment. The world didn’t feel entirely real. Surely, this—what was it?—was happening to some other Meta Knight. There was no need to worry. So Dedede didn’t answer his phone? There was no need for Meta Knight to be so…clingy. Right? He’d grown out of—tried so hard—not to be clingy.

No, surely, Dedede was fine, and he’d call eventually with a logical reason for missing his class and for not answering his phone. And it wasn’t like Meta Knight was Dedede’s babysitter. If his liege wanted to cut class—he’d never let Ribbon worry like that. Meta Knight swallowed around the lump in his throat. He tried to quell the uneasiness in his stomach. Was he overreacting? Was he being too clingy?

*Take care of Ribbon first,* Galaxia murmured. *You don’t know anything yet, but she’s in trouble now.*

She was right, of course. Meta Knight scrolled through his contacts until he found Ribbon and sent her a quick text:
His phone must be acting odd. He isn’t answering me either, but his part of the project is probably on his laptop. I’ll get it for you. Sorry for the trouble.

Everything was going to be fine. Dedede was fine. Meta Knight was just overreacting and being clingy. Dedede was fine.

The wind whispered in the trees, bringing with it the cold breath of autumn and night. Fluff, the once-prince of the annexed Kingdom of Patchland, rubbed his forearms and clenched his teeth together to silence their chattering. He wasn’t used to the cold; Patch Castle, his home, was in the warmest part of his kingdom.

Not really his kingdom. Queen Alera’s kingdom. It hadn’t been Fluff’s kingdom in a while.

He took a deep breath, watching it frost in the air. At the sight of headlights, Fluff crouched lower behind the bushes. It was a new moon, and he was—hopefully—invisible. Yin-Yarn drove into the yard and got out, as expected.

Fluff waited until Yin-Yarn entered the house before approaching, using the bushes for cover. Carefully, Fluff edged around the sorcerer’s car. The door to the house opened, and Fluff ducked low. Footsteps.

Fluff uncoiled his whip; he hadn’t wanted a fight. He hoped there wouldn’t be one. If there was a fight, it’d be much harder for Fluff to get what he really wanted from the sorcerer. More footsteps.

A man, wielding a massive hammer, walked around to Fluff’s side of the car. The man was tall and large and looked like he could probably snap Fluff in half, weapon or no. Fluff scrambled back, dodging the man’s first swipe. Fluff had never fought against an opponent with a hammer before.

Yin-Yarn laughed. “Did you miscalculate, little princeling?”

“I see you’re still using innocent people to fight your battles for you,” Fluff said.

Fluff swung his whip and struck the man in the shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he
charged. Fluff stepped aside, striking again, but the man still seemed undeterred. He’d only notice what Yin-Yarn let him notice, and—and this was probably just some innocent person Yin-Yarn had grabbed and enchanted. Fluff didn’t really want to hurt him.

But he didn’t know this person. He had no idea what might reach this other man. The hammer connected with Fluff’s stomach. Oh, Nova’s grace. It hurt beyond anything he’d ever felt. He stumbled backwards, as throbbing pain shot through his stomach and chest. His knees shook from the force of it. He struck again, but his aim was off. Fluff was weakening and fast, but he couldn’t go down so easily, not without a fight. He discarded the whip and drew his rapier.

The man paused, his hammer held ready to strike. Fluff backed away, unsure what the significance of that hesitation was. It could be that he’d touched on a memory of some sort, or it could be that his assailant was merely unfamiliar with how to fight a swordsman.

Damn Yin-Yarn. Everything hurt.

“Do I remind you of someone?” Fluff asked.

“I don’t think this is really the time for a conversation, Your Royal Highness,” Yin-Yarn said, with a jovial laugh. “You might as well give up. I don’t intend to kill you; you know. You’re far more… interesting alive.”

No. The hesitation faded, and the man swung again. Fluff tried to parry with his rapier, but he wasn’t nearly strong enough. He was surprised the blade didn’t break from the force of the blow. Fluff fell to the ground and dropped his sword. He scrambled to grab it, but before he could get up, the other man grabbed him and hauled him to his feet. The world blurred for a moment. Fluff hissed between his teeth. Don’t pass out, he thought.

He had to stay conscious. He had to keep fighting. He was the Prince of Patchland. He had to be dignified and strong and—and only his assailant’s grip on Fluff’s arm kept him from crashing face-first into the pavement.
As a trigger warning, there's a brief mention of PMS in this. Like...just an acknowledgment that Bandanna Dee has periods; it isn't graphic or anything like that. But I wanted to warn everyone, and if you'd like to skip it, it starts in the first section right after Meta Knight announces he's leaving, and it ends at the next section break.

It was too early to be awake, but Meta Knight hadn’t even gone to sleep. He hadn’t slept much since Dedede’s disappearance. It’d been a week, and Dedede seemed to have fallen off the face of Pop Star. Meta Knight had called the police, of course, but they’d been unable to find any evidence of Dedede’s disappearance or where he might’ve gone. A.M.B.E.R. had flatly refused to help, insisting that their involvement was limited solely to crimes where magic was involved, and there was no evidence that magic played any role in Dedede’s disappearance. And somewhere between getting the run-around from A.M.B.E.R. and the upper levels of government—because damn it all, Meta Knight was going to find him—someone had leaked the story to the press. The disappearance of a member of the royal family, no matter how far from the throne, had created an unprecedented stir, which had led to Dedede’s mother being ambushed when trying to leave the family estate one morning.

It was a disaster, and Meta Knight wanted to scream and break things.

But that wasn’t an option. He had to keep himself together, composed. Nightmare had taught Meta Knight how to be composed. And it wouldn’t do to fall apart in front of Dedede’s mother, who Meta Knight was supposed to retrieve from the airport.

Deep breaths. In and out.

Meta Knight reluctantly looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Dark circles lingered beneath his eyes, and his hair, badly in need of a wash, hung limply over his shoulders. He rummaged beneath the sink and found a bottle of concealer. He dabbed it beneath his eyes, trying to see if he could make himself look like he’d been sleeping decently. Maybe a little. That left his hair to deal with. Meta Knight frowned and abandoned his attempts to braid and coil it so elegantly like Bandanna Dee always did. Curse it all. He wasn’t very good at this. Swearing softly, Meta Knight pulled his hair back. That would have to do.

“Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura! Step away from the brush, and no one gets hurt.”
Meta Knight jumped. “Bandanna Dee, I thought you weren’t going with me. You said last night your monthly migraine had set in.”

“I’m not going with you, but I can’t let you meet the Duchess of the Stars like that. You look like you’re going to run track.”

“Sorry, I know it’s early.”

Bandanna Dee’s reflection appeared in the mirror. He wore an over-sized t-shirt that was just a few inches shy of covering his knees. His hair was disheveled and his fair-hued and freckled face was clearly sleepy, but his smile was soft and kind. “For you?” Bandanna Dee asked. “I don’t mind—especially if it’s a chance to play with your hair.”

Meta Knight sat on the toilet, while Bandanna Dee perched on the edge of the tub. Bandanna Dee hummed and began brushing in long, steady strokes. “I already brushed it, Bandanna Dee. I just need—”

“I want to do this. Relax, Meta Knight. You have time. After all, a pretty boy like you must look his best when he’s going to meet a duchess,” Bandanna Dee said.

A can rattled. It must be mousse or something of Bandanna Dee’s. “How do you feel about half-up, half-down?” Bandanna Dee asked, running his fingers through Meta Knight’s hair and saying nothing about how grimy it must feel. “You won’t be going to battle, after all. You can show off a little bit.”

“Whatever makes you happy, Dee.”

There was a few seconds’ silence during which Meta Knight tried to figure out if he had the energy to shave. He normally shaved every morning, but like classes, eating, and sleep, it’d just seemed so…unimportant since Dedede disappeared. “She won’t blame you; you know. No one blames you for this,” Bandanna Dee said.

No, Delilah, Duchess of the Stars, wouldn’t blame Meta Knight in the slightest. She’d already made that quite apparent with her phone calls. Meta Knight wished she’d be angry. He wished she’d hit him and scream and insult him. That would alleviate the guilt. Tit-for-tat. A punishment for the offense of not protecting her only son, the child she loved so much more than anyone else.
“Part of me wishes they would. I’d be more comfortable with that,” Meta Knight replied. “And I… I’ve been neglecting you, haven’t I? I’m sorry. I’ve been a terrible friend.”

“You’re hurt, Meta Knight. It’s okay. We all are. But guess what? We’re going to find him, and he’s going to be safe. It’ll all be fine.”

Bandanna Dee finished Meta Knight’s hair, and for a few seconds, he sat there. Meta Knight sighed and slowly stood. “I should be going.”

“Right. I’m going to take some Excedrin and try going back to bed. It probably won’t help, but…”

Poor Bandanna Dee. “We can budget out a doctor’s visit for you. I’ll admit that I don’t know much about the pre-menstrual cycle, but I don’t think it’s supposed to be this bad,” Meta Knight said.

“I know you can, but it’s bad enough that I’m freeloading off you without adding doctor visits to it.”

“Your family didn’t give you a choice. That isn’t your fault,” Meta Knight replied.

“I know.”

“But that doesn’t make it any better, does it?”

Bandanna Dee shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. But if you wanted to bring home tampons and some chocolate, I wouldn’t object.”

“I’ve always wanted to buy tampons with Dedede’s mother.”

Bandanna Dee smiled. “You haven’t made a joke in days,” he said. “I miss that side of you.”

Bandanna Dee stood and dusted invisible lint from his shirt. Meta Knight glanced at his hair in the mirror, even though it was—of course—flawless. Bandanna Dee never failed to deliver as far as hair was concerned. Meta Knight swiped his keys off the sink and paused before heading out.
“Thank you,” he said softly.

Bandanna Dee smiled. “Anytime.”

Meta Knight locked the door behind him since Bandanna Dee was going back to bed. The air was cool and crisp, September autumn breaking the spell of summer. Dawn was barely creeping over the horizon and killing the last, lingering stars. Meta Knight got in the Halberd and headed out.

The drive to the airport only took thirty minutes, even with a trip to the drugstore for the items Bandanna Dee had wanted. It wasn’t nearly long enough. Meta Knight fantasized about driving the car off a bridge for a fleeting moment. He didn’t want to meet Dedede’s mother. He didn’t want to look into the same eyes—

Deep breaths. Don’t cry.

Meta Knight steeled himself, practicing a smile in the glass of the airport’s front doors. Well. Smiling seemed to be a very bad idea. He sighed and plopped onto one of the benches. He pulled out his phone with the intention of doing something, but instead, he stared blankly at the screen. For ten minutes or an hour or half a day. It didn’t really matter. Time seemed to stop around him.

Dedede’s mother arrived in jeans, a purple silk shirt, and a leather jacket. She was very large, broad-shouldered and heavy. The duchess’s skin wasn’t olive-toned like Dedede’s, but it wasn’t pale enough to meet courtly standards either. Some might’ve dismissed it as a fondness for tanning, but Meta Knight knew it was more likely her love for the outdoors. Her face wasn’t conventionally pretty either; it was too broad with a disproportionately large nose and too-thin lips. At worst, people called her hideous and bemoaned that the product of two attractive people could produce a woman so rough and masculine. At best, people called her homely. People whispered that she couldn’t marry well because she was ugly and poor with a tactless son, and even their ancient lineage wasn’t a good enough selling point. Of course, Meta Knight was aware of what people said about her, but to him, she would always be Dedede’s mother. She would always be Delilah, Duchess of the Stars, who upon discovering an injured, malnourished, and unknown teenager in her apartment, had offered kindness and help. She would always be the woman, who dressed well and smiled so brilliantly, who always smelled of vanilla and lavender, and who was so intelligent and so kind. And she loved Dedede.

Meta Knight’s knees felt weak when he stood. He ought to call to her or wave, but if he didn’t he
could prolong the whole affair. For just a little longer. Just…a little longer.

Her face brightened when she saw him. “Oh, Meta Knight, aren’t you a vision? When did you grow into such a handsome young man? Here. Let me fix your shirt,” Delilah said, adjusting the collar of Meta Knight’s dress shirt. “You look tired, though. Poor pet, you’ve worried yourself sick over Dedede, haven’t you?”

“I imagine you have as well.”

He knew she had. He could see the circles under her eyes, where her concealer had failed her, and the stray hairs in her normally impeccable bun.

“Yeah. But all the same, I’m happy to see you safe and sound,” Delilah said. “Don’t blame yourself for this, Meta Knight. You’ve been very good to Dedede, and I’m very pleased with your service to him. However, you are his assistant, not his babysitter. And even if you’d been with him, we don’t know that you could’ve prevented this.”

It still hurt. “I know, Your Grace,” he murmured.

“And I know, too, that you’ve been trying so hard to get everyone looking for him, but it’s hard because—in spite of being in my son’s service—they aren’t taking you seriously because you’re common. Fortunately, I have been granted an audience with Sectonia, and A.M.B.E.R. will help find my son, regardless of what their policies say.”

“Oh. When is your audience?”

“About that…I don’t suppose you have a suit jacket in the car?”

Meta Knight mentally swore. He’d set one out, but he’d completely forgotten it. “No, I—”

“No worries,” Delilah said, waving a dismissive hand, “But we gotta go. It’s in two hours.”

“Two hours?”
“Having blue blood really does give you an edge. I called Sectonia up before dawn, and she graciously agreed to meet me. We’re gonna find my son,” Delilah said. “Even if I gotta make the sun and moon fight to do it.”

Meta Knight and Dedede’s mother were ushered into Crown Princess Sectonia’s personal parlor with the utmost grace and respect. There were offers of breakfast, coffee, tea, and water. And was the temperature of the room to their liking? Delilah’s reputation was even enough to spare Meta Knight the requirement of taking a magic suppressant—which always brought nausea with it—before being allowed in the same room with Dreamland’s beloved princess. After all, who would question the word of a pure-blooded Dreamlandic royal? Certainly no one who valued his livelihood.

Meta Knight had expected there to be a long wait, but Sectonia was already waiting for them. It was the first time he’d ever been so close to her and the first time he hadn’t taken a suppressant before being allowed in the same room as her. She was indescribably glorious.

Magic felt differently depending on who it belonged to. Magolor’s power was subtle, a light breeze in the midst of stillness, and since Magolor was so good at hiding his magic, it took a great deal of effort to feel it. Kirby’s powers were radiant and bright, delighted to be noticed. Princess Sectonia practically smelled like magic. She was too luminous, like the sun. It was overwhelming and awful and incredible. Meta Knight had never felt so out-matched in his life.

It took him a few seconds to notice that she was beautiful. He’d seen the princess before, of course—from very far away, and from photos, but in person, she was so stunning. Her glossy, dark hair was gathered up behind her head and woven with flowers. The princess’s face was strangely ageless, fashionably pale, with high cheekbones and intense, violet eyes. There was something about her, the way she carried herself, that seemed to fill the entire room and demand attention. “Delilah,” Sectonia greeted, spreading her arms wide and offering the duchess a hug. “How wonderful to see you. You so seldom make it to court.”

“Your Royal Highness,” Delilah replied. “Thank you for admitting my audience on such short notice.”

It was really the tactful way of thanking Princess Sectonia for ignoring protocol. Meta Knight had requested an audience and received three-hundred pages of paperwork to fill out with the snide comment of well, if your Lord isn’t around, how do you know he wants you to do this?
“Of course, although most people don't call so early in the morning,” Sectonia said, returning to her loveseat and lounging there. “Please, be seated. Both of you.”

Delilah took a seat in one of the chairs, and Meta Knight sat beside her. He clasped his hands in his lap, knowing he’d fidget otherwise. In hindsight, he shouldn’t have let Delilah argue her way around the suppressant requirements. Princess Sectonia was too much. Too full of beauty and power. She felt a lot like Father, and that realization certainly didn't help his discomfort.

“Would you like some hot tea?” Sectonia asked.

“I ain’t got time for the pleasantries, if you don’t mind me saying,” Delilah answered.

Sectonia smiled. “I do mind, but if you’ve no time for pleasantries, I’ll put them aside. What have you come to say at such an early hour?”

“I’m sure you’re aware that my son has disappeared.”

“I’d read about it, yes.”

“Well, A.M.B.E.R. has the best resources for investigation, and they refused cause there ain’t no proof magic is involved. I want you to persuade your mom to overrule that and have them investigate Dedede’s disappearance.”

Sectonia sighed. “I thought it might be that. Delilah, I would like to, but A.M.B.E.R. can’t possibly investigate all missing persons cases in Dreamland. It is too monumental a task. That is what my mother will say if I ask. You come from a very good name and heritage, but you’ve nothing else to offer. Mother isn’t interested in people that cannot offer her something of monetary value.”

“I see.”

Delilah hadn’t given up yet. She was thinking of another approach, trying to stall for the princess’s valuable time. She furrowed her brow just like Dedede did when he was thinking very hard.

“However,” Sectonia continued. “You do have something I desire. Perhaps, you might consider
another course of action. I may be unable to persuade my mother, but I don’t see why I couldn’t launch my own investigation using the resources at my disposal.”

“What have I got that you want?” Delilah asked.

Sectonia’s smile widened. “It involves Meta Knight, of course.”

Delilah put out a hand in front of Meta Knight, like she meant to protect him from some sort of physical threat. “My son’s personal assistant?” she asked.

“Whatever you want,” Meta Knight said.

“No, wait a minute! Don’t you dare agree to anything until she explains precisely what she means. You ain’t agreeing to this just to find out you’ve promised to be her…” Delilah waved a hand, clearly struggling for an effective example. “I already keep having to explain to Dedede to listen before he agrees to stuff, and now you?”

“I’m appalled that you think so lowly of me,” Sectonia replied, sounding more amused than affronted.

“I know too well how fashionable it is to have Halcandrans in your service,” Delilah retorted. “Just because—”

“I know that, too,” Meta Knight said. “Your Grace, isn’t this my choice?”

“Of course, it is, but don’t agree until you’ve heard her terms. Y’know better than that.”

“If it’s for Dedede—”

“Dedede wouldn’t want you to throw away your life for his.”

“You’re wise to counsel him as such,” Sectonia said, “But there’s no need for your caution. I have no desire to harm Meta Knight in any way, but I’m interested in his ability to wield Galaxia.”
“He cain’t. He just carries around a replica,” Delilah replied. “Lots of people—”

“Your desire to protect him is admirable,” Sectonia interrupted, “But you and I both know that he is the wielder of Galaxia. Many have tried to wield the sacred blade—myself included—but you are the first person she’s chosen. You must be something special, Meta Knight.”

“Taranza told you,” Meta Knight said.

“The Prince of Floralia?” Delilah asked, narrowing her eyes and likely imagining all the different ways she could make life very difficult for the aforementioned prince.

After all, Delilah did control the land along the Floralian border.

“Caught, although I’d already suspected it,” Sectonia said. “And this places me in a difficult position. It’s bad politically if the wielder of Galaxia is a common boy. There have been various… protests against the monarchy of late.”

Of course, there were. Queen Alera was ruthless, and the parliament nearly always buckled under her demands. Furthermore, she’d made her desire for expansion apparent, and some feared retaliation. King Bikaia had once placed a curse on Dreamland, assuring its destruction if it ever attempted conquest. Of course, Alera hadn’t invaded anyone; the Queen’s Guard hadn’t seen war in centuries. But she’d annexed Patchland.

She kept proposing bills requiring magically-inclined citizens below a certain status receive implants that kept them from accessing their powers as a matter of public safety. It was one of the few motions that had failed to come to fruition, but only just. It was enough to make every sorcerer and sorceress lacking in blue blood to loathe her.

“You want me to promote you?” Meta Knight guessed.

“On the contrary, Meta Knight, I’d like to keep this our little secret,” Sectonia said. “No, I just want you not to act against me.”

“There’s a trap in that somewhere,” Delilah said.
“There isn’t.” Sectonia paused, clearly deliberating something. “I…disagree with my mother’s policies. Many of them. However, there’s nothing I can do until I become Queen. I hardly care if you’re challenging knights or blogging about how my mother abuses her power. I just want your word that you won’t direct such protests in my direction.”

“My word?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yes, I daresay that is enough,” Sectonia replied, extending her hand. “You seem like a good man.”

Meta Knight glanced towards Delilah. “I don’t like this,” she said. “It seems harmless, but…”

“But she’s offering to help find Dedede,” Meta Knight argued. “Isn’t that worth the risk?”

Delilah shook her head. “You’re young, Meta. You know how dangerous the aristocracy can be, but you ain’t ever been screwed over by them. You’ll agree to something that sounds benign, and it’ll blow up in your face. That’s how it works. I already lost Dedede. What am I gonna do if something happens to you, too?”

Meta Knight looked guiltily away. His first, instinctive thought was you aren’t my mother. I can do what I want. But it sounded too harsh to voice aloud.

Because she cared about him very much, as much as his own father did, and saying something like that would only hurt her. “I trust you and Dedede to get me out of any trouble I may find myself in,” Meta Knight said softly.

Delilah closed her eyes and sighed. Sectonia watched silently, her violet eyes darting between each of them. “I accept your offer,” Meta Knight said, shaking her extended hand.

And—

_Sunlight filtered through the crystal walls, casting sparkles of rainbow light upon every shining, sleek surface. Sectonia stood amongst the light and air, wearing a long, flowing dress. It was gold and shimmered like sunlight. She smiled. “What a pleasant surprise,” she said._
“I’d ask a boon of you, my goddess,” Meta Knight said, kneeling.

Sectonia stepped closer. She cupped Meta Knight’s cheek and hummed thoughtfully, pretending to consider the request. When she was close, she smelled of fire and starlight. “A boon? What a pity. I thought you’d come for the pleasure of my company,” she teased.

“Would you find me greedy if I desired both?” Meta Knight asked, covering her hand with his.

“Perhaps, I’ll be a bit indulgent, Sir Galacta Knight, since I desire your company as well,” Sectonia replied.

Distantly, Meta Knight heard the name, and suddenly, Sectonia didn’t look like Sectonia. Her face was too perfect, too glowing, and her eyes were the softest, brightest sky-blue he’d ever seen. Her dark hair was replaced with cloud-like golden curls that hung like a halo around her head. But then—

Meta—no, Galacta Knight—drew a silk bundle from somewhere beneath his—no, her—large, glorious wings. Wings? How had Meta Knight missed the wings? What was this?

“I forged this sword with my blood and Landia’s fire,” Galacta Knight said.

Sectonia’s fingers hovered over the sword’s golden hilt. “This sword is alive. You forged it with a piece of Dark Matter. You’re playing with fire, Sir Knight.”

“Dark Matter is the embodiment of negative emotions, so I wonder…if it’s possible to turn those negative emotions into something else.”

Sectonia tilted her chin up and sighed deeply. “And what is it you desire of me?”

“I’ve come, Sacred Nova, to ask for your blessing upon the sword Galaxia.”

The world snapped back into place with a sharp, painful clarity. Sectonia drew her shaking hand
back and laughed nervously. “What an interesting boy you are,” she said.

“What happened to him? What did you do?” Delilah asked. “Meta Knight?”

Meta Knight clasped his hands in his lap and met Sectonia’s wary gaze. “I’m…fine,” he said. “It was nothing, Your Grace.”

Delilah didn’t look as if she believed him.

“Well, I’m afraid I must leave you,” Sectonia said. “I have a meeting with the governor of Patchland, and it’d be most discourteous of me to keep him waiting.”

She rose fluidly, and Meta Knight scrambled to his feet and bowed respectfully. He didn’t understand. Galaxia nudged him, her fire murmuring comfortingly in the back of his mind. I think it was a memory, she said. But I…I don’t remember this. Am I truly a piece of Dark Matter? I don’t remember that.

Delilah was bidding the princess farewell, but Meta Knight couldn’t pay attention with Galaxia’s confusion in his mind. I don’t care if you are Dark Matter. You’re still Sacred Galaxia.

Yes…that’s true. You never would care, Galaxia murmured fondly.

But why did I see this? Meta Knight thought.

I don’t know, Galaxia replied, But I don’t think Sectonia realized it would happen either.

Meta Knight wasn’t certain whether that made things better or worse. Sectonia smiled as she left, her long dress trailing on the floor. She was offering to help find Dedede. Surely, that was worth chancing any ulterior motives she might have, wasn’t it?
Why was he cursed to love someone who was so cruel to him? The same dark knight, who abducted him, who humiliated him, shouldn’t inspire such throes of fiery passion. The young prince gazed mournfully at the moon, through the canopy of pines and cedars. The goddess Nova was said to dwell in the moon. Could she see Bikaia, from where she perched? If so, why wouldn’t she help? Perhaps, Galacta Knight was so demonic that even Nova couldn’t approach him. And yet, as demonic as the knight was, Bikaia’s belly felt hot with the desire to see him again. Galacta Knight was beautiful beyond words, and when he stared at Bikaia in that way, it felt as if his heart would burst.

"Hello, Kirby. Are you busy?"

Kirby jumped and looked sheepishly over his novel. Meta Knight, a stack of books tucked under his arm, sat on the edge of the table beside Kirby, who’d been too engrossed to notice his approach. Kirby tilted his head, trying to read the titles.

“They’re about visions,” Meta Knight said. “I had one earlier, and I was hoping to figure it out. And I have a couple about Dark Matter. That’s just for a bit of personal research.”

“Wow! Dark Matter is really advanced stuff,” Kirby said.

“Yes, even today we don’t entirely understand it, but I think I’m up to the challenge. What are you reading?” asked Meta Knight.

"Um…a romance novel," Kirby admitted sheepishly.

"About King Bikaia and Galacta Knight?" asked Meta Knight, nodding to the cover.

"It’s not what I thought it would be. I just did a library search for Bikaia and Galacta Knight," Kirby said, toying with the pages. "I thought it would make Galacta Knight heroic. Instead, he's just…"

"A creep that abducts adolescent princes?"

"Yeah," Kirby muttered.
"That is how the story goes," Meta Knight said.

"The story, maybe, but I—I don't think that's how it really happened. I mean, they're…" Kirby trailed off. "Sorry. That's ridiculous, isn't it? I'm basing this big project on a couple of theories I've had."

"I wouldn't say that," Meta Knight said. "May I see?"

Kirby handed over the book, watching as Meta Knight skimmed over the summary. Meta Knight looked very tired and hunched over. Poor Meta Knight. In the month Kirby had known him, he'd always looked so elegant and impeccable. Eventually, Kirby's gaze landed on the gold hilt of Meta Knight's sword peeking over Meta Knight's shoulder. "Hello, Galaxia," Kirby said.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Meta Knight asked.

"Is she really made of gold like the legends say?" Kirby inquired.

Meta Knight paused and tilted his head, like he was listening to something Kirby couldn't hear. "No," Meta Knight said slowly, "She's made from steel, and when the dragon, Landia, blessed her with his flame, it turned her gold."

"Can I…? Will she harm me?"

Wordlessly, Meta Knight offered Kirby the sword hilt-first. It'd been a very long time, since Kirby had properly inspected a sword, but he remembered how to do it. Galaxia's balance was perfect, and the blade was surprisingly light.

“You must be quite a swordsman to wield Galaxia,” Kirby said, offering the blade back.

Meta Knight took Galaxia, but rather than sheathing her, set the blade across his knees. His fingers traced absentmindedly over the edge of the blade. There was something very sad about him. It was probably the weight of Dedede's disappearance and the uncertainty of where he might've went. “I'm sorry he's gone. I can't even imagine. I mean, you're always so…so…” Kirby trailed off.
“Yeah.”

“He’s very affectionate with you,” Kirby said, with a nervous laugh. “Even if he’s mean sometimes. He’s very accepting, though! You’re very lucky…”

“People have a history of not accepting you,” Meta Knight murmured.

“Well, I…I…” Kirby hadn’t meant to make the conversation about him. “I mean, it’s not without reason! I mean, like, people are just cautious. Like, my dad loves me, but he has to wear gloves—”

“Your father won’t touch you unless he’s wearing gloves because he’s afraid of your powers?”

Kirby winced. “He’s not a bad man, Meta Knight. He loves me. He just—”

“You’re his child.”

“He’s not afraid of me,” Kirby said, “But…kind of. I mean, I—I guess it makes sense. I can’t touch anyone.”

Something fierce and sparkling had replaced Meta Knight’s listlessness. He straightened and rolled his shoulders back. His eyes were hard like diamonds. “Would you want to be physically affectionate?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yes, but I—”

Meta Knight held his hand out. “There shouldn’t be a but, Kirby.”

“But I’ll copy your powers! A—and I mean, it’s not pleasant. It’ll hurt you when I do.”

“And? If you want affection, Kirby, you should have it,” Meta Knight said.
Kirby hesitated. “Are you sure—”

“I’m sure I’ve felt worse,” Meta Knight said.

Slowly, Kirby clasped Meta Knight’s hand. A painful jolt shot through his arms, copying whatever skill Meta Knight was best at. Likely his swordplay, if the sudden feeling of strength in Kirby’s muscles was any indication.

“Is that all?” Meta Knight asked.

“But it’s…you work so hard on your swordplay. It isn’t fair that I can just…duplicate that without any effort.”

“It’s fine,” Meta Knight said.

Meta Knight squeezed Kirby’s hand before pulling back with a sad, tired smile. The older boy glanced away, his gaze distant. “Dedede would probably say your father is an ass,” Meta Knight said dully, “If he was here.”

“I’m sorry,” Kirby said. “About Dedede.”

“You already said that.” And more softly. “I am, too.”

Kirby bit his lip when he thought of a wonderful, marvelous idea. His dad was a powerful man. Surely, he could do something, couldn’t he? Why hadn’t Kirby thought of asking his dad for help before? After all, his dad was the most powerful wizard in all of Dreamland. There was nothing Nightmare Nocturne couldn’t accomplish.
The Nightmare Wizard’s office was perpetually dark, an accommodation for Nightmare’s photophobia. The dim light shining on Nightmare’s black desk and black tile might’ve been intimidating to some, but to Kirby it was familiar and comfortable. The lamp-glow was soft and warm and cast gentle highlights over his father’s sharp face and grey eyes. “Kirby! Welcome, child!” Nightmare exclaimed, spreading his arms wide.

“Hi, Dad!” Kirby chirped.

His dad’s desk had been partially cleared to make room for his favorite chess set. Kirby grabbed a chair and dragged it closer. Nightmare opened a drawer and pulled out his favorite leather gloves. “Oh, you don’t have to!” Kirby said. “I Copied someone’s powers, so there’s no need for those!”

Nightmare paused. “By accident? You ought to be more careful.”

Kirby shook his head. “No, my friend let me!”

Nightmare pulled on his gloves anyway, before cupping Kirby’s cheek. The leather was too sleek and stiff. “You ought to consider taking suppressants on a permanent basis,” Nightmare said. “You’d have less problems. Surely, a few migraines are a fair trade for being normal, aren’t they? I know your mother mentioned it to you.”

“But my friends are okay with my powers. My new friends! Some of them—well, one of them—even has magic, too. Just like me!”

Nightmare smiled and waved towards the chessboard. The wizard had already handicapped himself, as usual, by removing one of his bishops, but even with that, Kirby had never managed to beat his dad. Nightmare was simply too good. Kirby was playing white, so he made the first move. He moved the pawn in front of his queen, freeing her to play. “I highly doubt this friend's powers are just like yours,” Nightmare said.
Kirby bit his lip, unsure what to say. They exchanged a few moves in silence.

Dad was right. Meta Knight’s powers weren’t Copy. They were wind-based and—according to Dedede—a few other things. It wasn’t like Meta Knight was some sort of leech, though, taking skills from people that had worked hard to hone them. Always plagued by doubt that all his accomplishments were the result of inadvertently Copying someone.

But beautiful, clever Meta Knight hadn’t cared! He’d let Kirby Copy his powers. He’d told Kirby that he was worthy of affection!

“Well, his powers aren’t Copy, but he doesn’t seem to mind mine,” Kirby said, “A—and I sort of get warm fuzzies when I think about him. And the others! Everyone here is so—”

“Warm fuzzies? You don’t have, ah, romantic feelings for this particular young man, do you?” Nightmare asked.

“What? No,” Kirby said, “But I actually kind of am visiting you because of him.”

Nightmare furrowed his brow and stared at the chessboard. “You’ve gotten rather good at this game,” he said. “Is your friend good at chess?”

Oh. Kirby’s shoulders slumped. He hadn’t noticed he was playing well.

“This, child, is why you can’t touch anyone,” Nightmare said with a tired sigh. “You take powers you don’t even know about and use them to cheat your way through things. Who knows what else you’ve taken from this boy? The Halcandran language? Fighting abilities? Something to pass your next exam?”

“But he…he let me,” Kirby replied. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

“I suspect he didn’t fully understand what he was doing,” Nightmare said. “Honestly, Kirby, why would anyone let you Copy their hard-earned talents? Why would someone you barely know be so eager to let you touch them? To be physically affectionate with you?”
Kirby silently released Meta Knight’s powers and slumped back in his chair. “I don’t know. I thought maybe he was my friend—”

“And is that why you’ve come to me? You want something to impress your friend? You can’t buy someone’s friendship, Kirby.”

Kirby shook his head. “It’s just…my friend, Meta Knight, works for this…um, Lord. And he’s gone missing, and I thought maybe you could find him. Because Meta Knight looks so heartbroken! And his Lord is kind of my friend, too. And Bandanna Dee is trying to hide it, but he’s hurt, too. And then, Dedede’s mom—”

Nightmare raised a hand. “I don’t know there’s much I can do. I’m sure Meta Knight has already approached the proper authorities.”

“But you’re the most powerful wizard in Dreamland!” Kirby protested, standing.

Nightmare raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“You’re the most powerful wizard in Dreamland,” Kirby repeated. “Surely, you can—can get in Dedede’s dreams or something, can’t you? Surely, you can find him. Please, Dad! I’ve never asked you for anything before. Just this! As—as my Saint Knight’s Day present! I want my friend back, so everyone can be happy again!”

“Kirby, it’s September.”

“But I need him, and—and our friends need him!” Kirby blinked back tears, unsure whether it was Dedede’s plight or his own determination to see his friend rescued, that had caused them.

Nightmare sighed deeply. “This is a huge favor, Kirby. I’m a very busy man. It wasn’t easy to give you twenty minutes, but to devote a large amount of time to finding a missing royal…”

“Would make you a hero! And it’d make me and my friends happy,” Kirby said, clasping Nightmare’s gloved hands with his. “Please, Dad! All I’ve ever wanted is friends, and I—I wouldn’t want to lose them. I just want everyone to be together and happy again. I—I mean, what
if something terrible has happened to Dedede? Wh-what if he’s being held hostage by terrorists? Or—or—”

Nightmare pulled his hands back. “Child, are you sure it’s not you that wants to be the hero?”

“No! I don’t even need the credit. I just want my friend back,” Kirby said, sinking back into his chair. “And I thought you could help me. I know it’s a lot to ask, but…but I love my friends.”

“You’ve known them for a month. It’s a little soon for them to be your friends, isn’t it?”

Kirby flinched.

“Acquaintances, perhaps,” Nightmare said, “If that. Are you entirely certain that they don’t just pretend to like you? I don’t say this to be cruel, but you’re a very naïve boy, Kirby. Are you sure they aren’t taking advantage of your innocence? I’ve seen all too often how people will act so nice to boys like you and become so vicious once your back is turned. People see naivety and innocence as weaknesses, and when people see weakness, they go for the throat.”

Kirby had never considered those horrible things until his dad said them. They made sense. Why else would someone as beautiful as Meta Knight, as talented as Bandanna Dee, or as high-ranking as Dedede ever want anything to do with Kirby Stellarum, who was—on one hand—a disgrace with terrifying powers and—on the other—painfully average? Did they all secretly hate him? Were they only tolerating him because they were too polite to tell him to go away?

Kirby clasped his hands in his lap and stared at the ground.

“Poor thing, I’ve upset you,” Nightmare said. “Please, understand I’m only trying to look out for you, Kirby.”

“I—I know,” Kirby mumbled.

*Did they all secretly hate him? Did he get on their nerves?*

“I’ll do it for you,” Nightmare said, “But keep it between us, hmm? I wouldn’t want to get Meta
Knight’s hopes up for nothing.”

“Thank you.”

“Good. That’s settled! Sorry, Kirby, but I have a very important three o’clock meeting.”

Kirby smiled and nodded. Nightmare pulled off his gloves and shoved them back in the drawer, indicating that Kirby wasn’t likely to receive a good-bye hug or much else. He was so selfish to expect it, though, wasn’t he? It wasn’t Dad’s fault that his son was a monster. Kirby ought to just be lucky that Nightmare had sacrificed some of his precious time. With a forced smile, Kirby left, calling a soft farewell over his shoulder.

Dedede had been missing for three weeks and two days. It felt like Meta Knight’s entire world had changed. The first change was the constant presence of Duchess Delilah. Since her arrival in the capital, Delilah had taken to spending alarming amounts of time with Meta Knight, and she treated him like he was six instead of twenty-one. She dropped by with breakfast every morning and dinner every night. She texted him constantly, inviting him along on shopping trips, courtly meetings, and even the post office at one point. The Duchess was worried, but her constant affection was suffocating. And undeserved.

The second change that occurred was that Kirby came over more often. Meta Knight hadn’t given Kirby as much thought as he should’ve, but during their meeting in the library, Galaxia had given Kirby a cursory glance, and while Galaxia hadn’t officially judged Kirby, she hadn’t sensed anything malevolent about him. Plus, Kirby was nice to Bandanna Dee, who surely felt Dedede’s absence as much as Meta Knight did, so Meta Knight let the matter rest. Instead, he became accustomed to Kirby’s loud energy, accompanied by sketchpads, markers, and alarming amounts of candy.

It’d been a rare quiet morning, so Meta Knight had spread out all the books he had on visions and set out to read them all. His concentration was dismal, and he’d read the same sentence three times. With a sigh, Meta Knight glanced at his cell phone. He wanted Sectonia to call; he kept waiting for her to call.

Surely, someone as powerful as her ought to have no trouble finding Dedede. Surely, the matter should’ve been resolved already. Why was it taking her so long?
The door burst open, shattering his quiet morning. Or rather, afternoon. He’d been reading for too long. Bandanna Dee entered, followed by Kirby. They both looked odd. Bandanna Dee’s brow was furrowed like he was thinking very hard, and Kirby’s smile seemed halfhearted. Meta Knight wondered if they’d had a fight of some sort. “Hello,” Meta Knight said.

Bandanna Dee’s smile looked genuine. “What’re you reading?”

“Books about visions.”

“Why?”

“I had a vision,” Meta Knight said. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Uh, no,” Bandanna Dee replied. “I think I’d remember something like that.”

“What did you find out?” Kirby asked. His voice was uncharacteristically quiet.

“Nothing helpful. It’s entirely possible it was simply a one-time anomaly caused by our powers interacting with Sectonia’s,” Meta Knight replied.

“Our?” Kirby inquired.

“I was including Galaxia. What are you two doing?”

Bandanna Dee swung a plastic grocery bag around his wrist. “We’re going to dye Kirby’s hair bubblegum pink! I’ve never dyed hair, though. If only I had a friend that dyed his every—”

“If only,” Meta Knight said flatly.

Kirby looked peculiarly unexcited for someone that had previously been so delighted at the prospect.
Meta Knight sighed. He didn’t feel like helping Kirby dye his hair, especially when there was clearly something else amiss. Meta Knight was so terrible at comforting and being a good friend, and—with a sharp pang to his chest—he realized that Dedede would know how to fix the situation. Right away, too. Galaxia nudged him. Try, she murmured.

“You don’t have to,” Kirby said.

“What? And let you leave with atrocious coloring? And risk you getting dye all over the gorgeous, school-provided tile?” Meta Knight asked.

Bandanna Dee chuckled. Kirby didn’t seem to get the joke; maybe he actually liked the dull, too-absorbent tile.

Meta Knight stood and stretched. “Come, Kirby. I will be your wise and sagely mentor and counsel you in the ancient art of dyeing your hair.”

Kirby shied away when Meta Knight offered his hand, instead choosing to fidget with his shirt. Odd. “Head into the bathroom,” Meta Knight said. “I’ll be there in a second.”

Meta Knight made a show of digging through the bag on Bandanna Dee’s arm and in reading the back of the box of hair dye. The moment Kirby left the room, Bandanna Dee leaned close and muttered, “I don’t know. He’s been like this all day.”

“Did something happen?”

Bandanna Dee shrugged. “I tried asking, but he says there’s nothing wrong. Do you think it’s something I did, Meta Knight?”

“I’m sure it’s not. I’ll find out.”

Somehow.
“Thank you, Meta Knight. You're the best.”

When Meta Knight entered the bathroom, Kirby was sitting on the edge of the tub. “Do you care about that shirt?” Meta Knight asked, opening the box of hair dye. “If you do, you’ll want to take it off.”

Kirby did, and after a few awkward seconds, tossed it on the floor. Meta Knight pulled on the disposable gloves and mixed bottle A into bottle B. “Did you and Dee have a fight?” he asked.

“No.”

Meta Knight shook the mixture together until it turned ivory. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

Meta Knight grabbed a towel and passed it to Kirby, who draped it over his shoulders. “You seem sad. We’re worried. Why are you sad?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby gulped.

Too blunt, beloved. You need to be softer, Galaxia murmured.

Softer? “Did someone hurt you?” Meta Knight ventured. “It’s all right if that’s the case. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You’ll be mad at me.”

Mad? Had Kirby figured out that Meta Knight suspected him of—of what? Of working for Nightmare? Of being stalked by Nightmare? Meta Knight wasn’t sure anymore. “I doubt that,” Meta Knight said. “If it’s something I’ve done, the only person to blame is myself.”

“No, it’s just—it’s me. It’s silly.”
“It isn’t silly if it’s bothering you.” There. That was something Dedede had once said.

“I—I wondered if you might actually hate me,” Kirby mumbled.

That was all? Meta Knight stifled a laugh. “People aren’t usually nice to you, so you worry I’m faking my…friendship.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your concerns are understandable. May I?” Meta Knight waved the bottle.

Kirby bit his lip and nodded. Meta Knight squeezed some of the mixture in his hands and rubbed it through Kirby’s hair, making sure to get the roots. “Understandable?” Kirby asked.

“Sure.”

Kirby stared at him, seeking an explanation. “Dedede and I weren’t always friends,” Meta Knight clarified. “He really annoyed me, to be honest. But one night, I was beaten pretty badly. I didn’t have anyone else to go to, so I went to Dedede’s palatial apartments.”

“You broke into the palace?”

“Sneaked right past the Queen’s Guard. To be fair, it was storming and two in the morning. I don’t imagine anyone wanted to be out. Poor Dedede, I went in his apartment and just collapsed on this white, vintage loveseat. He came in, and I thought he’d be furious I ruined it.”

“How?”

“I was bleeding,” Meta Knight said. “And drenched with rain. But he wasn’t mad. He laughed and told me his great-grandfather had his throat slit on that same loveseat. Said it must’ve been cursed. He took me in and helped me. He treated my wounds, made me soup, drew baths for me, and let me sleep in his spare bed. He had friends back then—a few nobles like him with a title and no
money. They made fun of him for spending so much time with gutter-trash.”

“Gutter-trash?” Kirby asked.

“My pet name,” Meta Knight replied wryly.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I’ve been called worse. Dedede didn’t like that, though,” Meta Knight said, spreading more dye through Kirby’s locks. “He stopped being friends with them, and I felt guilty. Maybe a little scared, too. I was worried he’d want payment for taking care of me, and I didn’t have anything I could give him. That Dedede might actually care about me never even crossed my mind.”

“What changed?”

“I did. Galaxia helped, of course. She guides me when I’m lost. Not to make it about me, Kirby, but I do understand. It takes time to trust people, especially if you’ve been used in the past,” Meta Knight said, “And that’s fine.”

Meta Knight felt a jolt of guilt when he said it. He didn’t deserve to be trusted. Especially not by Kirby. Meta Knight pulled off the gloves and tossed them in the trash. “Does that make things a little better?”

“Yeah,” Kirby said. “Thank you.”

“Great. You have thirty minutes. Don’t lean your head against the back of the sofa,” Meta Knight said, forcing his voice back to lightheartedness.

“Right,” Kirby said, standing. “It’s going to look good.”

“Of course.”

Bandanna Dee peeked inside the doorway. “Are you boys done, then?” he asked, his eyes darting
nervously between the two of them.

“It’s not pink,” Kirby said, glancing into the bathroom mirror.

“It will be,” Bandanna Dee replied, waving a large, brown envelope. “Just give it a few minutes.”

“Mail?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yes, it just came. For you,” Bandanna Dee replied. “From Orange Ocean.”

*Oh, no.* “Probably Saint Knight’s Day presents,” Meta Knight lied. “I ordered a few. Give me a couple minutes.”

Meta Knight snatched the envelope, ignoring Bandanna Dee’s mock protest. He tried to walk casually to his room and casually close the door. After taking a deep breath, Meta Knight tore the envelope open. Inside was a card made of thick, black paper and inscribed with looping silver ink. *To My Beloved Meta Knight Nocturne, Heir of Dreams.*

*My Dearest Child,*

*How are you doing without the good Lord Dedede? What would you give to know where he is, hm? I’d like to find out, so I’ll pick you up at six. I’m sure it’ll be a wonderful time! See you, then, pet.*

*Sincerely, etc.,*

*Father*

Meta Knight sank to the ground. Should he tell someone? No. Anyone he told would tell him not to take Father’s bait. Delilah hated Nightmare and would insist on any alternative; she’d want to go back to Sectonia. Bandanna Dee would tell Meta Knight that his father couldn’t be trusted. Both responses would be reasonable. But what choice did he have? If Nightmare really did have information about Dedede…
This was a terrible idea. Nightmare wanted to bargain, and his price wouldn’t be cheap. The information would be good, though. The Nightmare Wizard was his father; he wouldn’t invite Meta Knight over if there wasn’t something. Meta Knight could lie and tell Bandanna Dee he was meeting with someone from A.M.B.E.R. That would be a good cover, too. Yes, this would work. Meta Knight just couldn't tell anyone.

Customer Service was barely four-foot tall, if that. He was Nightmare’s right-hand man and had been one of Nightmare’s frequent visitors when Meta Knight was a child. The man was impeccably dressed in a navy-blue suit and dark, tinted glasses perched upon his nose. Meta Knight had never seen the man’s eyes because of them; light gave Customer Service migraines. “Lord Meta Knight,” he greeted with a mocking bow.

Lord Meta Knight. Heir to his father’s bought and entirely undeserved title. “Customer Service,” Meta Knight said.

Customer Service beckoned for him, so Meta Knight followed. Everything in the Holy Nightmare Corporation’s building was black and sleek. Meta Knight could see his reflections in the polished walls. They arrived before a large, wooden door at the end of the hallway. There was something strangely foreboding about it and about how all the other doors were modern constructions of glass and metal. “He’s in a good mood tonight. Behave yourself, and maybe you’ll leave without a beating,” Customer Service said, opening the door.

“Encouragement isn’t your strong suit, is it?”


The conference room was dimly lit. Nightmare sat at the head of a massive, hardwood table. When Meta Knight entered, the wizard stood fluidly, shadows rippling around him. “Stay where you are,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight recognized the cue; they’d went through this every time Nightmare had important guests over. Meta Knight rolled his shoulders back—taking comfort in Galaxia’s weight on his back—and fixed his gaze on the ground. The wizard, unnaturally silent, circled him. Meta Knight had done his best. He’d shaved, washed his hair, had Bandanna Dee actually fix his hair, and even ironed his clothes. “Was the sword really necessary?” Nightmare scoffed.
“Yes, Father.”

“And is that why you decided to forgo wearing a proper jacket? Good call. Galaxia probably would’ve wrinkled it. I’m not fond of this vest and dress shirt combination that young men are so fond of these days, but I suppose I should just be grateful you didn’t show up in jeans and an undershirt.”

He pinched Meta Knight’s earlobe but made no comment about the piercings; if Meta Knight had worn earrings, he certainly would’ve. “Hmm. Your cologne smells nice,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight would probably never wear it again.

Abruptly, Nightmare seized Meta Knight’s jaw and forced his head back. The wizard observed quietly, his eyes narrowing. “Adequate. Good boy.”

Nightmare strode away and returned to his chair. He waved at the seat to his right, and Meta Knight sat, carefully maneuvering Galaxia around. “Cabernet sauvignon?” Nightmare asked, tracing his finger around the rim of his wineglass.

“No thank you.”

“Splendid.”

Customer Service set a glass before Meta Knight and began pouring. “It was meant to be your birthday present,” Nightmare said. “It’s from your birth year, see? I’d wondered how I’d get you to accept such a gift, however. You always return my presents.”

“That’s because your presents are usually meant to be humiliating.”

“Please, that's just a bit of fun.”

“Shall I bring the first course, my Lord?” Customer Service asked.
“Please. I’m sure Meta Knight is probably famished. The boy hasn’t been eating well.”

“First course? I didn’t come to eat with you,” Meta Knight said.

“Yes, he does look a bit thinner than normal,” Customer Service said. “You can see it in his face.”

“He’s always made a habit of not eating when he’s upset,” Nightmare said.

“You’re probably trying to drug me,” Meta Knight retorted. “I’m not—”

“With all due respect, Lord Meta Knight, if your father intended to drug you, he wouldn’t be serving you a bottle of wine that costs twenty-thousand deden,” Customer Service replied.

Twenty-thousand deden? “That’s right,” Nightmare replied, with a laugh. “Five-thousand deden, maybe.”

Customer Service smirked and left. Meta Knight remained quiet, struck by the realization that his father wasn’t normal. Of course, he’d realized long ago that his father wasn’t normal, but it’d never struck him so strongly that parents probably weren’t supposed to joke around about drugging their children. Dedede would’ve been horrified. Dedede’s mother would’ve been horrified.

And while Nightmare had never—to Meta Knight’s knowledge—actually tried drugging him, that he might remained a terrifying possibility.

Nightmare raised his glass and toasted mockingly. “Do you see now why I warned you away from affection? This is the price it carries. It’s lovely when it’s there, but when it’s taken away, it just hurts your heart, doesn’t it?”

“And you’re oh-so-kindly offering Dedede back to me,” Meta Knight replied.

“Aren’t I noble?”
“What do you want from me?”

Nightmare smiled. “I’ve given that a lot of thought. I considered making you get on your hands and knees and beg for this favor. How long would you kneel on this floor if it meant saving him? I could order you to do any number of humiliating things, and I really think you’d swallow your pride and do them. He’s made you weak, pet. You've lost your fire.”

Meta Knight had expected much worse—like being asked to live with Nightmare again or being asked for Galaxia—and humiliation was a comparatively light punishment. It was almost a relief. “Is that it, then?” Meta Knight asked. “You want me to beg, so you can revel in my humiliation?”

“How absurd. I don’t want to humiliate you. I just want you to understand what having friends has done to you. You’re hurt because you let him get close to you, and you’ve no one but yourself to blame for that. I warned you.”

Father was right, but Meta Knight wanted Dedede back so badly. It’d been so quiet without him and so lonely. Meta Knight missed their petty fights over the shower. He missed Dedede climbing into his bed and snuggling against him because Dedede just couldn’t stand being alone in his bed. And Dedede’s poor mother with her suffocating affection…

“If you have any love left for me, you’ll help me regardless,” Meta Knight said. “Even if I didn’t like Dedede, I’d still try to save him because he’s—he’s being held prisoner or in trouble—and this is that right thing to do!”

“If I want to be your enabler, you mean,” Nightmare said. “This experience has taught you nothing.”

“But you have a price. You wouldn’t have called me here unless you were willing to make a deal. It’d be a waste of your time.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll help you find him, but in return, you’re going to be my servant for a week. That shouldn’t be too hard. You clearly enjoy being lorded over.”

That was an entire week of opportunities for his father to humiliate and demean him, and Nightmare was horribly creative. But if that was the price for Dedede…oh, Meta Knight would do it. If Nightmare wanted his servitude, he’d get it, and Meta Knight would make him pay for it. This meant war. Meta Knight didn't blindly do whatever Dedede wanted, so there was no way he was
going to do whatever Nightmare wanted without a fight.

“What exactly would that entail?” Meta Knight asked.

“Why, anything I ask, of course. Dedede must’ve trained you very poorly if you don’t even know what servants are for.”

Oh, yes. This would be fun. “I know what I’m supposed to do, but Dedede is reasonable. You aren’t.”

“But it doesn’t matter, does it? You’ll agree regardless because you want to save him, don’t you?”

Meta Knight needed to be safe and cover his bases. “I want a contract. If I have to be your servant, I want all the legal protections of one.”

“You don’t have to,” Nightmare said.

“I’ll do it, though.”

“Of course, you will,” Nightmare replied.

Customer Service sauntered in, wine in hand, followed by another man carrying bowls of soup. Meta Knight frowned, as the bowl of tomato soup and a spoon were placed before him. “We have an agreement. I want my information.”

“And I’ll happily give it to you,” Nightmare said, “When we get to dessert—assuming you behave yourself.”

Meta Knight knew it was a power play, but he couldn’t figure out how to turn it around on Nightmare. “How many courses?” Meta Knight asked.

“Four,” Customer Service said, sliding into the chair across from Meta Knight.
That wasn’t too bad. Meta Knight had known his father to host as much as fifteen courses. He took a small sip of wine, to show he intended to play along. At least, until a better alternative presented itself. “Before I forget, President Haltmann called,” Customer Service said.

Nightmare pinched the bridge of his nose. “What did he want?”

“He wants to move your meeting to this week. He wanted this evening, but I informed him you had another obligation. He requested that I express his displeasure with your decision regarding M-7110. You made an agreement, and he feels you ought to honor it.”

“Oh, I see. He wants to act as if he has the moral high ground, does he? The agreement we made was neither legal nor ethical. He should be thrilled I’m unwilling to honor it.”


“M-7110?” Meta Knight asked.

Nightmare said nothing, and his silence was never a good sign. Meta Knight averted his gaze and downed a spoonful of the soup, trying to show that he was playing along and behaving, in case that was the reason for Nightmare’s silent treatment. Nova’s grace, this was so awkward.

“It’s a secret, pet,” Nightmare said finally. “When I was very young, Haltmann and I made plans for a piece of technology called Star Dream. I was supposed to develop...ah, how to put it so you’d understand? An admin, you might say. Now, for various reasons, I’m reluctant to fulfill my end of the bargain. Haltmann is angry because he’s put so much time and money into this project, and now he can’t complete it.”

“But what does Star Dream do?” Meta Knight asked.

“I think that’s enough talk about business, isn’t it?” Nightmare asked. “Perhaps, we move our attentions elsewhere? Current events, maybe? The Queen is looking very old these days, isn’t she?”

The second course was fish, followed by lamb. Somewhere between the two, Nightmare had
Meta Knight had seen that before, of course. His father was capable of being very charming when he wanted to be, but he’d never tried being charming towards Meta Knight. That was odd.

Meta Knight sort of liked it. He knew he shouldn’t.

Dessert was chocolate cake—probably because it went well with the wine. Nightmare wasn’t particularly fond of chocolate, especially the decadently sweet variety. “You have an art professor named Drawcia de la Fuente, don’t you?” Nightmare asked.

More small talk. Meta Knight mentally sighed. “Yes, she’s great.”

“Did you know she was once an agent of A.M.B.E.R.?”

*What?* “No.”

Nightmare nodded. “Oh, yes. She was mentored by a gentleman named Yin-Yarn. A very eccentric man. He had this off-beat, disarming personality, and beneath it all, he was a very terrible man. Maybe that’s why he and the Queen got along so well.”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t. This man, Yin-Yarn, was sent to Patchland. Diplomatic relations, you know. Drawcia went with him. The official story is that Patchland was annexed; I’m sure you know that. But you probably don’t know that Alera hired Yin-Yarn specifically to use his powers on the King of Patchland and force him to sign it over to the Dreamlandic Crown.”

“How do you know?” Meta Knight asked.

“Through some very illegal means,” Nightmare replied. “Drawcia, having learned the truth, resigned—but not before forcing Yin-Yarn to also resign. I’m not very clear on the details there, but the short story is that they have a long-standing grudge. She ruined his career, and I imagine he thought it’d be fun to pay her back. But Yin-Yarn isn’t much of a fighter, himself. No, he makes other people fight for him.”
“So you think this sorcerer abducted Dedede to—to what? Kill our art professor?”

“Not quite. Initially, I think his intention was to gather intelligence, but then, he began to suspect he was being followed. He kept Dedede for protection. It turns out he was being followed by Fluff—”

“The prince?”

“The same. He has his suspicions about Yin-Yarn’s involvement. I think it was after his capture that Yin-Yarn thought he could possibly use Dedede to murder Drawcia. He’s still planning it out, though. Yin-Yarn is a notoriously bad planner. All malice and no focus.”

“So if I find Yin-Yarn, I find Dedede and Fluff?”

Nightmare stood and patted Meta Knight’s head. “I won’t even make you work that hard,” the wizard said.

And—

Meta Knight’s cheek pressed against the hardwood table, while he slept a deep, dreamless sleep. Nightmare reached around the boy’s chest and unbuckled the swordbelt holding Galaxia. In response, she sparked threateningly. How dare you.

“Parenting looks exhausting,” Customer Service said.

“It’s a massive headache,” Nightmare replied, “But it isn’t all bad. It’s even rewarding sometimes.”

The wizard placed Galaxia on the table, being careful only to touch her sheath. She crackled with energy, daring him to place his hand on her sacred blade. Nightmare smirked and slowly trailed a finger over Meta Knight’s cheekbone. “Do you think I should cut his hair? It’s been bothering me for years,” Nightmare said.
In a flash of light, Galaxia appeared. Her face was sharp-angled and cruel, her eyes like glowing embers, and her skin eerily white. She wore a silky golden evening gown that shimmered against the table. The sword was painful to look at, but Nightmare refused to drop his gaze. *Don’t you dare.*

Nightmare deliberately trailed a nail over Meta Knight’s throat. As Galaxia’s eyes followed the gesture, her hands curled into fists. *You won’t hurt him. You need him,* she said.

“Oh, I won’t kill him,” Nightmare said. “Hurt him, though? If that’s what it takes…”

*What do you want from me?*

“Just a conversation. Ah, I believe *a game of twenty questions* is the vernacular?”

*For what purpose?*

“Intelligence gathering. I’ve been fascinated with you for so long, Sacred Galaxia.”

*I’m well-aware.*

“Of course, you are. So tell me. How did it feel when dear Bikaia used you to run the good Sir Galacta Knight through the stomach? And—going off that question—how will you feel when it’s *beloved* Meta Knight’s blood on your blade?”

*Oh, I see. You’ve figured out that Bikaia and Galacta Knight have been reincarnated, so you think you understand it all.*

“Not just them. I’d imagine the goddess Nova is alive as well.”

*You assume that history is repeating itself,* Galaxia said. *I wonder if that’s truly the case. Because I’d place my bets on Meta Knight driving my blade into you.*
“Don’t be stupid, Galaxia. I’ve left him bleeding and crying on the floor before, and he still returned as loving and doting as ever,” Nightmare said.

Except for the time he ran away, Galaxia said.

“Meta Knight can only run away for so long. Eventually, I’ll catch up with him.”

Galaxia smiled, revealing sharp, jagged teeth. I’m sure you will, and when you do, we’ll see which wins out—the blood you’ve given him or my sacred fire.
The disinherited prince of Patchland sat in the half-light and the cold. He held a thick blanket over his shoulders. It was difficult to cover himself completely with it, but he always tried. The alternative was feeling the cold, indifferent concrete of the floor or the icy, barren walls. Having adjusted the blanket often, Fluff supposed he ought to be an expert at curling up in it, but it always took too long to adjust the blanket and fall asleep. Sometimes, he wondered if the sorcerer replaced the blanket ever so often with an identical one of a different size. He only dismissed the idea because he couldn’t believe Yin-Yarn could do anything so subtle.

The shadows shifted, darting like flames from the nightlight, the room’s only source of light. Fluff jumped and climbed to his feet. Slowly, the shadows rose before—with a sudden burst of starry sparks—abruptly sinking. A man emerged. He was tall with a cruel, sharp angled face. His skin was bleached white, and if his skin were peeled away, Fluff was certain the sorcerer’s bones would be the same color. Inky, black glasses settled on his pointed nose. When he stepped forward, the shadows scampered at his feet, drifting around his dark dress pants. All this should’ve resulted in the creature looking monstrous, but—somehow—he was utterly, sublimely beautiful. Like some night-god brought to Dreamland.

Fluff’s breath caught as Dreamland’s most infamous wizard strode closer. The wizard grinned, revealing unusually sharp eye teeth. Nightmare could tear a man’s throat out with those teeth; of that, Fluff had no doubt. “Hello, little princeling,” he said. His voice was soft and darkly melodious, seductive even.

Nova, preserve him.

It took Fluff a few seconds to realize Nightmare was carrying someone. Fluff’s first horrified thought was that Nightmare Nocturne had abducted someone’s child. Fluff’s second thought was that said child—well, really, a man—was quite pretty. Fluff assumed the man was of Halcandran heritage, based upon his skin color and soft-featured face. His hair was a stunning shade of blue, clearly the product of much patience and upkeep. The wizard strode closer and carefully laid down the boy on Fluff’s abandoned blanket. “You aren’t going to say something?” Nightmare queried.

Fluff steeled himself. He tilted his head defiantly and rolled back his shoulders. The wizard seemed to notice, for he moved closer, using his significant height as an unspoken threat. Fluff raised an
eyebrow. “Why are you here?” Fluff asked, forcing every ounce of regal composure he could into
the question.

“I brought you a gift, little princeling. Don’t you like him?”

The Dreamlanders’ fondness for Halcandrans was well-known even in Patchland. After the
destruction of Halcandra by Landia, the Halcandran race had nearly become extinct. They’d fled to
Dreamland and found acceptance and compassion during King Bikaia’s reign, but once he died,
Dreamland’s honor had, too. Instead, Halcandrans had become the favorite exotic playthings of the
aristocracy. Time had made the situation worse. While the old Dreamlandic families were slowly
losing their magic and power, the magic in Halcandran blood had never lost its resilience. It
continued as powerful as ever.

Fluff bristled at the insinuation that he was anything like that. Like the same aristocracy that’d
taken everything from his family and his people. The same aristocracy that made his people kneel
before Queen Alera, who’d stolen their realm with sorcery. “I don’t need a gift. Thank you,” Fluff
said, his anger overriding his fear. “I have everything under control.”

“Really?” the wizard sneered. “It appears to me that you’re locked in a half-finished bathroom.”

“I don’t need an accessory.”

“Oh, I do hope you call him an accessory to his face,” Nightmare said. “He doesn’t listen when I
tell him that it’s completely disgraceful to be selling himself out a third-tier nobleman.”

“You abducted a nobleman’s servant?”

Nightmare pinched the bridge of his nose. “My son,” he said, gesturing. “Yin-Yarn is holding his
Lord hostage.”

Oh. Dedede! That must be the lord that Nightmare meant. But why would the child of Nightmare
Nocturne be a servant of all things? Why did the child of Nightmare Nocturne look so…normal?
Fluff fixed his brown eyes on the wizard; the prince’s stomach churned as the shadows,
themselves, twisted beneath Nightmare’s feet.

Then again, if Fluff was the child of Nightmare Nocturne, he might want to be as far away from
him as possible. And if there was one thing the declining, aristocratic families of old hated, it was Nightmare Nocturne, with his success, magic, and common blood.

The wizard snapped his fingers, conjuring a violin and bow from the shadows around him. “For him,” the wizard explained. “Make certain he knows that.”

“A violin? How would a violin help in this situation? What is he going to do with it?”

The wizard laughed. “Play it, of course. Good luck, little princeling.”

Meta Knight woke slowly. The ground was hard and cold beneath him. His back and neck ached. He rolled onto his side and froze. Tentatively, he reached over his shoulder, confirming what he already felt. “Galaxia?”

*Stay calm. Worry about me later.*

She wasn’t there. Where was she? Meta Knight narrowed his eyes, trying to piece together how he’d found himself in a cramped room with a concrete floor and bare walls. *The wizard and I are talking, Galaxia said. I’d like to be at your side, but that isn’t possible right now. But don’t be afraid. You can do this, Meta Knight.*

The wizard. Of course, Father had done this. A throat cleared.

Meta Knight turned around. Fluff, the fallen prince of Patchland, sat imperiously across the room. His chin was tilted up, his shoulders rolled back, and his smile was careful. However, any regal effect was ruined by the fact that Fluff was sitting on a toilet and awkwardly balancing a violin across his knees. Still, the prince might be a potential ally, and a little flattery never hurt when dealing with royals—disenfranchised or no. Meta Knight knelt and bowed his head. “Your Royal Highness,” he said.

“I know who I am, Nocturne.”
How arrogant. “It’s *de Brillante Armadura*, actually. Or Meta Knight, if you prefer.”

“How arrogant. “It’s *de Brillante Armadura*, actually. Or Meta Knight, if you prefer.”

“Please, sit. Or stand. Whichever you prefer,” Fluff said, “Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight sat, although the floor was hard and cold. Fluff’s brow was furrowed, his famously large eyebrows drawn together over his autumn-brown eyes. “Lord Dedede is under Yin-Yarn’s control,” Fluff said. “Rescuing him won’t be simple. He’s more likely to attack you, especially since you’ve arrived so ill-equipped.”

The prince offered the violin and its bow. “A violin?” Meta Knight asked.

It was his father’s violin. Meta Knight took it carefully, almost reverently. “Yes, you’re supposed to play it,” Fluff said. “Obviously. Your father’s words—not mine. Your father is terrifying, by the way.”

“I know. Play it, though? What good will that do?”

Fluff sighed. “I thought you’d know. Mr. Nocturne assured me that you were more than a status symbol.”

“This is absurd. I’m not playing his little game, while Dedede is being controlled by an evil sorcerer,” Meta Knight said, pulling his cell phone from his front pocket. “I’m calling the proper authorities.”

“You had a phone this whole time?” Fluff groaned. “I could’ve done that! I knew I should’ve searched you.”

“Thank you for respecting my personal space,” Meta Knight replied, shifting the violin to rest on his shoulder and dialing the number with his free hand.

He put it on speaker. Hopefully, hearing the voice of Patchland’s disinherit princes would spur some action. “A.M.B.E.R. headquarters emergency line. What is your emergency?”

“I’m being held captive by a sorcerer named Yin-Yarn,” Fluff said, before Meta Knight could
answer. “I am Fluff, Crown Prince of Patchland, son to the late King Woole and Queen Skein.”

At least Fluff sounded appropriately like a snotty royal. “Do you have a location?” the operator asked.

“No, I’m locked in a bathroom,” Fluff said. “Presumably his house.”

Meta Knight scrolled through his apps and flipped on GPS. “According to GPS, we’re at 2478 Miracle Matter Boulevard.”

Why would someone name a street after an incarnation of Dark Matter? Odd. “And who are you?” the operator asked.

“Meta Knight,” he paused. The more high profile people involved, the greater chance that A.M.B.E.R. would take them seriously. “Meta Knight Nocturne.”

The operator made a sort of hissing sound. “Right. We’ll send a group to your location. Stay on the line—”

“No, sorry. I’m calling Sectonia,” Meta Knight replied, ending the call.

“What are you doing?” Fluff asked.

“Like I said, I’m calling Sectonia. A.M.B.E.R. has been phenomenally unhelpful lately, but they have our address. They’ll send help. Now I’m calling back-up. Sectonia and I made a bargain, and I expect her to come through,” Meta Knight said.

The phone rang once. “Hello?” Taranza replied.

“That isn’t her,” Fluff said.

“It’s the Crown Prince Taranza of Floralia,” Meta Knight said.
“Oh. Hello, Meta Knight!” Taranza chirped, sounding as if Meta Knight's call had made his entire day.

“Your Royal Highness, I need to speak to Sec—Princess Sectonia,” Meta Knight said.

“Nia’s in a cabinet meeting. Maybe I can help?”

_Nia? “Maybe. Fluff of Patchland and I are trapped in the bathroom of a sorcerer named Yin-Yarn, who is controlling Dedede and wants to use him to kill our art professor.”_

There was a long pause. “Don’t do anything foolish,” Taranza finally said. “Did you already call A.M.B.E.R.?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll fetch Sectonia, and we can coordinate with them. Just keep your head down. Don’t engage unless you have to. If this sorcerer’s powers are anything like mine, they’ll likely work on you, too. It’s unfortunate that he’s controlling Dedede, but I can only imagine the sort of things he’d do with Galaxia and your dimensional powers.”

“Yin-Yarn’s powers don’t work on me, though,” Fluff said. “They never have.”

“It’d still be wise for you not to engage him either,” Taranza replied.

Footsteps thudded down the hall. “That might be a problem,” Meta Knight said.

“You’re the child of Nightmare Nocturne,” Fluff said. “You have powers, right?”

“Meta Knight, run. Don’t fight him! I know you want to,” Taranza said, “But it’s a bad idea.”

“All right,” Meta Knight said. “I must go.”
Meta Knight ended the call and shoved the phone in his pocket. He carefully laid the violin on the ground and stood. “Here. Grab my hand,” he said.

Fluff laced his fingers with Meta Knight’s. “What’re you—”

Meta Knight closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air rippled before him, and—Fluff swore and dropped Meta Knight’s hand. “What—how did you do that?”

Meta Knight opened his eyes and glanced around the new room. The kitchen. “Dimensional powers. Do you know the way out?”

“I guess it’s across the living—”

“Stop!”

Meta Knight’s heart ached. He knew that voice. He wanted to hear it; he didn’t want to hear it. Fluff edged closer to Meta Knight. “Don’t be reckless,” the prince said.

Dedede, wielding his hammer, stepped closer. His gaze was vacant and his movements heavy and detached, like he wasn’t fully conscious of making them. “But if we leave, Yin-Yarn might realize we know something. He might flee,” Meta Knight said. “Dedede, it’s me. You know me. You trust me. Please, you don’t need to do this.”

“That won’t work,” Fluff said. “Do you think I didn’t try that with my father?”

“Go, then,” Meta Knight said. “Get help.”

Dedede swung. Meta Knight darted back, tripping over Fluff. The prince scrambled away. “Meta Knight, don’t!” he shouted.

Meta Knight darted around the opposite side of the counter and further away from Fluff. Once the prince realized Meta Knight wasn’t leaving, he’d do the practical thing and flee. Dedede followed
Meta Knight, who called his dimensional powers to him. He teleported around the counter, opposite Dedede. Fluff fled.

Good. Meta Knight hadn’t wanted the prince to be hurt. He’d flee and be safe. Meta Knight would do his best to evade the sorcerer and free Dedede, and hopefully, A.M.B.E.R. or Sectonia would arrive in time to aid him. “Come on, Dedede. You’re not going to let some evil sorcerer tell you what to do, are you?” Meta Knight asked.

Dedede ran around the counter, and Meta Knight climbed onto it, sliding around the other side. As long as he could keep out of range of Dedede’s hammer, he’d be fine.

_Crack!_

Meta Knight jumped. Fluff was at his side, and Dedede’s neck was bleeding. The prince cracked his whip threateningly against the floor. “Don’t _do_ that!” Meta Knight snapped. “You could’ve put out his eye!”

“I know how not to blind someone!” Fluff retorted. “You—”

Dedede lunged forward. Fluff moved in time, but Meta Knight didn’t. Deep, painful throbbing jolted through his chest, followed by a painful fall to the floor. Meta Knight’s head snapped back and struck the tile. He lost his breath for a moment. That was _really_ going to hurt in the morning. Meta Knight blinked back stars in his eyes and pulled at his dimensional powers. He managed to disappear before Dedede could slam his hammer into his ribs again.

He just needed a few seconds to recover. Was that scream his or Fluff’s? Meta Knight stumbled half to his feet when Dedede stepped around the counter. “Dedede, it’s me,” Meta Knight said, gasping for breath. “Th—that hurt. Ow.”

Meta Knight fleetingly imagined Dedede kicking him in the face or cracking his skull with his hammer. Meta Knight wasn’t in a good position to take a fighting stance either. It wouldn’t have done any good anyway. Fire shot through his chest. “I…I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said.

“Meta Knight!” Fluff shouted.

“Meta Knight?” a shrill voice cackled.
Dedede stopped, making way for a very tall man. Meta Knight gawked, in a mess of bewilderment and pain. The man looked to be in his forties, had an enormous mustache, and too-large violet eyes. He would've looked like an average man, with a couple striking features, and utterly unnoticeable were it not for one blaring thing: he seemed to share Professor Drawcia's admiration of obnoxiously large hats. His was green and pointed, with a wide brim, and Meta Knight suspected even Professor Drawcia would agree that the hat was too much. It probably made it very difficult to ride in a car and clashed horribly with the man's bright red and yellow sweater, which looked about two sizes too big.

“Stay back, Yin-Yarn! You fiend!” Fluff snapped.

The prince wedged himself between Meta Knight and Dedede, who gazed at Yin-Yarn with a frighteningly devoted look. “No, no, no,” Yin-Yarn said. “Meta Knight? That’s your name? Oh, that’s great! Say, princeling, have you ever met a knight?”

“What,” Meta Knight deadpanned.

“Oh, the brave knight in shining armor comes charging in to save his lord!” Yin-Yarn exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “How knightly of you!”

“Stop it. Here’s my ultimatum,” Fluff said. “Release his liege, and we’ll let you go. You can be halfway to Floralia before A.M.B.E.R. finds out. I don’t care about or need you. I just want proof of what you did to my father.”

“You’re just jealous because I’m so punny,” Yin-Yarn retorted, “And no, I don’t think so, Fluff. Because now that the child of Nightmare Nocturne is here, I think I want him. I mean, I don’t know what I’d do with him, but I’m sure I’d think of something.”

“My father would kill you,” Meta Knight said.

His chest was burning. Meta Knight thought of how lovely and warm Galaxia’s healing magic was. But—if they could keep Yin-Yarn talking, they wouldn’t have to fight. It’d give Sectonia time to arrive.

“I’m willing to take the chance,” Yin-Yarn replied. “Go ahead, Dedede!”
The sorcerer spun around, walking leisurely away. “I’m going after him,” Fluff said.

Fluff was clear, and Dedede was edging too close. Meta Knight called the wind to him, and it obeyed. The kitchen window shattered, flinging glass in. Sharp pain sliced through the side of Meta Knight’s face and neck, dulled by warm, stinging blood. He teleported away, behind Dedede.

Dedede spun around, one hand raised to a particularly bad cut on his shoulder. Meta Knight’s vision blurred. He darted back, trying to put as much distance as possible between them. Dedede lunged forward, and Meta Knight yelped. He moved, but his back struck a wall. Oh, that hurt. Why did it hurt so much? Why was he so unsteady? They were too close for Dedede to use his hammer. He dropped it and instead seized Meta Knight’s throat, the same way Father sometimes did. Galaxia wasn’t there, and Dedede was so much stronger than Meta Knight.

Think, think, think.

He summoned his dimensional powers and teleported away. Meta Knight gasped for breath from the exertion of it. He hadn’t moved far enough, but by the time he realized it, Dedede was there. Meta Knight felt the sharp, searing pain through his forehead before he realized he’d hit the counter. His eyes watered, and he stumbled around, nearly falling onto the floor.

Loud, chirpy music sliced through the air. Dedede froze, confusion flickering over his vacant gaze. “Um…sorry?” Meta Knight said, awkwardly going for his phone.

Why was Dedede letting him? Meta Knight ran past him, taking advantage of whatever had caused the hesitation. It faded quickly. Soon, he heard Dedede behind him. Nothing to do but run. Meta Knight would lose any physical altercation. But Nova’s grace, running hurt, and his vision blurred. He was probably about to vomit on Yin-Yarn’s carpet.

Meta Knight blindly ran in a room, slammed the door behind him, and locked it. A bedroom. Dedede’s hammer smashed against the door. Who knew how long it would hold? Gasping for breath, Meta Knight stumbled backwards and collapsed onto the soft, downy bed. His phone rang persistently. “Yeah?” Meta Knight asked. That didn’t sound like his voice.

“Meta Knight, we’re on our way,” Sectonia said.

“Great.”
Laying down was a bad idea. Meta Knight bit back a whimper and sat upright. “You’re injured?” Sectonia asked. “How badly?”

She must’ve heard. She said something else, but it was lost in Dedede’s efforts to beat down the door. “Is there a way to break Yin-Yarn’s control on Dedede?” Meta Knight asked.

“Music,” Sectonia said, “But—”

*Your phone went off,* Galaxia said.

“The violin!” Meta Knight exclaimed.

“Violin?” Sectonia inquired.

“Father left me with a violin,” Meta Knight said. “I—”

“Nightmare Nocturne sent you to rescue Dedede with a *violin,* and he didn’t even tell you how to use it?”

Meta Knight winced. His head hurt, and Sectonia’s indignant shouting made it worse. He needed to play it off like it was fine. Like *he* was fine. “I was unconscious.”

“Why were you unconscious?”

“Father,” Meta Knight replied.

*Father.*

Father was going to be so disappointed in him. Ice seemed to settle in Meta Knight’s veins, at odds with the heat and pain in Meta Knight’s head. He put his hand to the back of his head, thinking there must be blood. There wasn’t any.
Father was going to murder him if Dedede didn’t do it. Or worse, he’d lock him away somewhere. It’d be just like when Meta Knight was a child, young and defiant. It’d be just like that—their constant fights resulting in broken furniture, the punishments, the staff that always looked the other way while they cleaned blood and shattered glass off the floor. But there wouldn’t be any running away. Nightmare would be careful this time.

But Nightmare was right, wasn’t he? Meta Knight was too weak and naïve to be on his own. It was going to get him killed someday. He was foolish for thinking he could have friends and live normally and play happy and domestic with Dedede. Father was right.

“Meta Knight?” Sectonia’s voice was too loud.

“But the violin is in the bathroom. Or basement. I can’t make it there.”

Sectonia proceeded to make a lengthy, undignified assertion about Nightmare Nocturne’s parentage, immortal soul, and something he ought to do with a sheep. Meta Knight would’ve probably been impressed if he hadn’t felt like his skull had been cracked in.

Wait. Was it cracked? He didn’t know.

“One moment,” Sectonia said, sounding a little flustered.

There was muffled talking. Meta Knight focused on a large, glass orb across the room. It was purple and blue and speckled with white stars. Yin-Yarn was an artist, wasn’t he? It was probably something impressive. Dear Nova, he just wanted his vision to stop blurring and his head to stop hurting.

The door cracked. Meta Knight slowly stood, his ribs and head protesting. Galaxia fluttered with worry in the back of his mind.

“Meta Knight?”

“Mm?”
“Meta Knight, listen. Yin-Yarn has a piano in his parlor. If you can play something familiar to Dedede, it should free him from Yin-Yarn's control. His parlor is,” Sectonia paused, “On the ground floor. Opposite the kitchen.”

“Is there a bedroom between those?”

Sectonia repeated the question. “Yes. Leave and go right.”

Leave. The door wasn’t going to hold much longer. This would require magic, and magic took energy. And if I can’t leave? He almost asked.

He dropped his phone. It would take too much energy to pick it up. Deep breaths. You can do this, Galaxia murmured.

If she’d been near, he could’ve called on her power to help him. Father was right. Meta Knight had grown weak. He shouldn’t have neglected his powers. Then, he’d be better at it. He wouldn’t have to worry about messing it up. His vision blurred again.

Just through the wall. Just a little way across the floor. He could manage that. The air rippled around him like a warning. He’d used too much energy already, but he had to do it. He had to save Dedede. He had to make sure Dedede didn’t kill him.

Meta Knight nearly lost his balance. He breathed raggedly, but he’d managed to teleport behind Dedede, who whirled around. Meta Knight stumbled into the room behind him. Sectonia had been right; there was a piano. Meta Knight half-fell into it. He must’ve taken too long. Dedede was already there and storming towards him. If this didn’t work, Meta Knight was finished. He shouldn’t have let Dedede get that hit to his chest in. If his ribs weren’t entirely broken, they had to be fractured. The only consolation was that his ribs hadn’t broken and hit anything vital; he’d have already died if that was the case.

And his head. He felt like his skull was cracked. It was too hot and dizzy, and so hard to—

Focus, Meta Knight, Galaxia said.
Right. Music. Of all things, Dedede’s favorite piece was a winter hymnal. Meta Knight played it once or twice a year around the Winter Solstice and usually on the violin. He hadn’t touched a piano in over a year, but…hesitantly, he played a few notes. He’d skipped a few, butchering the lovely melody, but Dedede still stopped.

Meta Knight had his attention. That was good. Maybe another piece? Cautiously, Meta Knight sat on the piano bench and began a duet. Surely, Dedede would remember that one. They played it together for Delilah every time they visited her estate on the Floralian border, and it was the first song Meta Knight and Dedede had ever played together. If any song was going to reach Dedede, surely, it would be that one.

The room lost focus for a few seconds. Deep breaths. If he panicked, it’d increase his heart rate, and that would only make things worse. If he passed out, it was all over. “Do you want to join me?” Meta Knight asked. “It’s a duet. I can’t play it by myself.”

Meta Knight turned around to see where Dedede was, jumping when he found his lord right behind him. Was his hammer still with him? Yes. Curses. Meta Knight had hoped he’d drop it.

Meta Knight took a deep breath and resumed playing. This might take a while, but at least, Dedede wasn’t attacking him. Hopefully. Fluff was doing well against Yin-Yarn. Assuming he’d gone after the sorcerer and not left. Fluff seemed too noble to simply abandon anyone, though. No, Meta Knight had no doubt the prince was still in the house somewhere—hiding or fighting. He’d be fine. Sectonia was on her way, surely.

Meta Knight!

He snapped his head back, unsure when he’d bent forward. Only Galaxia’s warning kept him from smashing his forehead into the piano keys. Keep playing? Stop? Dedede’s hand brushed against Meta Knight’s. A flurry of notes filled the air.

It was a struggle to play his part, and hesitantly and tiredly, Meta Knight leaned his cheek against Dedede’s bicep. It took too much effort to keep his head up.

“Meta Knight.”

Why couldn’t the room stop spinning? “Hmm?”
It took several seconds for Meta Knight to realize the significance of his name being called.

“It hurt you,” Dedede said. “Oh, Meta Knight!”

Hurt him? This went a little beyond merely hurting him. “I’m fine,” Meta Knight said. “I promise.”

“No! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Dedede frantically wadded up his shirt and pressed it against Meta Knight’s forehead. Meta Knight nearly fell off the bench from the force of the gesture, but he couldn’t bring himself to care much. A welcome numbness had settled over him, and it seemed as if his injured ribs and head belonged to someone else, some other Meta Knight. “Oh, no! You’re bleeding! Meta, Meta…I—I did a number on you.”

Meta Knight choked on the laughter burning from his throat. “Yeah, you did, but it’s fine. You didn’t mean to.”

Dedede stared incomprehensibly at him. “Can you walk?”

Of course, he could. Meta Knight stumbled around the bench. Dedede’s hands fluttered awkwardly in the air, like he meant to catch him. Why was he so concerned? Everything was fine. Meta Knight was just a little sick and hot, but he’d be fine.

He left the room, Dedede following close behind. “Meta, I think you oughta sit down for a bit.”

A high-pitched shout split the air, and Meta Knight reacted reflexively. Yin-Yarn dashed around the corner, and Meta Knight, half by chance, punched him hard in the jaw. The sorcerer collapsed in an inelegant heap. Huh.

Fluff coiled his whip up in his hand as he approached the sorcerer. “Well, then. Thank you, Meta Knight. I had it under control, but—”

Meta Knight’s knees buckled. Both Dedede and Fluff scrambled to grab him. “I’m fine,” Meta Knight insisted. “I told you to run.”
“What?” Fluff asked.

“Yeah, he ain’t been making much sense,” Dedede said.

The front door burst open. Fluff readied his whip and stepped around Yin-Yarn, ready to defend them from any threat. Princess Sectonia paused and slowly lowered her rapiers. She was flanked by Taranza and Knight Commander Garlude of the Queen’s Guard. Everyone was out today, weren’t they? Who was going to appear next? Professor Drawcia? The witch peered inside, and Meta Knight burst into a fit of undignified, helpless laughter.

It was dark and warm. Meta Knight’s fingers grasped stiff, white sheets. Dazed, he lifted his head slightly and swallowed back the nausea tangled in his throat. He couldn't decide if he was hurting or merely uncomfortable. A hospital bed? Yes.

How had he gotten there? Meta Knight was getting really tired of passing out and waking up in different places. This made—what? The second time in just a few hours? Something flickered in his peripheral, and Meta Knight groggily turned his head towards it. The Nightmare Wizard sat primly by the bed. He wore a long coat over his clothes; the lining was spackled with silver stars. Meta Knight fixated on it.

“Meta Knight?”

Meta Knight furrowed his brow. “I don’t remember…coming here.”

“It’s probably the concussion combined with the medication and the exertion,” Nightmare said. “They want you to stay overnight for observation. And you can’t perform any magic for two weeks. You’ll be on medication for a while, too.”

Meta Knight cautiously sat upright, sending heat and pain jolting through his chest. It hurt to breathe. “F-father.”
The wizard flicked his wrist, conjuring Galaxia from midair. He held her by the sheath. “I assume you want her back? I’ve no further use for her, and she might aid the healing process. I imagine you’re in a great deal of pain.”

Guilt jolted through Meta Knight. He’d forgotten Nightmare had her. “Please.”

Meta Knight expected Nightmare to throw the sword at him, but instead, the wizard drifted closer and set Galaxia carefully on the bed. Meta Knight resisted the urge to grab her and hug her against his chest and to let her fire sink into his bones. Galaxia’s warmth was always so comforting. “I…is Dedede…” Meta Knight trailed off.

Nightmare nodded. Meta Knight followed the gesture and found Dedede, clearly asleep, slumped over in a chair. There were visible bandages over Dedede’s neck and a large cut across his forehead. “I wanted some time alone with you,” Nightmare said.

“You aren’t hurting him, are you?” Meta Knight asked. “Father—”

“No. I just cast a sleeping spell. I’ll allow Dedede to choose the form of his dream—if he dreams at all.”

How uncharacteristically generous.

“Fluff is well, too. I believe Duchess Delilah is hosting him in her palatial apartments. I do hope she’s not considering him as a viable marriage prospect. Can you imagine being so desperate?”

Meta Knight wondered how Fluff, who believed the Dreamlandic queen had stolen Patchland through trickery, felt about staying under her roof and in the apartments of one of the Queen’s distant cousins. “I’m sure she’s just being kind,” Meta Knight said. “Not everyone acts only for their own gain; you know.”

“That’s because there are so many fools in the world, my pet.”

“But to clarify, they’re all fine?” Meta Knight asked. “This isn’t some sort of trick?”
“No trick.”

Meta Knight smiled. “They’re both safe, then. They aren’t hurt or dead or…we—no, you did it?” Meta Knight furrowed his brow. “I don’t…remember anything. Yin-Yarn is arrested, though?”

“When memory loss of events before and after a concussion occurs are within the range of normal. You’ve already exhibited some sensitivity to light as well as headaches. You did lose consciousness for a little while, which isn’t good. However, it’s unclear whether that was the concussion or exhaustion. Confusion, of course, as expected. Your personality seems very much intact,” Nightmare added with a laugh.

Since when was his father an expert on head injuries? “But Dedede,” Meta Knight insisted, while carefully surveying Dedede’s injuries. “And Fluff. They’re fine? You promise.”

The wizard gently traced his knuckles across Meta Knight’s jaw. “Hush, now. Don’t worry about them. They’re fine.”

Safe! They were really safe, and when Meta Knight returned to the apartment, life could resume as normal—petty, half-facetious arguments, late night cramming sessions, Dedede filling every space of the apartment with his energy and joyfulness. Meta Knight laughed, flinching when the movement jolted pain along his chest. Breathing was hard. Laughing was murder. “I…I did that. He’s fine. And I…I don’t remember that.”

“What can you recall?”

Meta Knight sighed and thought for several minutes, trying to retrace his steps. “The cabernet sauvignon was really good,” he said after a moment. “And…I remember our bargain. Don’t worry; I’ll still come through.”

The wizard dimmed the lights and removed his glasses, folding them in his lap. Nightmare’s irises were silvery-white and glowed even in the dull light. “We’ll worry about it in a few weeks. You aren’t any good to me like this.”

Nightmare was likely finished with the pleasantries, and Meta Knight was too tired and hurt to fight. With a resigned sigh, he sank back into the pillows. “I assume you’re here to criticize me for getting hurt.”
“On the contrary, I’m here to see how you’re doing. I see that he beat up your lovely face, too,” Nightmare said, tapping Meta Knight’s cheek.

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“I know, but it still hurts, doesn’t it?” Nightmare asked, stroking Meta Knight’s hair.

Meta Knight winced. That was close to where he’d hit his head, and Nightmare’s touch hurt. “Father, please, stop.”

Nightmare let his hand drop back into his lap. “Poor boy. I wonder if I was, perhaps, too hasty in sending you after Dedede. Maybe the princess is right. I’d assumed A.M.B.E.R. wouldn’t help in fighting one of their own, and I was wrong. I’m very sorry, child.”

Nightmare had never apologized for anything before. How strange. “We’re both safe,” Meta Knight said. “That’s what matters.”

Nightmare smiled mischievously. “I’m told,” he said, “That after freeing Dedede, you rendered Yin-Yarn unconscious by punching him in the face. Who knew you had such a good right hook?”

For a moment, it was quiet. Meta Knight tried shifting his weight to see if he could find a position that didn’t hurt so badly. It seemed to be futile. He gave up and settled for feeling nauseous and sore.

“Maybe you need something stronger for the pain,” Nightmare said. “I can—”

“You sound concerned.”

“Of course, I’m concerned, you insolent brat!”

Nightmare stood abruptly, and Meta Knight watched, wide-eyed. Surely, the wizard wouldn’t hurt him. Not while he was already so injured. Still, Meta Knight’s hand brushed against Galaxia’s hilt. The wizard caught Meta Knight’s wrist and forced his hand back. Galaxia defiantly came to Meta Knight anyway. His fingers curled around her grip, even though the angle was wrong. Nightmare’s
nails dug in more harshly, and Meta Knight fleetingly wondered if his father intended to draw blood. “There’s no need for that,” Nightmare said. “Do you think I intend to hurt you?”

Yes. Yes, that was exactly what Meta Knight thought. “No,” he lied, letting Galaxia fall freely back into the sheets.

Meta Knight didn’t want Nightmare to hurt him. Even knowing they were in a hospital full of other people did little to inspire Meta Knight’s confidence. “I suppose a bit of flippancy can be forgiven, considering the circumstances,” the wizard replied, loosening his grip and rubbing his thumb over the area where his nails had been seconds before.

Nightmare never forgave anything, though. Meta Knight flushed with embarrassment. He had been rude, and he felt uncomfortably like a child that’d talked his way out of a well-deserved punishment. There was a guilty stirring of relief, too. In his current condition, the last thing Meta Knight wanted was one of his father’s punishments.

“But of course, I’m concerned. I’ve never seen you in a hospital bed before,” Nightmare said. “A few bruises and cuts…those you can handle. But this. Fractured ribs, a concussion…if Dedede had actually broken your ribs, they might’ve punctured a lung, and then, you’d have died. Because of me.”

Meta Knight furrowed his brow, unsure how to respond. This softer side of Father was strange. Nightmare gently stroked the delicate underside of Meta Knight’s wrist. “Do you remember when you were a child and I used to craft dreams for you?” Nightmare asked, his smile fond. “You used to fear monsters and shadows, and I always left the hallway light on for you. Even when you were fast asleep. You were an odd child; you know. I never quite puzzled out why a child born of darkness would also be afraid of it.”

“You made such beautiful dreams,” Meta Knight said. “I used to wish I could make them.”

“I’ll admit that I was a little surprised you couldn’t. I’d assumed that dimensional powers were purely theoretical until you were born. I’d expected a dream-weaver, and instead, my dear toddler kept crawling into different dimensions.” Nightmare chuckled. “I had to travel into your dreams to bring you back.”

“Did I really?”
“You did, and I thought that’d be the end of it. But then, there were tornadoes. I took you for dinner at President Haltmann’s one time, thinking you could play with Susanna, and you summoned one. Broke all his best china.”

“You used to take me places with you?” Meta Knight asked.

Nightmare frowned. “Well…yes, when you were young. Of course, I did. Children need socialization to help them successfully assimilate into society.”

“Why did you stop?”

“You got older.”

“And you stopped loving me?”

The wizard sighed. “Is that what you think? Child, I never stopped loving you. I just…I made mistakes. I suppose that I liked the thought of coming home to you. That was always so nice. I’d work for a few months and come home, and you were always happy to see me. I was your whole world, and I liked that. In hindsight, that was unforgivably selfish of me.”

Father admitting to being selfish? Meta Knight averted his gaze.

“I’ll leave you with a nice dream,” Nightmare said.

As if to prove his point, the wizard smiled and conjured dream magic around his fingertips. His power sparkled like diamonds in the air, and when Nightmare—gently, teasingly—tapped Meta Knight’s nose, he felt suddenly pleasantly and wonderfully tired. “Rest easy,” Nightmare murmured. “I promise I’ll do better, child.”

Meta Knight’s eyelids fluttered. Why was Nightmare being so nice and sentimental? Was he—had he really been—worried? Meta Knight felt something vague and warm stir inside him. Maybe hope or happiness. That—well—Father cared. Maybe Father could change. Maybe this would change everything between them. Maybe this was the beginning of something new and lovely because—maybe—deep down Meta Knight’s father actually did care about him and was just a little lost on how to show it.
Dedede watched the young king, Bikaia, step into the Fountain of Dreams. Something about the king’s face was like Kirby’s, but Dedede couldn’t fathom why. He’d seen images of King Bikaia, and aside from the trademark blue eyes and blond hair belong to most Dreamlanders, there was little in common between the two. Bikaia’s face was always portrayed as being angular and sharp with cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. In contrast, Kirby’s face was soft and gentle.

The waters of the Fountain of Dreams were as pure and sparkling as ever, but the air felt slick and suffocating. Like oil. “This is why we’re all having nightmares,” the young king said. “What could cause such a thing?”

“Perhaps, the same wizard who imprisoned me,” Nova said.

Silence settled between them. The goddess could sense him watching her. So young and concerned. Bikaia’s compassion was boundless. Even though she’d been captured. Even though she’d given that monster what he wanted. Even though she’d granted the wish that had taken his beloved mentor from him. Even though she’d made so many mistakes, Bikaia still loved her.

“Is it within your powers to purify the waters if I wish it?” Bikaia asked.

If her powers hadn’t been shattered in granting the dark wizard’s wish to imprison Sir Galacta Knight, they would’ve been. Easily. But Nova wasn’t at her full power, and she knew she never would be again. Dedede wasn’t certain how he knew that, but his heart felt it to be true. He also knew that the noble, fallen goddess only had one wish left in her, and that final wish given to Bikaia would kill her.

And when Dedede woke, still half-caught in his dream, he glimpsed Meta Knight, sleeping soundly. Anxiety strangled Dedede, threatening to burst force in a scream. Something was wrong. Everything was wrong. Groggily, Dedede stood and stepped quietly to Meta Knight’s bed. He watched the gentle rise and fall of Meta Knight’s chest and the way Galaxia, resting at his side, appeared to shine in the darkness. Poor Meta Knight was hurt so badly. “I’m so sorry,” Dedede whispered.

It’d be nice to talk to Meta Knight. Somehow, Dedede couldn’t be sure that Meta Knight would be fine until he woke and spoke. It was completely absurd. Meta Knight wasn’t at death’s door. He just
had a concussion. Dedede sniffed and fought back tears. He could practically hear Meta Knight's scolding that *tears are a sign of weakness*. It was the same scolding that always accompanied Meta Knight's wide, alarmed eyes. The poor man had never done well with tears. Meta Knight knew that it was wrong to beat someone for crying, but he didn't know what to do instead. No one had ever shown him.

*It isn't your fault.*

For a brief instant, Dedede thought his friend had awakened, but that voice wasn't entirely Meta Knight's. There was something softer and silkier about it. "I know, but I still hurt him, Galaxia," Dedede whispered. "What if I'd killed him?"

*It doesn't matter. He's alive, and you're alive. If it bothers you so much, you can spend the next three to four weeks carrying him bridal-style through your apartment and buying him lots of chocolate.*


*I know.*

The air shimmered. Galaxia appeared as a tall, imposing young woman. Her hair was sleek and long like Meta Knight's. It hung over her shoulders like a cloak of night. Her skin was likewise dark, broken by a starry cloud of ivory freckles over her nose and cheeks. Galaxia’s flowing gold dress rippled about her, as if blown by an unfeelable wind. Her eyes were like synthetic rubies, too bright and too pure to be real. *Perhaps, talking will help you. You needn't worry. Meta Knight won't wake.*

"Did Nightmare do that? I think he did that to me. Gave me a weird dream, too."

*What did you dream of?*

*"The Fountain of Dreams,"* Dedede replied quietly.

*Ah, yes, Galaxia said. The place where Dark Mind's ended. Bikaia and Nova combined their power to rend the fiend in half and sealed part of the monster’s soul away in another dimension.*
“Yeah, but why am I dreaming ‘bout that? This is all Nightmare’s fault, ain’t it? I knew he was in here,” Dedede scoffed.

Galaxia tilted her head. Her eyes gazed dreamily at something Dedede either couldn’t see or couldn’t comprehend. *Yes, I do wonder*, she murmured.

And although their conversation didn’t end there, that was all she would say about Dedede’s dream.
The first few days passed in a daze. Meta Knight lay propped up on every pillow they had and buried beneath a pile of comforters. Most of the time, his friends left him alone, religiously following the doctor’s orders to keep Meta Knight from anything remotely strenuous—including too much social activity, watching TV, texting, or reading. It was blessing in a way. Meta Knight knew what he had to look forward to and make up for.

Bandanna Dee hadn’t mentioned that Meta Knight had lied to him, and he hadn’t acted any differently. But Meta Knight was agonizing over it. He’d *lied*. Bandanna Dee was surely upset about it, and until they talked about it, Meta Knight couldn’t begin to fix things between them.

Delilah was probably furious that Meta Knight hadn’t let her in on the plan. She loathed Nightmare Nocturne more than anyone else.

Sectonia had sent Dame Garlude with Meta Knight’s phone, retrieved from Yin-Yarn’s floor, and a promise that there was a *very* long conversation in the future.

Meta Knight was grateful for his phone. He could dull the brightness down to ward off potential headaches and text everyone. Dedede and Bandanna Dee had resumed attending classes. It sounded far more exciting than be confined to bedrest.

His magic hadn’t recovered yet. He could feel it fluttering around him like wind on his bare skin, but he couldn’t call it forward. He couldn’t make it do anything. Only Galaxia’s powers responded for him, but she was being careful, allowing him her healing magic and little else. She didn’t want to overwhelm him. He was already overwhelmed. That was why he stood behind the sofa, his nails digging into the back of it. He’d run out of breath. If he waited just a few seconds, the pain in his ribs wouldn’t be so bad. It’d do little for the nausea and dizziness tangled in his throat, but if the past few days had taught Meta Knight anything, it was to appreciate small victories.

Bandanna Dee, dressed only in jeans and a black binder, was suddenly there, his hands fluttering by Meta Knight’s elbow. “May I?” he asked.

Meta Knight didn’t even bother raising a token protest. He let Bandanna Dee help him to the sofa, where he collapsed in a pile of pillows. The room spun, and the lights from the kitchen were too light. “Thank you,” Meta Knight said. “I’m sorry.”
Bandanna Dee pulled on the orange t-shirt he’d held draped over his arm. Meta Knight knew there would be more layers—probably a coat or a hoodie, if not another shirt—to better conceal Bandanna Dee’s still-noticeable breasts. “Yes, how dare you act like someone with a concussion?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight stifled his laugh. If there was anything he’d discovered very quickly about fractured ribs, it was that laughing and coughing were to be avoided at all costs. Bandanna Dee walked into the kitchen. Meta Knight frowned and tried to puzzle out why he’d left so quickly.

Oh.

No, there wasn’t anything for Meta Knight to puzzle out. It made perfect sense. He’d lied to Bandanna Dee about seeing Nightmare, so it was understandable that Meta Knight would be receiving the cold shoulder from his friend. Tit for tat.

The lights in the kitchen flipped off, and Bandanna Dee padded back into the living room. He offered Meta Knight a glass of water and two pills. “You’re late for your medicine,” Bandanna Dee said.

Meta Knight obediently took them, even if tilting his head back to drink water made him feel sick. Bandanna Dee beckoned for the glass and set it on the coffee table once Meta Knight was finished. Maybe he wasn’t receiving the cold shoulder treatment. Maybe Meta Knight had misread the situation. “I lied to you, Dee.”

Bandanna Dee pulled a green scarf from the side of the sofa. Meta Knight craned his neck and saw that Bandanna Dee had dropped his things there. “You don’t remember talking about this already?” Bandanna Dee asked, adjusting his scarf until it looped around his neck and covered his chest.

Bandanna Dee's calf-length beige coat was next. Meta Knight sighed. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not mad,” Bandanna Dee said. “I’m just happy I have you and Dedede back. You’re all I have.”

“And you’re always gonna have us!” Dedede declared, plopping onto the sofa beside Meta Knight. “Through thick and thin and whatever else comes our way!”
A scratch ran down the side of Dedede’s cheek, and black, ugly stitches were visible beneath his bangs. Smaller scrapes dotted Dedede’s neck and disappeared beneath the collar of his t-shirt. Damage done from a shattered window. Meta Knight averted his gaze and bit the inside of his cheek.

“I know,” Bandanna Dee said. “Thank you. Was that Fae on the phone?”

“Yeah! She’s gonna come by this evening,” Dedede said. “Or—I mean, maybe not. I dunno. We’ve been tossing around ideas. Maybe I’ll just go over to her place.

“There’s nothing wrong with our apartment,” Meta Knight replied.

“Uh, no. ‘Course not,” Dedede said, his voice hiding nothing.

“It’s me, isn’t it?” Meta Knight asked.

“It’s just you ain’t s’posed to be having a buncha social interaction,” Dedede said. “Didn’t you read the sheet the doctor gave you?”

It was hard to miss. Dedede had brought home about thirty “What to Do after a Concussion” brochures and set them all over the place. Meta Knight couldn’t even go to the bathroom without seeing one taped to the bathroom door or resting on a table. “I’m fine,” Meta Knight replied.

“Yeah, right,” Dedede said. “Meta, y’know I love you dearly, but you look like crap. The lack of sleep you’re getting ain’t escaped my notice either. And don’t think I didn’t see that Dee had to help you to the sofa. You ain’t fine.”

Meta Knight shot Dedede a death glare, which his lord dismissed with a snort and an overly dramatic roll of his eyes.

“What Lord Tactless means,” Bandanna Dee said, “Is that we’re both worried about you and want you to be comfortable.”

“Yeah, and you gotta tendency to push yourself too hard,” Dedede said. “I’m kinda surprised you
Meta Knight kept his face carefully composed. It hadn’t really been a tornado. He’d just wanted to see if he could call the wind to himself.

I told you it was a bad idea.

Of course, Galaxia had. He should’ve listened. Even when she’d warned him, Meta Knight knew she was right. But he just felt so profoundly disconnected from everything. He was used to feeling powerful with Galaxia’s fire and wind and the thin pulse of darkness between dimensions, and without it, he felt like some integral part of himself was missing. Logically, he knew that he felt like any non-magical person always felt, but it just wasn’t…it wasn’t right somehow.

“But if you wanna see Fae, we could invite her over for a bit,” Dedede said. “I mean, I’m sure she’d been worried, too. Maybe a quiet thing? We’ll order some pizza and watch a movie—wait. You ain’t s’posed to be doing that either. Or texting, which reminds me—”

“For Nova’s sake, I’m not four! I can take care of myself! You don’t have to mother hen me,” Meta Knight snapped.

“I know you aren’t four,” Dedede said. “I also know that you’re hurt and that a concussion ain’t nothing to mess around with. And I know that one of the symptoms of post-concussion syndrome can be irritability, so you can chew my head off all you like. I ain’t gonna get mad.”

“I hate you.”

“Love you, too, sugar cakes!” Dedede declared, smiling broadly.

To add insult to injury, Dedede leaned over and rubbed his cheek against Meta Knight’s bare shoulder. “I love my dearest Mety Knighty so much,” Dedede said, batting his eyelashes.

Up close, Dedede’s injuries looked even worse. “Aren’t you going to be late?” Meta Knight muttered.
“Not yet,” Bandanna Dee said. “Besides, I’m the only one with a class. Dedede is going to drop me off on his way to pick up Fae, so he can drop her by her hotel. Are you still going to come for art history?”

“Yes,” Dedede said, sitting upright. “Professor Drawcia sent me an email asking if I was all right. She was really worried, so I think I should. I told her I would.”

“Tell her that I won’t be in class?” Meta Knight asked.

“I already emailed all your professors,” Dedede said. “You told me to.”

When?

“I set an alarm on the kitchen timer, so you know when to take your meds next,” Bandanna Dee said abruptly.

Right. Because Meta Knight couldn’t remember anything. “I don’t suppose your mother already gave me a lecture, and I just don’t remember?” Meta Knight asked.

Maybe if Meta Knight made a joke of it, he could forget how much not remembering things terrified him.

“No, she ain’t been over at all, actually. We’ve been going over to her apartments since she’s still hosting Fluff there. She took that doctor’s list very seriously,” Dedede said, “But she ain’t mad at you; y’know. She’s just mad at your dad.”

Meta Knight would prefer she be angry. The duchess frightened him because Meta Knight had never seen her legitimately angry. Offended? Sure. Frustrated? Absolutely. But never angry. Never the sort of explosive anger that Nightmare could unleash. The few times Meta Knight had disappointed Delilah, he’d always left feeling vaguely like he’d received mercy he didn’t deserve. Some small part of him wondered if she was doing it on purpose, collecting his mistakes, so she could demand pay-back all at once.

How absurd. Dedede’s mother would never hurt him. He knew that and didn’t know it in the same way that he loved and didn’t love his terribly harsh, sometimes strangely doting father.
“We’re all mad at your father,” Bandanna Dee added. “Are you going through with that bargain you made with him?”

“He cain’t,” Dedede argued. “Who knows what that son of a scarfy will wanna make him do?”

“I think I will decide that when the time comes,” Meta Knight retorted. “I’ll cover my bases.”

Dedede furrowed his brow. “Well, I ain’t gonna argue with someone that’s got a concussion,” he said, “Cause you don’t need to be doing that.”

“Excuse—”

“But I think it’s pretty messed up that Nightmare sent you to save me. He coulda done it in five seconds with his powers,” Dedede said.

“He didn’t have to rescue you at all.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he just did it from the goodness of his black, rotted-out heart!” Dedede exclaimed. “For Nova’s sake, Meta, don’t you wonder what he’s getting outta this? You cain’t think he got involved for you?”

Dedede’s voice hurt. “Maybe he’s trying to be a better person,” Meta Knight said.

“We wish he would,” Bandanna Dee cut in. “We’d like nothing better.”

“But until we see some proof of that we gotta be careful,” Dedede said. “I mean, Meta, I almost—I almost killed you.”

Dedede felt guilty. Meta Knight stared, trying to process that. He hadn’t considered that Dedede might feel…guilt. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” Meta Knight said. “You were being controlled. That wasn’t you.”
“That doesn’t mean you didn’t get hurt,” Dedede said, reaching for his backpack.

Dedede felt **guilty**, and Meta Knight had been such a brat about it. Bandanna Dee heaved his backpack over his shoulder. “I’m going to have spinal problems by the time I’m thirty,” he said, clearly attempting to lighten the mood. “I hate textbooks.”

“Join the club,” Dedede said, rising. “You gonna be okay walking everywhere? I gotta pick up Fae, but I can bring you back to the apartment after art history.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Bandanna Dee grabbed the keys off the table. “Do you guys want a moment?”

The last thing Meta Knight wanted was a heart-to-heart. Maybe he should’ve taken that doctor’s list more seriously. He did feel absolutely exhausted. “I think we’re good,” Meta Knight replied. “Have fun in class. I’ll be on the sofa. Dying.”

“Make sure he don’t do nothing bad, Galaxia!” Dedede stage-whispered.

“I don’t really hate you, Dedede,” Meta Knight said.


Meta Knight smiled and adjusted himself on the pillows. He waited until his friends left before closing his eyes in a vain attempt to find sleep. As miserable as he was, though, he was really quite lucky to have them. If anyone had told sixteen-year-old Meta Knight that he’d have friends who he loved so much, he wouldn’t have believed them, but Meta Knight supposed, this was one instance where he was content to be proven wrong.

Dedede sat on a bench in Dreamland’s largest airport. Idly, he flipped through the magazine he’d snagged from the giftshop. It’d caught his attention because Fae, herself, graced the cover. She smiled in that dazed, soft manner she always did. Her violet eyes were wide and sparkled with mischief beneath her glasses. Her famously long, dark hair—that Dedede had always adored—was intricately coiled on her head in a fashion that would’ve made Bandanna Dee very happy. Fae’s
wore a shimmering white dress, so radiant that it nearly matched the delicate, dragonfly-like wings emerging from her back. She was as stunning as usual. Unfortunately, the article featuring her was much less stunning.

Dedede furrowed his brow and texted Meta Knight with his free hand. *U awake?*

The reply came almost instantly. *Yes. Why?*

Dedede smirked. Poor Meta Knight must be so bored. *U aint supposed 2 b texting.*

*Duck you.*

Dedede roared in laughter and received an annoyed glower from a middle-aged man on the next bench. *autocorrect monster get u mety knighty?*

*…yes.*

*Wanna read something awful?*

Dedede didn’t wait for a response. He snapped a photo of the offending article and texted it with his question.

*Fae Queen’s doll-like face offers a girlish smile. Her warm, almond eyes widen. She is as fragile as a cherry blossom caught in a summer’s monsoon. It is difficult to believe that this young girl, a successful designer, has the appearance and mannerisms of a pixie dream. I offer her my arm and feel a wash of intense protectiveness as she docilely accepts my offer of companionship. She is like a mountain-flower, clad in fine silk and without the least edge of steel.*

Mere seconds passed, broken by loud chatter and the announcements for landing and departing planes. One of them was Fae’s. Dedede’s phone chimed.

*Cherry blossom? Really? Did the writer just Google ‘things from Ripple Star’ and force them in all his metaphors?*
Probably. No clue where he gets the idea she aint got a edge of steel

From his own anus, probably.

Dedede snorted. lol. Meta that’s surprisingly vulgar 4 u

I’m not in a forgiving mood at the moment.

No, Dedede reflected, Meta Knight probably wasn’t. He’d been at the apartment for three days and spent most of the time in bed, interspersed with trips to the kitchen for his pain meds. It was frightening in a way, having Meta Knight bed-bound. Dedede had spent hours researching concussions, and afterward, he’d wished he hadn’t. Instead, he’d learned that symptoms from concussions could appear weeks later. Then, he’d learned about epidural hematoma. After a few more hours, he’d half-convinced himself that Meta Knight would wake up one day with a completely different personality, no memory of anything that had ever happened to him, and no control over his incredibly potent magical powers. It’d be Dedede’s fault, too. He might’ve been under Yin-Yarn’s control, but he’d still been the one to make Meta Knight crack his skull against the tile.

Dedede remembered it with a cruel sort of clarity. He remembered thinking about how pleased Yin-Yarn, his wonderful master, would be if he succeeded in defeating or incapacitating his quarry. He remembered being thrilled at Meta Knight on the floor and the feeble gasping noise he’d made. Dedede saw that often in his nightmares, and he’d had many of them lately.

Dedede hadn’t told his friends. When Meta Knight had asked, Dedede had replied that he didn’t remember any of it. Of course, there were police and A.M.B.E.R. reports verifying that Dedede remembered all too clearly, but Meta Knight hadn’t looked at any. He hadn’t had the energy. But why bother telling Meta Knight and Bandanna Dee? Dedede reasoned it was better that they didn’t know. Meta Knight would worry if he knew Dedede remembered, and Meta Knight didn’t need another thing to worry about.

Her flight landed, Dedede texted. Im gonna get her settled and go 2 class. Unless u want me to come home? U b ok?

I’ll be fine.
Stubborn. It was strange to think that Dedede had once hated Meta Knight for that exact quality. Dedede had mistaken it for frigidity and arrogance, and he’d decided—with all the wisdom of an entitled, selfish nobleman—that Meta Knight was due for a serious downfall. But Dedede could never bring himself to do more than be a mild nuisance. When Meta Knight showed up in Dedede’s palatial residence, wet and injured, stared Dedede down in front of his very high-born friends, and said, *you owe me. You’d better help me,* Dedede had realized that frosty demeanor was something else entirely. It was an unmatched tenacity, and Dedede, who’d never had anyone besides his mom demand anything of him, had found it wholly admirable.

*I swear 2 Nova youd say u were fine on ur deathbed,* Dedede retorted, adding a smiley face.

*We’ll find out soon. Your mother-hen tendencies are going to *put* me in an early grave.*

*U aint seen nothing til my mom gets ahold of u*

There was a pause in the conversation. Dedede frowned. They’d already had this conversation, but Meta Knight likely needed more reassurance. *She aint mad at u,* Dedede texted.

*She’s upset, though. Isn’t she?*

*Yeah cuz u didnt let her n on the plan BUT she’ll get over it she’s more worried than anything.*

*Worried?*

*U got hurt. y wouldn’t she?*

Dedede already knew the answer. Nightmare punished even the smallest offense, so—to Meta Knight—harsh and fast retaliation was to be expected. Welcomed even. Because while Nightmare’s punishments were horrible, the man didn’t hold grudges. He disciplined and moved on.

*She hates Father, and I conspired with him. I didn’t even tell her. She has every right to be angry.*

*Shes mad at your dad not u. what he did wasnt right*
Dedede saw Fae and hastily typed a quick message to let Meta Knight know. Satisfied, Dedede slipped his phone into his jeans pocket. He abandoned the offending magazine on his bench and strode over to her. Fae smiled and wrapped her arms around Dedede’s neck. She’d braided her long, dark hair and placed a sparkling gold tiara on her head. She looked like a fairy queen, as befitting of someone with her name. “Hello, Dedede,” she said. “Oh, look at your poor face.”

Fae rubbed a gentle thumb over a scratch on Dedede’s cheek. “Yeah, I’m trying on the ruggedly handsome look,” Dedede said, adding a sly wink. “How’s it look?”

Fae’s glasses caught the lights of the airport as she tilted her head; it made her dark, violet eyes shimmer. “Very good,” Fae replied. “It suits you. How’s Meta Knight?”

“Awful,” Dedede said, taking Fae’s suitcase and rolling it behind him, “And it’s worse ‘cause he cain’t access his magic. Totally depleted it.”

Fae took Dedede’s free arm and linked it with hers. “Poor thing,” Fae said. “He must feel so exhausted.”

Dedede sighed. “Yeah, he is.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Fae said.

“You’re too perceptive for your own good. You and Dee.”

Fae smiled and pushed open the doors to the airport, laughing when the autumn wind caressed her and caused her red and white skirts to billow around her. “I think I really might be sometimes.”

Because she’d caught all the subtle signs that Dedede’s affections were slowly drifting elsewhere. “I should’ve gave you more attention,” Dedede said. “It was all my fault. I know I ain’t that mature, but I can admit that.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You just fell out of love with me. It was fun while it lasted, and I’m infinitely grateful to have you as my friend. You haven’t ruined all men for me or anything like that.”
“Yeah.”

There was an awkward silence. Dedede wondered if he ought to further elaborate, but there didn’t seem much more to say. He’d already talked about this several times with Fae. “Anyway, I saw an ad for your winter line. Fairy perfect, huh?” Dedede said hurriedly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What a subtle change in topic,” Fae said.

“I thought so.”

Fae laughed. “I liked the pun. It makes up for the atrocious interview accompanying the reveal.”

“The one where you’re a delicate cherry blossom?”

Fae groaned. “You’ve read it, too? Evidently, the man interviewing me has a habit of doing that. He wrote a piece on a Halcandran dancer and called her an exotic chocolate treat that would be delicious to eat.”

“What a creep,” Dedede said. “You gonna do something about it?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Fae replied. “A few newspapers have already noted how bad it is, so it wouldn’t be entirely unwarranted if I did something.”

“Well, I was gonna have you sign it, but I figure you’d prefer I get something better.”

“Definitely. But I’d have signed it anyway. Anything for you. I’m just so happy you’re safely home. I wanted to come sooner and help with the search, but I just—”

“I know you were busy. Weren’t nothing you coulda done anyway,” Dedede replied. “You’d have just been worrying like everyone else.”
“Yes, perhaps.”

Her smile faltered, and she squeezed Dedede’s hand, as if reassuring herself that he was still there. Their relationship hadn’t ended on bad terms. No one had been unfaithful. Until the end, Dedede had been the most doting, wonderful boyfriend he could be. Fae hadn’t blamed him for falling in love with someone else. They’d talked it over like adults, trying to figure out if there might be a solution. Still, no matter how amicable their break-up, Dedede knew the chances of them becoming boyfriend and girlfriend again were slim. That was fine. Fae Queen of Ripple Star was still his dear friend, and as Dedede squeezed her hand in response, he’d never felt closer to her.

Fluff had expected a royal summons. While he appreciated Duchess Delilah’s offer and knew that she might have some legitimately kind-hearted reason for allowing the disinherited Prince of Patchland to stay in her apartments, Fluff also recognized the situation for what it was—an opportunity to keep a renegade prince under close, royal supervision. After this, Alera wouldn’t be taking any chances. He’d be lucky if she didn’t try to paint him as delusional and imprison him in Patchland Castle. For what it was worth, Duchess Delilah seemed refreshingly blunt and independent, disconnected from the more sinister courtly machinations. It might be a ruse, although her sense of honor and love for her son both, at least, seemed sincere.

When Dame Garlude came with the royal summons, Delilah received them, too. They were led to a parlor, where Nightmare Nocturne lounged across a rose-embroidered sofa. The wizard stood, and for the first time, Fluff realized where Dedede had gotten his considerable height. The duchess was nearly eye-level with Nightmare, while Fluff, even in heeled boots barely reached the wizard’s chest. “Delilah,” Nightmare greeted. “How’s the search for a husband going? I see you’ve taken an interest in very young men of the late. Perhaps, you ought to choose a different quarry. I believe you sold your beachfront estate last month? Clearly, you aren’t having much success.”

Well, there was certainly no question about how they felt about one another. “I found the additional house to be kinda extravagant,” Delilah replied. “Thank you for your concern, Nightmare. How’s your search for compassion and common decency going?”

“Compassion is for the weak of heart, Delilah,” Nightmare said pleasantly. “I’m surprised that a woman in politics would believe otherwise. But then, your morals always have been your undoing. Even now, you can’t help but take in strays. First, it was Meta Knight. Now it’s the disgraced Lady Sailor.”

They shook hands like they were in a competition to break one another’s fingers. “I wouldn’t have to take them in if all these parents would quit treating their kids as disposable.” Nightmare made to
take his hand back, but the duchess wouldn’t let him. “And—if you’ll excuse the language—it’s very fucked up that Nightmare Nocturne, the most powerful wizard in Dreamland, thinks it’s okay to send his unarmed son after a dangerous, renegade sorcerer! I’d think a man with your vast powers would be capable of defeating Yin-Yarn real easy!”

Abruptly, Delilah dropped Nightmare’s hand and stormed to the sofa. Fluff followed in her wake. Maybe she wouldn’t be bad to have as an ally. At any rate, she clearly had no intention of bending knee to Nightmare Nocturne, which was…impressive, really. Fluff sat beside her, while Nightmare took the sofa across from them.

“Fluff,” Nightmare said, almost as an afterthought.

“Nocturne.”

Nightmare tilted his chin up and rolled his shoulders back. “It’s my Lord, actually.”

He reminded Fluff of Meta Knight.

“It’s a bought title,” Delilah said. “It don’t take much effort to wave some money around.”

“At least, I have the money to wave around,” Nightmare retorted. “I’m not some high-titled rule, surviving on old prestige.”

“Don’t make you no less of an ass,” Delilah countered.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining. You have your child back, do you not?” Nightmare asked.


Everyone stood, offering respectful bows as Sectonia entered and seated herself in the empty chair. She held something—a magazine or a stack of papers—rolled up in her hand. “Good afternoon,” Sectonia said. “I’ll be brief, as I’m sure some of you are very busy.”
“That would be lovely,” Nightmare replied. “I have a company to run.

“I’m aware,” Sectonia said, offering nothing but a sharp smile.

“So Alera’s sending you to do her dirty work?” Delilah asked.

“How crudely put. Mother is, indeed, quite unhappy with this whole affair,” Sectonia said.

“Understandably so,” Nightmare replied. “This rumor about the Patchlandic monarchy is absolutely absurd.

“Absurd?” Fluff asked.

“It was my understanding that you’ve no proof of this alleged conspiracy,” Nightmare said, “But correct me if I’m wrong.”

“I know what my father was like,” Fluff said carefully. He didn’t want to show his hand to any of them—especially before he’d contacted Dom Woole, Fluff’s mentor and the head of Patchland’s secret intelligence network. “And he would’ve never given Patchland to Dreamland.”

“Maybe you simply didn’t know him as well as you thought,” Nightmare countered.

“He had suspicions and wanted to investigate,” Delilah said. “That ain’t against the law. Y’know what is against the law? Withholding information from the Agency of Magical Beings and Enchanted Relics. And reckless endangerment. I ain’t a lawyer, but I’m pretty sure knocking out your kid and dropping them in the house of a dangerous sorcerer qualifies.”

“Based on what? The testimony of a disenfranchised royal—who would have much to gain from such a trial and, thereby, not provide a reliable perspective—and a boy who can’t even remember what happened?”

“Then, I’ll take you to court in my home country,” Fluff said, “For endangering my royal person.
You willingly left me with Yin-Yarn.”

“With all due respect, you’re no longer a royal person,” Nightmare replied.

“This is neither here nor there,” Sectonia replied, breaking her silence. “Rather, I’d like to know which of you gave this story to the press.”

“The press?” Fluff asked.


The princess placed the paper on the table between them. QUEEN ALERA MIND-CONTROLLED EX-KING OF PATCHLAND, in all caps, blared from the front page. Beneath the title was a picture of Queen Alera and one of Fluff’s own father. Fluff’s stomach twisted as he leaned forward to read.

According to an anonymous source, the late King Woole of Patchland, who abolished the Patchlandic monarchy and agreed to annexation to the Kingdom of Dreamland, acted under the control of a sorcerer and former A.M.B.E.R. agent named Yin-Yarn, acting under the orders of Queen Alera.

Fluff could sense everyone’s gazes on him. Sectonia’s face was carefully composed and revealed nothing. “I didn’t,” Fluff said. “When have I had the opportunity to?”

“I’ll determine if you’ve had the opportunity, per my mother’s orders,” Sectonia replied. “We’re launching a full investigation into this since there are—evidently—classified A.M.B.E.R. documents referenced in this story. They’re due to be released soon, and legally, we can do nothing to prevent this.”

“But—but they’d verify my story,” Fluff said. “You know you’ve done this.”

Sectonia’s face still revealed nothing.

“And you think one of us is involved?” Nightmare asked. “I’ll have my lawyers get in touch with
“you. I refuse to submit myself to your interrogation when I’m sure you’d be all too happy to pin this mess on me.”

“I expected as much,” Sectonia replied. “You’d best call them quickly. By your own omission, we know the information you provided Meta Knight was illegally obtained.”

“And he told you that, did he? Or did you have dear Taranza read his mind and blatantly invade my injured child’s privacy?”

“Because you care so much about Meta Knight’s privacy,” Delilah muttered under her breath.

“The latter,” Sectonia replied coolly. “That’s why both Meta Knight and Dedede are being left out of the investigation at the moment.”

“At the moment,” Delilah said.

“Assuming a certain level of cooperation,” Sectonia said. “Mother disagrees, but I think we need only bother them as a last resort.”

Delilah nodded. “Do you believe, Your Royal Highness, that I’m concerned about anything besides the two injured and traumatized boys in my care? I’ll cooperate. You can confiscate my phone, my computer. Check my emails, texts, and calls. Check my apartments, if you like. Have your boyfriend dig around inside my thoughts. I have nothing to hide. If there is truth in what Fluff says, it is terrible and immoral, and I am deeply disappointed in the Queen. If it is true, I will fight for Patchland’s freedom. However, this is not my doing. I’ll vouch for Fluff as well; he’s been my guest for the past few days, as I’m sure the Queen’s Guard can attest to,” Delilah said.

“Then, I’ll launch an investigation immediately. If you’ve nothing to hide, it should proceed very quickly,” Sectonia replied. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“How noble,” Nightmare said. “You’ve nothing to lose, though. I’m not going to let your ineffectual A.M.B.E.R. agents snoop around my company and me. If you want to play dirty, Your Royal Highness, I’ll gladly stoop to your level. You messed with my child.”

“You don’t care about him anyway,” Sectonia replied flippantly. “At any rate, you’re dismissed. Fluff, you won’t be allowed to leave the grounds, unfortunately. Delilah, expect A.M.B.E.R. to be
at your door sometime in the evening. Nocturne, I’ll be in touch.”

“I’m sure you will be,” Nightmare replied.

The wizard vanished without even waiting for a proper dismissal. “How rude,” Sectonia commented, rising. “Garlude will escort you back to the Duchess’s apartments. I…I do hope Dedede and Meta Knight are doing well, Delilah.”

The princess paused, her composed mask dropping briefly and making way for soft concern. “And I do apologize, Fluff, if your story proves to be true. For what it’s worth.”

Fluff blinked, taken aback. Before anyone could say much else, Sectonia left, striding briskly out. “Well, that was interesting,” Delilah said after a moment. “Hope she makes Nocturne’s life hard for a while.”

“I didn’t leak the story,” Fluff said.

“I know. She prolly knows, too. I’d wager Sectonia already knows who put the story out, but Alera’s throwing a fit,” Delilah said, “So Sectonia’s gotta do something.”

“Who do you think did it, then?” Fluff asked.

“If I had to guess?” Delilah asked.

Fluff nodded. “Your best guess.”

“Sectonia did.”

It was cold, and it would take too much effort to reach the comforter draped at the opposite end of the sofa. Meta Knight waited, silently fuming. He just wanted a little of Galaxia’s sacred fire. “I’m
not going to set the curtains ablaze,” Meta Knight complained.

Meta Knight adjusted the pile of pillows, trying to accommodate his fractured ribs, which still ached badly. *My fire takes a good deal of energy to maintain,* Galaxia replied. *I don’t want to hurt you more.*

“I don’t think it’s possible to hurt more than this,” Meta Knight replied.

He knew, however, that she wasn’t about to change her stance. Meta Knight steeled himself and reached across the sofa, quickly grabbing the comforter, as if in some vain hope that—if he moved quickly enough—he could avoid the fire-sharp jolts of pain and the dull ache of nausea that accompanied any movement. He hissed in pain and didn’t bother to smother the sharp whine that came from his throat; no one would hear him save Galaxia.

Meta Knight settled himself again, getting as comfortable as possible. It would be wonderful if he didn’t have to move for several more hours. Yes. He closed his eyes and sighed. Dedede and Bandanna Dee would be in art history, so he had a good hour before anyone would be back.

Someone was knocking on the door. If it wouldn’t have hurt his ribs, Meta Knight probably would’ve screamed. Instead, he stood and walked slowly. The room tilted at awkward angles, and he forced back the bile in his throat. He opened the door. Kirby stood there, rocking back on his heels. Oh, Nova’s grace. It had to be the most excitable, energetic person in Pop Star, didn’t it? Meta Knight clenched the door frame and tried to dredge up his manners. “Hello, Kirby. Shouldn’t you be in class?” Meta Knight asked.

“I know. I—I kind of skipped class. I know it’s bad to lie, but I really wanted to talk to you. Alone. Sorry. That sounds creepy, doesn’t it?”

The light outside drove into Meta Knight’s skull like nails. He turned his head towards the inside of the apartment, where the light was dimmer. His stomach lurch. “Are you okay?” Kirby asked.

“Shut the door behind you.”

Meta Knight turned away and walked into the kitchen; it was closer than the bathroom. He pulled out the trashcan and tried to gather his hair back with his free hand. “Oh!” Kirby exclaimed.
Kirby fluttered around awkwardly, making soft, reassuring—and ultimately useless—noises, while Meta Knight threw up. This was so humiliating. He swore under his breath and stood there for several seconds, trying to fight against the remaining nausea. “I can throw it out,” Kirby said.

“I can do it.”

No, he couldn’t.

“I really hate this,” Meta Knight said. “Please, that’d be very helpful.”

Kirby marched out the door with the entire trashcan; he didn’t even bother to pull the bag out. Meta Knight stared at the kitchen counter. Why did he have to be so weak? He grabbed a glass of water and thought fleetingly of throwing the glass into a wall. His mouth tasted of iron and potassium bicarbonate until he washed it away. By the time Meta Knight returned to the sofa and rearranged the pillows, Kirby had returned with the empty trashcan.

“I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said. “That was very…disgusting.”

Kirby took the chair across from him. “How are you? I mean, sick, obviously. But…”

“Tired. Sore,” Meta Knight said. “Vaguely unbalanced. I don’t think my magic is really recovered yet.”

Meta Knight flicked his wrist. Nothing happened. “I can’t even call the wind. I have trouble making it obey me sometimes, but usually, I can at least feel it. Nothing, though.”

“Why sometimes?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight thought about lying; it seemed like it’d take too much effort. “There are certain people—no, really just one person—who I have difficulty performing magic in the presence of.”

“Oh. Like nerves?”
“Something like that. What did you need?”

Kirby gulped and fidgeted with his hands. “This is my fault,” Kirby said. “I—I didn’t think he’d make you do it. I just wanted to save Dedede and make everything okay again!”

*That* wasn’t where Meta Knight thought this conversation was going. “What are you talking about?” Meta Knight asked.

He had an inkling of an idea, but he didn’t have any idea what Kirby’s motive might be. Kirby blinked back tears. Nova’s grace, what would he do if Kirby began crying? Head it off before he could start. Yes. “Don’t cry,” Meta Knight said. “You don’t want to look weak.”

Meta Knight realized immediately how badly constructed that argument was. *He* had just vomited in a trashcan. He didn’t look strong; Meta Knight hoped Kirby wouldn’t mention that. “You’re my friend. If I can’t be weak in front of my friends…” Kirby trailed off and lowered his head. “You *were* my friend. We can’t be friends anymore. I’m so sorry, Meta Knight.”

He’d made it worse. Nova, why?

*Try reassuring him,* Galaxia offered. *Give him reasons for why it isn’t his fault.*

“I mean, you don’t have any reason to cry. You didn’t abduct Dedede and concoct some wild plan of killing our art professor. And some conspiracy involving Patchland,” Meta Knight said, waving a vague hand.

“Didn’t you wonder why Nightmare knew where Dedede was?”

No, because Nightmare—despite what he said—probably spied on Meta Knight all the time. If by some miracle Nightmare *wasn’t* spying, he’d probably read it in the paper or seen it on the evening news; the man had always followed politics. Regardless, he’d likely known about Dedede’s disappearance for weeks. “You told him?” Meta Knight guessed.

Kirby nodded haltingly. “I—I thought he would help, but I didn’t…I thought he’d magic it somehow! I didn’t think he’d send you in to get all beat up! I swear I didn’t, Meta Knight!”
Kirby was comfortable enough with Nightmare to ask favors from him, yet he, somehow, seemed legitimately distraught about the outcome. Meta Knight felt a spark of doubt and wondered if Kirby was a remarkable actor, but Galaxia believed Kirby’s sincerity.

With a slight nod, Meta Knight acknowledged her feelings. Galaxia was better versed in matters of the heart than Meta Knight was. “Why would you go to him of all people?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby gulped and picked at the sofa. “He—he’s my dad.”

No. No, this couldn’t be real. This couldn’t be possible. The world seemed to stop around that one sentence, that one sentence that couldn’t possibly be true. Surely, Meta Knight had misheard. “Sorry. What did you say? I know it can’t be what I think you said.”

“He’s my dad!” Kirby said, too loudly.

Dad. That couldn’t be right. Nightmare would never let anyone call him dad. It was too informal. No, surely, Meta Knight was just concussed and had a migraine, and that must be why he kept mishearing things. “Dad? Nightmare Nocturne is your father?” Meta Knight asked.

Tell Kirby? Don’t tell Kirby? “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but can you imagine how people react when they learn—”

No, that couldn’t be true. Hadn’t Drawcia said they looked a bit alike?

“You can’t be his child,” Meta Knight said.

Didn’t Kirby’s descriptions of his father as a distant, cold figure match Meta Knight’s? Didn’t Meta Knight’s own uneasiness of affection, carefully learned from his father’s lessons, blend so nicely with Kirby’s concerns about his supposed friends hating him?

“He would’ve told me,” Meta Knight said.

Meta Knight felt a pang in his chest. Because Nightmare was always so honest, wasn’t he?
“I think I know who my dad is,” Kirby said, his voice more bewildered than offended.

“But that…that can’t be right. I don’t understand. His son? No, you—prove it. No, that’s—that’s ridiculous. I can call him. You know that, right?”

“Prove it? You’ll call him? Why do you have his number? I can call him,” Kirby said. “You’re acting really weird.”

Tell Kirby? Don’t tell Kirby? Hadn’t Meta Knight always wanted a family? When he met Dedede, hadn’t he been envious because Dedede had a mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins? Granted, Meta Knight had soon discovered that Delilah was the black sheep of her family, who distanced themselves from her and her son, but it’d been a family. A family like normal people had. And this was Meta Knight’s chance, wasn’t it? To have someone besides Father. To have someone who shared his blood and someone who might—just might—understand how Father was. How hard it was to love Nightmare and hate Nightmare, who was so wonderful and so terrible. Someone who could help Meta Knight sort out all his contradictory feelings.

Meta Knight loved Dedede dearly, but he couldn’t really understand. Dedede’s view of the world was very black and white when it came to things like abuse. Nightmare had always been a monster in his mind, and—while Dedede tried so hard to understand—Meta Knight knew that his love towards his father both frustrated and disappointed Dedede.

Bandanna Dee might understand. His parents had rejected him, but Meta Knight had never broached the topic. It was still too raw and painful for Bandanna Dee, who saw his parents and siblings act as if he’d never existed. They smiled at cameras and dodged questions, refusing even to acknowledge why they’d disowned their son. They wouldn’t even acknowledge they’d had another son.

But maybe Kirby would understand.

Kirby had already dialed Nightmare’s number and put him on speaker. “Hello, Kirby,” Meta Knight’s father—their father?—said. “Is this important, child? I’m quite busy today.”

Kirby raised an eyebrow and looked at Meta Knight. “Sorry, Dad,” Kirby said. “I…I…um, one of my friends didn’t believe I was actually—”
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Meta Knight asked, raising his voice.

There was a long pause. “I really think this is a conversation we ought to have in person, Meta Knight, although—if I’m not mistaken—you’re supposed to be limiting your social interaction for the time being. You shouldn’t be having people over.” Even over the phone, there was no mistaking the frostiness and warning in Nightmare’s voice.

More than anything, Meta Knight didn’t want Nightmare to visit. “Why do you know Meta Knight has a concussion?” Kirby asked.

“Oh, he hasn’t told you, has he?” Nightmare asked. “Did he intend to, I wonder?”

Meta Knight clenched his jaw. “I’m in the middle of that,” he said. “When did you intend on telling him, Father?”

“I couldn’t find a good time,” Nightmare drawled. “I’d hoped to get the two of you together, but that proved difficult as you’re so determined to be my estranged, wayward son. Must you really shun all my affection, Meta Knight?”

There was a spark of guilt for how rude he’d been in the hospital. Nightmare had been nice. Concerned even. Meta Knight swallowed around the lump in his throat, before he managed to regain some of his steel. No, this wasn’t his fault. Nightmare had been the cause of this. He had withheld information first. He had wanted to turn it into a game instead of letting Meta Knight—and Kirby—know they were siblings. He had sent Meta Knight after Dedede instead of doing the work himself. He had no right to turn this all on Meta Knight.

Yet a very small part of Meta Knight wondered if he wasn’t at least part of the reason for Father’s maltreatment. It was true that Meta Knight made a habit of dismissing any kindness Nightmare offered, but wasn’t it justified? Nightmare offered so little. How was Meta Knight supposed to know when his father was being sincere?

Kirby screamed and dropped his phone. Meta Knight winced. “Please, don’t do that—”

Kirby scrambled for his phone, nearly dropping it again. “You! You’re—you’re Nightmare’s son? Th—that means you’re my brother! I’m related to you!”

Nightmare’s words did nothing to quell Kirby’s enthusiasm. “Brother,” Kirby said, sounding enchanted. “My brother. We’re related! I have an older brother.”

Meta Knight froze, unsure what to say or do when Kirby kept repeating that awful word like some sort of magic spell. It was as if he thought repeating the word brother enough could make it more real. Meta Knight didn’t want it to be real. Or did he?

“Half-brother,” Nightmare insisted. “He’s not really that close to you. Isn’t that right, Meta Knight?”

Father wanted him to agree. Meta Knight stared at the phone and at Kirby’s bright smile, unfazed by Nightmare’s words. Why was Nightmare so—afraid? Concerned? Insistent—about this? Kirby was happy that Meta Knight was his half-brother. The half part didn’t even matter. “It’s very close,” Meta Knight said. “We have so much to talk about.”

Kirby looked at Meta Knight like he’d announced that St. Knight’s Day was going to be every day for the rest of their lives. “I’ll tell you all about it later, Dad!” Kirby chirped. “Love you!”

“I…love you, too,” Nightmare said. He sounded irritated.

Kirby tossed his phone onto the table and covered his mouth with his hands, likely trying to stifle his laughter. “Brother!” he exclaimed.

“Apparently.”

Kirby furrowed his brow and lowered his hands, instead picking at the armrests of his chair. “But if we have the same dad…that means all the things you said about your dad…I love Dad, but…”

Of course, he did. Meta Knight loved him, too. “He—he didn’t see you often,” Meta Knight said, trying to find a tactful approach. “Did he…upset you when he did visit?”

“No. He was always really nice,” Kirby said, “Like you’d expect your dad to be.”
“He didn’t…” Meta Knight trailed off.

_He didn’t throw you into walls or strangle you or use his magic to hurt you or tell you that you could never have friends or family or that you were his biggest disappointment and should just leave—_

“Hit you or anything?” Meta Knight asked.

“No. D-does he hit you?” Kirby asked.

Nightmare hadn’t? Meta Knight paused, trying to gather his thoughts. They fell away like a dropped wineglass, bits of glass shattering in every direction, and he couldn’t bring them all together. He could only sweep them up in a disjointed pile. Meta Knight believed Kirby, which meant that Nightmare hadn’t abused Kirby like he had Meta Knight. And—and Meta Knight ought to be happy, right? Happy that Kirby hadn’t had the same childhood marked by violence. But he wasn’t.

He was angry. Angry at Nightmare for playing favorites and not being fair. For not treating both of his children the same way.

_Oh, dear heart—_

And he was jealous. Because why was Kirby better than he was?

_He isn’t. You’re both wonderful young men._

And so ashamed of being jealous. Because he _shouldn’t_ be jealous.

_Don’t be ashamed of how you feel._

And—and upset. Because this must be his fault somehow. Meta Knight must have some terrible flaw—his sass, his smart mouth, his narcissism—that made Nightmare love him less than he loved
Kirby Stellarum, who was so naïve and emotional and bright. *Everything* Nightmare wasn’t, and hadn’t Meta Knight tried to be everything Nightmare was and wanted?

_This isn’t your fault._

“What did Dad do to you?” Kirby asked. Solemn. Quiet.

This was a mistake. Meta Knight shouldn’t have said anything. “Nothing. I—I may have exaggerated,” Meta Knight said. “We’ve been estranged for a while. I shouldn’t have been so overdramatic about it. I mean, I couldn’t have known you’d know my father.”

“You’re back-tracking.”

Meta Knight shook his head. “No, no. I just—I exaggerated a bit, and I shouldn’t have.”

Maybe if Meta Knight kept lying, he could protect Kirby. If he kept lying, Meta Knight wouldn’t have to admit that all his feelings hurt, and he silently blamed his inability to reconcile them all on his concussion. A violent urge to flee rose inside him, but Meta Knight had always been a fighter. He never ran.

“Was Dedede lying, too?” Kirby asked.

No, Kirby wasn’t supposed to fight. He was supposed to back down into the fantasy he’d had just minutes before, where they weren’t related, and the possibility of Nightmare being abusive was absurd. “He’s my friend. He would take my side,” Meta Knight said.

“No, I don’t believe you,” Kirby replied. “Because you went to Dedede’s that night. You didn’t go to Dad’s even though it would’ve been easier.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The night you told me about. You got all beat up, and you broke into the palace. You thought you could depend on Dedede to help you. Estranged or not, you were hurt! You didn’t think Dad would help you even when you were bleeding out and cold in the rain,” Kirby said. “And you were mad
when I said Dad wouldn’t touch me without gloves! Maybe…maybe Dad isn’t a good person. And —and I just realized that he always visited me on holidays. Every single one.”

Meta Knight didn’t like where this was going; he was losing ground, and Kirby was gaining momentum. “Kirby, I’m happy he spent the holidays with you,” Meta Knight replied.

“But he promised to spend them with you!” Kirby argued. “An—and he spent them with me instead! He lied to you! You must’ve been so—no, he broke your heart over and over! He could’ve told us. We could’ve grown up together! We could’ve spent summers together at the beach. I wouldn’t have been so lonely if I’d had you, and Dad knew I was lonely…were you lonely, too, Meta Knight?”

Desperately. “He’s trying to do better. He promised.”

Kirby’s eyes filled with tears, making them look so painfully blue—like sapphire cabochons. “What is his promise worth, Meta Knight?” Kirby asked. “I…I want to believe he’s a good man, and I like giving people second chances. But…but I’m beginning to realize I don’t really know him at all. He had this whole different life I knew nothing about.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons.”

“Taranza said abuse,” Kirby insisted. “Did you lie to him, too?”

It wasn’t fair that someone so small and pixie-like with bright pink hair and teary eyes could look so fierce, so profoundly wounded by the thought of injustice. It wasn’t fair that Kirby’s face could make Meta Knight’s heart twist like it did.

“It isn’t abuse if you fight back, Kirby. Then, it’s a—”

“If you fight back because someone is hurting you and you want them to stop, yes, it’s still abuse!” Kirby protested. “I—I can’t even—what did he do to you, Meta Knight?”

“Why are you so quick to believe me? This isn’t my father anymore. It’s your father, too.”
Kirby blinked back tears and failed to hold them. “Because you’re my friend, and you were hurt because of him. An—and it was my fault! And now I learn that you’re my brother, and Dad knew! He knew and didn’t tell me, and…and he just got mad because I’d borrowed your powers! I messed this up, and—and the worst thing you can do for abuse victims is not to believe them. Why would you make that up? It hurts to think that Dad would hurt you, but…but I love you. I believe you, Meta Knight.”

Kirby’s belief in him was frightening. This was Kirby looking at the whole eighteen years that Nightmare had been his distant, loving father and trading them—reconciling them—with Meta Knight’s twenty-one years of—

He still couldn’t bring himself to say abuse.

“I won’t forget your faith in me,” Meta Knight said. “I just wish you didn’t have so be disappointed because of me. You couldn’t have someone better for your long-lost sibling.”

“Disappointed? Oh, no! No, I—I’m so—you’re my older brother! No, no, I’m so happy! I’m thrilled it’s you! Why wouldn’t I want to lay claim on someone that’s so funny an—and beautiful and smart! Nova’s grace, I just—I wish I’d known sooner! You can meet my mom! You’ll love her, Meta Knight! And I can show you where I grew up!”

Kirby crossed the room, knelt before Meta Knight, and grasped his hands. There was the split-second painful jolt of Kirby’s copy ability. In his excitement, Kirby didn’t even seem to notice. “You’re the best,” Kirby said sincerely. “If I have to…to rethink Dad’s behavior…I will. If I can have you as my brother. You’re worth that.”

Meta Knight forced a smile. Kirby rubbed his eyes against his shoulder. “I’ve always wanted a sibling,” he said softly, his wild energy seemingly spent. “I can’t wait to tell everyone. And I can—I can buy us mugs that say ‘best brother’ and those little sibling necklace things.”

“Bandanna Dee will be home in a few hours, and Dedede is coming by with Fae. We can tell everyone at once and surprise them,” Meta Knight said. “It’ll be our secret.”

“Yeah! Like a party,” Kirby said. “A quiet party because you need rest.”

“Yes, exactly.”
Meta Knight owed it to Kirby to be the best brother ever, to reward the faith that Kirby so easily gave him. Yes, that would make it fine. Maybe. For a time, anyway. There was no way he and Kirby could be normal, happy siblings forever. Meta Knight was sure that Nightmare Nocturne would see to that. Maybe he and Kirby could be brothers for a while, but they’d be at each other’s throat with blades and magic drawn in no time. Their father would never let them be happy; affection for anyone else—even a sibling—was an unforgivable weakness that warranted a swift and brutal punishment.
Dedede burst into the door with all the energy Meta Knight had expected. Kirby smothered his giggles with his hands; they'd talked about this, but Meta Knight had a sneaking suspicion that Kirby couldn't keep any secret very long. “But you love me, doncha, my dearest, sweetest, most favoritest pet?” Dedede asked, his voice booming from the entryway.

“I thought Meta Knight was your ‘most favoritest’ pet,” Bandanna Dee replied, his tone admirably emphasizing the scare-quotes.

Dedede rounded the corner and paused, his mouth hanging open. Bandanna Dee bumped into his back and raised an eyebrow. “Hi!” Kirby chirped. “Welcome home!”

“Yeah. Why’re you here?” Dedede asked.

“He skipped class to visit me,” Meta Knight answered.

Kirby grinned and clapped his hands together. “I did!”

“How thoughtful,” Bandanna Dee said. “Don’t worry. I took good notes. You’re welcome to borrow them, although it was mostly about Dark Mind. You know—the wizard Nova sealed away in another dimension?”

Galaxia stirred with interest; she’d been the weapon to weaken Dark Mind and shatter his power, so he could be sealed away.

“That is interesting,” Meta Knight said. “Today, I learned that I have a brother. Well, half-brother, actually. On my father’s side.”
Kirby laughed. “Me, too!” he declared.

Bandanna Dee clapped his hands over his mouth. “Brother?” he squeaked. “You’re—” Most of Bandanna Dee’s words were lost in Dedede’s full-throated screech.

Dedede crossed the room and leaned over Meta Knight. For a brief moment, Meta Knight thought his Lord might actually faint. Hopefully, not on him. Meta Knight’s ribs ached at the thought. “Brother!” Dedede exclaimed, gawking and pointing, his finger a half-inch from Meta Knight’s nose. “You are related to Kirby.”

“Yes. And concussion,” Meta Knight replied smoothly. “Can you not yell?”

Dedede twisted around and pointed at Kirby, who smiled cheerily back. “Brother,” Kirby echoed.

"Congratulations," Bandanna Dee said, his voice mercifully quieter than Dedede's.

“Brother,” Dedede replied. “You’re his brother? His brother.”

“How wonderful—” Bandanna Dee said.

“We’ve established that,” Meta Knight replied.

“Brother!” Dedede insisted. “How?”

“We were talking, and it turns out both of us have Nightmare as our father,” Meta Knight said.

“What d’you mean y’all are brothers?” Dedede exclaimed. “Y’all better no do joking around with us!”

“No, we really are!” Kirby replied, clapping his hands together. “Meta Knight is my half-brother!”
Dedede embraced Kirby in what looked like a bone-crushing hug. Meta Knight wilted against the sofa, praying to Nova that his dear, rambunctious lord remembered his fractured ribs. With a bellowing laugh, Dedede actually lifted Kirby off the ground. Kirby made a noise between a squeak and a laugh when Dedede finally released him. “Meta Knight’s brother? There are two of you! Dear Nova! A-are you gonna start calling each other cute pet names? I’ve read brothers do that.”

“Brothers don’t do that,” Bandanna Dee scoffed.

“But they gotta push each other’s buttons every now and then!” Dedede protested.

Bandanna Dee rolled his eyes. “I can see it a bit in the face,” Bandanna Dee said. “It’s something in the eyes—and maybe the mouth. I can’t believe I never noticed. Wow! You’re both so lucky! Kirby, you are really fortunate to have Meta Knight. He's wonderful brotherly material.”

Drawcia had noticed the similarity. Meta Knight mentally filed that knowledge away for later; he wasn’t sure the significance of it, or if there even was any.

“Probably because one of us is half-Halcandran,” Meta Knight replied. “And of course, none of us really expected me to have a long-lost sibling either.”

Meta Knight sensed Kirby watching him, so he offered Kirby a shy smile and a sort of self-deprecating shrug. Dedede sat on the sofa arm near Meta Knight, and after a second’s pause, Dedede gently dropped his hand and traced Galaxia’s mark down Meta Knight’s shoulder. “I kinda feel like the world’s stopped turning,” Dedede said.

“If it did, we’d all die,” Meta Knight said.

“Yeah, thanks, Mr. Astrophysicist,” Dedede said. “A freaking brother.”

“You keep saying that. I think we’ve broken you,” Meta Knight replied.

“Well, I guess I gotta be nice now,” Dedede replied, heaving a heavy sigh. “Pipsqueak. Doncha go hurting my Meta—”
“I wouldn’t!” Kirby exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted a brother, and… and he’s great. Meta Knight is everything I’ve ever wanted!”

“Hardly that,” Meta Knight murmured.

Dedede’s face split into a broad grin. “Mety is something else, ain’t he? Gorgeous boy.” Dedede turned his head and pressed his face against Meta Knight’s hair. Quietly, he added, “Are you okay with this, Meta Knight?”

Meta Knight turned his head away from the others. I don’t know he mouthed.

Dedede nodded. “Well, you’re darn lucky, Kirbs,” Dedede said. “Not everybody gets brothers as good as—I mean, you’re lucky to have…”

“Yes, very lucky,” Bandanna Dee said. “You couldn't find someone more loyal or so brave anywhere!”

Bandanna Dee sounded so genuinely happy, and it made Meta Knight’s heart ache. It must be difficult. Bandanna Dee hadn’t seen his own brother in almost two years, and they’d left on poor terms. Surely, out of all of them, Bandanna Dee was most deserving of a good sibling.

“I know,” Kirby said, “And I promise to be the best brother ever!”

Dedede plopped onto the sofa beside Meta Knight, and Bandanna Dee perched on the chair arm of Kirby’s seat. “I’m sure you will be,” Bandanna Dee said, patting Kirby’s shoulder.

“Yeah, well, this is kinda a shock. I feel like I’ve been kicked in the balls,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight winced. “I can assure you being kicked in your reproductive organs is much more painful than this.”

“Are you talking from experience?” Bandanna Dee asked.
Oh, yes. Meta Knight heaved a long-suffering sigh. Dedede leaned forward, far too eager to discuss the incident. “Embarrassing brother story-time! Okay, the first thing you gotta know,” Dedede said, “Is that I totally didn’t mean to knee him in the balls. Especially not that hard. And holy crap, I did not know that Meta Knight could swear like that. And I totally didn’t mean to laugh afterward.”

It was three in the morning when Kirby finally left. It’d been a fun evening, filled with numerous questions and comparisons and shared stories. Meta Knight hadn’t talked much once Dedede arrived. Kirby suspected his brother was more tired than he, perhaps, liked to let on. Meta Knight had started nodding off by midnight. But it was interesting. Dedede was all too happy to regale Kirby with the stories about all the things he and Meta Knight had done together, like the time Meta Knight had lived with a family of jewelers in Floralia, and Dedede would go over to visit him. Precisely why Meta Knight had ended up living with a family of jewelers when he was seventeen was awkwardly sidestepped. There were many awkward sidesteps and little bits that didn’t connect well.

Kirby suspected that Nightmare was the bit that would connect them all, but he hadn’t wanted to ask about his dad. It was clear neither Meta Knight nor Dedede liked him very much. Dedede cleared his throat and turned down the Halberd’s radio. He’d graciously agreed to drive Kirby home, and it’d led to the most awkward car ride in history.

“Yeah. Hey, it was—uh—good to see you,” Dedede said. “If Mety had to have a long-lost sibling, I guess I’m happy it was you. Don’t think this means I’m gonna go easy on you, though. You’re still a pipsqueak.”

Kirby stared at Dedede for a long moment. The older boy still seemed so large and intimidating, and while they weren’t really enemies, Kirby wasn’t entirely sure they were friends. “Why don’t you like me?” Kirby asked.

“Like you?”

“I mean…” Kirby shifted awkwardly. “What is it specifically about me that you dislike?”

Dedede furrowed his brow. “Well, it’s kinda complicated. I mean, I knew you had something to do with Nightmare, and I hate him so much. I guess…I dunno. I guess it just put a bad taste in my mouth.”
“But Meta Knight is Nightmare’s child, too.”

“Meta Knight’s different,” Dedede said. “Look. I don’t, like, hate you or nothing. Okay? I just gotta get to know you a bit better. I guess. Although you’ll still be a pipsqueak. I ain’t letting you just get rid of that title.”

“Get to know me…” Kirby muttered.


Kirby fidgeted with his hands. “I don’t like the way you talk about my dad,” he said.

“I don’t like the way your dad beats up on Meta Knight,” Dedede retorted. “Maybe you oughta quit acting like Nightmare’s so great. You didn’t have to live with him, did you? He came home—what? Once or twice a year? Meta had to deal with him every single weekend, and when Nightmare wasn’t around, he left his kid out in the middle of freaking nowhere with a handful of servants that he rotated out every three months. And d’you know why? ‘Cause he didn’t want Meta Knight getting attached to no one. And guess what? Even now that Meta’s living with me, Nightmare still wants to come around and tell him what to do. And that ain’t right.”

Kirby felt his face warm. He looked towards the street and scowled at his reflection in the rearview mirror. This was his dad. This was Meta Knight’s dad. Why was this so hard? Surely, Kirby—Kirby believed Meta Knight, but hearing Dedede tear apart their dad—

This was Kirby’s dad, who gave Kirby a fluffy black kitten named Mr. Meowington. This was Kirby’s dad, who took him stargazing on the beach. Kirby’s dad, who was always so sad to leave him. Kirby’s dad, who was somehow Meta Knight’s dad, too.

Kirby lowered his head against the car door and bit his lip. His eyes stung, and there was no questioning the hot tears flowing down his cheeks. No one had asked him to choose between his friends and his dad, but it felt like they had. Why did it have to be like this? Why couldn’t Nightmare just be a good dad to both Kirby and Meta Knight?

Dedede slammed on the brakes. “You ain’t crying, are you?”
“No,” Kirby lied.

“Yeah, you are. Might as well admit it. There ain’t no shame in crying, y’know. I keep telling Meta that,” Dedede said. “It’s ‘cause I said that ‘bout Nightmare, ain’t it? I wasn’t wrong. I ain’t gonna apologize for saying it, but…but maybe I should’ve been more tactful. I guess I get a little emotional when it comes to Meta.”

The Halberd began moving again. Kirby roughly rubbed his eyes. “I’m a bad friend,” he said dully. “I shouldn’t—”

Dedede turned abruptly. “We’re gonna get some ice cream,” Dedede said. “That’ll make it all better. Nothing better for a broken heart than a crap-ton of sugar!”

Kirby didn’t argue. “Where can we get ice cream at three in the morning?”

Dedede didn’t answer; instead, he pulled into a bubble gum pink shop. Through the shopfront windows, Kirby could see pictures of ice cream plastered on the walls, and—astonishingly—the lights were on, and the sign on the door read Open.

“There’s a twenty-four-hour ice cream parlor?” Kirby asked.

“Yep!”

Dedede strode from the car. “Meta and I used to come here a lot when we were freshmen,” he said.

Kirby carefully shut the Halberd’s door; that car was so expensive and sleek that he felt like it might break apart in his bare hands. Dedede led the way in. “Okay, so here’s how it works, Kirbs. You pick an ice cream and toppings, and they mix it all together for you.”

Kirby eyed the rows of jars filled with every candy imaginable. “Really?” he asked. “I can get all of them?”

Dedede smirked. “Funnily enough, that was Meta’s reaction, too.”
Kirby had gamely tried to exercise some self-control, and the end result was a monstrosity of cotton candy ice cream, overflowing with cookie pieces, chunks of chocolate, gummy worms, sprinkles, and hot fudge syrup. Dedede’s mint chocolate chip looked woefully plain and lonely by comparison. Still, Kirby ate happily because it was probably the best ice cream he’d ever had; maybe there was something to Dedede’s sugar as a cure for a broken heart philosophy.

“Y’know,” Dedede said, following several silent minutes of eating. “I wonder if I’m sometimes not as…I dunno, sympathetic as I should be. Maybe I’d be less…uh, hateful towards Nightmare if I had a dad.”

“You don’t?” Kirby asked. “What happened to him?”

“Oh, I never knew my dad,” Dedede said. “Neither did my mom. It was an artificial insemination kind of thing. She, uh, wasn’t gonna be able to have kids if she didn’t do something quickly, so she did that. All I know is that dad was pure-blooded Floralian. Mom’s in charge of the border, so she was trying to promote Dreamlandic-Florian relations. It appalled most of the court, of course. A Dreamlandic royal of Bikaia’s own line getting impregnated with a Floralian nobody knew. Scandalous.”

Kirby didn’t know much about the aristocracy, but even he knew the importance of having heirs. This wasn’t the conversation he’d expected to have, but it was a bit of a relief to speak about something other than his dad. “But what did they expect her to do?” Kirby asked.

“Secure a proper marriage and produce a child the old-fashioned way,” Dedede said, “But she’d been trying for years. She’s still trying; if she marries wealthy and saves the house, I ain’t gotta. But she still wants to be happy, y’know? And I cain’t fault Mom for that. It’s just complicated. If our house fails, Alera gets to choose who rules our duchy.”

“But she’d have to pick someone the Floralians would approve of, wouldn’t she?” Kirby asked.

“You’d think,” Dedede said, “But I think Sectonia’s more interested in good relations with Floralia than her mom is. Ain’t Alera care about no one except people just like her.”

Kirby furrowed his brow, trying very hard to imagine the beautiful, powerful Queen Alera, who his mother had always insisted was a fair, benevolent monarch, as the same person who Dedede and Meta Knight both loathed so much. It felt like his entire world was changing around him. “Is that why Meta Knight dislikes her?” Kirby asked.
“In part,” Dedede replied. “I mean, she’s got this idea that Halcandrans belong in a certain place. Nova, you shoulda seen the fit she threw behind closed doors when the old Patchlandic king wanted to bring a few of his Halcandran knights. Cain’t have anyone showing up her Dreamlandic-blooded Queen’s Guard. Might start a revolution or something. And she don’t exactly like that Meta walks around her palace in full armor. She chewed my mom out good over that one. Like she thought the Halcandran-Dreamlandic War had just restarted in her dining hall.”

“But Meta Knight wore armor when we went to the palace,” Kirby said.

Dedede smiled broadly. “Well, yeah. And some of the nobles and Queen’s Guard might not like it, but they ain’t gonna say so. I mean, the Queen pointed it out, but even Alera cain’t control how a duchess wants to let the people in her service dress. And ‘sides, my mom challenged Alera to a duel over it, ‘cept my mom don’t duel, so she chose Meta as her champion. Alera didn’t outright refuse ‘cause that would be dishonorable, but she didn’t make no move to fight him either. We cain’t have her precious knights fighting or—Nova forbid—losing to a Halcandran, after all, can we?”

“So your mom caught the Queen of Dreamland in a legal loophole?” Kirby asked.

“Yep! And lemme tell you, Alera once made this snide comment about Meta being too insubordinate for her liking, and he looked her dead in the eye, and said, fight me. Like, Meta might have that sort of ‘you can trust me to walk your grandma ‘cross the street face, but he has a spine of freaking iron. ‘Course, Alera wouldn’t do it,” Dedede said, beaming. “I heard Jecra volunteered, but she wouldn’t let him. Kinda a pity. Meta would love to fight someone like that.”

“Wow. I don’t think I could ever…are you allowed to say that to the Queen?” Kirby asked.

“Sure. I mean, I know we’re all so respectful and all, but there ain’t legally nothing the Queen can do if someone’s rude to her. Sure, she can challenge you to a duel, but she cain’t imprison you or nothing. The Queen ain’t had that kinda power in fifty years or so.”

Kirby thought of the villagers he’d lived with; it seemed so much simpler than the sort of courtly mechanisms Dedede was talking about. Kirby thought of Tiff and Tuff, the cabinet minister’s children, who spent the long summers on the coast. They’d been nice and friendly. Everyone had been nice and friendly. Granted, Kirby’s magic was a taboo, carefully monitored by his mom, but he’d, at least, been proud that his father was Nightmare Nocturne, who was well-beloved by many common-blooded magic users.
And the same Nightmare who’d built one of the most powerful companies in Dreamland, who’d proved that neither magic, wealth, nor power were exclusive to the aristocracy was the same man who’d—evidently—kept his child locked away in the countryside somewhere. Who'd abused and neglected his child. Kirby had never seen a picture of Meta Knight as a child, but he imagined him lonely like Kirby, himself, had been. Poor Meta Knight.

“What was Meta Knight like as a teenager?” Kirby asked. “If…if Dad kept him out in the countryside, how did you meet?”

“He ran away from home. He was…I dunno. Kinda skittish, I guess. He didn’t trust no one. Real mouthy, too. He’s still mouthy. I’ve always liked that about him. It was kinda weird, though, ‘cause while he was so suspicious, he was always so…” Dedede trailed off. “I guess charmed. He was always so delighted at even the littlest bit of kindness. He’d get flustered and awkward if you so much as held a door open for him.”

Was he so delighted because he'd never been offered any kindness? Surely, it hadn't been...that bad, had it? Or...maybe it had. Kirby felt like there was so much lost time, like he and Meta Knight could've had a wonderful, loving childhood together. They could've played on the beach together. Did Meta Knight like the beach? Could he swim? “He seems happy,” Kirby ventured, “Living with you and Bandanna Dee.”

“Good. Means I’m doing something right with him,” Dedede answered. He used his spoon to break up his waffle bowl into his ice cream. “I wasn’t always so nice to him.”

“I can’t imagine you being mean to Meta Knight.”

“Oh, I was a terror as a teenager,” Dedede said. “I thought I was better than everyone else. I mean, I was born to be better than everyone else. Royal blood and all, and I never had a desire to talk to anyone…well, common. Nova, I was so mean to Meta. I used to go ‘round and embarrass ‘im in front of his friends.”

Kirby privately thought that Dedede was still a massive jerk, but he didn’t say so. “Oh,” he said instead.

“Yeah. But Meta ain’t gonna serve and live with me forever, of course. As brilliant and gorgeous and quick-witted as he is, he’s bound to get a better opportunity. Tons of opportunities!” Dedede said, smiling fondly. “He’s really so spectacular.”
Kirby felt like there was something that he couldn’t quite grasp, but he couldn’t imagine what it might be. However intimidating Dedede was, though, it was clear he adored Meta Knight. Kirby’s brother. Meta Knight Nocturne. Why hadn’t their dad ever said anything? It would’ve been fun to grow up with Meta Knight. Kirby furrowed his brow.

“What about Dee?” Kirby asked. “How’d you meet him?”

“He’s my cousin. Real distant one. Part of the family that lost their title. He gotta real…” Dedede trailed off. “He struck out on the freaking parent lottery. Dee’s parents kicked him out over something ridiculous.”

“That’s awful,” Kirby said around a spoonful of cotton candy ice cream.

“Yeah, but we got each other,” Dedede replied. “That’s the important thing. You got a crappy family, you make your own.”

Dedede had reached the bottom of his bowl, and Kirby had nearly finished his. “Well, good talk, pipsqueak,” Dedede said. “Why doncha finish up? I’m gonna get Meta and Dee some. They’d be mad if they knew I came here and didn’t get them none.”

Kirby nodded. He watched as Dedede ordered a scoop of cookies and cream. Was that Meta Knight’s favorite? Dedede’s second order was something birthday cake, filled with a frightening amount of sprinkles and chocolate. Kirby snorted. He wasn’t entirely sure how taste factored into genetics, but some small part of him really hoped that Meta Knight was the one for whom that ice cream was intended. It would be really hilarious if his long-lost brother also had an insatiable sweet tooth. His long-lost brother, who hated their father. Or loved their father. His long-lost brother, who was abused by their father. Yes, that. It was all so confusing. Kirby wanted Meta Knight to be his brother, but...but how could he choose between Meta Knight, who he adored but had only known a couple months, and his father, who'd raised him?

Meta Knight had once been fond of hot, luxurious baths, but after running away and darting into showers at truck-stops, parks, and—once or twice—homeless shelters, Meta Knight had largely abandoned the practice of bathing in return for short showers. But he remembered that hot baths were pleasant, and since his pain meds weren’t quite effective enough, it was his last pitch effort. It did nothing for the pain, but since he’d already filled a tub with hot water and Bandanna Dee’s favorite bubble bath—which created much more impressive bubbles than Meta Knight’s shower gel—it seemed like he ought to at least enjoy the bath he’d made. Besides, it was a way to pass the time until Dedede returned. It seemed like he’d taken too long.
Meta Knight spent ten minutes trying to decide whether or not to leave his bath, grab his phone, and text Dedede. Was it too clingy to text him? Yes. Father would say so.

Did he care what Father would think?

It seemed like an eternity before Meta Knight heard the front door open. He sighed in relief and shifted a bit, trying to peer around the bathroom doorway. He didn’t have to work hard at it; Dedede walked into the bathroom. “Using the bathroom,” he declared.

Meta Knight tilted his head back and hummed. He didn’t particularly care to watch his oh-so-noble lord use the bathroom. Dedede sighed dramatically. “I don’t know why I—”

“If you’re about to tell me about how you’re urinating, please, don’t,” Meta Knight said. “You disgusting over-sharer.”

“The naked man in the bathtub says I’m an over-sharer,” Dedede replied. “Didn’t think that one through, did you?”

Admittedly, Dedede had a point. “Bite me,” Meta Knight said.

“Oh, with pleasure,” Dedede purred exaggeratedly. “Your collarbone looks delicious.”

“You should’ve stopped with the ‘pleasure’ bit. The part about my collarbone killed the joke,” Meta Knight replied.

Meta Knight only looked over at Dedede when he heard water running in the sink. Dedede washed his hands, using a gratuitous amount of the coconut-scented foaming soap. “What were you thinking about before I walked in?” Dedede asked.

“That it took you a long time to get back. Did something happen?”

“Kid started crying,” Dedede said. “I, uh, badmouthed your dad a bit.”
“You shouldn’t have. Kirby is his child. It’s understandable that he’d feel some attachment to his father.”

“Just like you.”

Meta Knight nodded sharply. Dedede sat awkwardly on the edge of the tub—awkwardly because Dedede was so large and the side of the tub so comparatively small. “Enjoying the view?” Meta Knight asked.

Dedede smirked. “I cain’t help it if you’re so adorable.”

Meta Knight flicked water at Dedede, who squeaked dramatically. “You just assaulted me!” Dedede exclaimed. “Me! I cain’t even—you’re outta control. What a bad servant. I’m gonna have to take some sort of disciplinary action for this.”

“Go ahead, then. What do you intend to do? Write me up?” Meta Knight said. “Terminate my employment?”

“Oh, I got the worst thing imaginable for you,” Dedede said. “Like, you cain’t even imagine.”

This was going to be something outrageous, wasn’t it? Clearly, this was some sort of bait, and Dedede would likely persist until Meta Knight took it. With an overly dramatic sigh, Meta Knight flicked water again at Dedede, who gasped and put a hand to his chest, undoubtedly mortally wounded by a few drops of water. “Discipline me, then,” Meta Knight said, leaning his head back against the shower wall. “My Lord.”

Dedede’s smirked as he left. Meta Knight warily eyed the bathroom door and waited for his friend to reappear. When Dedede did reappear, he sauntered in with a plastic bag tucked beneath his arm.

“You’re going to suffocate me with a plastic bag?” Meta Knight asked.

“And deprive myself the pleasure of tormenting you for the rest of your life? Not a chance, sugar-cakes.”
Dedede pulled the bag away like a magician doing a trick. In Dedede’s hand rested a pint of bright blue ice cream. “Kirbs and I went out for a treat.”

“That’s for me?” Meta Knight asked. “Is it birthday cake?”

“Complete with enough chocolate chips and sprinkles to satisfy an army of toddlers,” Dedede said.

Dedede dramatically handed over the spoon, and Meta Knight tried very hard to act like his inner child wasn’t absolutely delighted. “Not much of a punishment,” Meta Knight said, before taking a mouthful of cold, sugary bliss.

“Oh, it is. Those sprinkles are gonna cause irreparable harm to your reputation as a scary, intimidating knight-guy,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight sighed.

“I dunno why being pretty bothers you so much. You can still be Sir Meta Knight of Love and Justice even if you’re completely adorable,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight smiled in spite of himself. It was just as well that knight was part of his name because he, himself, would never be a real knight. Even Nightmare’s title and money, Meta Knight’s skill and desire for justice, and Dedede’s doting attention wasn’t enough to compensate for being born with the wrong blood.

Even if Meta Knight had managed to—miraculously—join the ranks of Queen’s Guard, he knew it wouldn’t be what he wanted. The same knights, who fought so well and upheld such values, weren’t devoid of corruption. Besides, they were all Dreamlandic or half-Dreamlandic and half-Floralian. There wasn’t a drop of Halcandran blood among them. Meta Knight would find himself constantly pushing against barriers to accomplish anything, and these were, also, the same people that had rejected Bandanna Dee over his gender identity. Meta Knight could imagine little more unpleasant than having to associate with people like that on a daily basis. The only benefit, realistically, would be that he’d finally be allowed to fight the best swordsmen in Dreamland.

“You ain’t gotta look intimidating to get the respect of people that matter,” Dedede murmured, rubbing his thumb over Meta Knight’s cheek. “That’s your dad’s approach. It ain’t gotta be yours. There ain’t no reason you cain’t be fair and honorable and a total cutie and still get people’s
Meta Knight took a bite of chocolate chip-gorged ice cream. “What kind of ice cream does Kirby like?”

“All kinds. He got cotton candy with lots of sprinkles and every kind of candy they had,” Dedede said.

“How d’you feel ‘bout having a brother?” Dedede asked.

“I don’t know,” Meta Knight admitted. “On one hand, I don’t want anything to do with him. But on the other hand, I feel like I want a brother. I want a family that’s…normal, and I feel like I owe this to Kirby. If I don’t want to be his brother, I’m no better than Nightmare, who really seems to have just ignored Kirby.”

“No, it isn’t the same. Nightmare made a choice to have a kid, and he made a choice to treat you like he did. You didn’t make a choice to have a brother. And if you don’t wanna be Kirby’s brother, you ain’t gotta. You don’t owe him anything, Meta Knight.”

“Father promised he’d try better,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede sighed. “And d’you really believe him?”

“I don’t know if I believe him or just want to believe him. Logically, I think that my being…brothers with Kirby will end in disaster. But maybe I like the idea of Father really trying. Maybe I like the idea of us being, not close, but maybe decent. Together.”

“Look, Meta. I know he’s your dad. And yeah, okay, maybe he does kinda love you in his own way. Does that justify the way he treats you, though? Do the few promises and nice moments make up for all the other times?”

Meta Knight ate a spoonful of ice cream to keep from having to answer.
Dedede stared hard at him. “Look; if you wanna play Kirby’s brother, fine. I’m sure it’d make him happy. You cain’t live your whole life not doing things ‘cause you’re afraid of your dad tearing it all apart. As for Nightmare, you’ll do what you wanna. It don’t matter what I think. It ain’t my choice anyway.”

“You’re disappointed in me.”

“Naw, you’re just reading me wrong. I’d never be disappointed in you, caballerito,” Dedede said, running his fingers through Meta Knight’s hair and watching as the strands slowly fell.

“I’m still going to work for him. I owe him, and I don’t want to be indebted to Father. You can’t persuade me otherwise.”

“I know I cain’t. I just don’t trust him not to hurt you, but then, I guess that’s kinda hypocritical coming from me, ain’t it? I mean, damn, look at you! That’s some awful bruising.”

Meta Knight looked at his ribs, blotched with masses of black and green. “Stop beating yourself up over that. It wasn’t your fault, and Fluff and I did a number on you, too. My ribs are no worse than your shoulder,” Meta Knight said. “Or your face.”

“I ain’t the one that’s been drugged out on painkillers and lying in bed for the past few days.”

Meta Knight sighed. “I’m trying—”

“I didn’t mean there was shame in that,” Dedede replied. “Taking your time to get better ain’t a sign of weakness. Take all the time you need.”

Meta Knight took a few bites of ice cream. It was…odd to be told to take his time. Meta Knight didn’t take his time. He prided himself on his ability to shrug off injuries; he’d done so countless times before, disregarding the severity.

“Fluff is pretty good with that whip, ain’t he?” Dedede said, likely sensing that he’d made Meta Knight uneasy. “What d’you think’s gonna happen to him now that this has all come out?”
“Since what has come out?”

“This mess with Alera having Yin-Yarn control the King of Patchland,” Dedede said. “I—oh, I
guess you ain’t been reading the news much, have you? Sorry. I’m used to you knowing
everything. Someone leaked the story. The Dreamland Enquirer says they got A.M.B.E.R.
documents backing it all up. Mom’s under investigation for giving out classified information, along
with your dad and Fluff.”

“This won’t stick to my father—even if he did do it,” Meta Knight replied. “He knows how to
cover his tracks, and too many people adore him. They’d say the Queen set him up to take the fall.
Your mother, though…”

“She says she ain’t got nothing to hide. I called and asked her,” Dedede said, “And my mom’s
pretty smart, y’know.”

But she didn’t have the resources that Nightmare did. She didn’t have the intimidating and heroic
image that Nightmare, the common-born wizard who’d become wealthier than most of the old
royal houses, had spent years cultivating. While the royalty and nobility generally loathed
Nightmare, there were still many who admired him, who saw him as a champion for the common
man and magic users. And he was. For all Nightmare’s cruelty, he was all too glad to play the hero
when it suited him. But the only people that cared about Dedede’s mother were the ones living in
her tiny, backwater duchy.

“Yes, I know,” Meta Knight said.

But cleverness didn’t matter if the Queen of Dreamland decided you were guilty.

“Good news is they ain’t questioning us,” Dedede said. “You were unconscious and didn’t have
the chance to leak anything, and I spent all my time in the hospital. I figure we’re just kinda
leverage anyhow if one of our parents don’t cooperate.”

Meta Knight sighed. “You know Father won’t,” he said.

“Well, it ain’t like they can really get much from you, unless they wanna look at all the weird stuff
you were thinking of while concussed,” Dedede said. “Hopefully, we can put all this behind us and
get back to school and have a few boring weeks, yeah? Things’ll be back to normal.”
“So I have to do chores again?” Meta Knight asked.

It hadn’t escaped Meta Knight’s notice that his usual chores of laundry and changing everyone’s bedding had been transferred to Bandanna Dee, and Bandanna Dee’s usual task of cleaning the kitchen and doing the dishes had been delegated to Dedede, who’d evidently been stuck with double-duty since he also cleaned the bathroom every couple of days.

“Maybe we wait a couple weeks to get you on your feet again,” Dedede said. “And ‘sides, Mom’s gonna pop over ‘fore she has to go back home, and she’d murder me if she came over and you were doing chores. She wanted to come see you today, but—y’know—A.M.B.E.R. agents are tearing her apartments apart.”

*Your father is here,* Galaxia murmured.

A few boring weeks? Not in Meta Knight’s lifetime, it seemed. Tell Dedede? Don’t tell Dedede?

Don’t. If Dedede knew, he’d want to pick a fight. Hopefully, Father would remain hidden until Dedede was gone. Meta Knight closed the tub of ice cream and handed it over to Dedede, who placed it on the sink along with the spoon. “Done already?” Dedede asked.

Meta Knight braced himself against the bathtub and pulled himself up, his ribs throbbing. Dedede shuffled back and gently grasped Meta Knight’s forearms. “Careful, there,” Dedede muttered.

Meta Knight grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist. “I could’ve gotten out on my own,” Meta Knight said. “I wouldn’t have decided to take a bath if I didn’t think I could get back out.”

Dedede opened the bathroom door and smirked broadly. “I think you would, actually. You’d get stuck in there and be too proud to admit it.”

*He’s gone,* Galaxia murmured, puzzled. *He left you a couple things, but he didn’t stay around.*

Meta Knight allowed himself a small smile as he leaned against the doorway of his room. “Maybe,” he said.
Dedede trailed his fingers through Meta Knight’s hair. “Meta, I—” Dedede paused. “I wondered if I could…”

Meta Knight raised an eyebrow. “It must be really absurd if you can’t say it.”

“Can I kiss you good night? I’ve just been feeling kinda funny since I got back, and I think I really need…some affection.”

Kiss him good night? Why was he so nervous about that? They'd known each other for almost six years, and during that time, Dedede had always been very liberal in showing affection. And heck, they’d seen one another naked on numerous occasions. How funny that Dedede would somehow find good night kisses to be the thing he had to ask about. Meta Knight laughed. “Really? That’s all? That’s fine.”

Dedede’s face brightened. He leaned close, and Meta Knight rolled his eyes. Dedede had to be so dramatic about everything—

*Meta Knight, I don’t think you realize what he was asking.*

And Dedede’s lips were on his. Meta Knight had never been kissed on the mouth before, and it was an odd feeling. It was warm and soft and *strange.* And why had Dedede kissed him on the *mouth?* Meta Knight put his hands on Dedede’s shoulders and pushed him back. Dedede furrowed his brow. “Did I do something wrong?”

“You kissed me!”

“You said I could,” Dedede replied.

“I didn’t think you meant on the mouth! I thought you meant like your mother does sometimes. Very infrequently. I mean, she doesn’t do it often, but I mean, that’s my only reference as far as kissing goes.”

“I dunno if I wanna kiss you like—I mean, oh. You were expecting—like—a forehead kiss, right? Not…not something like—I’m sorry. It didn’t mean anything. I just wanted a bit of…oh! I didn’t
think! I just kinda assumed you’d…I’m so sorry, Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight felt his face warm. “No, no, it’s fine. It wasn’t terrible. I mean, it was fine. I was just startled. You’re a very affectionate person, and we’ve known each other a long time. You were caught up in the moment,” Meta Knight said. “That’s all. It’s been a rough week.”

Dedede laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah! A rough week. That’s all. I, uh, good night. I’m gonna go and put your ice cream in the freezer.”

“Great!”

Meta Knight gracelessly entered his room and closed the door behind him. Thank Nova his Father had left. If he’d still been around, Meta Knight would’ve never heard the end of this. He put a hand to his mouth. It was surely his imagination, but he swore he felt his lips tingle. His face felt warm. He must be blushing. “Did I like that, Galaxia?” Meta Knight asked.

She laughed.

“But I really don’t know,” Meta Knight replied. “It was…nice. And awkward. But maybe that’s just because I’ve never…”

I think you liked the gesture well enough. I think it’s the meaning behind it that you’re struggling with.

The meaning. “Yes, maybe it is that,” Meta Knight said. “I’ve just never…I mean, Father would never allow me…I mean, I work for Dedede. We can’t do things like that. I mean, Father—”

I don’t think it’s really your father’s place to tell a twenty-one-year-old man what relationships he can and cannot have.

“Dedede is royalty.”

He’s the son of a duchess, yes. You’re the son of a duke, though, aren’t you?
Meta Knight took a deep breath. “Technically.”

Technically, that makes you equals. Granted, Dedede’s title has a history and more prestige than your father’s, but your father also is significantly wealthier. You do work for Dedede, but does your contract not dictate that you can leave anytime, and—if you choose to leave—Dedede must pay you all the money you would’ve made had you continued working for him?

“Well, yes, it does,” Meta Knight replied. “I insisted on it in case our arrangement didn’t work. I didn’t want…”

You didn’t want to have to choose between working for an abusive lord and having money to survive, and Dedede trusted that you wouldn’t take advantage of him. I know. But you like Dedede. If you did quit and had the option, what would you do? Would you go elsewhere, or if given the option, would you continue living with him and doing your part to contribute to this household? I don’t see why you couldn’t quit working for him, take the severance pay, and be… something else if that’s what you desire.

“I…I don’t know,” Meta Knight said.

The decision is yours, of course, Galaxia murmured, But if it’s the power imbalance that’s making you hesitate, I wonder if it’s really as great as you think it is. Of course, this isn’t even considering that one of you is capable of summoning tornadoes and flitting into other dimensions on a whim, and the other isn’t.

“You aren’t helping. You’re making it worse,” Meta Knight said, striding to his bed; he’d caught the glimmer of moonlight falling on something.

Worse? I’m merely asking you to analyze your own feelings, dear heart.

She didn’t have to be so amused about it, though.

The object was a small, glass paperweight, sitting benignly on a black folder. The paperweight was violet-blue with small spackles of silver stars strewn across its surface. Meta Knight felt Galaxia shift about in his mind, as she tried to study the object. “Do you give all your wielders relationship advice?” Meta Knight asked.
They never needed it.

Meta Knight weighed the glass paperweight in his hand. He considered tossing it out his window. “It’s probably made to spy on me somehow,” he said.

It was a gift from his father, though. Of course, he wouldn’t throw it away.

The university’s dorms came with a standard bed, closet, desk, and chair for each student. There wasn’t space for much else, so as a result, most of Meta Knight’s personal belongings ended up crammed in a desk drawer. Meta Knight opened the drawer and wedged the paperweight in amongst his father’s letters and various other presents. He had to take out the photo album to make it fit. Meta Knight paused and turned the album in his hands. It was one of the very few things he’d taken when he ran away. He opened the album and gazed at the first photo. It was one of the portraits Nightmare insisted on taking yearly, primarily for the purpose of the Saint Knight’s Day cards Customer Service sent out. A family man really tugs at the heartstrings of some of these old, affectionate fools, Nightmare had once said.

What better image than a poor, single father trying to raise his wayward, half-Halcandran son? Meta Knight wondered if Nightmare had ever been asked about his mother. If so, had he told the truth? Or had he merely painted a sympathetic image? Meta Knight could all too easily imagine his father weaving a tragic story of his beautiful wife dying in childbirth or in a car accident and leaving him, grief-stricken, with only their child to remember her by.

Meta Knight only knew her last name, and it’d taken no small amount of begging and promises to earn that information. He didn’t even know if his mother was full-blooded Halcandran or if she’d been part-Dreamlandic. Meta Knight only knew that he looked Halcandran, and his father did not.

Meta Knight traced a finger over the photo before him. The photo was a much younger Nightmare, not that Nightmare’s appearance had ever really changed much. The wizard’s eyes, grey and winter-cold, and his star-white hair were the same as Meta Knight’s own. Nightmare sat beside Haltmann, whose hair was still dark; years had made it white. The two men sat together on a vintage loveseat that Meta Knight only vaguely remembered. Meta Knight, himself, was maybe six or seven years old in the photo. He sat on the floor with Susanna, the two of them pretending to pour over a large gilded volume. It was strange looking at himself, so young, his hair undyed, his ears unpierced, his face so innocent and unassuming. It was stranger still looking at Susanna, her bright red hair gleaming in the light; he hadn’t seen her since he’d ran away.

Meta Knight flipped through a few more pages, trying to pinpoint the moment when Nightmare stopped being the loving, doting father that he’d once been. Or had he ever been the father Meta
Knight imagined?

Meta Knight reached the last photo. It was just Nightmare and himself. Nightmare looked unchanged, save for the glasses perched on his nose; he could no longer tolerate sunlight. His hair was darker. Meta Knight stared at the image of his younger self, trying to discern some sign of displeasure or melancholy in his photographed self. There weren’t any. He looked as cold and composed as his father. His smile was polite and nothing more. It was a perfectly acceptable, inoffensive photo. Great for Saint Knight’s cards to dozens, if not hundreds, of people that Meta Knight had never known.

Meta Knight set the album aside and tossed Nightmare’s folder on top of it. It was probably the contract for his week of employment, and Meta Knight seriously doubted Nightmare would give as easily as Dedede had. The contract could be dealt with in the morning, possibly in the company of Duchess Delilah’s favorite attorney; that attorney owed her a favor or two. A contract for a week’s worth of work shouldn’t be very complicated, but it was never a good idea to take chances with his father.

Meta Knight dried himself and dressed. Then, after a few seconds’ deliberation, he opened his bedroom door. Dedede hadn’t wanted to share a bed since he’d returned, but still, Meta Knight left the door and the opportunity open. Just so Dedede would know that he was still in Meta Knight’s good graces.
The Celeste Residence Hall was the most upper scale of all Dreamland University’s dorms. It was the only dorm on campus that offered apartments with multiple rooms, kitchens, and bathrooms. In contrast, Kirby’s dorm room only had a single bedroom, and his entire dorm shared bathing facilities as well as a woefully small kitchen. This didn’t particularly bother Kirby, but it’d hit him all at once just how wealthy some of these people must be. He sucked in a deep breath. This was a bad idea. When Meta Knight sent him that early morning text, asking if Kirby wanted to hang out with a disenfranchised prince, he should’ve refused. Instead, Kirby’s thoughts had careened into a fluffy, fairy tale dream. He’d never met a prince.

Kirby smoothed his pink hair once more and made sure the pockets of his jeans were pushed in. Then, he knocked. Meta Knight, clad in dark blue pajamas, opened the door. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his smile was halfhearted at best. He probably still wasn’t feeling well. Kirby felt a swell of sympathy. “Hi,” Kirby said.

“Good morning.”

Meta Knight offered his hand, and Kirby frowned. “You can’t. I’ll take your powers again.”

“But don’t you already have them?”

“No, of course not! I released them when I got back to my dorm. I’d never keep anyone’s abilities,” Kirby said, rocking back on his heels. “It’s wrong of me to take them in the first place.”

For a long moment, Meta Knight just stared at him. “I’m…I’m sorry,” he said. “I assumed you’d still have them, and I thought—since we’re siblings—we ought to engage in some sort of affectionate greeting. Obviously, I can’t really do the hugging thing right now, but maybe some sort of handshake. Siblings do that, don’t they?”

Kirby winced. He should’ve just accepted Meta Knight’s hand.
“But it’s fine. I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said. “I shouldn’t have assumed. I promise to respect your boundaries.”

As Kirby followed Meta Knight inside, he couldn’t help but think he’d messed it all up. Clearly, Meta Knight wanted them to be siblings and act like siblings, and Kirby had just thoughtlessly shunned his affection. Well, it hadn’t really been thoughtless. Kirby had been thinking about how Meta Knight would hate having his powers Copied, even if he’d already let Kirby do it twice. Because the third time might be the time that Meta Knight would decide Kirby was a monster unworthy of his fondness.

The room was crowded. Bandanna Dee sat by Dedede’s mom on the sofa. Kirby furrowed his brow and tried to remember her name. They’d met at the hospital, but they hadn’t spoken to one another. She’d been sick with worry, splitting her time between hugging her son and stroking Meta Knight’s hair.

Meta Knight sat beside her, whatever her name was. She immediately shifted over to give him more room, although Meta Knight clearly didn’t need anymore. Dedede stood awkwardly behind the sofa. The chair in the room was occupied by a young man with pale, blue hair. He was about Kirby’s age and so shockingly pale that Kirby thought he might actually be able to see the blue veins just beneath the man’s skin if he looked hard enough. His eyes were the same warm, autumn-brown as Bandanna Dee’s. His face was soft and delicate, almost fairy-like, and he looked very handsome in his powder blue button-up and black slacks.

“Oh!” Dedede’s mom exclaimed suddenly. “You’re Meta’s brother, ain’t you?”

Such a terrible brother. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t think I really gotta introduce myself. I’m Duchess Delilah of the Stars, Dedede’s mom, obviously. And…and I suppose you know everyone except Fluff of Patchland, disenfranchised prince, although we’re working on that.”

The fairy-like young man was a prince. A prince. Kirby gulped. “Hi!” he chirped.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Fluff said. “I hear you will be joining us on our outing today. It should be fun. Everyone here is so friendly! They follow me down the streets, staying a few feet away, of course. I assume they’re there in case I need something.”
Kirby was speechless, unsure whether he ought to laugh or express sympathy.

“Hopefully, they ain’t gonna be much longer,” Delilah said. “Sectonia said she’d do something ‘bout it, and I think she’s prolly good for her word. Better than most of ‘em at any rate.”

“I wish I shared your confidence in her,” Fluff replied. “At any rate, I am eager to go somewhere. Your apartments aren’t unpleasant, Delilah, but it’s difficult being kept indoors for days on end.”

“Oh, I get it,” Delilah said. “Enjoy yourself. We might join you once we get our business wrapped up.”

“What are you doing?” Kirby asked.

“Looking over my contract,” Meta Knight answered.

They must mean the one for their dad. Kirby sighed. Why did everything he do have to make things worse? There shouldn’t even be a contract. Dad should’ve just helped Dedede because doing so would make his son happy. “Is…there anything I can do?” Kirby asked.

“No,” Meta Knight replied.

“The entire arrangement is absurd,” Fluff said. “What sort of abhorrent human being would force their child to agree to such terms?”

Abhorrent human being. That was...that was Kirby's dad. “I wasn’t forced to agree. I could’ve walked out,” Meta Knight said, “And it’s partly my fault he’s under investigation.”

“Why do you think that?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight sighed. “Delilah said that Taranza was inside my thoughts, and—”
“And it ain’t your fault if someone goes looking around your memories and finds something,” Delilah interrupted. “It also ain’t your fault that Nocturne did some illegal stuff. You didn’t ask him to. And then, he had the nerve to manipulate the situation so he knew you’d have to do what he wanted.”

Meta Knight shook his head and glanced at Kirby, who guiltily looked away. “Can we talk about something else?” Meta Knight asked.

There was an awkward silence, as no one seemed quite able to think of an appropriate topic in light of that. Kirby bit his lip. “Y’know I really wanted a girl, and somehow, I ended up with a house full of young men,” Delilah said suddenly.

Dedede leaned over the sofa and hugged his mom awkwardly. “Love you, Mom!”

“Uh-huh,” Delilah said. “Sure you do. That’s why you decided to go to DU instead of the nice college down the road from our estate.”

“But Mommy, they ain’t got an archaeology program,” Dedede said.

“Well, darn. Why you gotta follow your dreams, pet?”

“Cause my mommy told me to,” Dedede replied, offering his mom a quick kiss on her cheek.

“Oh,” Kirby said. “Er…my Lady, I didn’t know you and Bandanna Dee were related.”

Everyone, save Fluff, stared at him, their expressions ranging from utter bafflement to—in Meta Knight’s case—completely unreadable. “Oh! Oh! Yeah, Dee and me,” Dedede said, laughing. “Yeah, surprise!”

“Explíquese usted,” Meta Knight said.

“Umm…no hablo que bien, Meta. Mentir…mintió porque…” Dedede trailed off.
“I—I asked how you’d met,” Kirby hedged in awkwardly. “I didn’t realize it was a big secret.”

“Tengo esto para usted, Dedede. Kirby, it’s not,” Meta Knight said. “It’s just a touchy subject. They aren’t quite cousins, though. It’s more like fourth-cousins. Bandanna Dee is the son of one of Delilah’s cousins—a lady named Dahlia.”

“Yeah!” Delilah replied. “I ain’t fond of people that ain’t there for their kids. That’s all. I mean, heck, that’s how I ended up with Meta Knight, too. ‘Sides, Dahlia’s been in so many scandals that we’re kinda estranged.”

“Right,” Bandanna Dee said, smiling awkwardly.

Kirby furrowed his brow, certain he was missing something crucial, but unable to figure out what it was.

“We should probably go,” Fluff said, rising.

“Yeah, you should!” Dedede said. “Dee’s got the keys to the Halberd. Y’all have fun, yeah?”

Bandanna Dee stood and linked arms with Kirby. “Sure thing. Come on, Kirby. We’re going to show Fluff all the tourist traps. Have you ever seen Bikaia Square?”

“No.”

“Oh! That would be interesting,” Fluff said, trailing them.

Kirby waved farewell over his shoulder—feeling a flash of guilt that he hadn’t done something special for Meta Knight—as Bandanna Dee ushered him out the door and towards the Halberd, gleaming under the sunlight. Kirby took the backseat, allowing Fluff to slide into the front passenger side. The playful autumn wind and overcast sky made for a pleasant drive into downtown Castle Town.

Being the capital of Dreamland, the city had many tourist traps, and among the most popular was Bikaia Square. It featured a massive marble statue of Bikaia in full armor with Galaxia raised
high above his head. One armored foot rested on Landia’s tail as the massive, four-headed dragon with its spread wings bore down upon him. Allegedly, it was the exact spot where Bikaia, with the help of Galaxia and Mace Knight, had slain Landia and ended his rampage against Dreamland.

They’d parked a block away and walked the distance. Once they arrived at the fabled statue, which Kirby had only seen in history books, he couldn’t help but gawk. His fingers itched to touch the smooth marble and disregard the many signs indicating that touching wasn’t allowed.

“This is Dreamland’s great hero, is it?” Fluff asked.

Kirby ducked his head as the prince joined him. “Y-yeah,” Kirby said. “King Bikaia.”

“I’ve never seen this statue before,” Fluff said thoughtfully.

“But didn’t you attend DU?” Bandanna Dee asked.

“Not of my own volition,” Fluff replied. “Alera wanted to keep me close and sufficiently busy. I suppose she thought I’d get into some sort of trouble. While I attended, I didn't explore much. I devoted much of my time towards finding Yin-Yarn's whereabouts.”

“It must be really hard being here,” Kirby said, “Surrounded by only Dreamlanders after everything that’s happened. I’m so sorry.”

Fluff shrugged. “It is, but I won’t say you’re all bad,” he said. “After all, the majority of you had no involvement in my family’s disownment. Furthermore, I am grateful towards Meta Knight for helping me, not that I really needed it. I'd have escaped eventually.”

Fluff spoke so formally. Kirby blushed and wondered if he ought to try elevating his language or adding a title to every other sentence. How were you supposed to address a prince? Kirby hadn’t the faintest idea; etiquette had never been his favorite class.

“Hopefully, not for long,” Bandanna Dee offered. “I’ve no doubt Sectonia and Delilah will see justice done for the matter.”
“Perhaps,” Fluff said, “But even if I am allowed to return to govern my country, to do so efficiently will mean that I must establish alliances with my neighbors. If I can’t establish good connections in Dreamland, I’ll inevitably fail.”

“But surely, you can manage it!” Kirby exclaimed. “You clearly care so much about everyone, and you’ve been trained your entire life to do it! And we’ll all help you.”

Fluff laughed warmly. “You are the most optimistic creature I’ve ever met,” he said. “We shall see, Kirby. Now I’ve heard that Galaxia’s temple is also near here. I’d like to see it if they still allow the public entrance.”

“They do if you have the right connections,” Bandanna Dee said mischievously. “Fortunately, I happen to have a signet ring belonging to the House of the Stars.”

Meta Knight, papers in hand, sat propped on a pile of pillows between Dedede and Delilah. “Father got these back to you very quickly,” Meta Knight said.

Delilah smiled. “Oh, no, I dropped them off personally,” she said.

Meta Knight wondered how much frustration that had brought his father.

Dedede boomed in laughter. "Stars, I love you, Mom!"

“To Nocturne's credit, it looked like a standard contract—no tricky language or anything like that. Even my attorney couldn’t find anything malicious about it. I managed to get you out of working during your classes, which he readily agreed to. You’ll be working for him the next three and a half weekends. You’re only obligated to work for him during business hours at his business, so you don’t have to worry about going to his home and cleaning his house or anything. It sounds very good. Of course, if he does anything that makes you uncomfortable, call me, and I’ll make his life very difficult for you.”

“Thank you. I will,” Meta Knight said.
He'd never do it. He'd just endure whatever Nightmare wanted him to.

“You also ain’t gonna work for Dedede at the same time, so you ain’t gotta worry ‘bout helping him on the weekends,” Delilah said.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I also think you oughta still be resting. Dedede said you was planning on going back to class on Tuesday.”

“Did he now?”

Meta Knight glared at Dedede, who stood abruptly. “I’m gonna go make cookies!”

If looks could kill, Dedede would’ve disintegrated into ashes before he made it to the kitchen. “Well, it’s Wednesday today,” Meta Knight said, “So that’s almost an entire week. I’ve already missed a few days, so that’s a week-and-a-half. It’s not like I’m going back after a day.”

“We just think you’re pushing yourself too hard,” Delilah said.

“Then, it’s fortunate that my father thinks it’s fine,” Meta Knight replied.

“Your dad would make you walk through fire ‘cause it amused him. I don’t think he’s really an authority on good health.”

“I’ve no fear of fire,” Meta Knight said.

Delilah sighed. “It’s a cute witticism, Meta, but your health ain’t—”

“You don’t need to coddle me, Your Grace.”
“It ain’t coddling to make sure you’re getting enough rest,” Delilah said. “Your dad pushes you too hard.”

“You worry too much.”

“Just be safe, pet. That’s all I ask.” Delilah leaned close. “And if you do get in a tight spot, I’m sure Sectonia will probably have a couple of A.M.B.E.R. agents snooping around. She’d love to get Nocturne on something—no matter how small, eh? Please, keep that in mind.”

The last thing Meta Knight would ever do was knowingly get his father in trouble with Princess Sectonia.

“He’s my father. He’d never really hurt me.”

“That he intentionally hurts you at all’s too much,” Delilah said.

“He’s just trying to make me stronger.”

“You ain’t gotta be stronger. You’re already strong.”

Meta Knight ducked his head and picked at the sofa. “Self-improvement is always a noble goal,” he said.

“That’s true,” Delilah replied, “But it’s different when it’s you trying to improve yourself versus your dad trying to improve you. Cain’t he already see you’ve become a wholly admirable young man?”

She smoothed the bangs back from his face and kissed his forehead. Meta Knight felt the familiar flash of guilt he always felt when she tried to offer any sort of maternal affection. Dedede’s casual gestures of affection didn’t usually bother him, but hers never ceased to send a shiver down his spine. He’d never told her that it felt like he was betraying his father. Her gentle forehead kisses were undeserved, and he shouldn’t enjoy them.

Now it was worse because he thought about Dedede's kiss, and maybe some very small part of
Meta Knight wanted to engage in that sort of romantic behavior. Father would be furious, of course. He’d made it very clear that Meta Knight was ill-suited for romantic relationships of any kind, and he was—admittedly—right. Meta Knight’s one attempt at a romance, fed by defiance of his father and eagerness to be grown-up, had ended disastrously.

“If…if…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“What’s it, pet?”

Meta Knight took a deep breath. “You want Dedede to marry wealthy, obviously—”

“If he can,” Delilah interrupted. “One of us oughta, but if Dedede finds someone he really loves, that’s more important than saving our house. I cain’t expect—”

“But what about Floralia?”

“It ain’t Dedede’s fault our house is falling. It ain’t even my fault. Well, I ain’t gonna talk down to you. If Dedede don’t marry someone wealthy, I’ll make alternate plans. I can leave my duchy to someone wealthier; then, ol’ Alera don’t get to choose. I ain’t gonna force my kid to be with someone he don’t like.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Why would you bring it up?”

Because he felt like he needed her permission as if somehow her permission could eliminate Nightmare’s insistence that Meta Knight never be involved with anyone. “I…I’m just comparing perspectives,” Meta Knight said awkwardly. “I’ve had a relationship before, and it didn’t end well.”

“You were seventeen, dear,” Delilah replied, “But it didn’t end well. Okay. Lots of people have relationships that don’t end well. Surely, you know I’ve got a string of them, eh?”

“I know. I just…when I was a child, Father would tell me that romance was just…a myth with
good PR. Hormones and chemical reactions,” Meta Knight said, “And he told me once that any relationship I did have would be disastrous—”

“Oh, Meta Knight.”

— and he was right. But I’ve had some…questionable thoughts of late.”

“Questionable thoughts,” Delilah echoed.

He shouldn’t have said anything. If Nova could descend from the sky and strike him dead, that would be an act of great mercy. “Not like…” Meta Knight trailed off. “I haven’t been fantasizing about…copulating, so to speak.”

“Okay, but y’know I wouldn’t care if you were. You’re an adult. If you wanna get laid, just—y’know—be safe about it.”

Meta Knight buried his face in his hands. “Can you just kill me?”

“Kill you? But if I kill you, you’ll never learn,” Delilah said with a laugh. “Child, there ain’t nothing to be embarrassed by. Y’know I talked with Dedede ‘bout this kinda stuff, and I assume someone gave you the talk.”

“Well, Father gave me anatomy textbooks, and I read them,” Meta Knight said, “But I’ve been thinking that I might want to try a romantic relationship. Maybe. I could research how to do it, so I didn’t make mistakes. I just wondered if you thought I might be good enough. For someone.”

“You ain’t gotta find some sorta checklist. You’d be good enough for anyone,” Delilah replied.

“But what if, hypothetically, it’s someone like Dedede? I mean, let’s assume it’s a Dreamlandic nobleman. Am I still good enough?”

“You’re good enough for anyone!” Delilah replied fiercely. “I ain’t gonna say you wouldn’t run into awful people that’d try to make you feel bad ‘bout it, but y’know you’d have my support no matter who it was. As long as they treated you right and weren’t, like, a convicted criminal.”
“A pity. I was planning on going to the castle dungeons and seducing a serial killer,” Meta Knight replied.

Delilah scoffed and tapped him on the nose. “Even Alera ain’t got no prisoners in her dungeons. Less you count the poor servants that gotta go sort through all the barrels of booze. If you’re interested, I’ll take you to see ‘em. Since you grew up with a wine snob, you might appreciate it more than me.”

Meta Knight smiled. “Can you not tell Dedede we talked about this? I’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.”

“Course not.”

“Thank you. I…I’ll miss you when you’re in Floralia,” Meta Knight admitted.

He shouldn’t have said that. He had a father, a parent. He was a monster for feeling affectionate towards someone else’s parent. It was betraying his father. It was betraying Dedede. This wasn’t Meta Knight’s mother, and he had no right to feel close or even sentimental towards her.

“It won’t be that long, pet. I’ll see you for winter break, right? It’ll be good having Dedede and you there. Lighten the place up a bit, and I’ll have some help with the decorations for Saint Knight’s Day. Oh, and the present-wrapping! Speaking of, whatcha want this year?”

“You don’t have to buy me anything.”

“Like that’ll stop me. You cain’t stop me from getting you something, so you might as well tell me! Otherwise, I might get something you don’t like.”

“I don’t want anything.”

Delilah sighed dramatically. “Well, darn it. I’ll just have to take a shot in the dark for Saint Knight’s Day and your birthday!”
“Or you can combine the two.”


Dedede returned and sauntered across the floor. “What’d I miss?” he asked.

“We were discussing what Meta wants for his Saint Knight’s Day present,” Delilah replied.

Dedede clapped his hands together, evidently delighted at the prospect of buying presents. Even though Dedede was, admittedly, the worst gift-giver Meta Knight had ever known. Meta Knight jumped a bit when Dedede’s arm wrapped around his shoulders, but he leaned into the gesture and the warmth. Meta Knight glanced at Dedede’s face. He probably should’ve been unnerved by the mischievous grin, but instead, Meta Knight’s attention was caught by Dedede’s eyes. He’d never noticed just how blue they were before and how nicely they looked with the tan freckles dotting Dedede’s nose. No, this was very bad. Very bad.

Dame Garlude, the Knight Commander of Queen’s Guard, was a tall, imposing woman even while seated in the back corner of a university lecture hall. She was a great beauty with amethyst eyes, porcelain-white skin, and long, silky hair. Her muscles were also very impressive, although they were presently covered by her armor. Bandanna Dee was too nervous to turn around and see if the knight’s gaze was on him and if it carried any recognition with it.

She was probably there to watch Drawcia, the former A.M.B.E.R. agent. If Drawcia was particularly unnerved about the knight commander sitting in her class, she gave no indication of it.

Bandanna Dee sat between Kirby and Dedede, towards the back. Dedede, presently, was drawing some annoyed looks, which he seemed oblivious of and Bandanna Dee was all too aware of. Class started in five minutes, and Dedede had decided that was the perfect time to call Meta Knight. And Dedede took his phone calls very, very loudly. “But Mety, I just wanna make sure you’re okay! I don’t see why I cain’t hang out at your dad’s work all day!”

Bandanna Dee smothered a laugh. He could all too easily imagine Dedede marching into the Holy Nightmare Corporation and trying to lounge around the lobby all day. If the CEO had been anyone other than Nightmare Nocturne, he probably would’ve gotten away with it, too.
“Well…I, yeah, I hadn’t thought about him taking it out on you,” Dedede said, quietening. “I’m sorry.”

To Bandanna Dee’s left, Kirby shifted uncomfortably. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” Bandanna Dee whispered.

Kirby toyed with the page of his notebook, which was a disorganized mess of doodles and sketches with legitimate class-notes scrawled in awkwardly around the drawings. It was clear which of the two took priority.

“If Meta Knight isn’t agonizing over it, you shouldn’t be either,” Bandanna Dee added.

Kirby tilted his head slightly. “I don’t know. I just…I feel like everything’s changed. I like Meta Knight a lot.”

“Lord Dedede, if you’ll kindly end your conversation with Meta Knight, so I can begin class, I’d be very appreciative!” Drawcia called from the front of the classroom.

“Sorry! Bye, Meta! Love you, sugar-cakes!” Dedede shouted. “Pumpkin strudel! Schnookums! My sweetest darling Mety Knight!”

Dedede dramatically lowered his phone and shot Drawcia a frightening, cheeky sort of smile. She appeared unfazed. “How is Meta Knight?” she asked.

“He’s good,” Dedede said. “A bit sore, but…”

Drawcia’s face softened with visible relief. “I’m glad.” She paused for a moment as if she wasn’t sure what to say next. Then, she clapped her hands together and strode to the center of the lecture hall. “Now, just a bit of review. Last class, we talked about the goddess Nova. She was captured by the wizard Dark Mind, and after being freed by King Bikaia, she shattered the wizard’s powers and trapped him where?”

“The Dimension Mirror,” someone supplied.
“Correct. And to shatter his powers, she used a sacred weapon called…?”

“Galaxia!” Dedede answered brightly.

“Very good,” Drawcia said. “To put this a bit into perspective, Bikiaia took the throne—historians believe—around this time. We know there was a brief period of peace. At some point, Galacta Knight was sealed away during this time.”

Bandanna Dee dutifully scribbled notes around a half-finished sketch of Kirby’s profile. Really, he wasn’t in the right to criticize the organization of anyone’s notes.

“Shortly thereafter, the dragon Landia destroyed Halcandra.”

Bandanna Dee perked up at the mention of Landia. He’d chosen Landia for his semester-long project in Drawcia’s other class, picking up from his childhood obsession with dragons. His family had a statue of Landia on their country estate. The massive and fierce four-headed dragon was composed of bronze and stood six feet tall. Bandanna Dee remembered being a child and fantasizing about flying on its back.

That felt so far away. That little girl who loved dragons and her family had grown into a young man who loved dragons and so desperately missed his parents and his younger brother.

He shouldn’t miss them. They’d thrown him out after an hours’ long screaming match. No, that wasn’t entirely fair. They’d had the butler throw him out as if their own child wasn’t even worth escorting to the door.

They’d taken his signet ring, destroying any chance of him gaining any aristocratic favors. He’d left with nothing but a pair of jeans and a sweater, sneakers, and his wallet. His parents had canceled his credit cards very quickly, and he’d never carried cash. The only useful thing he had was the already paid for annual train pass. The train pass was useful because it was first class and included food. Bandanna Dee had spent months living on trains, going from one place to another, eating their food and trying to formulate a plan. None of his relatives would take him. The tabloids might’ve offered some money for the truth of his disownment, but the pain had been too raw for him to go to any.

It’d been sheer luck that changed things.
It’d been another day and another train—an exceptionally crowded one. Bandanna Dee knew he looked awful, and he’d noticed that the other passengers were steadily giving him a wider berth. That was fine. He’d started when someone said, “May I sit across from you?”

Bandanna Dee quietly agreed. He’d turned his head towards the window, trying to make it clear that he wasn’t in a conversational mood. He also was—hopefully covertly—scoping out this other passenger. It’d been Meta Knight, although he hadn’t realized it yet. He’d only thought that his fellow passenger was a very attractive Halcandran man with a beautiful face and hair the color of sapphires. Perhaps, he’d fleetingly hoped that a Halcandran man would understand a little of what it was like to be on the outside. Not that he’d had any intention of revealing anything to Meta Knight.

But Meta Knight had a way of figuring things out for himself. When he’d offhandedly said, “It’s very unfortunate about what happened to the Lady Sailor, don’t you think?” Bandanna Dee knew he’d been caught.

Drawcia had taken to walking up the side aisle and drew Bandanna Dee from his thoughts. “Yes, Adeleine, you’re absolutely right,” Drawcia replied, evidently addressing something her teaching assistant had said.

Bandanna Dee poised his pen and lowered his head, trying to act like the diligent student that he normally was. But he was suddenly stuck trying to remember what he had responded with when Meta Knight said that. He remembered his heart racing. He remembered feeling hot and cold at once. There’d been dread and concerns about Meta Knight being a tabloid reporter. There’d been concerns about Meta Knight—with his signet ring shining bright silver—being a nobleman’s servant and playing some sort of political game.

“Landia is typically depicted as being a benevolent, guardian creature prior to his destruction of Halcandra. Some archaeologists speculate that Landia was, perhaps, acting under the influence of a magical object.” Drawcia flipped on the projector. “Let’s let this thing warm up, and I’ll explain what I mean.”

“How presumptuous of you.”

Yes, that was it. Spoken in an awkward, wavering voice.

He’d thought that Meta Knight’s eyes were lovely but very cold. “I sincerely apologize,” Meta Knight had said. “I merely wondered if you had nowhere to go. You look a bit disheveled, my Lady.”
“Don’t call me that.”

“I’m sorry. What is your preferred address?”

There hadn’t been one. Bandanna Dee hadn’t chosen a new name yet. He had only known that he didn’t want to be Sailor and certainly not my Lady.

The projector displayed a carving of a four-headed dragon with a large, claw-like object affixed to its head. “There is some debate around the nature of this object on Landia’s head,” Drawcia said. “It is notable that prior to Landia’s rampage, images of the dragon do not feature this object. Therefore, archaeologists speculate that it may be some sort of mystical relic or—perhaps, even—a piece of Dark Matter.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bandanna Dee had said.

Meta Knight had nodded. “As you say, I merely wondered if you might want to by my Lord’s guest. I’m going to his estate in Floralia, and you look in sore need of some kindness.”

In hindsight, he probably should’ve resisted more, but being disowned and left penniless had a tendency to make a person reckless.

The next slide was an elaborate fresco of Landia, its long tail coiled around Bikaia, who stood in silver armor with Galaxia in one hand. Nova stood behind him, her slender, white hands on his shoulders. “We generally credit Bikaia with slaying Landia, although some contemporary historians argue that Mace Knight played a crucial role—and possibly delivered the killing blow—to Landia.”

Drawcia pointed to the much smaller, knightly figure in the corner. “If you’ll recall,” she said, “The size of these people does not correspond to their actual height. Rather, we’re using hierarchical scale to show their importance. Naturally, we would—at least, to the people of this era—consider King Bikaia and the goddess Nova worthier of our respect than Mace Knight, however skilled she may have been.”

A hand went into the air. “Professor, I thought that Landia died while guarding Galaxia of the Sacred Fire,” someone said.
“It’s actually both. Archaeologists are admittedly a bit puzzled by the discrepancy. It’s unclear whether one of the stories—or both of the stories—are merely myths. Most scholars agree with the first one simply because we do have evidence of Bikaia Square being covered in dragon fire, based upon the ash we’ve found. We don’t necessarily know if that is Landia, but given the time period, it makes sense. There’s a more recent scholar, who argues that both stories are true. Since dragons can give their lives to someone else, there is speculation that Landia really did die twice—once by Bikaia’s hands and once by…well, we don’t really know.”

Bandanna Dee began doodling a small, cartoony dragon on his notes.

“But how did Galaxia end up in her temple?” a classmate asked.

“We believe the temple was built for Galaxia,” Drawcia replied, “But we aren’t entirely sure. Galaxia hasn’t been especially receptive to answering questions.”

There was a smattering of laughter. Bandanna Dee smiled to himself. She’d answer if the right person asked. Or, perhaps, someone very close to the right person.

“Wasn’t Galaxia stolen a few years back?” a girl from the front row—was her name Chu Chu?—asked.

“She was,” Drawcia replied, “Although since she was stolen, we can assume that there was a level of cooperation involved. I don’t imagine anyone capable of keeping Sacred Galaxia against her will.”

“It wouldn’t have even been illegal if Alera hadn’t decided to get involved,” Dedede muttered.

“It’s illegal, nevertheless,” Garlude replied.

Their whispers seemed to attract Drawcia’s attention, for she swept to the back of the room. “Yes, Dame Garlude, you faced Galaxia’s judgment. I hear it was quite a shocking experience.”

The two women gazed at one another for a long second. “Class dismissed,” Drawcia said. “Remember that you have reading tonight.”
Bandanna Dee ducked his head as he walked past. He glanced over his shoulder at Dededede, who looked as though he intended to say something—likely very offensive—to the knight commander. “Come on,” Bandanna Dee said. “Let’s get home to Meta Knight.”

At the mention of Meta Knight, Dededede hesitated. “Only ‘cause he’s hurt,” Dededede grumbled.

As they filed into the hallway, Bandanna Dee reached for his phone. Kirby darted out beside him. “Do you have plans this evening, Kirby?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Kirby shook his head. “Nope! Did you have something?”

“Well, I just thought you might want to come over,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Sounds great!”

Bandanna Dee had missed three texts, and he froze when he read them. He’d expected Meta Knight, half-facetiously complaining about his Lord. Or maybe Delilah, wishing him farewell again. It was neither.

Hello. It’s Waddle Doo. I realize this is awkward, but I think we should meet.

Let me know.

It’s been a while.

While Saturday morning arrived too quickly, it began rather pleasantly, both Dededede and Bandanna Dee being overly accommodating and helpful. The former had gotten up early to make a massive breakfast, and the latter had spent extra time fixing Meta Knight’s hair. The attention might've left Meta Knight feeling a bit flustered, and while he’d never admit it aloud, he'd enjoyed it. Even if Bandanna Dee and Dededede had both been a bit overdramatic about the situation. They acted as if Meta Knight was leaving for his execution rather than a day at his father's office.
Meta Knight observed his reflection in the glass of the elevator. He looked far better than he had during his last visit to his father’s company. He’d even venture to say he looked nice. Meta Knight adjusted Galaxia’s sword belt and turned around, checking to ensure his shirt was tucked neatly in.

“Twelfth floor,” the elevator intoned.

Meta Knight took a deep breath. His father’s office was at the end of the hallway. The walls were a deceptively gentle gray and the floor black, shining tile. At the end, a massive cherry-wood door loomed forebodingly. He approached the door, adjusted Galaxia once more, and knocked. Maybe Nightmare wouldn’t answer.

The door opened, and Meta Knight couldn’t help but gawk at the tall, blond-haired men that’d opened the door. Being tall and blond wasn’t anything unusual, of course, but Meta Knight recognized this man. Hastily, he bowed. His ribs burned like wildfire, and a wave of dizziness enveloped him. Standing straight again felt even worse. But this was Jecra, the former Knight Commander of Queen’s Guard, the greatest swordsman in all of Dreamland. “Now there’s no need for that,” Jecra replied.

Jecra grasped Meta Knight’s hand, lightly pressed his lips to his knuckles, and trailed his fingers across the delicate underside of his wrist. Meta Knight shivered, and it wasn’t at all because the gesture was unpleasant. Jecra smiled brilliantly. “Rest assured, Meta Knight, the honor is wholly mine. It isn’t often that I meet such an accomplished swordsman, and it’s far less often that I meet one so pretty.”

Meta Knight’s mouth was dry. Jecra thought he was accomplished? And pretty? No, surely not. Surely, he was just being friendly. “I’m really not that good with a sword. I’m nowhere nearly as good as you,” Meta Knight replied, "Sir Knight.”

The knight laughed and winked. “Do you really think I don’t know a good swordsman when I see one?” he asked. “I saw your duel with Lady Sailor’s father and brother. You were so exciting to watch.”

He’d seen that? Meta Knight made a strangled half-laughing noise.

“I must be going, though. You have business with your father, after all. It was nice talking. I’ll see you around.”
As the former knight strode away, Meta Knight stared dumbfounded after him.

“Close the door, Meta Knight,” Nightmare said, shattering Meta Knight's rather pleasant giddiness of having spoken to Jecra of Queen's Guard.

Meta Knight did so quickly. “Father, I—”

“I didn’t realize I’d raised a teenage girl,” Nightmare said. “He’s just a knight—not even that anymore—although he is quite skilled. I don’t just hire anyone, after all.”

“He works for you?”

“Oh, yes.”

But why? There were very few nobles that Meta Knight respected, and Jecra had always been one of the few. Of course, Jecra’s swordsmanship was unparalleled, but he’d always acted so honorably, too. He’d seemed admirable. But to work for Nightmare?

Nightmare strode away from his desk. Meta Knight waited silently. Undoubtedly, Father would find something wrong. Nightmare circled him and hummed, notably avoiding Galaxia's hilt. The wizard reached out and slowly traced a nail down the back of Meta Knight’s neck, tracing down the vertebrae of his spine. Abruptly, the wizard moved before him, hooked a finger beneath the collar of Meta Knight’s shirt, and drew out the silver chain around his neck. “What is this?” Nightmare asked, deceptively sweet.

As if the wizard didn’t already know.

“Dedede’s signet ring. I usually wear it.”

Nightmare’s lip curled. “How cute. So if you get lost, some do-gooder can find you and return you to your master.”
“It’s so I can call in favors if I need them. It’s a mark of privilege, which I’m sure you’re well-aware of. After all, you’ve only recently been granted access to the residential wing of the palace. I’ve had access to those rooms for years.”

“I think when I receive my palatial apartments, I’m going to request they be directly across from the House of the Stars,” Nightmare said.

“You’ll be fortunate if Alera doesn’t try putting you down in the sewers.”

Nightmare smiled. “Hm. I’d make them absurdly pleasant just to spite her. At any rate, you won’t need to wear that absurd thing anymore. I’ll order you one of my rings.”

“I don’t want yours.”

“I don’t recall asking if you wanted it,” Nightmare said.

“If I tried using your signet ring to call in aristocratic privilege, I’d probably end up on some A.M.B.E.R. watchlist.”

“Dear child, I’m certain you’re already on several, and after this whole affair with Yin-Yarn and Prince Fluff, I wouldn’t be surprised if there are a few A.M.B.E.R. agents actively watching you. How much money do you think it would take for them to coax your art history professor out of retirement, hm? Or Dedede’s mother? She seems peculiarly attached, doesn’t she?”

The comment was obviously meant to make Meta Knight distrustful. There was a time when it would’ve worked, too. It might’ve worked still if Nightmare had mentioned Drawcia and left it at that, but mentioning Dedede’s mother made it too clear what his aim was.

“I’m sure Dedede’s mother considers me an investment,” Meta Knight said. “Don’t you take good care of your investments, Father?”

Nightmare leaned very close and grabbed Meta Knight’s jaw with a bruising force. “My investments don’t seem to appreciate my good care. You’ve no idea the headache you’ve caused me, brat. I am being investigated by A.M.B.E.R. agents over this mess, Sectonia is threatening me, and everyone is acting as if I’m somehow being unfair by making you keep our bargain. You’d think I was selling you on a street corner. And now you want to waltz into my office with Galaxia
of the Sacred Fire. Why don’t we add high treason for stealing royal property to my list of potential offenses?”

“I—”

The wizard leaned so close that their faces practically touched. It might’ve been funny if Nightmare hadn’t looked so threatening. He was, after all, a good foot taller than Meta Knight, so he really had to bend over to get that close. Meta Knight smothered a nervous laugh that, undoubtedly, came from some part of him that lacked self-preservation. “You’re almost a threat with your magic and Galaxia,” Nightmare purred, “But without your window-tricks and dimensional powers, with your concussion and fractured ribs, I doubt you’d put up a fight more than a couple of seconds. You may have Galaxia, child, but rest assured, if I wanted to throw you over my desk and beat you into submission, I could. Keep that in mind if you’re thinking of sabotaging any of my important interviews today.”

“Yes, Father.”

Mercifully, Nightmare released him and strode back to his desk. “Good boy,” Nightmare said. “Sit.”

Meta Knight sat and took the tablet Nightmare offered him. “My schedule for today,” Nightmare said. “As of now, you are my shadow. You are to fetch anything I ask and ensure all my appointments begin and end at the appropriate times. If I request you to leave the room, you are to warn me fifteen minutes before the next meeting is scheduled. Then, five minutes. Some of these appointments will include briefings beforehand or other items. Customer Service graciously programmed them all in for you, so you don’t have to go hunting for them. Any questions?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Kirby?”

“My reasons aren’t as malicious as you might think. Kirby’s mother didn’t want you to know about one another, and I feared if I told you the truth, you’d go looking for your long-lost brother. Besides, I promised her I wouldn’t tell you. She didn’t want the…burden of Kirby having a brother. Technically, I kept my word. It’s hardly my fault that the two of you happened to meet and figure it out.”

“Does Kirby know that?”
“No, and I’ve no intention of telling him. That’s between his mother and him.”

Meta Knight frowned. “What is she like? Kirby’s mother?”

“I suppose she’s an adequate parent for Kirby. Not someone you want to meet, though. She’s part of the same narrow-minded trash that makes up that little, backwards town. She tolerates me.”

“Then, what attracted you to her?”

Nightmare laughed. “She’s an attractive woman. I was twenty-two and wasn’t, perhaps, as in control of my hormones as I should’ve been. I didn’t have anyone to guide me like I have you.”

Meta Knight averted his gaze towards the tablet; he recognized a couple of the names. Admittedly, following Father’s advice probably had kept Meta Knight from some difficulties, and Meta Knight’s one attempt at a romantic relationship—explicitly against his father’s advice—had ended disastrously. Granted, Nightmare’s advice also kept Meta Knight from trusting Dedede for years, but Meta Knight wondered if—looking from the outside—his budding friendship with Dedede hadn’t looked really bad. Maybe it really had looked like an entitled nobleman taking advantage of someone. Maybe Nightmare really had been just beyond himself with worry.

“You didn’t plan on Kirby, then?” Meta Knight asked.

“I didn’t even know he existed for a decade,” Nightmare said. “His mother only contacted me because she wanted money—which is fair, admittedly. He’s my child, and I could easily spare a few million for him.”

And was that revelation when Meta Knight stopped being as important? When his father learned that he had another child? A child that was nothing like Nightmare wanted. It wasn’t fair that Meta Knight stopped mattering less. Hadn’t he tried to be what Father wanted? Hadn’t he—

No, he was focusing on the wrong thing. Why hadn’t Nightmare wanted to be part of Kirby’s life? Why hadn’t Nightmare treated Kirby like he had Meta Knight? Not that Meta Knight wanted Kirby to be beaten or—

No, that was exactly what he wanted, wasn’t it? No, not beatings. In spite of what everyone said, they weren’t really beatings. They were fights. And usually, Meta Knight started them by
displeasing his father. As Nightmare often said, if their arguments upset Meta Knight so much, why couldn’t he just behave? But why did he and Father fight when...why could Kirby please Father so much more than Meta Knight could? Why was Kirby more deserving of Father's affection and patience?

Or maybe not. Maybe it was something else. Nightmare's treatment of Kirby's powers was terrible. There was no reason for Kirby to feel so insecure about Copy. It wasn't as if Kirby's power was mind control or something that could only be used to hurt another person. Maybe it was just a less physical form of abuse? Control? A power play? Meta Knight's relationship had been so much simpler before Kirby became involved.

“Do you…” Love him more than me.

No, he couldn’t say that. That was awful. He shouldn’t even be thinking it. Nightmare probably loved them both in his own temperamental way.

“Is that what my mother was, too?”

Nightmare raised an eyebrow.

“A good lay,” Meta Knight clarified.

“No,” Nightmare answered.

“Then, what was—”

“I will never understand why you bear such an attachment to a woman who abandoned you,” Nightmare said, “But I suppose it’s so easy to idolize someone who’s never around, isn’t it? Next question, perhaps, related to your new job?”

Of course. “Your first appointment with Tiffany Ebrum. Isn’t that the cabinet minister’s daughter?”

“Very good. Yes, she is. She’s interviewing me for her school newspaper.”
“She attends Aqua Star College, right?” Meta Knight asked. “Wasn’t her mother, Lady Like, one of the founders?”

“Indeed, she was. Lady Like believed that Dreamland was in sore need of a women’s only liberal arts college. She modeled the school after ones she’d seen in Patchland.”

“So why is her daughter interviewing you?”

“My vast amount of charitable donations.”

“You didn’t donate to my university.”

Nightmare looked thoughtful. “Would that make you happy, pet? How much money do you think our darling Queen donates to that university? I imagine most of it goes to the jousting and fencing teams; that’s where she pulls her recruits for Queen’s Guard. Do you think that comes at the expense of the arts? Or that struggling Halcandran studies program that dear Delilah and Drawcia are trying to get sponsors for?”

“Delilah is trying to fund that?”

“She’s the one who pressured it into being created about—oh, I suppose it’s been a decade,” Nightmare said, “Along with Drawcia and her sister Paintra. It’s really quite clever. There’s a storm brewing, Meta Knight, and she comes from a long line of privilege. But magic left that family line so long ago, and her influence is waning. So she thinks she’ll endear herself to the rising threat. It’s the opposite approach from Alera, who—”

“Or maybe she does care and is trying her best,” Meta Knight replied. “Maybe you just can’t imagine anyone doing anything out of kindness.”

“How did that poor, uncultured woman buy your loyalty?” Nightmare asked. “Do you enjoy being owned so much?”

“They don’t own me. I am contracted to them. You contract people to work for you, don’t you? It isn’t as if we’re in the pre-Bikaian era, and Dedede can march me off to the dungeons and have me
flogged anytime he wants.”

“And if he did—hypothetically—do that, who precisely do you think would dare see him punished for it, hm? I just worry about you, pet. There are so many horror stories about the aristocracy these days.”

“The aristocracy that you’re now a part of. If you really are so concerned about me suffering injustices, why don’t you go to parliament and have them reconsider things? You have a seat now, don’t you?”

“What a novel idea.”

“Maybe you can persuade Haltmann to buy a title, too. You can do it together.”

Nightmare grimaced. “I sincerely doubt we’ll be doing anything of the kind.”

“Are you two still at odds?”

Nightmare glanced at his watch. “You’ll get to see for yourself at eleven. And this conversation has run longer than I anticipated. At any rate, let’s get you started, hm?”

“Yes, Father.”

Nightmare produced a list from the front pocket of his suit jacket. Meta Knight took it, looked it over, and raised an eyebrow. “A large coffee, twelve espresso shots, three pumps of caramel syrup, two pumps vanilla, three pumps dark chocolate, two pumps milk chocolate, six sugar, half-whole milk, half-skim milk, cinnamon powder, extra whip, caramel drizzle, in that order,” Meta Knight said. “Are you serious?”

Nightmare smirked and held out his credit card. “As a heart attack. Leave Galaxia in your car and fetch my coffee. Now hop to it, boy. I’m paying you to perform soul-crushing, menial tasks—not to sass me.”

Meta Knight took the card and put it in his wallet. He was not going to his usual coffee shop for
this monstrosity of an order; the baristas would probably spit in his coffee until the end of time. “The sass comes free,” Meta Knight retorted.

Nightmare smirked. “I’m not above retaliation, child. Test me, and I’ll have you on your hands and knees scrubbing the bathroom floors with a toothbrush. Be back by nine-thirty.”

Maybe he ought to spit in his father’s coffee. “Yes, Father,” Meta Knight replied.

Meta Knight stood and turned away, the tablet held in one hand. “Oh, and Meta Knight?” Nightmare asked.

Meta Knight looked over his shoulder, expecting some sort of rebuke for walking across the floor incorrectly. Nightmare’s mouth was open like he meant to say something, but no words came. Instead, the wizard strode away from his desk and turned towards the massive floor-to-ceiling window behind him. “Aside from the things we discussed, you look…passable,” Nightmare said. “No, that isn’t quite right. You look better than passable. When did you become such a handsome, young man, Meta Knight?”

It was a strangely enchanting moment, the moment where Nightmare had gazed at him with curiosity and genuine fondness. It remained fixed in Meta Knight’s mind as he left the Holy Nightmare Corporation to fetch his father’s coffee. Maybe it would be fine. Maybe this time Father really would do better. Some part of him knew it was a foolish belief, but that small inkling of hope was too powerful for Meta Knight to let go. At least, it was until Meta Knight caught a glimpse of the red blotches on his jaw in the Halberd’s rearview mirrors. Just because Father hurt him didn’t mean he wasn’t trying, did it? If he was a little intense, that didn’t matter. He was trying. Wasn’t he?
Queen Alera Announces Winter Ball for Princess Sectonia's Birthday

Chapter Notes

Mostly Meta Knight this chapter; I have to kickstart the Amazing Mirror and Kirby's Adventure arcs. Next chapter, it's Kirby and friends and evil wizards.

Meta Knight swallowed back the taste of vomit, and after thinking about it for about five minutes, tilted his head beneath the bathroom faucet, letting the cool water flow over his face. It did little for the pain in his skull. He reached for a paper towel and dabbed his face dry. With a sigh, Meta Knight pressed his forehead against the cold marble of the sink. He was going to be the first person ever to overdose on acetaminophen. Hopefully, Dedede would have an eloquent obituary for him. When Meta Knight looked up, his father was there.

Meta Knight straightened and turned around, one hand still massaging his forehead. “I left your coffee with the secretary,” Meta Knight said.

“I appreciate that.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear you vomiting,” Nightmare replied, wrinkling his nose. “I assume you have a migraine?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Have you taken anything for it?”

“Yes, Father.”

The wizard waved his hand, dimming the lights with the gesture, and after a moment’s pause, he strode closer and brushed Meta Knight’s bangs back from his face. “Poor boy,” Nightmare said. “You haven’t been out much since you become concussed, have you?”
“I haven’t been out at all. I planned on going out with Bandanna Dee, Kirby, and Fluff a couple days ago, but I stayed in my dorm and slept. Everyone else has come to me.”

“You weren’t ready for this.”

“No, I’ll be fine! I can do this, Father. I’m not weak.”

“I really doubt you’ll be fine. If you’re trying to work like this you’re going to be unfocused and inefficient. When I agreed to this arrangement, I expected you at your best.”

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised. I never meet your expectations anyway.”

Meta Knight only realized what he’d said after the fact and froze. He didn’t have Galaxia, he still couldn’t access his magic, and he didn’t have any back-up. The last thing he needed to do was provoke his father. Meta Knight wished desperately for something to put between them—a chair, a table, a door, anything. He pushed away from the sink, so his back was no longer against it. This was very bad. This would be the most one-sided fight in history.

Nightmare clenched his fists together. Then, slowly, he unclenched them and offered his hand. “I’m not angry. You’re concussed, after all. Some irritability is to be expected. But we’ll continue this conversation elsewhere. It isn’t very gentlemanly to have it in the bathroom. Don’t you agree?”

It was a trap. Meta Knight considered his options. He could run, but Nightmare would obviously stop him. His father could render him unconscious at any moment. Meta Knight wouldn’t make it more than a couple feet unless his father wanted him to. Screaming might bring someone, but it’d also make Nightmare very angry. And Meta Knight seriously doubted his father’s employees would take the side of anyone except their employer. There wasn’t a way out, and any attempt would only serve to anger his father.

Meta Knight placed his hand in his father’s. The world changed. Nightmare’s teleportation felt a little like crossing dimensions, but instead of the sensation of pushing through water, it was more like being underwater already and swimming. It was quicker, too, just a brief surge of darkness.

They weren’t in Nightmare’s office. Meta Knight frowned at the sight of a completely unfamiliar room. It looked like an employee lounge with a large television, a plush sofa, two chairs, a large cabinet, and a table. Uncommonly unfurnished for an employee lounge. It was more like a living room.
The clock on the wall said nine-forty-five. That meant Nightmare had fifteen minutes before his appointment with Tiffany Ebrum, but Nightmare could do a lot in fifteen minutes. Presently, Nightmare was rummaging through the cabinet.

“I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said, knowing that no defense no matter how eloquent or well-reasoned would be enough. “I didn’t mean that, Father.”

Nightmare pulled a bedspread from the cabinet. Meta Knight recognized the dark blue mass of fabric, embellished with silver-white floral patterns that were either snowflakes or stars depending on how you looked at them; it’d once adorned Meta Knight’s own bed. Nightmare paused and awkwardly held out the bedspread. “For you.”

A nightmare, of course. Meta Knight took the offered blanket and held it against his chest. “Did you plan on—”

“I was trying to make a joke,” Nightmare said, “But I got the tone wrong. You would be unfocused and inefficient, but I shouldn’t have said it that way. You have a concussion, and you clearly weren’t ready for this. I need you to attend my meeting with Max, but after that, you can go. We’ll try this again another week.”

This strange, merciful father was more unnerving than his familiar, angry father, and yet Meta Knight couldn’t help the sharp, sudden relief he felt. He really wasn’t in trouble. His father really did care about him.

“Thank you, Father,” Meta Knight said.

Nightmare’s smile appeared both genuine and charming. “You’re more than welcome, child. I thought in the meantime you might like a nap. I’ve read insomnia often accompanies a concussion, and you do look a bit tired. It might help your migraine also.”

“You planned on me taking a nap?”

Nightmare shook his head. “No. This is my personal lounge. I often take naps in here when I work late or stay overnight. That’s why I had the comforter here. Why waste it and let it just gather dust in your room?”
“That makes sense.” Meta Knight averted his gaze and picked at invisible lint on the comforter.

“Besides, perhaps, you deserve…a little mercy. You did leave Galaxia in your car like I requested, after all.”

“Unsheathed.”

Nightmare’s dream magic manifested in bright, gold sparkles that danced around his slender fingers. “Are you afraid someone might steal her?” he asked with a chuckle. “I’d have someone arrested if they so much as breathed on your car. Lay down, child. I’ll give you a pleasant dream.”

Meta Knight did and pulled the soft blanket over himself. His father leaned over, brushed Meta Knight’s bangs aside, and kissed his forehead. “Sleep well, my child. I’ll wake you when it’s time to meet with Max.”

Kirby didn’t even have any magical defenses around his room. Dark slipped between dimensions and easily arrived inside. Was everyone on this side of the mirror as foolish, or was Kirby simply very naïve?

The room was very strange. Dark recognized the furniture, although he couldn’t discern why Kirby would have two beds; he didn’t seem to live with anyone. It was clean but cluttered. Books and papers dotted the room in stacks. Kirby’s desk was overflowing with papers, paints, and pencils. His sketchbook was open to a half-finished pencil drawing of Meta Knight, his expression stern. Much attention had been paid to the way Meta Knight’s long hair fell over his shoulders. It was an absurd amount of time and devotion to offer only a piece of paper. And why spend time drawing someone he saw almost every day? How disgustingly sentimental. That time could be better spent, but…

But wouldn’t Shadow, Dark’s own brother and Kirby’s mirror-twin, admire something like this? Shadow always had admired artists, even though their Father had forbidden them to indulge in most arts. He made an exception for dancing and music, but even then, Dark suspected that was more for their father’s benefit than theirs.
There were other sketches. Dark picked out Dedede easily, and their other friend—Bandanna Dee?—was there. There was a very lovely profile of the pale, blue-haired young man he’d seen with Kirby. A letter fell onto the floor.

*Hey, Mom!*  

_I really like university. I know you didn’t really want me to go here, but everyone is super nice! I like it a lot, and I’ve made lots of new friends! Some of them are even royalty nobility? I’m not entirely sure what the difference is, but I know Dedede is going to be a duke. And he’s related to Princess Sectonia, and he’s also related to Bandanna Dee, who is I guess also related? Oh! And I met a prince—Prince Fluff! He’s really dashing and nice and gives me sort and I really hope we can be friends._

_I haven’t seen Dad much because I know you don’t like him, but I found out about Meta Knight. Why didn’t you tell me I had a brother? I would’ve loved Meta Knight. He’s very brave and smart and pretty. And mature! And really polite! Did you know? Did you know I had a brother, Mom?_

_I can’t wait for him to meet you!_

Evidently, Father’s relationships were as messy on this side of the mirror as they were on his. Dark laid the letter and sketchbook on Kirby’s desk. He checked under Kirby’s bed—empty save for a pair of bright pink sneakers and a sock. Kirby’s tiny closet revealed a handful of clothes—primarily in pink. No hidden compartments.

Kirby didn’t have Galaxia.

This meant that Dark couldn’t simply march back through the Mirror and overthrow his father. He had to wait and search for Galaxia, and surely, if Galaxia would be drawn to anyone, it would be Kirby. She must be nearby, or there must be some information about her whereabouts. The people of Dreamland surely wouldn’t lose sight of such a valuable artifact. Dark rocked back on his heels and frowned.

Ideally, Dark would find Galaxia, and she’d at least let him take her through the Mirror to Shadow, who’d refused to be involved in any part of this. *Surely*, Galaxia would find Shadow worthy if no one else. He was the mirror-image of Bikaia’s own soul. However, Galaxia wasn’t with Kirby or in his room.
The sword could be anywhere in Dreamland, but surely, there would be some record of her whereabouts. The Dreamlanders wouldn’t be so foolish to misplace her so easily. It was only a matter of looking in the right places and talking to the right people, and since this world was a mirror-image of his own, Dark had a pretty good idea of who he needed to talk to.

True to his word, Nightmare woke Meta Knight twenty minutes before Haltmann’s arrival. The nap actually had dulled the pain in Meta Knight’s skull. He and his father waited in the conference room for Haltmann to arrive. “One thing,” Nightmare said, “Before we meet with Max. Don’t refer to me as Father. I’m performing an experiment of sorts.”

“What sort of experiment?”

“You’ll see.”

“Then, what do I call you?”

Nightmare smirked. “All those courtly manners and you’ve no idea how to address a duke,” he said, texting beneath the table. “He’s coming down the hall.”

Meta Knight pushed aside his chair and stood beside his father. A few minutes later, the doors were opened, and Haltmann strode in. “Stay where you are,” Nightmare whispered to Meta Knight, before spreading his arms wide and striding around the table. “Max! So good to see you!”

Haltmann’s face was paler and bore more wrinkles than the last time Meta Knight had seen him. He was still a short, round man with cold, blue eyes and a fondness for sleek, elegant wigs. He’d given the best hugs when Meta Knight was a child, always very warm and joyful. Haltmann didn’t seem particularly receptive to Nightmare’s embrace, but he accepted it all the same.

Behind Haltmann stood his secretary. She was a pretty woman with a glossy mane of bright pink hair and an impressive hourglass shape which was accentuated by her well-tailored blouse and pencil skirt. Dedede would’ve found her very attractive, and Meta Knight fleetingly considered asking for her number on Dedede’s behalf. Haltmann’s secretary really did look like Susanna, though. She had the same soft blue eyes and the same pale, rounded face that Haltmann had.

“Max! It’s such a pleasure! Would you like some refreshments? I can have my intern fetch
something for you. Water, perhaps? Tea?"

“I’d rather get to the point, Nocturne.”

Nocturne? When had Haltmann begun calling Father Nocturne rather than Nightmare?

Haltmann took his seat first. Meta Knight sat across from Haltmann’s secretary. If she was bothered by her boss’s shortness, she gave no sign of it. “Susie, Haltmann Works’ beautiful secretary,” she said, holding out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance…?”

She sounded like Susanna. “Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura,” he said, shaking her hand.

“You wished to meet with me,” Nightmare said. “What was it you desired?”

“As if you don’t know,” Haltmann replied. “I want you to come through with your end of the bargain. I want M-7110.”

Haltmann didn’t even glance at Meta Knight, who frowned and narrowed his eyes. Why hadn’t Haltmann offered even so much as a greeting to him? Surely, Haltmann recognized him. It’d only been five years, and even if Meta Knight had grown up since then, surely, there couldn’t be many people that shared his name.

“You’ve used Star Dream, haven’t you?” Nightmare asked. “I do wonder what its reasoning is. You don’t remember Susanna, your own daughter.”

“I don’t have a daughter!” Haltmann snapped. “I thought you were above listening to tabloid gossip, Nocturne.”

“But you—” Nightmare cut Meta Knight off with a sweep of his hand.

“Really?” Nightmare asked. “I wonder what else Star Dream has made you forget. Do you remember my children?”
“Of course, I know you have children! Don’t be absurd!”

“What is my older son’s name?” Nightmare asked.

Haltmann’s eyes darted around the room, passing over Meta Knight as if he wasn’t even there. “I—why would I care to remember—”

“Because you watched him grow up,” Nightmare replied, with more passion and concern than Meta Knight had ever heard from his father. “You were there when I first held him in my arms. You were there every holiday—you and Susanna. Don’t you remember the way our children used to run through the house and play together, while everyone was talking business? Or all the times you played chess with my child? Played duets with my child, watched my child while I was away? I love my child more than anything in this world, and I entrusted my precious, dear boy with you. And you don’t remember his name?”

Haltmann’s gaze finally settled on Meta Knight, but even the slightest hint of recognition was absent. It seemed Haltmann merely didn’t want to look at Nightmare.

“Star Dream is too powerful for you to withstand,” Nightmare said. “You need to turn it off. I’ll help you. I just—”

“This meeting is over,” Haltmann said, rising abruptly. “I came here to negotiate. You promised me M-7110, and if you don’t intend to deliver, there’s no need for our alliance any longer.”

“Our alliance? I’ve known you for thirty years. We grew up together. And you want to call it an alliance? Or have you forgotten that, also? Do you keep pictures around your house, Max? Maybe you ought to dig up some of those old photo albums and look very carefully at yourself and the people close to you. Then, decide whether or not Star Dream has taken something from you.”

“Save it, Nocturne. You like to think you know everything, don’t you? You like to think you have everything under control? Well, guess what? Even with all your power and wealth, you’re still the same filthy trailer trash you were as a child. Class is bred—not learned. I bet the moment I leave, you’ll have your intern whoring—”
“Enough.”

Nightmare stood. His face was frighteningly emotionless. Fleetingly, Meta Knight glanced towards Susie and wondered if they were about to witness a full-fledged fight.

“Oh, did I strike a nerve? I mean, what other future does the boy have? What did he major in? Halcandran studies?”

“Very classy,” Nightmare said, “Attacking an innocent boy to bring him into our fight. Aren’t you just so well-bred? Meta Knight, come. We’re going downtown. I trust President Haltmann and his secretary can see themselves out.”

Without waiting to see if Meta Knight was actually following, Nightmare swept out the door, pulling the shadows with him. Quickly, Meta Knight gathered the tablet and his father’s notepad. He hurried after Nightmare, who’d caught the elevator for them. The wizard paced jerkily around as they descended. Meta Knight didn’t dare speak with his father acting so volatile.

Around the third floor, Nightmare pulled out his cellphone. “Customer Service, I’ll be going out for lunch.”

A pause, while his father listened.

“No, it didn’t go well at all. I’ll give you the details later.”

That was an understatement. It’d went disastrously in Meta Knight’s opinion.

First floor. They stepped out. Nightmare had adopted an incredibly brittle smile, but no one seemed to notice. Meta Knight quietly followed along. Even though Nightmare’s anger wasn’t direct towards him, he still thought that his father might feel inclined to lash out and take that anger out on someone else.

“Thank you. You’re a lifesaver. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Nightmare ended the call and shoved the phone in his jacket pocket. They walked to the parking
garage in silence and eventually, ended up beside Nightmare’s sleek, cobalt convertible. “I need Galaxia, Father.”

“We’re going to lunch. I’ll drop you off by your apartment when we’re finished and have Customer Service return her along with the Halberd.”

“But—”

“Not another word, Meta Knight. I’m not in the mood.”

Right. Of course.

*I’ll be fine, Meta Knight,* Galaxia murmured. *I’d never let anyone take me from you.*

Without another word, Meta Knight slipped into the passenger seat of Nightmare’s car. He folded his hands in his lap, over his father’s tablet and notepad. Nightmare got in, started the car, and drove them out of the garage. “You look so disheartened,” Nightmare said, once they were properly on the road. “I’m sorry. I’m angry, but I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s just until we get to the restaurant. Then, I promise you can ask me anything you like about our meeting.”

“That’s fair. Thank you, Father.”

Life was so much easier when Father set specific rules. It was easier not to break them, then. Questions, though? Meta Knight remained quiet and carefully compiled a list.

The restaurant Nightmare chose was a very upscale place, located five minutes away from Dreamland University. It looked like the sort of place that would require reservations and have a dress code, but they were ushered quickly into seats and with no small amount of respect and bowing. Meta Knight wasn’t certain whether this indicated his father was a frequent customer or if the staff merely recognized his father and were being overly respectful to the most powerful wizard in Dreamland.

They were seated very far away from anyone else, which Meta Knight supposed was probably to
his father’s liking. “Fancy some wine, Meta Knight? They have a lovely roscato here. I know you have a fondness for sweet things.”

“Meds,” Meta Knight replied.

“Ah. Yes, of course.” Nightmare paused. “You should try their clam chowder. It’s so difficult to find good clam chowder. No one makes it quite like they do in the orange country, but theirs is very close.”

“Do you ever go back?” Meta Knight asked.

“Sometimes,” Nightmare replied. “I miss the Orange Ocean. Looking out at the sunsets from the second floor.”

“You could see the ocean over the tops of the trees,” Meta Knight said. “When I was a child, I used to sneak onto the roof and watch the moonlight shining on the waves. The stars, too. They were so bright out there.”

Nightmare’s smile was fond. “I know you did. You thought you could fool me with a few pillows stuffed under your blanket.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the waitress taking their orders.

“You know…you could invite Kirby over,” Nightmare said, once the waitress had left. “The two of you could spend winter break by the beach. I might even be willing to let your…lord come. Or perhaps, summer break. I doubt Lynnette would let me have Kirby for Saint Knight’s Day.”

“That’s his mother?”

“Yes.”

“Speaking of mothers—”
“Just one question,” Meta Knight insisted. “My mother’s name meant something to Drawcia. Why did she recognize it?”

“She was an A.M.B.E.R. agent. The agency investigates people and crimes of a magical nature. Of course, Drawcia would recognize her name.”

“What did—”

“Ah, *one question*. You don’t get any more about her.”

Of course not. “Haltmann didn’t recognize me,” Meta Knight said. “What happened to him? What is Star Dream?”

“It’s a machine that grants wishes. Haltmann and I have been working on it since we were teenagers.”

“When you were trailer trash?”

“My mother died when I was very young, and I was raised in a group home,” Nightmare said. “My foster mother was very cruel, and she gave us very little. We were always hungry. Taking in foster children pays decent money if you don’t spend anything to take care of them. But then, you went into foster care for a year or so. You know how…difficult it is to find good people.”

“I never knew you…” Meta Knight trailed off. “I just thought…I never knew you were in foster care like that. Father, I…”

“Of course, you didn’t. I didn’t tell you,” Nightmare replied. “You’re very fortunate that the Duchess found a couple that didn’t mistreat you.”

Meta Knight shrugged. “If they had, she’d have found someone else. Delilah wanted me to live with her and Dedede, but I didn’t want to feel like I was freeloading off them.”
“And foster parents are paid for taking care of children. I see.”

“I didn’t realize you knew about that, though.”

“I kept tabs on you. You are my child, after all.”

The waitress brought their drinks—merlot for Nightmare and warm, mint tea for Meta Knight.

“Did you succeed, then? With Star Dream?” Meta Knight asked.

“Somewhat. We created our machine, but there was a problem. An accident of some sort, and Susie…Max used to insist she was killed, but I wonder if that was the case. The magic I incorporated into Star Dream shouldn’t have killed her. After that, though, Max kept working on Star Dream. I thought he would scrap the project, but we’d come so far I suppose. Or perhaps, he was just grief-stricken and couldn’t bear to leave it unfinished. I wonder if he hoped to see her again.”

“You said he activated it.”

“Yes, and I suspect that’s why he can’t remember Susanna. Or you. Star Dream was never meant to be used without our admin in place. The machine is simply too powerful.”

“So your admin is some sort of AI software to power it?” Meta Knight guessed. “Sort of like a middleman?”

“Something like that, yes. I’ve no doubt that M-7110 can bear the power and knowledge of Star Dream,” Nightmare said, “But I…I fear there would be consequences. I fear our admin would meet the same fate, only more slowly.”

“But if the admin is just software, can’t you just install updates? Or recreate it? Install and uninstall?”
“It’s not nearly as simple as you might think, my dearest child,” Nightmare said.

That sounded reasonable, but, then, Meta Knight wasn’t a computer scientist. What would he know about AI software?

“So what do you intend to do?” Meta Knight asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Nightmare replied. “I’m hoping he’ll think about what I said and come to his senses, but I have my doubts about how successful my attempts will be.”

“If you don’t, will Star Dream continue to make him forget things?”

“I suspect so, yes. I’m having Computer Virus look into it for the specifics.”

“Computer Virus? Isn’t that the man who hacked into A.M.B.E.R. a few years ago?”

Nightmare smirked. “The same. He’s quite an eccentric man, but very good at what he does. Computer Virus isn’t his actual name, after all. We call him that because he’s so good at what he does.”

“You have a rather odd assortment of employees. Computer Virus. Sir Jecra of Queen’s Guard.”

“Ah, Sir Jecra, you admire him, don’t you?”

“He’s the greatest swordsman in all of Dreamland. There’s a lot to admire.”

“There is,” Nightmare said slowly. “I was more interested in specifics, though.”

Specifics? “…I’d like to duel him,” Meta Knight said. “I think he’d present a real challenge.”

“And?”
“And… I mean, he’s not bad looking. He seems to really care about his child. That’s admirable.”

“That’s true.”

“I feel like you expect me to say something, and I’m not getting it.”

Nightmare hummed. “Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t. No matter. I just wanted your opinion of him.”

“It seems like an odd change in career,” Meta Knight said.

“Valiant effort, but I’m not telling you why he’s working for me,” Nightmare replied. “Just remember, my dearest Meta Knight, that everyone can be bought with something. Even the noble Jecra of Queen’s Guard. Even you.”

True to his word, Nightmare had dropped Meta Knight by his dorm right after lunch. The day hadn’t been terrible, but it was still a relief to go home. He unlocked the door and entered, pulling off his tie and coat and dropping them both on the kitchen counter. Meta Knight yawned. Another nap sounded like a very pleasant idea. “This concussion is horrifying,” he said aloud.

_I’m sorry I can’t do more for it. I might be more help once your magic has fully recovered. I just fear that—right now—my power would be too much for you._

Meta Knight placed a pot of water on the stovetop and turned it on. He unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off, and tossed it aside with the rest of his discarded clothing. This left him in a dark blue undershirt and slacks. “It’s fine,” he said. “I know you’re being cautious.”

Dedede strode in, wearing all black. Dedede wearing black was strange enough, but his waistcoat and shirt looked at least two-hundred years out of fashion. “Does that outfit come with a cane sword?” Meta Knight asked.

“No. There is, however, a corset if you feel inclined to try it,” Dedede replied, his voice having
adopted a *very* gentlemanly, northern accent.

“Curses. Of all the times to have fractured ribs,” Meta Knight deadpanned. “I don’t know how I’ll live knowing that I missed an opportunity to have steel boning digging into me.”

“It doesn’t dig in if you wear it properly.”

Meta Knight dropped the chamomile tea bags into the water and spun around to face Dedede, who grinned and offered a mocking bow. “So this is Fae’s new line? I thought she was going with a more…airy interpretation of autumn,” Meta Knight said. "More bright colors and less dead rising from their graves."

“Yes, it is a distinct—”

Meta Knight laughed, causing his ribs to twitch in pain. “Are you going to talk like that the whole time you’re wearing it?”

“Obviously.”

Meta Knight paused and put his hand up by Dedede’s hairline. Dedede started and took a step back. “Sorry,” Meta Knight said. “I just…that cut on your forehead healed up nicely. I was worried there would be scarring."

Dedede sighed and said nothing. An awkward silence stretched between them. When Meta Knight couldn’t take it anymore, he retrieved two cups from the cabinet. Dedede pretended to be engrossed with the medicine bottles on the countertop.

Well-done, Meta Knight. Way to mess everything up.

“Do you want to know how my day went?” Meta Knight asked tentatively.

“Do you know what I think?” Dedede asked. “I think you should let *me* make the tea, while you lay on the sofa. Put your feet up. You must be tired after dealing with your father all morning. Then, you can tell me all about it.”
“Your commitment to that accent is astounding.”

Dedede winked. “Ain’t it, though?”

Meta Knight rolled his eyes and gratefully lay on the sofa, propped up on every spare pillow they had. He kicked off his shoes and nudged them under the coffee table with his foot. "I appreciate being waited on," Meta Knight said, as Dedede arrived with tea.

"I'm sure you do."

Meta Knight took a mouthful of tea; Dedede always made it right, with alarming amounts of honey, but this was...off. Too much honey. "So it wasn't too terrible," Meta Knight replied. "I...I really do think he's trying to do better. To be less..."

"Downright abusive?" Dedede asked.

Meta Knight sighed. "I was going to say intense."

Another sip. The tea made Meta Knight feel very pleasantly warm and had a nice herbal-sweet taste, but something was still odd about it. Meta Knight kept drinking, so he wouldn't offend Dedede. But...it was too sweet. Good, but sweeter than normal.

"I trust your father about as far as I can throw him."

They sat in silence for a few moments. How odd that Dedede wasn't trying to start a conversation. He hated awkward silences as much as Meta Knight. And Nova, was he suddenly very--oh. Oh. Oh, something was very wrong. There was a faint bitterness to his tea, and Meta Knight felt suddenly odd. It was a vague dizziness, the sort of distant fuzziness that came from being buzzed, but...this was tea. He shouldn't feel anything at all.

Logical explanations.
One. Meta Knight was concussed and having another dizzy spell. *But it didn't feel like a normal dizzy spell.*

Two. Dedede, who Meta Knight trusted more than anyone else in the world, had just drugged him.

Three. This wasn’t Dedede.

“I think I left my wallet in Father’s car,” Meta Knight lied, as he pulled out his cellphone and dialed Dedede’s number.

Two rings. Three rings. “What’s up, sugar-cakes?” Dedede asked.

But the Dedede sitting across from Meta Knight hadn’t spoken. Oh. “Hello, Father, I think I left my wallet in your car. Do you mind checking?”

A pause.

“Oh, okay, Dedede said. “I’m gonna guess you cain’t talk to me for whatever reason. Are you in some kinda danger? Do I need to come back home? Call the police? A.M.B.E.R.?"

“Probably. Hold on. I can check my room for it, though. Maybe I didn’t take it this morning?” Meta Knight stood and smiled in the Other Dedede’s direction.

He seemed to be buying it. Fortunately.

Meta Knight walked at a very careful pace to his room, opened the door, and closed it behind him. He locked it. “Dedede, there’s someone in our apartment that looks just like you, but it’s obviously not you,” Meta Knight said. “I think he drugged me with something. Probably something in our kitchen.”

“What? Nova’s grace! Dammit! I hope it weren’t my insomnia meds. Their dosage is...I mean, um...don’t panic. Don’t panic! You’ll prolly be okay—”
“I’m not panicking, but I’m not really in any shape to fight. I don’t even have Galaxia.”

“What? Where is she?”

“The trunk of the Halberd. Be quiet. I’m going out the window.”

Meta Knight shoved his phone in his pocket. Then, he reached underneath his bed and unsheathed Master. Master had been a gift from Dedede, a beautiful sword with perfect balance. Unfortunately, Master was his primary dueling sword, and dueling swords were never kept very sharp. It would cut, but it wasn’t ideal for a life-or-death, fighting the dark forces situation. Still, it was better than nothing.

He leaned over the desk and pushed open the window. The Other Dedede would be getting suspicious by then.

Behind you!

Meta Knight turned around, his sword barely parrying the blade that came towards his face. It wasn’t the Other Dedede. The mere seconds seemed to stretch into an eternity. The first thing Meta Knight noticed was that his opponent only had a single, scarlet eye; the other had clearly been damaged somehow. Perhaps, from a sword-blow, although striking an opponent’s face was considered very unchivalrous. The surprise was followed by a vague sense of familiarity, stirred up at the sight of warm, autumn-kissed skin, the high cheekbones, the thick, blond hair. The Other Meta Knight struck again, and their blades crossed. It was clear the Other Meta Knight was trying to pin him against the desk. Meta Knight pushed against him, feigning an amateur move. Then, he swept his foot out, darting to the side as he lowered his blade. The Other Meta Knight stumbled forward with the sudden loss of resistance. Before he could recover, Meta Knight was ready.

He drove his blade across the other’s arm. It tore through the fabric of his black coat, blood pouring quickly. Good, the Other Meta Knight wasn’t wearing armor underneath. But that cut probably wasn’t very deep.

The Other Meta Knight grinned. “My, you’re a very spirited young man, aren’t you?”

“Who are you?”
“Dark,” he replied.

“Nice name,” Meta Knight said, shifting his weight forward.

“Oh, like *Meta Knight* is so much better. What does that even *mean*?”

Dark lunged forward, and Meta Knight was ready. He parried the blow coming towards his chest and tried to strike Dark’s chest. His opponent stepped back, out of range, and swung left. It looked like a feint. Meta Knight parried again, just as Dark twisted his blade right. Dark was powerful and *fast*. Meta Knight stepped to the right, trying to edge back towards the window. If he could get there without Dark pinning him against the desk, he had a chance at escape.

Meta Knight *wanted* to fight, but he knew he wasn’t strong enough to fight someone that was his equal in skills. Not with his concussion and fractured ribs. And if Dark pulled out some sort of magic, Meta Knight wouldn’t last more than a few seconds.

Meta Knight went on the defensive, aiming for Dark’s wrist. Meta Knight’s blow landed, and Dark dropped his sword. Meta Knight kicked it away.

*Run!* Galaxia shrieked.

He made it two steps. Something heavy and sharp tore across Meta Knight’s shoulder and threw him backward. He yelped as his back struck the wall. Warm blood numbed the stinging across his arm. Dark had wings. *Of course*, he did.

“I can do that, too,” Meta Knight said, gasping for breath.

But unsheathing his wings *hurt*. They tore through the skin of his back, and Meta Knight had no idea how to fight with them even if he had them out. The Other Dedede burst in, having pried the door open. Evidently, Meta Knight’s tuition hadn’t gone towards decent locks.

Meta Knight stumbled up, his sword held ready. His ribs ached. This was bad, very bad. He couldn’t out-fight them. Keep them talking, then. Hope by some miracle that someone arrived in time to save him. Hope that A.M.B.E.R. really was watching him and that someone with magical powers was about to burst in and help him. “Wh-what do you want?” he asked.
Dark smirked. “I would tell you, but I fear you’d interfere with my plans. I can’t have that.”

Dark vanished. Meta Knight felt Dark before he saw him and twisted around, aiming for Dark’s throat. There was a burst of wind magic, very fast and very powerful. Meta Knight was forced back. There were arms around his waist as the Other Dedede grabbed him from behind. He was too close for Meta Knight to use a sword, so he twisted around and punched the other man’s throat. Dedede’s grip loosened just enough for Meta Knight to duck away and back towards the open door.

Meta Knight thought he might be sick. Even with all the adrenaline, the exertion and his injuries were catching up to him. Dark retrieved his sword and teleported again. Meta Knight knew what was about to happen, but without his magic…

Meta Knight called his dimensional powers to him. The dimension rippled like water, very cool and very comforting. The force of the teleportation brought him to his knees. He dropped his blade as pain jolted through his chest. It felt like something had snapped somewhere inside him, close to his heart. Meta Knight gagged on nothing. The Other Dedede grabbed him from behind and wrenched his arms behind his back. Meta Knight thrashed futilely as the Other Dedede forced him to his feet.

Nova’s grace, that hurt.

Dark approached and casually patted Meta Knight’s head. “There’s a good boy.”

Meta Knight snapped at his hand. Dark pulled back and grinned. “Did you just try to bite me?” he asked, his tone mock-scandalized. “That wasn’t very polite.”

“And breaking into my dorm, drugging me, and attack—”

Dark moved forward in a quick, fluid motion and sank his teeth into the place where Meta Knight’s neck met his shoulder.

“—ow!”
There was blood. An *alarming* amount of blood. Dark licked his lips, and Meta Knight looked away. This did little to help with the sick feeling in his stomach, and Nova’s grace, *bloodborne pathogens*. And Meta Knight was thinking of somewhere very cold and of thorny vines wrapped around his thighs and stomach and neck. And how humiliated and defenseless he’d felt when Marx tauntingly stroked his cheek. *Hey, now. Don’t be upset, Mety Knight! I have something wonderful in store for you!*

Galaxia had saved him then, but she couldn’t save him now. Reluctantly, Meta Knight gathered his courage and looked at Dark again. If he was going to die, he was going to ignore the pain in his ribs and the blood still flowing from his neck. He was going to die while glaring daggers at his assailant.

“I bite, too. So maybe you shouldn’t challenge me.”

“You repulse me,” Meta Knight said, trying to kick his double.

Dark pulled a pair of bejeweled, silver handcuffs from his coat. They looked more like a fashion accessory than anything that could restrain anyone, and Meta Knight wondered if their dramatic appearance indicated they were magical in nature. “I’m wounded,” Dark said. “This isn’t anything personal. You were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Meta Knight struggled even as the handcuffs were clicked around his wrists, but the Other Dedede was simply too strong. Meta Knight was *so* tired of passing out, of being knocked out, and of being so outclassed by *everyone*. “You do realize that if you kill me, you’ve signed your own death warrant, right?” Meta Knight asked between rough gasps for air. “My father is the Nightmare Wizard.”

“I don’t plan on killing you,” Dark replied. “I merely need you to stay out of my way, so I can masquerade as you and search for Galaxia.”

*Galaxia?*

“You’ll never find her. She was stolen years ago…” he trailed off.

Whatever he’d been drugged with was beginning to work. He felt like his words weren’t coming out right, and his knees felt weak.
Dark ran his hands through his short, blond hair. It lengthened and darkened until it matched the exact color and length of Meta Knight’s own hair. This was bad. No, surely, Dedede wouldn’t be fooled by this. Meta Knight had warned him. Dedede might even still be on the phone, listening. Father wouldn’t be fooled by this. Still, Meta Knight’s stomach churned with dread as Dark fashioned himself into an exact copy of Meta Knight. Dark winked, his bright irises having faded to a soft grey. “We’ll see about that.”
The King's Mourning Day Preparations Are Underway

Chapter Notes

What's this? Seraphina Bellemonte updating *twice* in the month of October? Has something terrible happened? Is it the end of days?

...actually, I've had most of the Amazing Mirror arc written for a while, so the next few chapters through the "Nightmare in Dreamland" arc should actually come out in a semi-timely fashion. Unfortunately, you'll still probably get the Christmas expy chapter in February.

“Hey, Sir! You dropped this!” Dedede’s voice was loud enough to wake the dead.

Meta Knight flinched as his would-be target, a wealthy nobleman, turned around. Damn Dedede. Why did he have to interfere and be so—so jovial about that? As if to add insult to injury, Dedede sauntered up from behind and patted Meta Knight’s hair, as if he was Dedede’s lapdog. “Your wallet fell right outta your coat,” Dedede said. “Good thing my servant saw it, huh?”

Fuming, Meta Knight handed it over. He averted his eyes, trying to look appropriately submissive to his superiors.

Dedede rewarded him with another pat on his head. “Good boy,” Dedede cooed.

“Thank you, Lord Dedede,” the nobleman said. “I’ll need to be more careful in the future.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Dedede replied, “But hey, I gotta get going. Busy, y’know?”

Meta Knight flinched when Dedede linked arms with him and pulled him away in the most passive-aggressive manner possible. “I hate you,” Meta Knight said.

“Wanna stay in my family’s dungeon for petty thievery?” Dedede asked.

“Want to find out how powerful I really am?” Meta Knight retorted.
“You forget your place.”

“Well, forgive me, my Lord. I’m so sorry that I’m not the demure servant you think I should be. Would you like me to entertain you?”

**Meta Knight** called the wind to him and let it ruffle **Dedede**’s hair. **Dedede** visibly tensed, but he didn’t release **Meta Knight**’s arm. When **Meta Knight** tried to free himself, **Dedede** grasped hands with him instead. “I didn’t mean like that. I meant that you think you’re better than every freaking body, and you ain’t. You ain’t above the law, and stealing is wrong. If you’re gonna be homeless, you oughta—”

“I will not beg,” **Meta Knight** said.

“Then, go to—I dunno—soup kitchens or something. Get a job. I offered you one, remember?”

“How are you so out of touch with everything?” **Meta Knight** asked. “It’s really quite remarkable.”

**Meta Knight** twisted his wrist free and snatched **Dedede**’s wallet from his coat pocket. **Dedede** had the nerve to laugh as **Meta Knight** stormed away from him. **Meta Knight** was well-aware of **Dedede**’s steps behind him. “Hey, where’re you going?” **Dedede** asked. “I don’t carry cash. Ain’t nobody gonna believe you’re authorized to use my card.”

**Meta Knight** spun around, and **Dedede** was suddenly there. Because of their height difference, **Meta Knight** had to crane his neck to meet **Dedede**’s gaze. “You’re buying me lunch,” **Meta Knight** said. “I’m hungry, and you ruined my chances of stealing his money.”

“Soup. Kitchens.”

“Are only open three days a week and only from nine-to-five, and it’s one meal only.”

“Job,” he said.
“I had one,” Meta Knight replied.

“Should’ve stuck with it.”

Meta Knight clenched his jaw. “I might be desperate, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to be someone’s punching bag.”

“What was your job? Cage-fighting?”

“I cleaned floors for a noble house.”

“Y’know nobles ain’t allowed to beat their servants anymore, right?” Dedede asked.

“Right. I’ll waltz into the palace and petition the Queen. I’m sure she’d be very sympathetic to my plight.”

“Y’know you’re good at making excuses. If you really wanted to improve things, you’d just go back to your dad. Instead, you wanna be a victim and have everything handed to you.”

“Why can’t you just leave me alone? What sort of abhorrent human being enjoys making another person’s life harder? And you—you’re jealous, aren’t you? Because my father has money, and you enjoy me struggling, don’t you? You are so self-centered and petty—”

Dedede snatched his wallet back. “I am the Heir of the Stars. I ain’t—nor will I ever be—envious of gutter-trash like you. I offered you a job, too, and you didn’t take it.”

“Between starving and licking your boots for you? I’ll take starving. Thank you.”

“Y’know being mouthy like that’s gonna get you in trouble someday,” Dedede said. “I ain’t ever seen someone with such atrocious manners.”

“My manners are fine. You just aren’t worthy of them,” Meta Knight replied.
Meta Knight tried walking away, but Dedede followed. Of course, he did. Meta Knight resolved to ignore him. Eventually, Dedede would get bored with his annoying, little game. “So why’d you leave ol’ Nightmare Nocturne anyway?” Dedede asked. “Your daddy not get you something you wanted?”

Meta Knight tensed. “He threw me through a glass table, and I—”

Was terrified.

Meta Knight took a moment to regain his composure. “And he said if I was going to be so ungrateful, I should try making it on my own. He said he didn’t want me anymore,” Meta Knight tried to say it flippantly. As if it didn’t matter.

It shouldn’t matter. He’d had it coming to him by being so bratty. Curses, Meta Knight had thought he was over it all.

Dedede grasped Meta Knight’s arm and spun him around. “Let go,” Meta Knight said, glaring daggers.

Dedede’s face softened. “I—I’m so—”

“I don’t need your pity,” Meta Knight retorted, jerking his arm free. “Just leave me alone. That’s all I need from you.”

When he walked away the second time, Dedede didn’t follow. Good. He’d gotten bored, or Meta Knight had guilted him into abandoning his little game. Hopefully, for good, although Meta Knight very much doubted it.

When Meta Knight called, Dedede had been downtown shopping. There hadn’t been any particular reason for it. It’d merely been something for him to do with Bandanna Dee, Kirby, and Fluff. Meta Knight had taken the Halberd, but they’d driven downtown in Fluff’s limo. Thus, they’d returned to
the dorms very quickly. Somehow, Nightmare had still beaten them back. The wizard sat in the Halberd, his nails tapping on the steering wheel.

“Why’re you here?” Dedede asked.

Nightmare pushed the button to open the trunk. “Because of her,” he said.

Dedede walked around and retrieved Galaxia from the Halberd’s trunk. Of course, Dedede couldn’t wield the sword, but having her in his hands made him feel a little better, a little closer to Meta Knight.

“Why was she in the trunk?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Nightmare made a hissing noise. When Dedede looked at the wizard, he saw Nightmare had curled his hands tightly over the steering wheel. “I didn’t want him in my office with stolen property,” he said evenly. “Then, I took him to lunch and dropped him off here. I had no way of knowing that he would be attacked.”

Dedede felt an unwelcome inkling of sympathy for the wizard.

“Stolen property?” Fluff cut in. “Are you implying that Meta Knight’s sword is the Galaxia? It isn’t a replica?”

“Yeah,” Bandanna Dee said.

“So why’re you waiting out here?” Dedede asked.

“Because A.M.B.E.R. refuses to let me inside until they’ve finished investigating, and this is their fault to begin with,” Nightmare said, “And I will be having a word with Sectonia about it.”

“What do they have to do with this?” Kirby asked.

“Because one of their agents watched this happen,” Nightmare said. “She saw Meta Knight being
abducted and did nothing to prevent it. Now my only child—my oldest child—is missing, and it’s their fault. And if he’s hurt, I will destroy them. I will sue A.M.B.E.R. for all they’re worth. I will —”

“Okay, but what do we know about it?” Dedede asked. “Where’s Meta?”

“We don’t know for certain, although we have some suspicions. Galaxia is aware of what is around Meta Knight, but thus far, it’s only been memories. She suspects there’s someone looking through his thought. Meta Knight doesn’t seem very aware of that. He’s likely unconscious.”

A familiar young woman with dark hair and dark eyes stepped out of their dorm. “Nova’s grace, is that Adeleine?” Dedede asked.

“Yeah,” Bandanna Dee replied. “Is everyone at our school involved in A.M.B.E.R.?”

“Everyone but us, I reckon,” Dedede said.

“You have clearance to go in now,” Adeleine said, “But don’t touch anything.”

“It took you long enough,” Nightmare said, nearly hitting Bandanna Dee with the car door.

The wizard stormed from the vehicle, the shadows leaping at his feet like enraged scarfies. “Charming,” Fluff muttered.

He didn’t know the half of it. Adeleine took a startled step back as Nightmare walked past her; he’d practically shoved her aside. Dedede followed, vaguely aware of Kirby trying to apologize for his father’s rude behavior.

At first, their apartment looked deceptively normal. The kitchen looked fine. At first glance, the living room looked fine. Nightmare paused behind the sofa, so Dedede peered around him to see what had captured his attention. Blood spotted the carpet.

Dedede’s stomach churned. “D’you think it’s Meta’s?”
Yes, it's his, Galaxia murmured.

Dedede started. “Was...was he hurt badly?”

Most of the injuries were superficial, she said. He'll likely be very sore when he wakes, though.

“Who are you talking to?” Fluff asked.

“Galaxia,” Dedede replied.

“Oh. Right. She...talks.”

“The Galaxia?” the Adeleine asked.

“Can you go stand in a corner or something?” Nightmare snapped. “You've been remarkably unhelpful today.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“There’s more blood in his room,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Is there?” Nightmare asked.

“Galaxia said his injuries were mostly superficial,” Dedede offered.

“So he’s...okay?” Kirby asked. “No, I mean, he’s not—he’s not going to bleed to death, is he? Because this is a lot of blood, and...”

“No. He—” Nightmare cut off abruptly and turned towards the door. “Oh, wonderful. Just who I
wanted to see.”

Princess Sectonia, clad in a very fashionable, tight-fitting black gown, strode in. Adeleine and Bandanna Dee bowed respectfully; Kirby did, too, although very awkwardly. Dedede bowed his head and cut his eyes toward Fluff. Fluff didn’t even acknowledge her presence. “Apologies for taking so long. I was at my fitting for my father’s funeral,” Sectonia said.

Sectonia’s father, the late King Daedelus, had been assassinated by a Halcandran servant over fifteen years ago, and Queen Alera insisted on reenacting the man’s funeral every year on the anniversary of his death. She said it was to pay respects to her beloved husband. Dedede suspected it was because she wanted to remind everyone who their common enemy really was. Like every other aristocrat, Dedede had received an invitation weeks ago. He’d thrown it away, hoping Meta Knight wouldn’t realize the funeral was approaching until it was too late, so they wouldn’t have to go.

Sectonia still had pins in her dress; Dedede wondered if she’d literally ran out of her fitting.

“Oh, is that coming up? I didn’t receive an invitation,” Nightmare said.

“That’s because you weren’t invited.”

“Right. Because you don’t like me, do you?” Nightmare asked. “Is that why you didn’t help my child?”

“I bear no ill will towards Meta Knight,” Sectonia replied. “He’s a far better man than you will ever be.”

“So it’s just incompetence, then. Did you never think *hm, perhaps, I should stop the clearly magical abduction taking place*?”

Sectonia placed a hand on the Adeleine’s shoulder. “Adeleine wanted to, but Mother told her not to interfere. She had no choice but to obey. It was…a wise decision. Adeleine didn’t have back-up.”

“A group of college students arrived more quickly than you did,” Nightmare sneered. “*College students.* I am growing very weary of your gross incompetence. One of your agents let *my child* get magically abducted. I don’t care if your agent didn’t have back-up. I don’t care what the Queen
said. A.M.B.E.R. is supposed to prevent and investigate magical crimes, and you let someone hurt my child!”

“I’m sorry,” Sectonia said. “That’s why I’m here. I want to help you find him.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“I think you do,” Sectonia replied, “Because unlike you, I know where he is.”

“How?” Dedede asked.

“By tracking his phone,” she said. “The creature who took Meta Knight also appears to have dimensional powers.”

“But the odds that anyone would have the same powers…” Bandanna Dee trailed off.

“Would be astronomically unlikely, yes,” Sectonia said. “Until Meta Knight was born, dimensional powers were considered to be a purely theoretical branch of reality warping magic. However, I suspect this creature is Meta Knight, or rather, a reflection of him.”

“A reflection?” Kirby asked.

“Interesting hypothesis,” Nightmare said.

“Meta Knight left this dimension with his captor,” Sectonia said, “But they reentered this dimension at a later point. The interesting thing is that they reentered in an antique shop, of all places, before vanishing again.”

“So what are you saying?” Fluff asked. “What does that have to do with reflections?”

“This antique shop has a mirror, which they entered,” Sectonia said.
“You mean the Dimension Mirror?” Dedede asked. “Archaeologists have devoted their careers to trying to find that mirror, and it's in an antique shop? You gotta be kidding.”

“Unfortunately not,” Sectonia replied. “I believe that Meta Knight is in the Mirror World.”

“But isn’t…isn’t that where Nova imprisoned Dark Mind?” Kirby asked.

“Yes,” Sectonia replied, “And there’s a good chance he’s still alive.”

“So to rescue Meta Knight, we need to enter the Mirror World and somehow defeat a centuries’ old sorcerer?” Bandanna Dee asked. “A sorcerer so powerful that even the goddess Nova could only half his power and seal him away?”

“Yes, but that was Nova and Bikaia without the aid of Galaxia,” Nightmare said. “Nova was also significantly weakened by that point, and if I’m correct, we have Bikaia and Galaxia. We might be able to get Galacta Knight as well.”

“Uh…not to rain on anyone’s parade,” Dedede said, “But we got Galaxia. I don’t see the undead hero-king of Dreamland walking around. There don’t appear to be an undead knight either.”

“It’s the reincarnation of Bikaia, not Bikaia himself,” Nightmare said.

“Reincarnation?” Bandanna Dee asked. “That happens? We know that happens?”

Nightmare sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s complicated,” Sectonia replied, “But yes, Bikaia was reincarnated.”

“So who is it?” Kirby asked. “Prince Fluff?”

Nightmare’s laugh was mocking. “Does Fluff have Bikaia’s signature ability?”

Kirby’s jaw dropped. Dedede thought he might pass out. “Pipsqueak is the reincarnation of King Bikaia,” Dedede deadpanned. “Y’all cain’t be serious.”
“Do you honestly believe I would joke about this with Meta Knight’s safety on the line?” Nightmare asked.

“Well, I’m sure this comes as something of a shock,” Sectonia said. “You don’t need to be so obnoxious, Nocturne.”

“But it doesn’t come as a shock to you,” Nightmare replied. “How did you know?”

Sectonia took a deep breath. “Adeleine, would you step outside for a moment, please?”

The A.M.B.E.R. agent nodded. “Of course, Your Royal Highness.”

Sectonia waited until Adeleine had left and closed the door behind her before speaking again. “I know,” Sectonia said, “Because I’ve had dreams of Bikaia and Galacta Knight since I was a little girl. I’m…I’m a reincarnation of someone, too.”

“No one said anything. Dedede was half-sure he was dreaming, and he was going to wake any moment and tell Meta Knight just how wild of a dream it’d been. Hysterical laughter bubbled from his throat. “Lemme guess,” he said. “If Kirbs’s Bikaia, and she’s freaking Nova, Meta’s Galacta Knight, huh?”

“For once, you’ve got something right,” Nightmare drawled.

No, this wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening.

“How did you acquire such information?” Sectonia asked.

“Meta Knight had nightmares as a very young child. Not of my doing,” Nightmare added, “About being trapped. About killing a woman and dying. I was…concerned, so I looked.”
No. No, no. “Okay. What a minute! You’re telling me that Kirbs is the reincarnation of Bikaia, Meta’s Galacta Knight, the Princess is Nova, and—and history’s gonna repeat itself or something?” Dedede asked. “That’s ridiculous. You ain’t—you’re wrong. There ain’t no way Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura would ever slaughter innocent people!”

“We aren’t certain history is repeating itself,” Sectonia replied. “At least, I’m not. It’s like a game of chess—the same players, but a different play each time.”

“Is that why your mother loathes him so much?” Nightmare scoffed.

“No,” Sectonia said, “Because I…I haven’t told her. She thinks Meta Knight is merely an uncommonly powerful sorcerer and a gifted swordsman.”

An uneasy silence fell. Dedede wasn’t sure if it was because of the impossible revelations that had just been revealed, or because Galacta Knight was infamous for doing what no other person in history had ever done—slaying the Star-Goddess of Dreamland, Nova the Wish-Granter.

The goddess Nova was associated with the stars, the moon, and water. When Meta Knight had been a very young child, his father had taken him to the beach, and they’d taken pitchers of water to offer the goddess. They would wait until moonrise on the Winter Solstice before trekking through the sand to the water. There, they’d poured their pitchers of water onto the sand and made their wishes to Nova beneath the nightscape.

That had all ended when Nightmare stopped coming home for holidays, and Meta Knight had been forbidden to go to the beach himself. Instead, they’d made their Solstice wishes whenever Nightmare returned—days or weeks later. Nightmare insisted the day didn’t really matter, but it mattered to Meta Knight.

Dreamland’s capital wasn’t near the ocean, and it didn’t have any of Nova’s sacred spaces, except for the Fountain of Dreams, which only the royalty was allowed to access. Instead, Meta Knight had resolved to make his Solstice wish to Sacred Galaxia.

“Hey, brat!”
Really? Even on Solstice?

Dedede was usually accompanied by a group of friends—most of them new money. They were among some of the most obnoxious people Meta Knight had ever met, so, in general, he tried to avoid them. Unfortunately, they frequented the downtown area, where Meta Knight happened to live and also frequented. Meta Knight glanced up, saw that it was Dedede and only one of his friends, and kept walking.

“Hey! Don’t ignore me! What’re you doing?”

Meta Knight heard them following. “I’m making my Solstice wish,” Meta Knight replied.

“What’s gutter-trash even wish for?” Dedede’s friend asked.

Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek. “The blood of my enemies,” he replied.

“Is that a threat? Maybe I break your jaw and we see how feisty you feel then.”

Meta Knight suppressed a shudder and kept walking. While he was certain that Dedede wouldn’t break his jaw, Meta Knight wasn’t entirely convinced Dedede wouldn’t let his friends do it. “Hey, c’mon. You really gonna pick on some kid trying to make their Solstice wish?” Dedede asked.

“So he can find a water fountain or something. Galaxia isn’t going to answer a wish for someone like that. I bet he’d die if he touched her.”

“I bet I’d have more success than you if I touched her,” Meta Knight muttered.

“Oh, yes. The grand and noble street-rat. I’m sure you’d be—”

Meta Knight slammed the door to Galaxia’s temple right in that obnoxious nobleman’s face. A couple guards looked in his direction, but, overall, the temple was quiet. Most people had made their wishes during the day. Meta Knight kicked off his shoes and placed them to the side; it was improper to enter sacred space with one’s shoes on. Then, he approached the large double doors that opened into Galaxia’s chamber. Typically, Galaxia was offered fire, and there were small
votive candles located in the antechamber. Meta Knight lit one, cupping his hands around the tiny glass candle holder, and took it with him.

The inner chamber of Galaxia’s temple was a round space. The walls were composed almost entirely of massive stain glass windows depicting Galaxia and the goddess Nova. Meta Knight noticed none of it on his first visit. Instead, his eyes were drawn to Galaxia, resting in her pedestal. The colored light from the windows left spots of color on her golden blade, and her mirror-finish was so bright that Meta Knight could see his face reflected in her steel. Even the air around Galaxia felt sacred. It was still and bright.

“Oh, wow,” Meta Knight whispered.

He bowed his head and sat on his knees, leaning back on his heels. Carefully, he placed the candle before him. “Sacred Galaxia, I want…” Meta Knight paused. “I mean…that sounds selfish, doesn’t it? I’m sorry. Father is always chastising me for being selfish. I guess I want to wish for his approval. Or maybe just his love. Do you think he still loves me? Do you think he’d take me back? He said he didn’t want me anymore. No, I’m sorry. I just sound like I’m whining, don’t I?”

For several minutes, he stared silently at her. Then, gathering some of his steel, Meta Knight gulped and slowly climbed to his feet. He knew he wasn’t worthy of Galaxia; no one was. Still, ever so often, someone would try to pull her from her pedestal and suffer the consequences. The upper classes had done so for years, and occasionally, Meta Knight would hear a news story about how this person or that person had tried to pull the sword. It was said that Galaxia’s judgment brought a sort of spiritual clarity and guidance. Meta Knight carefully set his candle aside and approached her pedestal. He held out his hand, his fingertips a hairsbreadth from her hilt.

“I just want to know how bad I really am,” Meta Knight said. “Am I even worthy of Father’s attention?”

His hand lighted on her steel. It felt like a branding. Memories flashed in his mind, too quick to catch, and it hurt. And an angry, ancient presence consumed and shredded every thought he’d ever had or experienced. It was awful, horrifying, magnificent, and painful beyond anything he could’ve imagined. He screamed.

This wasn’t purifying or enlightening or any of the countless other wonderful, glorious things Galaxia’s judgment had been described as. It hurt. He’d never fathomed being this unworthy. He’d just made everything so much worse.

His knees buckled. There was blood; he’d cut his knee on her pedestal. Deep breaths. Father
would tell him to clear his head and compose himself. Distantly, he noted the wetness on his face, and it took him a moment to realize it was tears.

Shifting, considering. The presence was still there. Be polite. Appeal to her mercy.

“The thank you for your judgment, Galaxia of the Sacred Fire,” Meta Knight rasped, bowing his head.

The hem of a dress appeared in his vision. Startled, Meta Knight jerked his head up. It was a woman, and she was so beautiful that Meta Knight’s throat went dry at the sight of her. Any words fluttered away from his grasp, and he simply couldn’t think about much except how her light, golden dress seemed to shimmer like starlight over her dark skin, how soft the curls tumbling down her shoulders must be, and how her eyes were the color of the same blood flowing through his veins. She was the most beautiful, celestial being he’d ever encountered, and he felt that if she’d asked him to slit his own throat he’d have done it. Surely, nothing in the world could bring greater pleasure than obeying this woman’s every whim.

“Say something! I know you’ve better manners than this,” she said.

Galaxia.

It was like gazing at the ocean for the first time. It was like finding that some part of himself, some part he’d never even known he was missing but always unknowingly longed for. Her fire was soft and welcoming, rather than the fierce explosion of pain and judgment. He felt her shift around in his mind and in his magic, softly melding herself in with his memories and weaving her light and fire with his darkness and air. His dimensional powers responded eagerly to her sacredness; he’d never felt so aware of the small tears between the layers of the worlds. Was this the purification everyone spoke of? Those that had spoken of being judged by Galaxia had never mentioned speaking to her—

Meta Knight flinched when a rough hand touched his arm. It was a tall, balding man dressed in gold; he was obviously one of the temple’s caretakers. “Hurts, huh? Come along. I have something for the burns.”

“But I…”

The woman was gone.
The caretaker tugged insistently on Meta Knight’s arm, cooing soft reassurances. Meta Knight let himself be led away. The caretaker rolled up the sleeve of Meta Knight’s shirt and whistled. “Huh. That’s something I haven’t seen before.”

Galaxia’s fire had left a lightning-like mark that ran up the span of Meta Knight’s arm. Tentatively, Meta Knight trailed his fingers over the mark and watched the light play on it. It didn’t hurt. The burns on his hand hurt, but the pain wasn’t unbearable. Maybe he really wasn’t so awful. He’d touched Galaxia and managed to walk away from it. Surely, that meant he was—well—not a terrible child, didn’t it?

When Meta Knight emerged from Galaxia’s temple, the world seemed brighter and more incredible than he’d ever dreamed. He felt the air ripple around him, indicating a thinness between the dimensions. Dedede waited for him, his friend nowhere to be found. Meta Knight’s euphoria suddenly faded. The last thing he wanted was to be seen with the tell-tale burns on his hand and tear-tracks down his cheek. “Meta! Dear Nova, you didn’t actually think you had to prove you could touch her, did you?” Dedede grasped Meta Knight’s hand and winced. “Poor thing.”

“It’s not that bad,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede dropped his hand. “That’s…uh, that’s good.”

“Where’s your friend?”

“He went ahead,” Dedede said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry ’bout him.”

“It’s fine,” Meta Knight said.

It wasn’t really, but how much could Meta Knight reasonably expect from a pampered royal? “At least, he didn’t break my jaw,” Meta Knight added.

“I wouldn’t have let him,” Dedede replied. “Did you think I would?”

Meta Knight didn’t answer, deliberately letting the stillness settle between them. Eventually, Dedede nodded, his face thoughtful. “I see,” Dedede said. “Well, then. Happy Solstice, Meta
"You, too," Meta Knight said, although they both knew which of them was sleeping on the street and which of them was sleeping behind thick, stone walls and an army of knights.

Sectonia emerged from Meta Knight’s room. She wore an outfit cobbled together from one of Bandanna Dee’s sports bras, which Bandanna Dee insisted was left over from an ex-girlfriend, a pair of Meta Knight’s jeans, which fit decently if everyone ignored the fact that the length of those jeans was clearly made for someone several inches shorter than her, and one of Meta Knight’s button-up shirts, which actually looked half-decent on her. At least, it looked more practical for fighting any potential dark wizards than her dress had. “I’m sure Meta Knight wears it better,” Sectonia said.

“Yeah, he does,” Dedede said.

She pulled on a pair of Meta Knight’s combat boots, too.

“What? Do you inspect Meta Knight’s appearance every time he enters your presence?” Nightmare asked.

No, it was just that Dedede…liked looking at him. He liked the way Meta Knight’s midnight-blue hair looked against his warm skin and how handsome he looked when he dressed to impress powerful people. He liked how Meta Knight’s eyes were like diamonds, pale and full of fire and shine. He liked how graceful Meta Knight’s neck looked and the way he tilted his head just the slightest bit when he was puzzled. Dedede might’ve also fantasized more than once about kissing that same neck, which always smelled of Meta Knight's very pleasant, spicy cologne, but Meta Knight never picked up on the hints.

“No,” Dedede said evenly, “But I mean, we live together. I kinda know how he looks in his clothes.”

Dedede wished Nightmare didn’t always wear glasses; maybe, then, Dedede would have an easier time figuring out what the wizard was thinking.
“Are we ready to go now?” Nightmare asked. “As enjoyable as it is watching you play dress-up, my son has been abducted!”

“Yes,” Sectonia replied, adjusting her rapiers around her waist. “Hopefully, we’ll arrive before Mother catches wind of this. She’ll only take Taranza’s insistence that I’m indisposed for so long.”

“You’re lying to the Queen?” Fluff asked, sounding impressed.

Sectonia led the way to the door. “Yes,” she said, beckoning for Adeleine, who stood by the door outside. “My limo can hold eight, so let’s go. Try not to make it miserable for all involved, Nocturne.”

“Very classy,” Nightmare replied, stepping past her.

“If the two of them decided to pull out the old fisticuffs, who do you think would win?” Fluff whispered.

“My bet’s on Nocturne,” Dedede muttered.

“Let’s just hope they don’t try that in the limo,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Yeah,” Kirby said, “But you don’t think they’ll really fight, do you?”

Nightmare and Sectonia sat across from one another. There was no question about where Dedede was sitting; he slipped in beside the princess. Bandanna Dee joined him. After a moment’s hesitation, Kirby sidled over beside his father. Fluff sat beside Bandanna Dee, leaving Adeleine to sit beside Kirby. Adeleine pulled the door shut, and Sectonia knocked on the partition. The driver began moving immediately.

“Have you seen this antique shop yet?” Nightmare asked.

“No, I came straight here,” Sectonia replied. “I’ve been briefed by my agents.”
“I hope they’re better than this one,” Nightmare said, gesturing towards Adeleine, who bit her lip and looked away.

Kirby offered her a smile, but she didn’t appear to catch it.

“Adeleine does a good job,” Sectonia said. “There were two of these mirror-creatures, one resembling Meta Knight and one resembling Dedede. There’s no way Adeleine could’ve bested them both. Instead, she watched, recorded, and called for back-up—as she is trained to do.”

“And it had nothing to do with your fear of dying on Meta Knight’s blade, I’m sure,” Nightmare replied.

Sectonia’s face reddened, and she gripped her rapiers tightly. Dedede envisioned her lunging at Nightmare, and regardless of how satisfying that might be, Dedede exchanged a glance with Bandanna Dee and Fluff. If a fight broke out, someone would need to intervene. Bandanna Dee nodded slightly, clearly understanding. Fluff looked thoughtful, but gave no sign that he’d caught Dedede’s look. Sectonia slowly uncurled her hands. “Meta Knight hasn’t done anything wrong,” Sectonia said. “It doesn’t benefit me at all if some harm befalls him.”

“Guys, please, don’t fight,” Kirby said.

“Don’t fight?” Nightmare sneered. “In case you’ve forgotten, this is your brother. She endangered him with her inaction.”

“I know, but…fighting won’t help Meta Knight,” Kirby replied.

“Hey, question,” Dedede said. “If Kirbs is Bikaia, cain’t he wield Galaxia?”

_I’d let him, yes_, Galaxia replied.

Well. Then, he needed to hand her over, but it was a bit like handing over Meta Knight. This was Galaxia, Meta Knight's companion and most treasured possession. But, oh, what wouldn't Dedede give up for Meta Knight? Reverently, Dedede offered the blade and swallowed back the feeling that he was betraying Meta Knight in some profound, unspeakable way. Kirby placed his hand on her hilt. His eyes widened as he took the blade and hugged her to his chest. Nightmare flinched away almost imperceptibly. “She feels like Meta Knight,” Kirby said. “Like his powers. Wow.”
“Do you think you’ve Copied Meta Knight’s skills with her?” Sectonia asked. “Having a sword does you no good if you can’t properly wield her.”

Kirby’s eyes flashed grey. He tilted his head and flexed his fingers experimentally. “Oh, yes,” Kirby replied, with a small, mischievous smile. “Dark wizards had best be wary, Your Royal Highness.”

The concrete floor was wreathed in ice that refused to melt in the dead of winter. It burned Meta Knight’s cheek, but he was too sleepy to care about that. Or about the thorny vines keeping him bound to the ground. He’d tried unsheathing his wings in a vain attempt to free himself, but the vines had only shifted and dug into those. It put pressure on his back, making his shoulder blades ache.

He didn’t know if it’d been hours or days even. Marx could be ruthless when he wanted to be.

Meta Knight could free himself as soon as the suppressants wore off, but that was taking so long. And Meta Knight had no idea when, precisely, Marx had drugged him with those. Everything hurt and ached, and Meta Knight alternated between shivering and burning up. He really just wanted to sleep, and maybe he’d wake up and everything would be fine. Maybe...

Meta Knight knew he was dreaming; he always knew. And if it was a dream, he could make it whatever he desired. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He thought of home and the beach with its gentle waves. But not Father. Thinking of Father might conjure him. He thought of the sea-breeze and the moonlight, of the smell of salt and sand.

When he opened his eyes, he was still tethered to the ground in that Nova-forsaken warehouse. His breath frosted the air. Meta Knight groaned in frustration.

“Do not despair, beloved. Your lucid dreaming hasn’t failed you.”

He recognized that voice, as fine and soft as moonlight. Still, he glanced up to confirm it was her. Once more, he was awestruck by her beauty. That made it difficult to speak. “Galaxia—I mean, my Lady. Your...” he trailed off.
There was a title for beings like her, but he couldn’t remember it. He’d never anticipated having to address her.

“You may call me Galaxia if it pleases you,” she said.

“I—I didn’t conjure you, did I? I’m so sorry! I wasn’t thinking of you! I—”

“Shh.” She placed a gentle finger against his lips. “There’s no need to be so flustered. I came of my own volition. Poor child, he did hurt you so, didn’t he?”

Meta Knight nodded mutely.

“I can only speed the healing along so much,” Galaxia said. “I will lend you my fire. However, escaping is ultimately up to you.”

“You’ll help me?” Meta Knight asked.

“Of course. Did you think I’d appear merely to taunt you in your hour of need?” Galaxia asked, clasping her hands with his. “I imagine, dear heart, that if you use your dimensional powers, you’ll be able to pull me from this dream-world with you.”

He’d never tried anything like that before, but if Sacred Galaxia said he could do it, Meta Knight would certainly give it his best effort. “I understand. Thank you for your mercy. I swear I shall return you to your pedestal as soon as I am able.”

“Return me? But I want to be with you always,” Galaxia said. “My poor, wounded beloved, this isn’t a favor. I’m proposing a partnership. I want you as my champion.”

It hadn’t escaped Kirby’s notice that Nightmare kept edging away from him. He’s scared of you, a small voice murmured.
But Kirby couldn’t tell if it was Galaxia or Meta Knight. Or if it was even a real voice or just some newfound instinct brought by having Meta Knight’s powers. Kirby stepped lightly from the limo, following his father and Sectonia. Kirby had put on Galaxia’s swordbelt, and her weight felt natural and familiar between his shoulder blades.

The antique shop was closed off by A.M.B.E.R. agents, who parted at the sight of their princess. They entered, and immediately, Kirby’s skin crawled. The air seemed to ripple like water around him. “What is that?” he asked.

_The layers between dimensions are very thin_, a voice—this one _distinctly_ like softly crackling flames—_murmured_. In some places, they’re practically nonexistent, and oftentimes, there are little _pocket dimensions_ within them, created by sorcerers long ago. Most people can’t feel them.

“What is what?” Dedede asked.

“But Meta Knight can,” Kirby replied. “Hmm.”

“Galaxia?” Fluff guessed.

“Yes,” Kirby said.

Sectonia and Nightmare both moved quickly further into the shop. Kirby followed, unsheathing Galaxia as he went. Nightmare visibly tensed at the sound of steel being drawn. “Careful not to stab anyone, child,” Nightmare said.

“I won’t, Dad!”

Kirby felt the Mirror before he saw it. It called to him, its soft powers beckoning him onward. He quickened his pace and fought against his desire to run past both Nightmare and Sectonia. Once they’d reached the Mirror, there was no denying that it was magical. It stood, tall and rimmed with ornately carved gold. From behind him, Kirby heard Dedede swear. The glass of the Mirror was cracked into several pieces, all held barely in-tact by the frame.

Kirby stepped forward.
“Be careful,” Nightmare said.

Kirby spread his fingers wide and felt the spider-cracks marring the smooth surface. He felt Meta Knight’s dimensional powers respond to the Mirror, rippling and striding through the air. Kirby took a deep breath, but Meta Knight’s magic didn’t respond. Kirby could *feel* it, but he couldn’t use it. He might have Meta Knight’s swordsmanship and his heightened awareness for magic, but he didn’t have his dimensional powers.

“I’m sorry,” Kirby said. “I—I don’t…”

“You don’t have his dimensional magic,” Sectonia said, squeezing Kirby’s shoulder. “It’s all right.”

“How is it all right?” Nightmare snapped.

“Hey, don’t be an ass!” Dedede exclaimed. “You ain’t the only one here that cares about Meta Knight! It ain’t Kirbs’s fault that he couldn’t get Meta’s powers!”

Nightmare clenched his jaw. “*You are*—”

“Then, we need to find the Mirror Meta Knight,” Bandanna Dee said, “Right? And convince him to help us. How difficult can it be to find someone with dimensional powers like that?”

“It depends,” Sectonia said, glancing at Nightmare. “If we pool our resources, it’s feasible. We must keep it under the table, however. I’m sure Mother will inevitably learn of my involvement, and when she does, she’ll surely limit my ability to help.”

Nightmare jerkily offered a hand. “Truce, then. For Meta Knight.”

Sectonia didn’t hesitate to shake his hand. “For Meta Knight,” she agreed. “This will be easiest if we have something of Meta Knight’s, so we can pull a magical sample from it. Because every sorcerer has a unique magical signature, if we can find something Meta Knight uses often or something he’s enchanted, we have a good chance of finding it.”
“Like Galaxia?” Kirby inquired.

Sectonia hesitated. “No, she’s too risky. We’ll have to take this object for testing. Someone would figure out what she is, and her magic would likely make it more difficult to isolate Meta Knight’s unique signature, anyway.”

“Surely, he’s tried enchanting something,” Adeleine piped up. “Most young sorcerers do.”

“Knowing Meta, it’s probably his clothing,” Dedede said. “Not his armor, though. That wouldn’t meet dueling standards. I…”

“He used wind magic on those papers,” Bandanna Dee said, “Weeks ago. Before…before Yin-Yarn.”

A phone chimed. Sectonia sighed. “That’s Mother’s ringtone. I’m probably caught,” she said, as she walked past them. “I’ll have you driven back. Find something of his, and I’ll have Taranza swing by for it later.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Dedede said.

Kirby paused and put his hand against the Mirror once more. He gazed at his broken reflection in the Mirror, and for the first time, it dawned on him just how much he really did resemble Meta Knight. The others had turned to follow Sectonia out, except for Nightmare. Kirby saw his dad’s reflection staring at him—or the Mirror. Perhaps, both. There was something else, some odd emotion that was wary and strange. Kirby felt like he’d discovered a terrible, unspeakable secret, but he just couldn't define it. “I’m sorry,” Kirby said.

Nightmare turned away without saying a word. Kirby sighed and sheathed Galaxia again. He turned away from the Mirror. For a split second, Kirby had felt like he was on the verge of some unwelcome revelation about Meta Knight, their father, and himself. And that revelation wasn’t kind.
When Meta Knight woke, he felt hot and sick. He didn’t recognize the bed he was in. He wore an
unfamiliar shirt that reached to his mid-thigh and his underwear. Dedede’s? Right? Yes. He’d
went to Dedede. The previous night hit him all at once, filling him with a mixture of relief and
shame. Relief because waking up in Dedede’s apartments was better than waking up with thorns
digging into him. Shame because he’d needed help.

Cautiously, Meta Knight lifted the shirt and looked at his stomach. There were welts, cuts, and
lacerations from jagged pieces of ice. The injuries were still painful and looked awful, but he’d
expected worse of them. Galaxia’s magic must’ve sped along the healing process.

Meta Knight padded across the carpet and reluctantly looked in the mirror hanging on the wall.
He pried loose the strands of hair that his tears and sweat had glued to his face and brushed his
fingers through it. He straightened his shirt, rolled his shoulders back, and tilted his chin up.
Nothing would fix the massive bruise coloring his right cheek, the welts spanning from his
collarbone all the way up to his jaw, or the long scratch across his throat. With a sigh, Meta
Knight put a tender hand against his swollen cheek. The end-result made him look even more like
an injured, underweight, pathetic teenager.

Clearly, intimidating Dedede wasn’t an option. So maybe it wouldn’t hurt to do a bit of groveling,
even if he wasn’t good at it. Even if he didn’t feel like he’d done anything wrong. He could do this.

The room spun. Meta Knight winced.

I don’t think you’re quite ready to be up.

No, clearly not. Meta Knight fought down a wave of nausea. It would be fine. He climbed back into
the bed and buried his face in the pillow. Meta Knight shivered and pulled the blankets up over his
shoulders. Galaxia rested on the nightstand beside him, and after a moment’s pause, Meta Knight
grasped the sword and pulled her into bed with him. She was very warm and soothing.

Meta Knight dozed. He woke frequently, shifted about, and fell back asleep. Time didn’t seem to
exist anymore, so he counted his shivering spells—three—and assumed there was a...vague
amount of time between them. One time he woke, and Dedede was there. Meta Knight gazed
blearily at him.

“For Nova’s sake, you cain’t sleep with a sword! You’ll cut yourself up!” Dedede exclaimed.
Dedede picked up Galaxia, and Meta Knight watched, wide-eyed, as Dedede placed the blade on the nightstand. There were no sparks or flames. It seemed Galaxia hadn’t hurt him in the slightest.

If I hurt him, he’d catch you.

Catch him?

“So…uh, that’s a pretty good replica,” Dedede said. “When did you steal that?”

Catch him. That made sense.

“I didn’t,” Meta Knight paused, vaguely recalling that he’d resolved to be demure. “It belonged to my mother. It’s all I have from her, my Lord. That’s why I wanted to touch the real Galaxia. Because Mother owned a replica.”

That was a good lie, wasn’t it?

“Oh! Crap. Sorry. I just kinda assumed.”

Meta Knight rubbed his cheek against his pillow. “There’s no offense taken, my Lord. What happened to me?” Meta Knight mumbled. “Everything hurts, and I feel…worse.”

It was really hard to get the courtly language right when he felt so awful.

“You got a fever. Pretty high one. Doc says you got the flu, and I’m sure the hypothermia and frostnip didn’t help. Especially on top of getting the crap beat outta you.”

“Fever…”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. I’m gonna take good care of you. Sit up. You gotta stay on schedule with these meds.”
“Meds? I can’t afford…”

Dedede ran his fingers through Meta Knight’s hair, smoothing away the tangles like Father sometimes did. “Hush now. I ain’t gonna let you go around with a fever,” Dedede murmured. “It’s fine.”

Reluctantly, Meta Knight sat up. “I don’t trust you,” he said. “You might be drugging me.”

“I ain’t gonna drug someone whose dad might come from the shadows and break me in half,” Dedede said. “C’mon, blondie. Look; they’re in prescription bottles. Why would I getcha actual medicine and just use something else to drug you? ‘Sides, I wouldn’t even need to drug you to do something to you. As bad a shape as you’re in, I doubt you could stop me from doing whatever.”

Meta Knight tilted his head and saw that the bottles did, indeed, bear his name. Meta Knight Nocturne. “I’m sorry, my Lord,” Meta Knight said, “That I’m burdening you like this. What do you want…in return for your hospitality?”

“I want for you to get better, and you cain’t be doing too good if you’re talking like that. I mean, my Lord? Are you gonna die? Here. Put this in your mouth, blondie,” Dedede said, holding up a thermometer.

Meta Knight glared at the instrument as if it’d deeply offended him, but he obediently stuck it under his tongue. Forget being demure. For Nova’s sake, Dedede could’ve at least appreciated the effort.

“D’you remember last night?”

Meta Knight rolled his eyes. He remembered most of it, but it felt more like it’d happened a week ago than the day before.

“Hey, I wasn’t sure’s all,” Dedede replied. “I didn’t expect you to get outta bed today after last night. This is what your friends do to you, I’d hate to see your enemies.”

Meta Knight pulled the thermometer out and grimaced. A hundred-and-one. “Aren’t you my enemy?” Meta Knight asked.
“No, I figure I’m your frenemy, at least. How bad?” Dedede asked.

“Ninety-eight-point-six.”

Dedede scowled and snatched the thermometer from Meta Knight’s hand. “For Nova’s sake! I’m just trying to figure out whether you need a fever reducer with the rest!”

Meta Knight glanced guiltily at the medicine bottles. “I should go. You’ve already done too much, and I really can’t pay you—”

“You ain’t gotta pay me. Look; you said I owe you, and you’re right. And then, you said I’d better help you, so I’m gonna. You cain’t go back to your friends. You cain’t go home. So where does that leave? You cain’t honestly believe living on the streets, alone, in the dead of winter is better than living in the freaking palace.”

Wasn’t that a tempting offer? Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek. He shouldn’t accept. Sure, maybe he and Dedede didn’t hate one another anymore, but they certainly weren’t friends.

Dearest, you’re hurt. He’s not without empathy. I think you ought to take a good opportunity when you have one.

No. Accepting help was weakness. Accepting help from someone with royal blood was even worse.

“I wanted to be gone when you woke up,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a ring box, and offered it to Meta Knight. “Well, it’s three in the afternoon, so a bit late for that. But I kinda thought that might be the case. Here. I got something for you.”

A present? Meta Knight tentatively opened the ring box, expecting something mean-spirited. Instead, it was a gleaming silver ring on a long chain. “This is one of your signet rings,” Meta Knight said, dumbfounded.
“I’d kinda like you to stay and get healed up,” Dedede said, “But I cain’t make you. That’ll getcha access to my apartments, so if you wanna leave, you can come back any time. After the maid brings back your clothes, obviously. And if you do go...at least, take the meds with you. I mean, you’re healing real fast—like magically fast—but you still look pretty rough.”

Free access to the palace? To the private wing where lesser members of the royal family and the nobility lived? Even Father didn’t have this sort of access. Meta Knight slipped the chain over his head; the ring rested gently against his chest. Dedede offered an awkward, wary smile. “D’you feel like eating breakfast, blondie? I’ve been looking up what to feed someone that ain’t eaten in a while.”

Meta Knight rubbed his fingers over the rabbit insignia on the ring. This must be a trap somehow. It was all part of an elaborate plan to coax Meta Knight into some sort of false security. Dedede would inevitably demand payment, in spite of all his praises and grand gestures. Meta Knight needed to flee as soon as possible before this got any further out of hand.

“I know you don’t trust me,” Dedede said, “And...and after the way I’ve treated you, I kinda deserve that. You...you fought off a guy and kept me from bleeding out in an alley, and I guess...it would’ve been better for you if you’d let me bleed out, wouldn’t it? Heck, you could’ve robbed my corpse, huh? And instead, I...I repaid you so poorly for that. And I’m sorry. But I’ve changed, and I promise I’ll keep changing into a better person. But lemme make it up to you, okay? Please, stay. I can take really good care of you. Let me repay that kindness you showed me. You deserve compassion way more than I ever did, Mety Knight.”

“No, I—I got blood on your sofa. Your white sofa.”

“The maids’ll get it out. ‘Sides, my granddad had his throat slit on that same sofa, so clearly, it’s cursed. Maybe we oughta get rid of it, huh? Pass the curse onto someone else.”

“I made you fight with your friends.”

“Hey, they ain’t my friends anymore, and that’s a long time coming. I finally grew a spine and kicked ’em to the curb. So...I ain’t got no friends now, and you ain’t got no friends now. Maybe...we try being friends to one another and see if it works out?”

Dedede shakily raised his hand and cupped Meta Knight’s cheek. Meta Knight’s face burned; he wasn’t sure if anyone had ever touched him that gently or that sincerely before. So naturally before. Perhaps, Father had, but those instances were so rare. Meta Knight had to earn Father’s affection, and Dedede was just...giving it away. Hesitantly, Meta Knight curled his hand over
Dedede’s, signaling his agreement. “Friends, then,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede’s face lit up. “Friends.”

“You smell like her.”

Meta Knight didn’t come to awareness quickly. Nausea was the first thing he felt, followed by a pounding headache and the feeling of a powerful presence shifting around in his mind. Someone leaned over him, their breath hot on his neck. Meta Knight’s first impulse was to fight, but there his wrists were chained together behind him and—

What was that?

Something was deeply wrong. It was too cold and too silent. It felt like his heart had been torn out, and he felt weak, so terribly weak. What was it? What was it? Dear Nova, this wasn’t possible. “Galaxia!” he shouted.

There was nothing. No answer, no hint of magic, no warmth from her flames.

Meta Knight registered the deep throbbing in his cheek before he realized he’d been hit. The thick, coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. A strong, armored hand grasped his jaw, the metal hard and cold against his skin. For a split second, Meta Knight thought it was his father, and, indeed, the figure leaning over him did look like his father, but even Nightmare Nocturne refrained from wearing armor made of what looked like some poor creature’s bones. “The next time you say that name, I will cut out your tongue,” the wizard said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Fath—Sir?”

“I am Dark Mind, Emperor of the Mirror World,” the wizard said.

Dear Nova, this couldn’t be happening.
“The Mirror World is in another dimension,” Meta Knight said. “I didn’t…I didn’t use my powers.”

“No. I’m afraid you were thrown unceremoniously through the Dimension Mirror.”

Dark Mind, the wizard who’d corrupted the Fountain of Dreams. The wizard who’d had his power shattered and been imprisoned because even Nova the Wish-Granter, the noble Star-Goddess of Dreamland, hadn’t been able to defeat him. This couldn’t possibly be the same wizard. Surely, he must be some imposter. Why would Dark Mind, the Dark Mind, look like Meta Knight’s own father?

“You doubt me,” Dark Mind said. “Shall I prove it to you?”

“No, Your Royal Majesty.”

The wizard smiled. “Poor creature, I’ve frightened you. I’m not a cruel master, but I do expect my subordinates to follow my rules,” he said. “Those rules extend to you, as my dearly valued guest. I do apologize for what my son has done to you and hope I can…rectify that situation. Shadow will have you cleaned up, and then, perhaps, we can talk in my parlor? I very much like to be entertained.”

Dark Mind winked and patted Meta Knight’s cheek, before vanishing in a twist of shadows. Meta Knight took a deep breath and, with the wizard gone, finally managed to survey his surroundings. It was a dungeon, a legitimate prisoner-holding sort of dungeon. It was very dark; Meta Knight wondered if the wizard had been keeping the shadows at bay throughout their conversation.

Meta Knight tugged experimentally on the handcuffs; they were attached to the wall, but it was too dark to tell precisely how. He tried to get to his feet, before realizing the chains were too short for him to stand properly. With a sigh, he sank to the ground and leaned his head back against the wall.

Neither Meta Knight’s concussion nor his fractured ribs had magically healed, and his fight with Dark had only aggravated his injuries. Now, he also had a painful injury on his neck—from Dark’s bite—and his magic was still inaccessible—if not more so than before, from his haphazard attempt to teleport. He felt like something might be about to burst from his skull. He had no weapon, and, to make matters worse, he was now chained to a wall. Most pressingly, he couldn’t feel Galaxia. That had never happened before, and that was the only reason Meta Knight was remotely considering that this might be another dimension. His bond with Galaxia was strong, but at most,
he’d teleported without her. Meta Knight had spent lengthy amounts of time in different dimensions before, but he’d never done so without Galaxia. It seemed plausible that being in a different dimension might make it difficult for them to communicate.

Worst case scenario: he was being held prisoner by a dark wizard even more powerful than the goddess Nova.

Best case scenario: he was being held by a fraud and couldn’t feel Galaxia because of some sort of enchantment.

If he really was in another world, trapped by Dark Mind of the legends, surely, she was his only hope for rescue. Even if he wasn’t trapped in another world, while he couldn’t hear Galaxia, it was still possible that she was capable of hearing him. Meta Knight didn’t know the limits to this wizard’s powers, but Meta Knight didn’t doubt that this self-proclaimed Dark Mind probably made good on his threats. Either way, Meta Knight was in no condition to fight; his only hope was to bide his time and wait for a good opportunity. Hopefully, one would arrive soon.
Meta Knight didn’t think he’d ever felt as demeaned as he did while Dark Mind’s servants stripped him and forced him into a bath. It wasn’t that the servants were abusive or untoward; they were very professional and attentive, offering to add a half-dozen oils he’d never heard of to his bath. They insisted on topping it off with hot water, too, even though it meant hauling buckets of water into his bath. They’d redressed his injuries and treated the more recent bite mark, which Meta Knight was genuinely grateful for. The last thing he needed at the moment was an infection from the bacteria in Dark’s mouth. The servants were also careful not to press too harshly against Meta Knight’s aching ribs. This was infinitely preferable to being chained to a wall, and he shouldn’t be so profoundly bothered by a bath. It shouldn’t be embarrassing. Aristocrats had servants bathe and dress them, but Meta Knight really just wanted them all to leave.

Maybe it was because it was all being done because some evil sorcerer was ordering it, or maybe it was the handcuffs. Even when they’d undressed him, the servants had only removed one cuff, and they’d chained his wrists together again the second his shirt was out of the way. They did it all with a disturbing efficiency, too. Maybe Dark Mind did this with all his guests.

None of Dark Mind’s servants wore shoes, which seemed odd. The stone was rough and cold, and walking on it barefoot all the time couldn’t be at all pleasant. Meta Knight tried to recall if he’d read anything about a time in history about servants going barefoot. This place was post-Bikaian, but it certainly wasn’t anything close to modern. Meta Knight knew corsets existed because the Other Dedede had referenced one; that put this world two-hundred or so years in the past. However, the lack of indoor plumbing and running water indicated a much earlier time. Their accents and diction were different, too, but Meta Knight still couldn’t discern much from that. Their vowels were just cut oddly. At least, it was clearly a version of modern Dreamlandic rather than Middle Dreamlandic.

“Is the water to your liking, Sir?”

Meta Knight bit back any snarky reply that might’ve emerged. There was no point in snapping at servants that were likely just following their king’s orders, and it was probably best to endear himself to them. After all, Meta Knight might be able to coax a few of them into helping him escape or giving him some answers. He forced a smile and hoped it was charming. “It’s fine. Thank you.”
Even Meta Knight’s resolve to be polite didn’t keep him from shivering as one of them put a hand on his shoulder blades and spread something vaguely lavender-scented and oily down his spine. Meta Knight ran his thumb along the keyhole along one of the cuffs, under the guise of rubbing his wrist. The cuffs appeared to be the same pair Dark had put on him. They looked like they were made of silver, etched with intricate floral patterns and set with diamonds. Silver was a very soft metal. Meta Knight experimentally pulled the chain taut between his wrists. There was something familiar about these—something about their appearance—that he recognized now that he wasn’t drugged and running on adrenaline.

Something about silver and diamonds and elaborate metal etchings that just nagged at him. He slipped them beneath the bath water, trying to figure out if he could slip them if his hands were wet. He doubted it. Even if the cuffs were wet, it looked like the bones in his hand were too wide. He might be able to manage it if he broke his thumb, but clearly, the cuffs worked if only one was on him. That would mean somehow breaking both his hands, and Meta Knight still doubted he’d succeed in getting them off.

“Lord Shadow, may I present Lord Meta Knight of Dreamland,” one of the servants said.

Meta Knight’s breath caught in his throat as Shadow entered the room. He looked remarkably like Kirby, minus the pink hair; Shadow’s was black. Like the servants, he was barefoot, but unlike their black and grey clothing, Shadow wore an absurdly colorful get-up, complete with a large, floppy hat. Meta Knight would’ve assumed he was the court jester if he hadn’t been introduced with a title. “Will you leave us for a moment?” Shadow asked, smiling. “I want to look him over myself.”

The servants filed out, and Meta Knight wasn’t sure whether that made things better or not. Shadow skipped forward and pulled a magic wand from beneath his hat. “Bop!” Shadow exclaimed, tapping Meta Knight on the nose with it and unleashing a stream of pink sparkles.

“Um…”

When Shadow was close, more differences became apparent. Shadow’s eyes were black, like polished onyx, rather than Kirby’s dark blue. “Aw, that usually gets a rise out of Dark!” Shadow pouted.

“Your brother?” Meta Knight asked.

Shadow beamed. “Got it! You look a lot like him, except for your eyes. And your hair. Did you magic it that color?”
“It’s dye,” Meta Knight replied.

“Mm…I wonder, though…” Shadow twirled away, poking at a couple of bottles placed on wooden shelves along the wall. “Aw, this one!”

Shadow returned with a blue bottle. “Lean forward. This is for your hair.”

Meta Knight did, and Shadow cheerfully moved behind him. “So—” Meta Knight began.

Shadow’s nose brushed across Meta Knight’s neck. “You can’t break them. I know you’re thinking about it,” Shadow murmured. “Dark has tried many times before, but those were forged with dragon’s fire many years ago. It’s impossible.”

Forged with dragon’s fire? They could be cut, then, with a diamond blade or a laser; neither of which he had. Dragon’s fire-forged metal could be reforged—assuming it didn’t bear any additional protective magic, like Galaxia did—but the temperature required for that would be far hotter than anything Meta Knight would want near his hand. If he intended slipping these, then, he’d probably have to pick the locks and hope the handcuffs didn’t have an enchantment preventing that.

“So why are they so…pretty?” Meta Knight asked.

Shadow massaged Meta Knight’s scalp. “Father once had a very powerful prisoner, whom he liked to put on display. He made many such fanciful restraints for her,” Shadow said, his voice louder—but not by much.

Meta Knight’s stomach churned. A very powerful prisoner. There was only one prisoner that Dark Mind was very famous for holding. Surely, this wasn’t possible.

Suddenly, Meta Knight realized why the handcuffs looked so familiar. “There was a collar, wasn’t there?” Meta Knight asked, lowering his voice. “That matched these?”

“There are several collars in all different colors,” Shadow said. “To—well—match her dresses.”
Because that wasn’t creepy at all.

“He really only uses one pair of the handcuffs and sometimes the muzzle. I’ve never seen him use the rest, but he ensures the servants keep them polished. He’s saving them for when she returns someday. I know where he keeps them if you want to look.”

_No, I’d rather not see all the creepy artifacts your creepy father made some poor woman wear_, was what Meta Knight dearly wanted to say. However, this didn’t seem like the appropriate time for sarcasm. “No, I’m just trying to figure out why _my_ father has one.”

Shadow shrugged. “Before the Mirror was enchanted to keep the worlds separate, travel between them was much more common. It wouldn’t be so strange for a few items to cross between the worlds.”

That sounded logical. At any rate, Meta Knight himself probably could’ve slipped into the Mirror World and taken a few objects with him—mirror or no—if he really wanted to. “They suppress my magic, don’t they?” he asked.

“Yes. Rinse.”

Meta Knight dunked his head back under the water. Wouldn’t it have been nice to be wrong about that? “So if I had a bond with a certain magical object…”

“What sort of bond?”

“Like…like an enchanted sword that always comes when I call it. Or a charmed staff that is sentient. Something like that. Would these handcuffs prevent me from contacting it?”

“Probably,” Shadow replied. “Father made them _very_ powerful, and over the centuries, their magic hasn’t even waned.”

“This woman,” Meta Knight said. “How precisely does your father expect her to return? Surely, this woman would be dead by now if he forged these objects for her in the pre- or early-Bikaian era.”
“Father said it was a wish gone awry.”

“A wish?”

“Bikaia,” Shadow whispered. “His last wish was for everyone to come together again.”

“No, it was—he wished for the prosperity of Dreamland.”

“Not according to Father,” Shadow replied. “Father said that, because of that wish, she’d return to
him. He must be right. You’re here, and you smell like her.”

Meta Knight dug his nails into his hands. “Like who?”

Shadow looked nervously around, before leaning close to Meta Knight’s ear. “Nova,” Shadow
whispered. “Her scent still lingers here in some places. Starlight and fresh rain.”

Dear Nova. “That’s impossible,” Meta Knight said. “She died by Galacta Knight’s lance, and even
if she was—alive again or something—I’m sure I’d know if I met her.”

“You don’t understand. She’s someone different now. Father looked at your memories, didn’t he?
You must’ve noticed that he focused more on some than others.”

Memories of Galaxia and Dedede. Meta Knight shook his head. “You’ve—this isn’t right. There’s
no way Dedede can be the goddess Nova. I—I’ve lived with him! I’ve done his laundry, and I can
assure you no goddess would smell like his dirty socks.”

Shadow sighed. “Be careful with Father,” he said. “He won’t take kindly to your disbelief. He isn’t
accustomed to being questioned.”

“What’s the worst he’ll do?”
“Gauge out your lovely, grey eyes,” Shadow replied. “Give you lashes. Brand you. Please, don’t willfully disobey him. He likes to have my brother and I punish one another. I don’t imagine you’d be any different, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

Great. Creepy and sadistic. Meta Knight felt a knot in his stomach. “And…why doesn’t anyone wear shoes?”

“The servants are only allowed to wear shoes outside the castle grounds. It’s a reminder to please Father.”

“Or he’ll…?”

Shadow bit his lip and lifted his right foot. The welts and bruises looked superficial, but they surely hurt. Especially with Shadow walking around on rough, stone floors. “For smaller offenses, it’s usually foot-whippings. I…I did something I shouldn’t have,” Shadow said, lowering his foot.

“I’m so sorry,” Meta Knight said.

“Why? Doesn’t your father inflict similar punishments?”

“No, we fight sometimes, but he’s never…I mean, you aren't...these sorts of things aren't allowed where I'm from. Even if your father is the king, he can't flog you or keep you in the dungeons. Not in Dreamland.”

“I’m happy for you, then,” Shadow said. “I must be going now. If Father is feeling charitable, I might be allowed to join you later.”

“Wait! What am I really meeting him for? What did he mean by entertainment?”

“He could mean anything with that,” Shadow replied, shrugging. “If it’s any consolation, he probably won't torture you. He might force his way into your mind again and analyze some of your memories, but because it’s his study, he probably won’t…physically hurt you. Father keeps expensive rugs in his study, and he hates it when blood gets on them.”
Meta Knight would much rather take a beating than have this cruel sorcerer looking through his memories and doing Nova knew what else.

“Good luck, Meta Knight,” Shadow said. “For what it’s worth, I hope your goddess stays far away from here. That might be the best for both of you.”

Meta Knight absentmindedly rubbed Galaxia’s mark, as best as he could with his wrists chained together.

This dark wizard was wrong. Wrong, but very dangerous and very cruel. Meta Knight tilted his head and watched the empty doorway where Shadow had gone. Shadow seemed very willing to talk, and while his information didn’t make sense, it at least sounded honest. Poor boy. Poor everyone in this world. Just…how much coaxing would it take for them to rebel against this horrible king? It surely couldn’t be easy; if it were, someone would’ve rebelled already. Still, Meta Knight mulled it over. No one was invincible, and if these cuffs worked on him, with his dimensional powers, they would work on Dark Mind, wouldn’t they?

Dark Mind’s servants had replicated Bandanna Dee’s elaborate hairstyling. Meta Knight wanted to feel good about that because he looked more like himself, but he couldn’t quite manage it. He felt like a dress-up doll. His only consolation was that Dark Mind had chosen to dress him in clothes pulled seemingly from Dark’s wardrobe. Even though black wasn’t Meta Knight’s favorite color, he looked almost princely in a high-fantasy sort of way, and the red, velvet cape looked like something Dedede would choose. Meta Knight, who’d watched more than his share of bad fantasy movies, had expected something much more demeaning to wear, so even though the clothes made his skin crawl, he had no intention of complaining about those. Unfortunately, being Dark Mind’s guest didn’t make him any more deserving of shoes than anyone else, and the floor was as uncomfortable as expected beneath his bare feet.

Knights, dressed all in black, escorted him to Dark Mind’s study. It’d occurred to Meta Knight that this building was likely a reflection of one in his world, and he tried to judge which one based upon the hallways. It was difficult to tell because they all looked exactly the same, and it became clear after a series of consecutive left turns that the knights were purposefully trying to confuse him. When they finally arrived, Meta Knight couldn’t help but be taken aback. Unlike the dark, death-chamber he’d expected, Dark Mind’s study was deceptively nice-looking, luxurious even. Books lined most of the walls, their shelves interrupted by a massive fireplace, which was filled with a cheerfully crackling fire. Two plush, gilded chairs were seated across from one another atop a massive, intricately embroidered red and gold rug.
Dark Mind stood when they entered. His armor remained, and Meta Knight could see that only
Dark Mind’s helmet was made of bones, some of them gilded. The rest of his armor was dull grey
with so many spikes that Meta Knight wasn’t entirely sure how the wizard put it on without
injuring himself. It was topped with a flowing violet cape, which seemed like something Meta
Knight’s father would’ve liked. “That’ll be all,” Dark Mind said, dismissing his servants.

Once it was just the two of them, Dark Mind strode forward and narrowed his eyes, the same color
as Nightmare’s own. The wizard drew a finger down Meta Knight’s cheek, and suddenly, Meta
Knight understood. This was like when Father inspected him. This was easy. He knew how to do
this. Meta Knight rolled back his shoulders and kept his gaze on the floor.

Dark Mind strode around, observing him slowly and quietly. He paused behind Meta Knight and
put his fingers by Meta Knight’s neck. "Are you very accustomed to metaphors?" Dark Mind
asked. "The carrot and the stick, hm?"

"I'm not familiar with that one, no."

"There are two methods in which to receive desired behavior," Dark Mind said. "If you behave
yourself, you'll be rewarded. If you misbehave, you'll be punished. They're very simple rules. I
hope you'll remember them and mind your mouth. You may speak to your father and liege with
such blatant disrespect, but I will not tolerate such treatment. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

“Very good. My servants said you didn’t give them any trouble, so, perhaps, a little reward for your
good behavior? To prove I'm a man of my word? I think you’d like that.”

A thin chain pressed against his neck, and Meta Knight started, before realizing it was Dedede’s
signet ring.

"I believe this trinket holds sentimental value to you?" Dark Mind asked.

"Yes, thank you," Meta Knight replied, running a thumb over the familiar insignia.

The wizard nodded, seeming satisfied. Then, Dark Mind returned to his chair and gestured to the
seat across from him. Meta Knight took the proffered chair and clasped his hands in his lap; the
handcuffs were heavy and had already rubbed his wrists until they were an angry shade of red.

“Normally, I’d begin these conversations by asking you questions about yourself, but I fear I already know all there is to know,” Dark Mind said. “It truly is an honor to meet you once again. It has been so long, Sir Knight.”

Argue with him? Don’t argue with him? “Has it?” Meta Knight asked carefully.

“I assume Shadow has already told you why I'm so interested in your memories? I asked him to.”

“He did, but I fear you're…” Meta Knight trailed off, wary of questioning a clearly sadistic and powerful sorcerer. “I don’t understand how Dedede can be Nova. Nova died many years ago.”

“Ah, but Bikaia’s last wish! I wish everyone could be together again. A foolish wish. Don’t you see the foolish boy intended to save everyone and instead caused history to repeat itself? Don’t you wonder why Dedede was so interested in you?”

“Because we have a relationship built on good communication and a genuine like for one another?” Meta Knight asked.

“Ah, I suppose a headstrong boy like you wouldn’t believe in destiny.”

"Why would it be destined for him to be interested in me? I'm nothing to the goddess Nova."

"Because you're the reincarnation of Sir Galacta Knight, the Knight of the Slaughter."

This just kept getting worse and worse. "I'm not," Meta Knight replied. "I can't be. I've never killed anyone. I apologize. I don't mean to question you, but the things you speak of make no sense to me."

Even as Meta Knight said it, he remembered the odd vision he'd had when he touched Sectonia's hand. But no, this couldn't be real. He was Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura, the child of Nightmare Nocturne, and the furthest thing anyone could be from a powerful sorcerer-knight like Galacta Knight. No. No, no, no.
"Child, he is the goddess Nova. It’s a pity, really. I was hoping for something more attractive. I know you like looking at him, but I fear my tastes differ greatly from yours."

“He won’t come here, anyway,” Meta Knight said. “He can’t. He doesn’t have the power to cross dimensions.”

“True, but my son does,” Dark Mind said, “And I’m all too aware now of his treachery. I devoted myself to that ungrateful, selfish child, and now this is how he betrays me. I’m certain he’d love to storm my castle with Galaxia.”

“I’m the only one who can wield her—”

“No. Bikaia can. You may be Galaxia’s chosen wielder, but you are not the only one capable of mastering her.”

“I’m her wielder. If anyone is being mastered, it’s me. And Bikaia is dead. Furthermore, if you really are Dark Mind, a centuries’ old wizard, perhaps, you can explain why you look exactly like my forty-year-old father.”

“Careful. You’re very close to sounding haughty, and I hate insubordination.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty.”

Dark Mind rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I have no quarrel with you, and as long as you are respectful and obedient, you shall remain my valued guest. I’ll ensure that my accommodations are acceptable and that you are reasonably content. I so seldom have guests to entertain me, after all.”

“Entertain you how?” Meta Knight asked.

Dark Mind’s smile was gleeful as he crossed the room and hovered over Meta Knight. The wizard was far too close, and Meta Knight considered bolting. Dark Mind probably considered torture to be entertainment. It’d be difficult, and it’d anger the wizard. Risk it anyway? “My dearest child, I mean your memories, of course! I didn’t search them all, and there’s one thing I desperately want to see from you,” Dark Mind said, trailing a spider-like finger along Meta Knight’s jawline. “Now,
I wish to see the death of Nova the Wish-Granter.”

Kirby had kept Galaxia because he was the only person that could wield her, and because the other options—with Sectonia or with Nightmare—had drawn heavy protests. Plus, Galaxia would be notoriously difficult to hide from the powerful people that Sectonia and Nightmare might encounter. Instead, Galaxia remained with Kirby, and Kirby was under heavy guard. No less than three of his father’s employees watched him constantly, along with a couple of Sectonia’s. Kirby hadn’t surrendered Meta Knight’s powers, despite their father’s protests. Instead, he’d held them for almost forty-eight hours. Kirby lay on his bed and opened his contacts with the intention of rereading all the texts he’d exchanged with Meta Knight.

*Magolor.* Something in Kirby’s stomach lurched.

Kirby had meant to call Magolor, but he’d forgotten. Somewhere between having friends, Dedede’s abduction, discovering a long-lost brother, and Meta Knight’s abduction, Kirby had completely forgotten about it.

Magolor couldn’t be trusted. Why? Kirby barely knew him.

Kirby tried to push aside his wariness and tapped his finger against Meta Knight’s name. Their texts were few, probably less than they should’ve been. The more recent ones were short, easy questions: what is your favorite color? Favorite season? Favorite book? Most of those questions were Kirby’s, and Meta Knight had been gracious enough to indulge him.

They never talked about their dad. They probably should’ve. Kirby realized that he was being very selfish and that he should be concerned only about Meta Knight, but Kirby couldn’t help cycle back to Nightmare’s awkward slip-up every few hours.

When he’d meant to say Meta Knight was his *oldest child* and said *only child* instead. It was nothing. Just a slip-up, and Kirby should stop reading into it. It wasn’t some subconscious indication that Nightmare preferred Meta Knight. Father was just frightened because Meta Knight was gone, and that *should* be where Kirby was focusing his energy and thoughts.

Kirby stared at the texts for a few seconds, reading them over. Kirby wondered if his overuse of emojis had ever annoyed Meta Knight, with all his flawless, grammatically correct texts. Then,
Kirby went back to his contacts, his finger hovering over Magolor’s name.

Kirby tapped *compose*.

*Magolor. Its Kirby.*

Send.

*How do you know meta knight?*

Send.

Kirby waited to see if Magolor would respond right away. When he didn’t, Kirby set the phone aside and paced. He couldn’t focus. He couldn’t sit still. Surely, he ought to be doing *something*, shouldn’t he? Hadn’t Dad and Princess Sectonia said he was Bikaia? Hadn’t Galaxia as much as confirmed it by letting him touch her sacred blade? He was Bikaia! He was the noble hero-king, who’d ushered Dreamland into centuries of prosperity.

He was the one who’d slain Galacta Knight after he murdered Nova. Kirby braced himself against his desk and took a deep breath. No matter what *that* wasn’t going to happen. Meta Knight was good and kind and Kirby’s long-wished-for sibling. Kirby would never, *ever* hurt him. Tears burned in Kirby’s eyes, and he tried halfheartedly to stop them from flowing. But he was caught somewhere between the past and present, between Galacta Knight and Meta Knight.

“I *know* they were friends,” Kirby said. “If history is repeating and we’re friends now, Bikaia and Galacta Knight must’ve been friends, too, but Meta Knight and I are going to change history. We know how the story played out last time. Bikaia and Galacta Knight didn’t. Yes.”

When Kirby said it, it sounded more doable.

His phone beeped.

*Why haven’t you asked Meta Knight?*
Kirby took a steadying breath. This was prying in Meta Knight’s business without his permission. This was deceitful. This was wrong.

Don’t give Magolor—don’t trust him—any information.

I cant. He isnt around.

A pause.

He does that.

Does what

Disappears. He’ll turn up again eventually.

No, not this time. Kirby hesitated. No, he didn’t want to text Magolor anymore. It wasn’t the time for digging into Meta Knight’s past, but Kirby felt like he ought to be doing something. He shoved his phone in his pocket, grabbed Galaxia, and dug under his bed for his shoes. Kirby thought he might as well spend the night with Dedede and Bandanna Dee, who were probably awake and worried, too.

Nova had thrown off her helm. Her long, blonde hair was twisted behind her head, loose strands swinging tempestuously in the wind. Tears shined in her wide, blue eyes. Her once-unscathed silver armor was marred with blood and grime; only the traitorous Galaxia, gleaming and gold, remained un tarnished. “Stop!” Nova shouted.

Stop? Did Nova truly believe she had the power to command the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy? Galacta Knight laughed. “Please,” Nova said. “This isn’t you. I know you!”

As if begging could erase centuries of being sealed in that accursed crystal. Centuries of loneliness
and awareness and pain. Of knowing that she and Bikaia were content and happy, and Dreamland was prospering. “You don’t,” Galacta Knight said. “You never did.”

The knight spread her wings, knowing how imposing it made her. How much taller and more powerful she was than this feeble goddess. Nova raised Galaxia. Galacta Knight took flight and charged, her lance lowered and ready.

Nova was once very powerful, but her powers had weakened. It’d taken more energy to seal Galacta Knight away than the goddess had planned, and it’d broken her. Nova was a goddess, a serene magic-user and unaccustomed to the battlefield. She had Galaxia, but that was it.

Don’t do this, Galaxia said, her fire burning and crackling. I can help you. This isn’t you, Mistress. Don’t—

Galacta Knight’s lance hit its target, tearing skin and shattering bones. Nova screamed, and when Galacta Knight drew her lance back, the goddess fell to the ground, Galaxia falling from her grasp. The knight’s heart quickened at seeing her defeated. “Hurts, doesn’t it?” Galacta Knight asked.

There was no need to fight her further. She was dying, slowly and surely.

“Noval” Bikaia’s sharp cry split the air.

The prince ran to her, casting aside his blade in favor of retrieving Galaxia. Bikaia pressed his hand against Nova’s chest, slick with blood. Galacta Knight laughed. “Do you honestly believe you’ll be able to do anything?” she asked.

Nova struggled for breath, her words coming in ragged pants. “Make a…make a wish, Bikaia,” she rasped.

No. The last wish the goddess Nova granted had led to being sealed in the crystal.

“I wish for us all to come together again. It shouldn’t have happened this way,” Bikaia said softly.
Galacta Knight struck, but Bikaia was a far superior fighter to the goddess Nova. Galacta Knight’s lance struck Galaxia, and the sacred blade held. “I’m so sorry, friend,” Bikaia murmured.

Meta Knight snapped to awareness, or maybe not. The handcuffs glowed from the crackling fire, and this was definitely the wizard’s castle. Even though he was on Dark Mind’s carpet, half-fallen from his chair, he felt a gentle hand petting his hair and the soothing darkness of his father’s dream-magic.

“They’re just dreams, Meta Knight,” Nightmare murmured. “You’d never harm another person. Hush now; I can make them go away. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Meta Knight nodded because he was young, and they were scary. Nightmare’s silver eyes were soft and his hands gentle on Meta Knight’s blond curls. When his father embraced him, Meta Knight happily snuggled against his father, who smelled of vanilla and cinnamon.

The memory stirred from some place different than Nova’s death. It felt like his, wholly his. "Father," Meta Knight whispered, half-caught between his dream and reality.

Dark Mind caressed Meta Knight’s neck, sending a shiver down his spine. Meta Knight turned his head and tried to hide the tears he felt gathering in his eyes. “Do you still think it’s an illusion?” the wizard asked.

Meta Knight was too unsteady to form a response right away. When he didn’t answer, Dark Mind laughed. “Oh, huh, oh, make, huh, a wish, Bikaia!” The wizard adopted a mockingly high voice, accompanied with sharp gasps. “Oh, I’ve waited so long to see those tears again on that beautiful face. Poor little goddess.”

“Stop! I—yes. Yes, it’s a trick. An awful trick! I can’t be…I’m not a monster like that.”

“We aren’t monsters, Meta Knight. We’re gods. Those with the most power rule over those without; that’s life. And these mortals are so afraid that—maybe—there’s something in the world superior to their shining goddess, to Galaxia, and Bikaia, so they call us monsters.”

“You can call yourself whatever you want. I am nothing like you.”
Dark Mind seized Meta Knight’s chin roughly and forced him back into the chair. “Tears, Meta Knight? For her? And tell me, what purpose does that serve?”

“It proves I’m not a sadistic degenerate that enjoys the suffering of others!”

“Shall I show you how sadistic I can be? I don’t take kindly to my guests insulting me, so, unfortunately, I’m obligated to discipline you,” Dark Mind replied gleefully. "It's really a shame. All that fire and fury for the goddess Nova. If she was so benevolent, she wouldn't have sealed you away for centuries, would she?"

It was just past midnight, and there was darkness in the palace. Sectonia felt it, like a cool, autumn breeze. She rose from the chair in her parlor and waited, letting the magic shift around her. She recognized this magic, but surely, it couldn’t be this easy, could it? Surely, this Other Meta Knight hadn’t just appeared in the palace, had he?

Sectonia grabbed her phone and called Taranza. The phone rang three times. “Hello?” Taranza answered sleepily.

“Do you feel that?” Sectonia asked without preamble.

“Umm…yes! He came here?”

“Evidently. It feels like he’s in the West Wing. Meet me outside my room?”

“On my way.”

Sectonia left her parlor and opened her massive wardrobe. Garlude would be on duty outside her chambers. The Knight Commander could be trusted to keep some secrets—like midnight flirtations and explorations—but she definitely would get involved if Sectonia left with her rapiers in hand. Sectonia chose a midnight blue, ermine-trimmed cape. Once she’d tossed it over her shoulders, she buckled her rapiers around her waist. Sectonia twisted before her mirror, confirming that the rapiers were hidden when Sectonia pulled her cloak around herself.
Then, she swept from her room, moving quietly past her lady-in-waiting, asleep in the antechamber.

When Sectonia left her chambers, Taranza waited in the hall, along with Garlude, who swept into a respectful bow. “Your Royal Highness.”

“Dame Garlude, I wish to show Taranza the Fountain of Dreams,” Sectonia said. “I don’t suppose it would inconvenience you to…ignore the late hour?”

The knight’s eyes seemed too knowing. “Of course,” Garlude replied.

“Thank you,” Sectonia answered. “And Taranza, thank you for joining me at such a late hour.”

Taranza smiled. “Of course.”

Taranza kept close to Sectonia’s side until they were out of Garlude’s sight. Sectonia let her cloak drop, her rapiers catching the moonlight. “Any chance we’ll encounter guards?” Taranza asked. “Do you need me to pull a few strings?”

Sectonia’s lips quirked into a smile. “That pun was so bad, you ought to be executed,” she replied.

“If it was the glorious Sectonia doing the executing, I doubt I’d mind much,” Taranza replied.

“No guards,” Sectonia said. “Most of them have been relocated to keep an eye on Fluff. Ever since Dom Woole arrived, Mother has been dreadfully concerned about Fluff speaking with spies and trying to sabotage her. There is a regular patrol the comes on this floor, but we shouldn’t have any trouble evading them. The guard changes at twelve-thirty, so they’ll all be returning to their posts.”

“What is our plan as far as Meta Knight is concerned?” Taranza asked. “We know I can apprehend him, as long as he doesn’t flee.”

“He hasn’t thus far. Hopefully, he doesn’t realize that we know he isn’t Meta Knight. I’m counting
on that—and on him not picking up your powers because he’s too focused on mine,” Sectonia said. “Once we’ve apprehended him, we’ll have him take suppressants if he seems uncooperative. I suppose, then, we’ll have to take him somewhere for interrogation. I’d prefer my chambers, although we’ll have to get past Garlude, so perhaps, your rooms, then; if we take him anywhere else, Mother will find out. Then, she’ll want to take over, and I’m sure she’ll be quite unwilling to send anyone into the Mirror World after the child of Nightmare Nocturne. Hopefully, we’ll be able to reason with Dark. If not, we’ll do what we must.”

“What about Nightmare?”

“No yet,” Sectonia replied. “I’ll grant that his help may be invaluable, but I’d rather get my information before getting him involved. I shudder to imagine how he might extract information.”

The Fountain of Dreams was located in the palace’s West Wing. Officially, only the royalty and nobility were allowed to access the sacred fountain, although the rules were sometimes bent for historians and scholars. The fountain was often guarded, but the fountain was also the first place guards were pulled from when there was a shortage.

The hall opened into a round, tile room. Sectonia heard the sound of the fountain before she saw it. Dark still hadn’t left.

The tile sloped downwards into a large, round pool of shimmering water. The fountain, itself, was round and pale blue. It’d one held the Star Rod and safeguarded the dreams of all Dreamland’s residents, but that’d been long ago. The Star Rod hadn’t been seen since Bikaia used it.

The shadows shifted, and Sectonia fingered the hilts of her rapiers. She felt Taranza behind her, ready to call his powers at a moment’s notice. “I know you’re here,” she said. “I have questions. You’re looking for Galaxia, aren’t you? Why?”

Nothing.

Taranza snapped his fingers.

The shadows twisted, and Meta Knight emerged. At least, he looked exactly like Meta Knight, but Sectonia didn’t believe that Meta Knight could’ve returned so easily. He stumbled around the water. “I—you—” he said.
“Yes, my powers are so unnoticeable beside Sectonia’s, aren’t they?” Taranza asked.

Sectonia strode forward until she stood at the edge of the fountain. “Why are you searching for Galaxia?” she asked.

Meta Knight glared and shook his head.

“Don’t be rude,” Taranza said. “She asked you a question.”

“I—I need her to—”

Sectonia caught a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye. Dedede—no, not Dedede—he looked off—leapt from the shadows, his hammer poised to strike Taranza. Sectonia raised a wall of rose-colored crystal between them. The Other Dedede struck the wall, and it shattered. Taranza yelled in surprise as shattered chunks of crystal rained on them. He stepped backwards, swearing very colorfully.

“Keep Meta Knight under your control,” Sectonia said, drawing her rapiers and moving between Taranza and the Other Dedede.

Sectonia knew that Dedede easily outmatched her in brute force, but she still had magic and speed on her side. “This is sacred space,” Sectonia said. “Do you truly wish to defile it this way?”

Steel rang behind her, Dark drawing his blade at Taranza’s behest. The Other Dedede’s eyes flickered over to him. “We don’t want to hurt him,” Sectonia said. “We simply want to ask him some questions. We want our Meta Knight. You seek Galaxia, correct? Is that because you seek to defeat Dark Mind? If so, we have a common foe. Surely, you’d have a greater chance of success if you had more people fighting with you. We have Galaxia. We have Bikaia, and we have the goddess Nova. We’re willing to pursue a diplomatic solution with you. Are you?”

Dedede lowered his hammer, considering. “You…you truly have Bikaia and the goddess Nova? And Galaxia?”

“Yes, and while you may be reflections of Dreamlanders, you don’t carry those same spirits, do you? We have something you want, and you have something we want,” Sectonia replied. “Give me your word, and we’ll let Dark go. He’s your friend, isn’t he?”
“My prince,” the Other Dedede answered. “We…we do not practice diplomacy much in our kingdom.”

“We do in ours,” Sectonia replied, “And I guarantee our assistance if you help us save Meta Knight. As an act of good faith, I’m willing to release Dark, as long as you give me your word.”

Sectonia sheathed her rapiers and offered her hand. “Do we have an agreement?”

Taranza took a deep breath and let his powers wane. “Yes,” Dark said, sheathing his sword. “For now. Be forewarned, however, that if you betray us, you won’t live to regret the choice.”
The wizard’s knights had dragged Meta Knight to a surprisingly beautiful room of blue marble and elegant, crystal windows with an altar-like structure in the floor’s center. He’d been strapped down on his stomach, still with the handcuffs. There were spots in his vision, as his ribs throbbed and made it difficult to breathe. Meta Knight could barely move, and he wondered—hoped desperately—that Dark Mind’s only intention was to restrain and confine him. Considering Dark Mind’s penchant for physical violence, Meta Knight doubted it.

He waited, testing the bonds. They didn’t budge. Meta Knight turned his head to the side. The sound of running water bubbled in the room, but Meta Knight didn’t see any water. Perhaps, he would’ve if it’d been daytime, and he hadn’t had only the dull, dying gleams of dusk drifting through the windows. This was a very strange place to torture someone. It looked almost like one of Nova’s temples, a realization that wasn’t nearly as comforting as Meta Knight wanted it to be.

Dark Mind swept into the room, Shadow behind him. Meta Knight leveled a glare at them, and Dark Mind smiled, seeming amused. “Do you like this room, Meta Knight? Do you know what it is?”

At this point, it didn't seem like Meta Knight could make the situation worse, and he knew that when Dark Mind tortured him, he likely wouldn't feel so brave. Meta Knight gathered the waning bravado he had left. "Your obsession with Nova is disturbing. I'd tell you to move on and find another woman to be attracted to, but quite frankly, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"I built it to resemble one of Nova’s temples in your world," Dark Mind said, continuing as if Meta Knight hadn't said anything. "When she lived with me, I often brought her here. Poetic, isn’t it?"

Poetic because Dark Mind had bound the poor, noble goddess Nova to this same altar, the same sort of altar where her people had offered her water and flowers. And this place was filled with the sound of running water because Nova loved water. Meta Knight remembered the Nova of his
vision. He remembered that soft, gentle face and her kind, lovely eyes, and Meta Knight imagined that poor woman being tortured by a monster in this mockery of her temple.

"Monstrous is what it is. Vile, heinous, appalling."

The wizard's eyes narrowed. "She should've granted my wish. Then, I would've released her," Dark Mind said.

"No, you wouldn't have because you enjoy hurting people," Meta Knight said, "And even if you didn't, so she didn't grant your wish! You sound like a spoiled brat!"

Dark Mind trailed a finger down Meta Knight’s back. “This will be simple for you, Shadow. You can see his spine. Just barely, but it’s there.”

Shadow’s touch was light, almost shy. His fingers swept over Meta Knight’s shoulder blades, mere millimeters from the strap that buckled over Meta Knight’s upper back. No matter how sympathetic he was, Meta Knight doubted Shadow was going to free him and defy his father.

Could Meta Knight delay them by talking? It was worth a try.

"What did you wish for, anyway?” Meta Knight asked. "Clearly, it wasn't morals or strikingly good looks."

“Let me show you how it's done,” Dark Mind said.

Cold brushed against Meta Knight’s back, followed by a sharp crackling. Meta Knight frowned and shifted what little he could. It was uncomfortable, but it didn’t seem particularly torturous. Was it ice? Meta Knight couldn’t manage to look over his shoulder, but it felt like ice. It tightened between his shoulder blades and prickled, but it still wasn’t particularly bad.

Then, it tore through his skin in a sharp, sudden movement. Meta Knight yelped in surprise and instinctively tried to move away. The ice shard tore in deeper, and Dark Mind’s hand pushed down on Meta Knight's back, forcing him to be still. “I wouldn’t move if I were you,” the wizard cooed. “Greater men than you have broken their spines while moving during this.”

“Sure. These are very thin—like sewing needles. They make tiny holes in your skin—not enough for you to bleed out. Where’s the enjoyment in that? But they’re also very strong. Just one wrong twitch and you’ve severed your own spine.”

Dark Mind couldn’t really do that, could he? It didn’t matter. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Ice crackled on his back. Meta Knight dropped his forehead against the hard stone of the altar and bit the inside of cheek. The ice dug in again, slowly and sharply. Deep breaths. Deep breaths would help with the pain, but despite his best efforts, Meta Knight could feel his breath quicken. Dark Mind continued, and Meta Knight fought to stay still. He chest burned, his head ached, his back throbbed, and his mouth tasted of blood where he’d bitten into his cheek to keep from screaming. Dark Mind paused and put his hand on Meta Knight’s ribs. “Why don’t you try, Shadow?”

Was that for better or worse? Shadow’s fingertips lighted on Meta Knight’s back, where his ribs met his spine. Ice crackled, and Meta Knight winced. This would be very bad. He clenched his jaw, determined not to give Dark Mind the satisfaction of hearing him scream.

“You need to make sure he knows you mean it, Shadow,” Dark Mind said.

The ice sharpened, and even though Meta Knight knew what was going to happen when it struck where his fractured ribs met his spine, it still wasn’t enough to keep him from yelling at the sudden burst of pain. It was dizzying, and he jerked away. He couldn’t breathe.

“That’s better, boy,” Dark Mind said.

Meta Knight wasn’t sure which of them kept driving the ice into his back, but it felt as though his spine would break. He couldn’t see what was happening, but it felt like Dark Mind really was letting the ice pry its way into the vertebrae. It burned and ached, and it took all Meta Knight’s willpower not to move. His efforts soon became futile; Meta Knight was shaking and couldn’t stop. “Shall we continue, Meta Knight?” Dark Mind asked.

He felt like he needed to say something, some sarcastic retort or brave one-liner, but he couldn’t catch his breath enough to do it. That would be the heroic thing to do. That would be the brave thing to do.
But everything hurt so very badly.

Cold metal pressed against Meta Knight’s upper back. Meta Knight clenched his jaw and tried not to react as the wizard pressed down harder, sending sharp aches up his shoulder blades. The ice crackled and dug in more sharply. “Does that hurt?” Dark Mind asked innocently.

Meta Knight tried to steady his breathing. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he rasped.

The ice tightened, sending another wave of pain down Meta Knight’s spine. “Do you think you’ve learned your lesson?” Dark Mind asked.

Only if the lesson was that Dark Mind was an abhorrent human being. Dear Nova, it hurt so badly. Meta Knight wasn’t sure how much of this he could possibly endure.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I don’t think you really have. Come, Shadow.”

They left. For a long time, Meta Knight stared at the door. Then, he laid his cheek on the bench and took a shuddering breath. Nova’s grace, he hadn’t known it was possible to hurt this much. And how had this happened? Logically, he knew why this had happened. It’d happened because an evil tyrant tortured him, but why hadn’t…

Why did these things keep happening? He’d been beaten by Yin-Yarn controlling Dedede, by Dark, and now by Dark Mind and Shadow. Why did he keep getting bested by everyone? Why wasn’t he strong enough to prevent this? All of these? Wasn’t he the child of Dreamland’s most feared wizard?

Meta Knight’s chest ached dully. He wondered if it was possible for him to die of asphyxiation in this situation. No, surely not. Logically, he knew he was still breathing. He could make noise. He could even scream if he wanted to, and that meant he was getting air. But it really felt like his ribs were being fractured all over again, and his back throbbed. He felt like he’d been torn apart and hastily patched together, and there was nothing he could do about it. Even the slightest movement caused jolts of pain, and he couldn’t move very much as it was.

He’d fainted at some point, and he knew that only because he’d suddenly regained awareness. It
Meta Knight wished he was stronger. Someone braver, someone smarter, just someone else. Nightmare wouldn’t have let someone do this to him. He’d have never let someone do this to Meta Knight. Maybe Nightmare really hadn’t been a terrible parent. Why had Meta Knight ever thought so? Dark Mind was an abusive parent. Nightmare tried; he just wasn’t very good at it, but he was trying better. Maybe Meta Knight should try to be a better son, assuming he ever saw his father again.

Assuming his father still loved him. Nightmare abhorred weakness, and surely, he’d be deeply ashamed of how Meta Knight was reacting to all of this. And how could Meta Knight possibly tell his father that he was Galacta Knight, the Knight of the Slaughter?

The incarnation of history’s most infamous mass murderer, who couldn’t even keep himself from being tortured.

The door slammed open. Dark Mind entered, Shadow following a few paces back. Meta Knight took a deep breath, preparing himself. “You’ve had time to think things over now,” Dark Mind said, tracing a finger over Meta Knight’s shoulder blades. “What were you thinking of?”

“It really hurts.”

“And what else?”

What else? “My father,” Meta Knight said. “Her. You told me not to speak of her.”

“Galaxia? How pathetic. Your loyalty is wasted on her. If she was here, she’d gladly sacrifice you for her own safety. She’d stand and watch me do this to you without batting an eye.”

“No, she…”

“What? Loves you? Do you think she didn’t know what you are? She didn’t choose you for your heart, Meta Knight. She chose you because she was bored and lonely, and she knew that eventually
you’d bring her to Bikaia. Now that she has him, there’s no need for you, is there?"

No. No, he was lying. He knew Meta Knight was weak and in pain, and Dark Mind’s absurd lies were meant to make him hurt worse.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry—somehow, through sheer force of will, he managed that. Even though everything hurt. Even though his throat was raw. Even though Dark Mind was saying terrible, so reasonable sounding things, Meta Knight managed not to cry.

“Do you think I’ve been unfair, Meta Knight?”

Unfair? More like a cold-blooded torturer. Meta Knight had never killed anyone before. He’d never wanted to kill anyone before, but this abhorrent creature deserved something wretched. Something wretched to as repayment for all the injustices he’d reaped on Meta Knight and everyone else.

And now Dark Mind wanted to play this little mind game wherein he made Meta Knight say it was all deserved? As if this was in any way appropriate retaliation for smarting off.

“No, Your Majesty. It was deserved,” Meta Knight said.

This coward wouldn’t dare if Meta Knight was armed and could access his magic. If Meta Knight had access to a sword and his magic, Dark Mind would’ve never been able to do so much anyway.

“Then, shouldn’t you thank me for it? Shouldn’t you thank Shadow for it?” Dark Mind asked.

No, it was so easy to face opponents that couldn’t defend themselves, wasn’t it?

“Yes, thank you, Your Majesty. Thank you, Lord Shadow.”

Shadow looked like he might be sick. “Do you believe him, Shadow?” Dark Mind asked.

“Yes,” Shadow replied quickly. “I know Meta Knight is very sorry, and he’ll know never to speak
to you in such a disrespectful manner again. He is also new to our realm, Father, so surely, that warrants a bit of initial leniency.”

Nova bless Shadow for trying to help. Dark Mind was quiet for an unsettlingly long time. Eventually, he drew the ice back. Meta Knight winced and clenched his teeth together. He let out a low, soft sigh when the ice was finally removed. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he mumbled, trying desperately to stay in Dark Mind’s good graces.

“Shadow is right,” Dark Mind said. “You should be allowed a bit of leniency, so, perhaps, I’ve been too harsh.”

Meta Knight caught the implication that something worse was coming, and the suddenly concerned look on Shadow’s face only confirmed it. “I would be an absolutely dreadful host if I didn’t cauterize your wounds,” Dark Mind said, drawing fire to his hand. “Don’t you think?”

Dark Mind was clearly waiting for an answer, and ‘no’ was clearly the wrong one. This sounded like Meta Knight was in for a very bad infection sometime in the future. “You would be, Your Majesty,” Meta Knight said.

It was going to hurt so badly.

And it did hurt. Dark Mind moved very slowly, leaving behind the lingering burning sensation of fire. When the wizard finished, he mockingly patted Meta Knight’s cheek, spreading his blood across his face, before striding away. Meta Knight looked at the stone beneath him. He still wasn’t sure he was the reincarnation of Galacta Knight, the Knight of the Slaughter, but if he was ever given a chance, he was going to live up to that epitaph.

Shadow lingered behind. “Shall I free him, Father?” Shadow asked.

Dark Mind paused by the door. “If you wish. I don’t particularly care.”

The wizard left, and Meta Knight let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Shadow unbuckled the straps, and Meta Knight quickly sat upright. Everything hurt, but he couldn’t imagine laying there any longer, strapped down or no. Air seemed to rush into his lungs, soothing some of the fiery pain in his chest. “Ssh,” Shadow said. “It’s all right now. It’s all right. He didn’t do anything permanent. Don’t worry; Father was careful. You’ll be fine.”
Meta Knight didn’t feel quite real anymore. He couldn’t stop shaking or control his breathing, and he thought surely, he must’ve died already. This was all surely some near-death fever dream of some sort. Shadow pulled his coat off and draped it over Meta Knight’s shoulders. Then, he climbed onto the altar beside Meta Knight and hugged him. “Come on,” Shadow coaxed. “I know you’re hurt and upset, but talk to me. Can you walk? We need to take you to the infirmary.”

Meta Knight forced himself to his feet, only succeeding with Shadow’s help. Everything hurt. “I hate it here,” Meta Knight said.

“Then, you should be very careful and bide your time until you’re strong enough to escape,” Shadow whispered. “Because Father never lets anyone go easily.”

Although Kirby had spent the night with Bandanna Dee and Dedede, he’d still forced himself to get up and attend his nine o’clock Dreamlandic composition class. At least, he felt as though he was doing something when he had schoolwork to distract him. Once class ended, Kirby trudged across campus, making his way to the dorm. Galaxia was sheathed on his back, but they didn’t speak. Kirby still felt as though he really didn’t have a right to speak to her about casual things like school. Or Meta Knight. When Kirby approached the Celeste Residence Hall, he immediately noticed two things. One, his father, clad in a long, black coat and armor, stood outside the dorm. Two, his father was being accosted by a very tall, dark-skinned man with bright green hair. Why was Nightmare even there, though? Kirby had just wanted to hang out with his friends.

Maybe Nightmare had information about Meta Knight? Or the Mirror Meta Knight? Kirby hastened his pace, as Galaxia stirred anxiously.

Nightmare pinched the bridge of his nose. “With all due respect, I’ve business to attend to, and I don’t have time. If you’ll kindly move—”

The green-haired man turned suddenly and smiled widely. “Hello! I am Woods. Whispy Woods, and if you would be so kind as to sign my petition, I’d be much appreciative!”

“He’s busy, too,” Nightmare said, resting a hand on Kirby’s shoulder.

“And is your business more important than the environment? Is it more important than the pollution that Haltmann Works is—”
“Haltmann Works?” Nightmare asked. “You’re protesting them?!”

Woods, Whispy Woods nodded fiercely. “Oh, yeah! They’re the absolute worst!”

Nightmare reached into his coat and pulled out his wallet. From there, he produced a business card. “Give my personal assistant a call. He’d love to make a…significant charitable donation to your cause,” Nightmare said. “Come, Kirby.”

Nightmare steered Kirby with one hand and slammed the dorm room door with the other.

“But wait! You didn’t sign my—”

A young woman with long, black hair and violet eyes opened the door. “Hello, Lord Noc—”

Nightmare stormed past her without preamble. The woman muttered something under her breath that Kirby didn’t catch. After closing the door, she spun around in a bright cloud of silk; Kirby noticed the pair of shimmering translucent wings from her back. “Fae Queen,” she said. “You must be Kirby! Yes, I can definitely see the resemblance to Meta Knight.”

Kirby beamed at her, delighted with the comparison. In the back of his mind, Galaxia stirred and chuckled with fond amusement.

“I’d expected some security,” Nightmare said, striding into the living room.

Kirby followed, peering around his father into the living room. Sectonia sat in the chair, wearing armor, elaborated decorated with floral designs, and a royal blue cape. A man sat opposite her. He was clad in armor, also, but that wasn’t what caught Kirby’s focus. The most striking thing about the man was that half his face was heavily scarred around his left eye, which was milky and clearly bore heavy signs of scarring; his other eye was unblemished with a stunningly red iris. But once Kirby managed to look past those eyes, he recognized that this man had once been—still was, really—uncommonly attractive. Gorgeous, even.

Gorgeous because he looked exactly like Meta Knight.
The other oddity was that there were now two Dedede’s—one standing behind the Meta Knight look-alike and one seated on the sofa beside Bandanna Dee. Fae remained at Kirby’s side, and even though he didn’t know her well, she had a very comforting sort of presence.

Kirby was in a room with the crown princess of Dreamland, a famous designer, and two Mirror Worlders. This was Kirby’s life now. It was never going to make sense again, and Kirby wondered if he might be on the verge of some sort of emotional breakdown.

“I’m trying to keep a low profile, Nocturne,” Sectonia said. “Mother thinks I’m shopping for Solstice gifts with Taranza.”

“And no one noticed that their princess is missing?” Nightmare asked.

Sectonia smirked. “I have my ways. Lord Dark, Lord Dedede, this is Nightmare Nocturne, Meta Knight’s father, and Kirby Stellarum.”

“Is that Galaxia?” Dark asked, evidently unconcerned with other introductions.

Kirby unsheathed the blade, and Dark leaned forward, fascinated. “Galaxia of the Sacred Fire…” he muttered. “I can’t believe she’s really here. I…”

“You’ll repair the Mirror, so we can save Meta Knight,” Nightmare cut in, “Or I will disembowel you.”

“I see you’re as charming as my own father,” Dark replied, “But I will.”

“Very good,” Sectonia replied. “Then, you, Kirby, Nightmare, Mirror Dedede, and I will proceed to the Mirror.”

“Hold on a minute! I know you ain’t saying I cain’t go,” Dedede said. “I’ve got ten years’ experience with my war hammer, and Meta Knight works for me. I’m going.”
“Me, too,” Bandanna Dee said. “I’m the best on DU’s spear team, and—”

Sectonia raised her hand for silence. “This isn’t a game,” she said. “Someone might get hurt. Can you imagine, Dedede, what your mother would say if you were injured?”

“Don’t try to play my mom against me! If she hadn’t just gone back home, she’d be offering to go save Meta, too!”

“I will excuse your poor manners,” Sectonia said, “For I can only fathom the distress you feel. However, I stand firm in my decision. You may go with us to the Mirror, but I forbid you to cross over with it.”

Dedede scowled, but he nodded all the same. Fae reached across Bandanna Dee and squeezed his hand. “Very good, then,” Sectonia replied, rising.

“Bring him home safely,” Fae whispered to Kirby, “And yourself as well.”

Kirby nodded.

Everyone filed out together, Kirby taking his place towards the Other Meta Knight. Dark cut his eye towards Kirby and surveyed him carefully. “Does Nightmare Nocturne treat you well, Kirby Stellarum?” he whispered.

*There was glass and blood and sharp, stinging pain in his shoulder. He doubled over and bit back the pained whine in his throat. He’d started this. This was all his fault. Why had he envisioned it being any other way?*

Kirby put a hand to his forehead. That wasn’t his memory.

“I…I don’t know anymore. I think he probably…” Kirby trailed off and swallowed the lump in his throat. “I think he threw Meta Knight around a lot. When he was a child.”

“At least, he’s accustomed to maltreatment,” Dark muttered bitterly. “Maybe we ought to kill them both and try our luck as orphans.”
Kirby bristled. “Stay away from my father,” he said.

Dedede grabbed Dark’s shoulder and whispered something to him. Kirby took the momentary distraction to join his father. Dark might be a mirror version of Meta Knight, but clearly, he was lacking in all morals. And tact. To just…suggest killing someone’s father so flippantly was horrific.

Nightmare wasn’t—

Kirby bit the inside of his cheek. He pictured a very young, very small child-Meta Knight being thrown around by their father, and—and it wasn’t made any better when he imagined Meta Knight was a teenager.

It should be logical. It should be easy. Abuse was bad, and abusers were bad. Therefore, Nightmare should be undeniably horrible. He hurt Meta Knight!

But once Kirby admitted that, he could never love his dad again. And…

And Kirby thought of the past few months. Wasn’t that an absurdly short time to decide he loved someone? Surely, he couldn’t really love Meta Knight’s calm presence or his elegant demeanor. Surely, Kirby couldn’t love him already, but maybe…

Maybe if he had to choose between Nightmare and Meta Knight, maybe if he could only choose one…

Maybe it would be Meta Knight. Bikaia or no, Galacta Knight or no, Kirby had waited eighteen years to meet his long-lost brother, and if changing the very course of history was what it took to have his happy family, Kirby was determined to do just that.

The doctors in Dark Mind’s infirmary were both astonishingly gentle and horrifying. While one of them had cleaned Meta Knight’s injuries very carefully and proficiently, another doctor had struck
up a conversation about the benefits of bloodletting, and yet another began describing what sounded like a magical lobotomy. Meta Knight listened to the horrific beginnings of modern medicine with increasing dread. He silently decided to say nothing about his fractured ribs and concussion, even though his chest felt like it was on fire, and his head had burst into a persistent, throbbing pain. The absolute last thing he needed was these people poisoning him in a misguided attempt to help him.

However, one of the doctors had rubbed a nice, numbing paste over Meta Knight’s back, and the absence of pain was such a relief that Meta Knight really didn’t care if it was some deadly concoction of lead, arsenic, and oleander.

Meta Knight managed to keep quiet through having his injuries cleaned and bandaged, although he thought about all the benefit that could come just from slipping these doctors a few medical textbooks. The servants arrived and placed him in a fresh shirt. They were careful with the handcuffs, and once Meta Knight looked semi-presentable, Shadow arrived.

There was a chorus of greetings and a fluttering of bowing. “I wish to be alone with Lord Meta Knight,” Shadow replied.

No one seemed too upset about leaving, but aside from Meta Knight, there were no patients in the infirmary. The doctors probably had little to occupy them.

“I’m sorry about everything,” Shadow said. “I didn’t want to hurt you, but it would’ve been worse if I hadn’t.”

“Why are you so nice?” Meta Knight asked.

“I like making people happy,” Shadow said. “That’s all.”

“Fine, but why? You’re nothing like Dark Mind, and you’re nothing like your brother.”

“My brother isn’t bad,” Shadow whispered. “He wanted to…to find Galaxia and overthrow Father. He’d hoped I’d be able to wield her because I’m a reflection of Bikaia’s soul.”

“He didn’t realize I was her wielder,” Meta Knight muttered.
“You?” Shadow asked. “I’d suspected after some things Father said, but that’s...that’s impressive.”

“It might’ve gone better if he’d asked for my help rather than attacking me,” Meta Knight said.

“In his defense, we usually attack first and ask questions later, assuming there are survivors. At least, that’s what Dark tells me. I’ve never seen the battlefield. Father says I don’t have the right temperament, so I manage the servants and entertain him.”

“And you have Copy, correct?”

“Yes. I’m allowed to copy anyone except Father, but I tend towards the more magical powers.”

Meta Knight tried to recall what he’d learned about the Copy ability. It was a notoriously rare ability, most famously used by King Bikaia, who’d allegedly Copied over seventy abilities with his powers. When Meta Knight was young, he’d been taught them all, but that knowledge hadn’t seemed especially useful at the time. He’d forgotten most of them.

“Why didn’t you go with your brother?’

Shadow leaned close to Meta Knight’s ear. “I didn’t know if he’d find it, and I couldn’t risk leaving for nothing. I’m doing damage control,” Shadow whispered.

Shadow shifted Meta Knight’s handcuffs up his forearm, so he could clean the raw and bruised skin of Meta Knight’s wrists.

“It must be difficult to be so compassionate in your situation.”

“Father says that you either inflict pain, or you suffer it,” Shadow replied, wrapping a bandage around Meta Knight’s wrist. “That is the law he lives by. I find, though, that it’s difficult to bringing suffering to others once you’ve suffered the same treatment. Father has done this to me as well as my brother.”
Shadow turned his attention to Meta Knight’s other wrist.

“How did you find yourself living with Dark Mind?” Meta Knight asked.

“He’s my father. Doesn’t my Dreamland counterpart live with his father?”

“No. Technically, he lives in a dorm, but I imagine he lives with his mother when school isn’t in session.”

Shadow nodded. “Father was once very extravagant, or so I’m told. Dark’s mother, Nieva, was our father’s mistress and an especially gifted sorceress. My mama makes—or used to make—jewelry for wealthy women. Father initially approached her to make gifts for his mistress, but…somehow, I happened.”

“Used to make?”

Shadow gently wrapped bandages around Meta Knight's wrist. “When I was born, Nieva wasn’t pleased. She insisted that Father have no relationship with me, and he was content with that. So it was decided that I’d be Dark’s servant. I think she meant to humiliate me, but it worked out for me. Just like it worked out for you, right?”

“Worked out for me?”

“Being a servant. Father said that Nova’s incarnation is your master.”

“Well, he’s my Lord,” Meta Knight said. “In Dreamland, it’s an insult to use master like that. It implies a sort of inescapable, pre-determined fate, and I wasn’t assigned to Dedede like that. We wrote up a contract together when I was eighteen, and it only lasts five years.”

“Eighteen?” Shadow asked. “What did you do before that?”

“I was a pickpocket, and before that, I didn’t do much. I didn’t have a proper job if that’s what you mean.”
Shadow furrowed his brow. “How strange. Well, I…I suppose Dark was a fair…lord. We were children, so we played together. I had my magic, but Mama insisted I never tell anyone it was Copy. Instead, I always carried the Beam power. People assumed I was a powerful Beam mage, and that worked for years. Eventually, though, Dark found out, and when he did, he told his mother.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He was only twelve years old,” Shadow said. “He didn’t quite realize the weight of that secret; I didn’t either. Father was furious that my mother hadn’t told him. He ordered her to be executed. And I…I begged him not to. Father said he’d spare her, but I’d have to give something up. He wanted to teach me the price for loving someone and for giving mercy to someone. Of course, I agreed. I didn’t want him to hurt my mama.”

Shadow’s breath hitched.

“You don’t have to tell me what he did,” Meta Knight said. “It’s all right.”

“N-no, just…Dark agreed to take my punishment for me,” Shadow said, “So Father blinded him in one eye. And…my mama was banished. Father let me grow up as Dark’s brother, but Nieva was in charge of raising us. She hated me so much, but, I don’t think she liked Dark much either. She just wanted to be Queen, and giving Father a warrior-prince helped cement her claim.”

“Dark Mind hasn’t mentioned a queen. Is she still around?”

“There was a young noblewoman named Sectonia, and she started a rebellion against Father. After that, Father became terrified of betrayal. He executed many people, and Nieva was one of them. Father said she was too clever and that she’d been plotting against him. Of course, no one really knew if she was, but…he had Dark behead her as a show of loyalty.”

“And he did it, didn’t he?”

“If he hadn’t, Father would’ve killed him, too.”
Meta Knight was at a loss for words. How could any response be kind enough to assuage such cruelty? How could any gesture appropriately express the pity, the horror, and the sadness the situation required? “I am so sorry,” Meta Knight said. “I can’t even imagine enduring what you have.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I can’t help you. If you can’t—” Shadow cut off abruptly as a knight entered the room. “Sir Knight, I requested that I be allowed to tend to our guest’s injuries without intrusion.”

The knight bowed. “Forgive me, my Lord. The emperor requests your presence in the throne room.”

“Oh. Then, I’ll escort Meta Knight—”

“He requests Lord Meta Knight, too. Rebels are storming the castle, and His Majesty feels we ought to lead them into the throne room and put an end to this farce.”
**The Scarlet Magician Strikes Again**

Chapter Summary

*Hello, readers! I uploaded chapters 15 and 16 at the same time, so if you just went to this one, make sure you first read the one before. (I bring this up only because I've never done this before and don't want any confusion).

**Also, epic battle! And people die! I promise, promise, promise the next chapter is full of comfort, fluffy friendship, and university stuff.

Dark Mind’s throne room was massive with a high-vaulted ceiling, decorated with numerous crystal chandeliers. The black, marble floor was covered with a plush, red carpet. Meta Knight had been chained to the small, dark throne beside Dark Mind’s own. The wizard, himself, lounged on his obsidian throne, looking completely in his element. His cloak spread over the throne and onto the polished floor. Behind Meta Knight, Shadow stood with his magic wand.

Shouts boomed from the hallway behind the throne room’s massive, oak doors. Meta Knight wondered how large the rebel army was. Did they know they were being purposefully lured into Dark Mind’s throne room? Were they powerful enough to win? Would it be possible to find someone sympathetic among them? It would be obvious that he wasn’t here of his own free will.

The doors inched open, and with a frustrated sigh, Dark Mind flicked his wrist. The doors burst open, amidst a cloud of swears, screams, and metal-like screeches.

Meta Knight felt as though time had stopped in its tracks.

Dedede, hammer in hand, strode in. Blood was smeared over his chest and his hammer; clearly, he’d been in the thick of it all. Bandanna Dee, spear in hand, followed. The doors slammed behind them with an echoing boom.

This was the worst possible thing that could’ve happened. It was his…friends? They weren’t supposed to be here. They were supposed to be safe in Dreamland, far away from the nightmares of this place.

Dark Mind stood and spread his arms wide. “Welcome, noble goddess! It has been so long since you’ve graced my halls, although you’re not nearly as lovely this time. Alas, the years have not been kind. It looks like dear Meta Knight got all the beauty, hmm?”
Dedede and Bandanna Dee looked at one another. “We’re not Nova,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Of course, you aren’t,” Dark Mind replied. “I was referring to Dedede.”

“Nova? I ain’t Nova! That’s Sectonia!” Dedede argued.

Sectonia? Then…they knew? But Sectonia didn’t make sense. Meta Knight would’ve preferred it be her, but…

“Sectonia? You can’t lie to me,” Dark Mind said. “I’d recognize the goddess Nova anywhere.”

“Then, take it up with Sectonia! Let Meta Knight go,” Dedede said. “And we’ll be on our way. I don’t care ‘bout overthrowing you or nothing. I just want him.”

“But I’ve been enjoying his company so much,” Dark Mind drawled.

“We’ll see if you still enjoy it after I kick your ass halfway to Halcandra!” Dedede snapped, storming forward.

Dark Mind clapped his hands together in delight and strode forward.

“Wait, Your Majesty!” Meta Knight stood, nearly tripping over the chains. “Don’t hurt him! He doesn’t understand—”

“Silence!” Dark Mind roared, twisting around. “One more word from you, and I will beat you half to death, you—”

“Over my dead body!” Dedede shouted, swinging his hammer.

Astonishingly, the blow connected, and the wizard fell back, curling nearly double and holding one hand to his stomach. Bandanna Dee ran towards Meta Knight and dropped to his knees. “Oh,
crap!” Bandanna Dee exclaimed, tugging futilely at the chains.

The crackling of ice exploded in the air. Dark Mind, having regained his bearings, had launched into a full-scale magical assault. Dedede leaped aside and swung his hammer. Dark Mind vanished before Dedede could land another blow.

“Don’t worry, Meta Knight. We’re going to get you out of here,” Bandanna Dee insisted, shoving his spear through one of the chain links and trying to break it.

“I can do it,” Shadow said quietly. “Just don’t move.”

Dark Mind reappeared.

“All right,” Bandanna Dee said. “Let’s—”

Bandanna Dee lurched forward and fell into Meta Knight’s calves. It took Meta Knight several seconds to realize the significance of the red ice spread across Bandanna Dee’s back and the warmth against Meta Knight’s legs. Blood.

There was a lot of blood. Meta Knight screamed when the realization struck him. “Oh, Nova, Dee!”

Meta Knight pressed against Bandanna Dee’s back, trying to halt the blood flow, but Bandanna Dee wasn’t moving. And that had gone into his back and through his chest. Logically, Bandanna Dee was dead. Very dead.

Shakily, Meta Knight raised his fingers, searching for the pulse he couldn’t find. He couldn’t accept this. No. No, Bandanna Dee had to be fine.

Oh, no. No, no, no. Not Bandanna Dee. Not like this. Not—

Landia’s four heads were muzzled, and its body was held to the ground with chains that shined unnaturally in the glow of embers and darkness. The dragon’s blue eyes remained fixed on Galacta Knight, as she wedged her knife between the dragon’s scales. If the knight had still had
Galaxia, this would’ve been quick and easy.

Because she didn’t have Galaxia, it was long and dirty work, trying to pry the dragon’s armored scales apart and dig into the dragon’s hide until it bled. Landia writhed, trying to escape. The movement caused the chains to tighten, threatening to rip the dragon’s wings from its back.

Galacta Knight shook her head in mock dismay. “Poor little dragon,” she cooed. “Don’t worry. We’ll be done soon.”

With a smirk, the knight pushed her knife in further. The only thing stronger than dragon’s fire was dragon’s blood.

What? Meta Knight stumbled backwards into the throne. What was that? Bandanna Dee was dead. And Landia—why Landia?

Dedede joined them, shoving Shadow aside. Frantically, Dedede pressed his fingers against Bandanna Dee’s neck, in a panicky attempt to catch his pulse. “Dee! Dee, you can’t be! Dee, Dee, come on—”

“It’ll be Meta Knight next,” Dark Mind said calmly. “I’ll make you watch him die, Nova.”

Dedede whirled around and swung his hammer, missing the wizard by inches. “I ain’t Nova, you son of a bitch!”

“Denying it won’t save you. It didn’t save your friend. Poor little goddess, do you remember being here? Do you remember sitting where Meta Knight is now?”

Shadow gathered Bandanna Dee in his arms and laid him out on the ground. As he did, Shadow’s eyes held Meta Knight’s. I’m sorry, he mouthed.

Dark Mind didn’t seem to notice; he was too focused upon Dedede standing between them.

An explosion rocked the room, as the doors flew off their hinges, their heavy wood splintering across the floor. Nightmare Nocturne swept in; his coat billowed behind him and cracked smartly,
as if held aloft by an unseen wind. Beneath it, armor glinted silver in the flickering torchlight. The shadows leaped after him, cascading over the floor. Nightmare had removed his glasses, and his eyes were cold and glowed silver with the threat of his power. Father had never looked so terrifying or so glorious.

Meta Knight shifted forward in the throne. His heart was in his throat. Never in any of his fantasies of escape or being rescued, had Meta Knight considered that his father would come to his rescue. Father had really come for him! Father had power, real power! “Father,” Meta Knight breathed.

Undeterred, Nightmare stepped over the shattered doors and the jagged bits of ice. “Hello, dearest. Did this man hurt you?”

“Bandanna Dee is badly injured,” Meta Knight replied.

“Injured? That boy is dead,” Dark Mind said. “As for Meta Knight, well…he didn’t get anything he didn’t deserve.”

Dark Mind strode towards the wizard, showing his back to Meta Knight. Dedede could’ve struck the wizard, but he abandoned the endeavor in favor of tearing open Bandanna Dee’s shirt. Dedede took Bandanna Dee’s pulse again. “He cain’t be dead,” Dedede whispered. “He cain’t. He cain’t be dead. He cain’t…”

“He isn’t breathing,” Shadow said. “I’m so sorry.”

Ice crackled, and there was a split-second warning before the wall of ice formed. Shadow pulled Bandanna Dee clear. Dedede was knocked backwards and onto the ground. Meta Knight placed his hand against the wall as if that would miraculously shatter it. Dedede attacked it with his hammer, but the wall didn’t give. Instead, it shifted around, hemming Dedede, Bandanna Dee, and Shadow in a corner. Dedede attacked the wall again, to no avail. Shadow’s beam magic, likewise, bounced off the ice and left it unscathed.

“It’s rude to speak while others are talking, children,” Dark Mind said, before turning to Nightmare. “Ah, and you must be Lord Nightmare. What an absolute honor to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise,” Nightmare deadpanned.
“I’ve no quarrel with you,” Dark Mind said, “So why don’t you give me Nova, and I’ll release your child, hmm?”

“Iintriguing, but I fear I must respectfully decline. Here’s my offer,” Nightmare said, his voice deceptively soft and unparalleled in the danger it held. “You release my child, and I don’t break you in half.”

Dark Mind heaved a dramatic sigh. “So unreasonable,” the wizard said. “You can’t possibly defeat me.”

Nightmare called lightning to his hand. It crackled and popped as it gathered over the wizard’s slender, armor-clad fingers.

Nightmare released the lightning, which struck Dark Mind’s armor and knocked the wizard a half-step backwards. Just as quickly, Nightmare gathered more lightning around him. Dark Mind moved into a fighting stance and raised his arm. Jagged ice rose through the floor. Nightmare vanished, barely evading it. Meta Knight stood again, although he couldn’t move more than a couple inches away from his throne.

Pink crystals formed in the air and rushed with blinding speed towards Dark Mind, who raised lightning in time to deflect them. Sectonia stormed in, her rapiers ready. Nightmare materialized beside her and threw his lightning at Dark Mind, who seamlessly dodged it. Seeing the additional resistance, the wizard backed away, as Sectonia and Nightmare closed in on him.

“Normally, I like men in chains,” a voice purred, “But this is neither the time nor place for that, hm?”

Meta Knight jumped as Dark appeared beside him. His mirror-double crouched in front of the throne and wrapped his hand around Meta Knight’s ankle. Dark produced a hairpin from his coat pocket and placed it in the keyhole. “This will work on your handcuffs, too,” Dark said. “Because it’s forged with dragon’s fire just like they are. Can you fight?”

“If I must,” Meta Knight replied.

Meta Knight looked towards the wall of ice. Dedede still futilely tried to crack the ice with his hammer. Shadow sat beside Bandanna Dee. “My friend is dead,” Meta Knight said, but the words didn’t make sense.
“Father does that,” Dark said, managing to free Meta Knight’s right ankle.

Meta Knight swallowed past the lump in his throat.

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself,” Dark said. “That isn’t going to fix anything. You need to help us fight Father. You’re supposed to be the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy, the Wielder of Galaxia.”

“You’re as lacking in empathy as that monster you call a father!” Meta Knight snapped.

“Because your father is such a lovely creature, isn’t he?” Dark asked.

Once Meta Knight’s ankles were free, Dark moved to his handcuffs. Across the room, Dark Mind still fought Nightmare and Sectonia. Although it was apparent both Nightmare and Sectonia were skilled fighters, Dark Mind looked no closer to losing. When Meta Knight hadn’t been looking, Nightmare had taken a blow to the face. His glasses were gone, and blood streaked the side of his face.

Dark Mind raised his arm, causing ice to break through the floor. Nightmare vanished, but Sectonia lacked the gift of teleportation. She turned to run, casting crystal shields behind her. They broke beneath the force of Dark Mind’s ice. Suddenly, fire arched before her, halting the ice and viciously melting it in a rush of steam.

“I’m here!” Kirby’s voice sounded like a hawk’s cry amidst the battlefield.

Kirby wore armor, likely borrowed from someone on Queen’s Guard, and he held Galaxia high, her blade shining with fire and light. He looked like Bikaia returned. Meta Knight felt his breath quicken, whether from the sight of Kirby or Galaxia was impossible to say.

Meta Knight’s right wrist was free, and Dark leaned over to grab the other one.

“No, one’s enough,” Meta Knight said. “I just need to ensure he’s weaker than them.”
Understanding dawned in Dark’s eyes. He drew his sword and offered Meta Knight his free hand. “All right. I'll cover you.”

Kirby ran forward and swiped with Galaxia. Sectonia approached with her rapiers, clearly ready to protect Kirby should the need arise. Nightmare called lightning to his hand. The world rippled like water, and Meta Knight and Dark were suddenly behind Dark Mind.

Galaxia tore through Dark Mind’s armor as if it was made of paper. In retaliation, Dark Mind released his lightning. Sectonia shoved Kirby aside and took the attack herself. She screamed as it knocked her to the ground and back several feet. The sound of her screams startled Kirby, who rushed to her side, deflecting the second volley of lightning with Galaxia’s blade.

Meta Knight rushed forward and clicked the cuff closed over Dark Mind’s wrist. The wizard twisted around and snarled. “You—”

Dark Mind never finished the thought, for Nightmare’s lightning struck him in the chest. Dark Mind fell to the ground, taking Meta Knight with him. The wizard regained his footing quickly, pulling so hard on Meta Knight’s arm that he thought it might be dislocated. Still, Meta Knight held out his free hand, silently bidding Galaxia to come to him.

Even without his powers, Galaxia recognized the presence of her beloved wielder. The sword flew into his hand, and Dark Mind stumbled back. Abruptly, the wizard halted, stopped by Dark’s sword in his back. Meta Knight drove Galaxia into Dark Mind’s chest and twisted the blade. “Know my power,” Meta Knight hissed, pulling the blade free.

Dark Mind remained standing, still impaled on Dark’s sword. Dark pulled it free, and the wizard fell to the ground, pulling awkwardly at Meta Knight’s wrist. “We did it,” Dark said, sounding amazed. “I never…I never thought this day would come. I can't wait to tell Dedede! I lost him in the fight earlier. I must find him, though, and tell him personally! And, Shadow! Shadow, we’re finally free of him! Free! After all these years, we've done it! Shadow?”

When Meta Knight looked at Shadow, the mirror-Kirby had his ear pressed against Bandanna Dee’s chest. The wall of ice before them descended into a flood of water. Dedede took a few steps forward. “Meta Knight!” he shouted.

“I just killed our father,” Dark said, sounding bemused. “That isn’t going to magically bring him back to life. He took an ice shard through his chest. With Father’s death, it would’ve melted, but that doesn’t mean—”
“I know, but…this will sound really odd, but I think he is. Yes, there…” Shadow trailed off, moving his hand to the blood crusted beneath Bandanna Dee’s sports bra. “I don’t…”

“What?” Dedede asked, whirling around. “That cain’t be! I—I sat beside him trapped behind a freaking wall of ice!”

That was impossible. It should’ve been impossible, but Bandanna Dee, his shirt half-open and stained in blood, groaned loudly. He was—couldn’t be—alive! Somehow, miraculously alive! Kirby ran across the room, dropping to his knees beside Bandanna Dee. “Dee!” he shouted.

“But your…your heart stopped,” Meta Knight said, looking at Dedede for confirmation.

“Yeah,” Dedede said. “How’re…? I don’t…nothing makes sense anymore! But I am so freaking—you’re alive!”

No, it suddenly made a terrible amount of sense. “Landia,” Meta Knight whispered. “You’re Landia, aren’t you, and I…”

I tortured you.

“Landia?” Sectonia asked, slowly climbing to her feet. “Then…you did die. Landia had four lives, so you merely used one. Dragons are the only creatures capable of recovering from mortal wounds like that, so the ice must’ve prevented Bandanna Dee from accessing those powers. But when Dark Mind died, his magic over the ice snapped and caused it to melt. That’s…I never suspected…”

Bandanna Dee climbed to his feet, wobbling unsteadily. Shadow remained close and raised his hands, seemingly to catch Bandanna Dee if he fell. Kirby was there in an instant, and Bandanna Dee gratefully looped an arm over Kirby’s shoulders. “Hey, lemme do that,” Dedede said. “Meta’s still chained to a dead guy, and he’ll have an easier time getting free if someone cuts that for him.”

Dedede took Bandanna Dee’s weight from Kirby, who then, approached Meta Knight. With a shaky hand, Meta Knight offered Kirby the sacred blade. Meta Knight bared his wrist, unable to keep away the sudden and unwelcome image of Kirby just running Galaxia through his chest. Kirby raised the blade and brought it down on the cuff, slicing cleanly through the dragon-forged metal and leaving Meta Knight unharmed.
With a cheerful smile, Kirby offered the blade back. Meta Knight’s heart was in his throat. “No,” he said. “No, I can’t…”

Why was everyone moving towards him? Even Bandanna Dee, hobbling with Dedede’s aid, moved close and caressed Meta Knight’s cheek. “So you’re Galacta Knight, and I’m Landia? I saw the vision, too, Meta Knight. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Bandanna Dee said. “We’re your friends, and—”

“No. No, we can’t be friends anymore,” Meta Knight said, backing away.

“Why not?” Kirby asked. “If I—”

“Meta Knight—” Nightmare began.

And at that calm invocation of his name, something deep inside Meta Knight snapped. Father hadn’t even been surprised when Dark Mind asked for the goddess Nova. Father had hidden Meta Knight’s nightmares as a child. Father had known all along. “You knew!” Meta Knight screamed. “You knew all this time, and you never told me! How could you do this to me? You never—you never told me I was a monster! Don’t you think that was kind of important? I could’ve hurt someone! Bandanna Dee nearly died because of me! I—I could’ve—I’m destined to kill Dedede, and you let me live with him! And Kirby! And—”

“Dearest, I only wanted to keep you safe,” Nightmare said, his voice infuriatingly gentle.

“I’m not fucking done! You knew, and I don’t believe for one second that you didn’t know Kirby was Bikaia. You let me befriend someone who was destined to kill me! And—and you never once mentioned that maybe I, of all people, shouldn’t be waltzing around with Galaxia of the Sacred Fire!”

_Meta Knight, I chose you—_

“And did you know?”

_Not until after Yin-Yarn. Then, I suspected, but it doesn’t matter! I chose you for your heart—not_
who you were in a past life.

“That doesn’t make it any better! Was I literally the last to know who I really was? Do you know how I learned, Father? Galaxia? Sectonia? I learned by watching myself kill the goddess Nova! I learned because some sadist from another dimension wanted to see the poor woman he’d captured and paraded around suffer! And then, you brought Dedede here. You brought Kirby here. You brought Galaxia here! Everyone here could’ve died because of me, and now everyone wants to say it’s fine? It isn’t fine, and it will never be fine again!”

“We didn’t bring Dedede or Bandanna Dee here,” Sectonia said, her voice tight.

Dedede squeezed Bandanna Dee’s shoulder. “We…we talked Dark into sneaking us in after y’all,” Dedede said. “I know we shouldn’t have done it, but we couldn’t bear the thought of…”

“If something had happened to everyone,” Bandanna Dee said, “If something happened to Meta Knight...”

“You died, Dee,” Meta Knight said.

“And if me dying was the price for your happiness and freedom, I’d pay it in a heartbeat,” Bandanna Dee said.

Meta Knight’s breath caught in his throat. Dark awkwardly tried to pat his shoulder, but Meta Knight shrugged the gesture off.

“Of course, I knew,” Nightmare said, “So I tried to keep you from becoming attached to anyone. I thought if I kept you away from everyone, I could prepare you for this when you were older. But then, you ran away, and—and I watched you. And I began to think that maybe you could live a normal life, regardless. Why would anyone think Dedede was the goddess Nova?”

“You lied to me!”

“My pet, look how you’re reacting. Of course, I lied to you.”
He moved into a fighting stance and thought of calling Galaxia. She would help him. She would protect him—

Then, he remembered what she was. He curled his hands into fists, despite her protests that she belonged with him, would always belong with him, chose him...

She’d chosen wrong.

Beloved, no! I chose you because your heart was good, and I loved you. I still love you.

“I can’t be friends with any of you!” Meta Knight exclaimed.

“Well, you’ve never killed me in a past life,” Dark hedged in.

“Shut-up! You’re no better!” Meta Knight snapped. “You abducted me and stranded me here! Your father tortured me!”

Dark exchanged a look with Shadow. “Well, I…” Dark trailed off.

Nightmare swept Meta Knight into his arms. Despite the blood still trickling down his cheek, the wizard’s face was jubilant, and he gazed at Meta Knight with an unfamiliar and intense warmth. “But you killed him, Meta Knight,” he said. “My dearest child, you’ve nothing to fear. Everything will be fine. You just need time to think.”

Meta Knight lowered his head, trying desperately not to cry. He was so tired of crying and being weak. Children cried. People with weaknesses cried. He was Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura, the Knight of the Slaughter, and he shouldn’t cry. Crying was beneath him. He was a monster, and monsters didn’t deserve to cry. And Meta Knight could no longer deny he was a monster; everyone clearly knew it was true. His father drew him closer, letting Meta Knight rest his head against his chest. If the wizard was aware of Meta Knight’s shivering or tears, he said nothing about it. “That’s my boy,” Nightmare murmured. “Just let it out. You’re such a strong boy, but this is too overwhelming, isn’t it? Anyone would cry.”

Somehow, Nightmare’s praise made everything worse. “Father, I—”
“Ssh, it’s all right. You need some time to recover and to process all this. You’ll come home, and —”

“He ain’t going nowhere with you!” Dedede snapped.

“Ah, listen to my proposal first! He’ll come home with me, spend a week recovering, and then, attend school as normal. I’m not proposing that I isolate him, only that he gets a little distance from you—just for a little while. This will be distance from me as well. I’m unfortunately too busy with my company to be around very much.”

“If he needs distance, I can set him up in a very nice estate,” Sectonia said.

“And have him at your mercy?” Nightmare inquired. “In case you’ve forgotten, you’re the goddess Nova.”

“I thought that was Dedede,” Meta Knight said, his voice muffled against Nightmare’s shirt.

“Well, Dark Mind must’ve been wrong,” Dedede cut in, “So I ain’t got nothing to fear from you. Even if I was Nova, I wouldn’t be scared!”

“No,” Dark replied. “I think Father would recognize the goddess Nova anywhere. The obvious solution is that Nova is *both* Dedede and Sectonia. If you recall correctly, when Nova granted the wish to imprison Sir Galacta Knight, her powers were shattered. It’s feasible, then, that while *she* returned, her powers remained split. Or, at least, part of her spirit. That might also be why our fathers resemble one another.”

Nightmare was Dark Mind, who’d also had his powers split? Yes. Meta Knight suppressed a shudder. That made sense. But Dark Mind had never faced Galacta Knight. He’d hurt Nova, but—

Yes. This was good. Stay with Father, keep him far away from Dedede, and live safely with someone that could best him in combat should Meta Knight follow in Galacta Knight’s footsteps. Keep everyone safe.

“Okay, but we still don’t know *why* Nova imprisoned Galacta Knight in the first place!” Dedede protested. “All we know is that it happened sometime when she was alive and before Bikaia was king, and by the time she came to battle Dark Mind, she was too weakened to do so alone. And—"
and Dark Mind may have corrupted the Fountain of Dreams. Or not. We ain’t sure. There’s like eighty-billion famous dead evil wizards. Maybe circumstances are different now!”

“And even if that’s no longer my destiny, it doesn’t erase the danger I present to you,” Meta Knight said, “To any of you. You and Bandanna Dee don’t even have magical powers. Well, Bandanna Dee can apparently resurrect himself, but how would you defend yourself against someone like me?”

“Why would we have to?” Bandanna Dee asked. “You’d never hurt us.”

“You don’t know that,” Meta Knight said.

“I don’t think you’re going to wake one morning and be the embodiment of all evil,” Dark said, “But if you fear that, I’d be delighted to have you stay here.”

“Oh! That’d be nice!” Shadow exclaimed, beaming at his brother. “We could make amends for all the terrible things Father—”

“You don’t need to make amends, and I’d rather stay in my own realm,” Meta Knight said. “I… I think Father is right. I do need time to think about this, and maybe this is a good idea. In the meanwhile, maybe we can find some sort of safeguard. I could consider taking suppressants if I can find some that don’t make me ill.”

It was obvious from the set of Dedede’s shoulders and the way he clenched his jaw that he intended to argue.

“Please,” Meta Knight said.

“This is foolish,” Sectonia said.

“That’s easy for you to say! You aren’t the mass murderer!” Meta Knight snapped. “You weren’t—you weren’t just tortured by some monstrous, evil wizard! And you know what? I just killed him, and I’m glad I killed him! I don’t feel any of the things I’m supposed to feel, and—”
“But you’re my brother, Meta Knight—” Kirby began.

“And someday, you’re probably going to kill me,” Meta Knight retorted, “And I’d rather it not be today. I just want to go home and have everyone leave me alone!”

“There ain’t no point in arguing with him. He’s made up his mind,” Dedede said.

“That’s right,” Meta Knight replied firmly.

Slowly, Dedede’s shoulders slumped, resignation settling like a cloak upon him. “I still get to text you,” Dedede said. “Every day.”

“Yes,” Nightmare said. “You’re even welcome to visit, as long as Meta Knight is fine with it. I’m not locking him in a tower like some fairy tale princess. I just think that he needs some space and time to himself.”

Meta Knight, his energy suddenly spent, sighed and leaned back against his father. If he looked towards the ground, he could pretend not to notice the heartbreak on Dedede’s face. And Bandanna Dee’s face. And Kirby’s. This was the best decision, though. Nightmare was definitely powerful enough to stop him, incarnation of Galacta Knight or no.

Father was being very generous, too! And—and after being in Dark Mind’s castle, Meta Knight wasn’t entirely sure that Nightmare really was that bad of a father. Sure, sometimes, he and Nightmare fought. Sure, Nightmare had kept him on his estate, but—but hadn’t that been reasonable? He’d just been keeping Meta Knight away, so he couldn’t hurt anyone else. All Nightmare’s strict rules suddenly made sense in light of these revelations. Meta Knight had been so bratty and self-centered, and he’d just read his father wrong all these years. Yes, this solution made sense. This would make things right.
President Haltmann Invests in Archaeological Dig in Raisin Ruins

Chapter Summary

So I moved some things around and ended up moving the Bandanna Dee plotline (because if I didn't, it'd result in Meta Knight falling asleep, like, four times in one chapter. And because I forgot I needed to set up something that happens later with Sectonia and Dark). So. There's this one, and then, we return to our regularly scheduled Bandanna Dee-Waddle Doo subplot. Also, everyone actually goes to school.

*Also, trigger warnings for mentions of transphobia.

Meta Knight’s lovely, sleek hair was spread across his pillow like blue spider’s silk. The moonlight streaming through the window left delicate highlights on his face, accentuating the high cheekbones and his thick eyelashes. Dark’s bite still marred the skin of Meta Knight’s throat, leaving a blotch of burst blood vessels. Dark knew there were more injuries beneath Meta Knight’s shirt, and yet Meta Knight slept peacefully, his blankets tangled around him and Galaxia’s blade lying against his stomach. Seeing no signs of wakefulness, Dark strode closer and observed his double.

Meta Knight really was a lovely creature; he’d taken more from his mother than Nightmare. Dark thought of striding across the room and going for Meta Knight’s throat, of watching his double snap awake. He thought of those grey eyes opening, of how the confusion and panic would melt away for ferocity and anger. Meta Knight would go for Galaxia, of course, unless Dark was too fast for him. Dark would have to break Meta Knight’s arm. It wouldn’t be hard. Dark could pin him to the bed, use the mattress and bedding to muffle Meta Knight’s screams, and break the bone cleanly. Dark had years of practice in breaking bones.

Dark took a deep breath and bit his lip hard as if paying a penance for having such horrifying thoughts. He hated it when his mind went in such irrational, violent directions. They were pointless, for Dark had no intention of hurting Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura, who slept enthralled in a web of Nightmare’s dream magic.

Dark felt Nightmare’s dark magic seep through the walls, but it had neither waxed nor waned, indicating the wizard was being still. He was likely as lost in his dreams as Meta Knight was. Wasn’t it curious how nice this version of Father seemed? Very curious.

Kirby hadn’t made it sound like Nightmare was a man who ought to be trusted, yet here was Meta Knight, sleeping in his father’s house and bound in his father’s magic. Something was amiss. Whatever it was wasn’t Dark’s problem, but, still, he did sort of owe Meta Knight for his
involvement.

And maybe for abducting him. And for letting Dark Mind torture him.

Dark swore softly. Why did he have to develop a conscience now? Well, that question was easily answered; Shadow had been fretting over Meta Knight since he’d left. And maybe Shadow’s worries had spurred Dark’s actions just a little. After all, Dark was going to be a good king, and part of being a good king was repaying debts and showing compassion.

Dark walked around the room. He raised an eyebrow at a framed photo of Meta Knight and Nightmare. Meta Knight looked younger, probably in his late adolescence, and perfectly groomed. His hair was short and blond. Nightmare evidently hadn’t changed much, but then, Dark’s own father hadn’t changed much either. Dark hummed and called his magic to him, changing his shape, so he resembled the wizard. He stumbled over the dark, sleek shoes, off-balance without his usual heeled riding boots.

“Father?”

Dark smirked to himself and spun around. “Hello, pet,” he said.

He waited for Meta Knight to sense his magic and realize that Dark wasn’t his father, but the realization never came.

Meta Knight sat up straight, rolled his shoulders back, his chin high, and his eyes lowered. Dark recognized the mingling of confidence and submissiveness that his own father always demanded. Dark smiled with Nightmare’s teeth and face. Surely, Meta Knight should’ve noticed.

Cautiously, Dark sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed gentle circles over the bruises and welts dotting Meta Knight’s wrist. Dark Mind had never put him in bed to recover like this. If Dark was injured, Shadow or Dedede were his only caretakers, and if Dark took too long to recover, Dark Mind would sometimes swoop in and demand he get up. The severity of the injury didn’t matter. Recovery time was minimal, sometimes nonexistent.

“Just checking on you,” Dark said, managing the voice flawlessly.

Dark fumbled for an affectionate gesture. His father hadn’t been an affectionate man, and Dark
doubted Meta Knight would react favorably to having nails digging into his jaw. Perhaps, a hug? Like the rare ones he and Shadow had exchanged? Yes. Nightmare had hugged Meta Knight in the Mirror World.

Dark settled beside Meta Knight and put an arm around his shoulders. Meta Knight’s face brightened. He eagerly pressed against Dark’s side and leaned his head against Dark’s shoulder. Nervous laughter bubbled in Dark’s chest, and he pulled his arm away. His hug wasn’t supposed to go over that well.

“Father, I…” Meta Knight trailed off. “Thank you, Father.”

Oh. Dark clambered from the bed, trying to put distance between them. Meta Knight’s face revealed nothing. Whether he was heartbroken or angry would’ve been impossible to guess, but this didn’t make sense.

Abruptly, Meta Knight grabbed Galaxia and moved into a fighting stance. His bare feet bounced lightly on the mattress.

Dark knew he was caught and let his disguise slip away.

“ Took you long enough,” Dark said.

“Why are you here?” Meta Knight asked.

Dark raised his hands placatingly and perched on the corner of Meta Knight’s bed, mere feet away from Galaxia’s steel.

“I wanted to see how you were,” Dark replied. “For Nova’s sake, sit down. I’m not here to fight, and even if I were, you wouldn’t even be a challenge.”

“I’m stronger than I look.”

“Sure, you are. Is your magic so weak you really couldn’t sense my powers? That’s pathetic.”
“I’m on suppressants. My magic is fine, and Galaxia is still very powerful, I assure you.”

Ah, so Galaxia had caught him.

“Suppressants?” Dark asked. “They make it so you can’t use magic? What are you—some kind of masochist?”

“It’s not what you think. Sometimes, our medicine can have unexpected reactions to magic. Suppressants thwart any unexpected side effects.”

Dark flopped back onto the bed, momentarily startled by the softness of the mattress. He tilted his head and gazed up at Meta Knight, his disheveled hair ruining the fierce knightly look he was clearly going for. “I’m envious of your hair. Father would’ve never let me do something so outlandish with mine,” Dark said.

“That’s because your father is an abhorrent human being.”

“From what I hear, yours isn’t much better.”

“Then, what you hear is wrong,” Meta Knight replied. “He’s better than your father, and—”

“My father used to make me wear a muzzle when I spoke out of turn.”

“That proves my point.”

“He used to make me punish Shadow every morning. Father liked to punish his servants,” Dark said, wincing. “He said it kept them cautious because they never knew when it was coming, and he said it would teach me how to rule responsibly, to make difficult decisions.”

Meta Knight plopped onto the bed beside Dark. After a moment’s hesitation, Meta Knight lay back, mirroring Dark’s position. “I can’t imagine being made to do that to Kirby,” Meta Knight admitted softly. “And Dark Mind checked to make sure Shadow was really hurt, didn’t he? He did
that thing where he circles and inspects you.”

“Yes. And of course, there were the whippings, the brandings, losing my eye, beheading my own mother…” Dark trailed off. “But I’m losing my point. It’s no great prize to be better than a man like that. Don’t use my suffering to justify your abuse. It’s an insult to us both.”

“My father isn’t abusive. Maybe he was a little intense when I was younger, but now, he’s trying better. You have no right to judge him.”

“Of course, he’s trying better. You’re giving him what he wants.”

Meta Knight glared.

Dark grinned, unperturbed. “You’re adorable when you’re angry. Perhaps, I ought to consider wearing your face more often, hm?”

“Get out, or I’ll call Father. I’m not supposed to have company this late.”

Dark heaved a longsuffering sigh. Meta Knight’s steel would show itself when it came to his father. “But I don’t want to go, Mety Knighty. Your bed is so delightfully soft. What feathers is it stuffed with?”

Meta Knight grimaced, seemingly in an attempt to keep from smiling. “We don’t stuff our beds with feathers. Sometimes, our pillows. We have stuffing for that. It’s like artificial feathers and snow combined into one.”

Dark wrinkled his nose and tried to puzzle out how that would work.

“If you’re going to stay, you could at least offer to answer some of my questions,” Meta Knight said.

“Oh? I might humor you,” Dark said. “What did you want to know?”
“What was your mother like?” Meta Knight asked. “Cruel, I know, but what else?”

“What was your mother like?” Dark asked.

“I never knew her.”

Dark bit the inside of his cheek. “Are you hoping we have the same mother?”

“It seems logical that we could have. At least, she might’ve been a reflection of my mother,” Meta Knight said. “I assume our parents would be the same, although Dark Mind is hundreds of years older than my father, so maybe not.”

“Did Shadow tell you about Sectonia in our world?”

“Please, tell me I’m not the Queen’s illegitimate son,” Meta Knight said, his eyes wide with alarm.

“No, definitely not,” Dark replied. “Did Shadow tell you about Sectonia?”

“Briefly, yes.”

“After Sectonia launched her rebellion, Mother suggested I use my magic to seduce Sectonia through her mirror. Father was delighted, of course. I did it, and Mother coaxed me through it. She showed me how to pick apart someone’s insecurities, how to change what they saw, and I picked away like Mother had taught me. I made Sectonia so obsessed with her own reflection and her own beauty that when I told her true beauty is control, she believed me. I broke her, Meta Knight, and Mother was so proud. She liked breaking people.”

“What happened to Sectonia?”

“She turned against her own rebellion, afraid they would betray her. Eventually, she was killed, and Dedede’s mother took over. She’d learned from Sectonia’s failure, and she’s still fighting us. Clever creature. She’s become good at avoiding reflective surfaces.”
“Delilah is a good woman. She…takes good care of me.” Meta Knight said it like he’d had some great revelation, but whatever it was, he didn’t seem inclined to share.

“But for all of that, Mother was witty, lively, ambitious, and incredibly intelligent,” Dark said.

“I thought it might be something like that,” Meta Knight said. “Maybe I like the idea of a mother more than I would actually like my mother, but Father won’t tell me much about her.”

“But it’s difficult to tell if he’s trying to protect you or hiding information with some ulterior motive?” Dark asked. “I understand that.”

“You’re surprisingly decent when you aren’t trying to assault me,” Meta Knight said, absentmindedly fingering the bite-mark.

Dark smirked and rolled onto his stomach. “I like marking my conquests.”

Meta Knight grabbed his pillow and smacked Dark in the face with it. “If you ever refer to me as a conquest again, you won’t live long enough to brag about it,” Meta Knight said.

“You are my conquest. I defeated you, and I outrank you.”

“I was injured. It wasn’t a fair fight. And you can’t call me your conquest. That—that implies something else on this side of the mirror.”

Dark hadn’t realized that, but he caught the implications in Meta Knight’s tone. “Implies what?” Dark asked, feigning innocence.

Even the dim light couldn’t hide that alarm and embarrassment painted across Meta Knight’s face. “It implies we might have engaged in certain, adult activities,” Meta Knight replied.

“Such as…?” Dark trailed off in a sing-song voice.

“You know precisely what I mean.”
Dark sighed. “What a charmer. I bet everyone is fighting to tip the velvet with you.”

Meta Knight snorted and put a hand over his mouth to hide his laughter. “Tip the velvet? Is that what you call it?”

“That is a perfectly acceptable euphemism. You have no idea how many people it’s worked on. Of course, the shapeshifting helps, too. I can be anyone.” Dark paused and called his magic, teasingly copying Meta Knight’s midnight blue hair. “I can… show you her if you like.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

“Father can’t know,” Meta Knight said slowly. “He’d be angry if he knew.”

“Because you learned something about your mother?”

Meta Knight paused. “He’s just trying to protect me.”

Sure, he was, and Dark was going to abdicate his hard-won throne and become a hermit. “Do you have a mirror?” Dark asked.

Meta Knight slid off the bed and walked into another room, Dark following. After Meta Knight flipped a switch, light flooded the room. It was a large space, all blue marble. Was it a bathroom? It looked odd, but that explained the large basin set into the floor. Dark had many questions, but he withheld them. Meta Knight’s mirror was nothing impressive—just a piece of glass and a gilded, silver frame. It wasn’t even magical. Still, it would serve its purpose well.

“Give me a moment,” Dark replied.

He started with the clothes: the long, multi-layered skirts, the tight corsets, the sleeves that fell off her shoulders. All in shimmering, gold cloth. She loved jewelry, but Dark wasn’t wearing any. He
could transform already existing materials, but he couldn’t create from nothing. He winced at the unfamiliar tightness against his stomach; Mother always tied her corsets very tightly, even though her waist was already tiny. His mother had worn scandalously low necklines. She knew she was beautiful and liked to show it.

Her skin was the same warm brown as his, so that didn’t require changing. Dark peered into the mirror and blinked a couple times, forcing his irises to match the piercing gold hers were. He lengthened his hair into chestnut ringlets that nearly fell to the floor and made his cheekbones less prominent. His cheeks a little fuller, and his nose slightly more upturned. Dark titled his head to the side and placed a hand against his throat. Meta Knight’s reflection showed apprehension.

Dark sighed and frowned at the unfamiliar restriction of his chest. He hadn’t seen Mother properly in so long; Father had burned all her portraits. Dark swallowed and spun around, skirts swirling dramatically around him. He was shorter than Meta Knight, but not by much.

“Wow,” Meta Knight said, awkwardly raising a hand and letting it fall.

Dark arched an eyebrow.

“I don’t feel like I’m actually looking at you,” Meta Knight replied. “I’ve just never…I’ve never seen her.”

“She liked to call me darling,” Dark said, altering his voice so it matched the trilling sweetness of his mother’s. “Darling Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight didn’t respond. Instead, he stared at Dark with something akin to worshipful fascination. Dark put his fingertips lightly against Meta Knight’s chest. “Darling,” Dark purred, capturing his mother’s exaggerated drama.

“Did she love you?” Meta Knight asked, letting his fingers settle on Dark’s.

“Does Nightmare love you?” Dark asked.

“Of course, he does.”
“Do remember what I’ve said. The moment you do something that displeases Nightmare, all his affection fades away.”

“I’ve no reason to displease Father. He’s trying to help me with a difficult transition.”

“Oh, yes. I’d forgotten that you turned into a monster with an insatiable lust for the blood of innocents.” Dark patted Meta Knight’s cheek, equally amused and dismayed by the angry scowl. “Do you bite, Mety Knighty? Oh, don’t hurt me.”

“Get out.”

Dark strode away and bowed, shedding his mother’s form as he did. Something flashed fleetingly across Meta Knight’s face—perhaps, regret—but it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

“As you wish, Sir Galacta Knight. You do realize, of course, that I’ve killed more people than you have, don’t you? See; it isn’t that hard to kill someone. It just requires the right mindset. You’re nothing special.”

Before Meta Knight could respond, Dark called his powers and vanished. The world rippled coolly over his skin, and once his feet reached solid ground, he was home.

________________________________________________________________________________________

That wasn’t Dedede. Meta Knight froze and stared blankly at the woman. She was very tall and broad-shouldered, nicely-dressed in a petal-pink pantsuit with a black, silky top beneath her suit jacket. This wasn’t a servant; this was someone clearly important and likely his social superior. Meta Knight bowed. What if she thought he wasn’t supposed to be there and demanded he be thrown out? What if she did something worse?

Okay, this was bad, but salvageable. All he had to do was pretend to be Dedede’s servant. Because the Lord of the Stars would employ someone who looked so pathetic. Right. Just...

Just be reasonably polite. “Um…are you certain you’re in the right apartments?” Meta Knight asked.
That was horrible. Of course, she’d know.

Meta Knight tilted his chin up, trying to copy the effortlessly cold confidence his father was so good at portraying. “My Lord is out,” Meta Knight said. “I fear if you’re seeking an audience, you’ll need to return later, my Lady.”

The woman laughed. “If Dedede is your Lord, I suppose that makes me your Lady, then.”

Oh, no.

Meta Knight moved into a fighting stance and hoped the woman wouldn’t notice. He moved back a bit, putting the counter between them. Display his magic or no?

No, she might read it as a threat, rather than a warning.

“I—I can explain,” Meta Knight said.

She raised a hand and shook her head. “Poor pet, someone has treated you very badly, ain’t they?” she asked. “You ain’t got nothing to fear from me. I won’t hurt you.”

Right. How many times had Meta Knight’s own father said that same thing? And how many of those times had devolved into fights or full-fledged brawls?

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“That’s fine,” she said. “If someone had treated me so badly, I doubt I’d wanna trust a complete stranger either.”

She was acting compassionately; that was worse.

“I’m Delilah, Duchess of the Stars, and Dedede’s mother,” she said. “I’d wanted to surprise him by coming down early. What’s your name? Is Dedede taking good care of you?”
Lie or no?

“It’s Meta Knight.”

“Meta Knight Nocturne,” she said slowly. “Yes, I know about you.”

Nocturne. She knew his last name. She knew who his father was. Meta Knight was about to be thrown out. Probably unceremoniously and painfully.

“You don’t look like you’ve been eating well,” Delilah said. “Poor thing, when was the last time you ate something?”

“A few days ago,” he replied. “I tried this morning, but I can’t keep anything down, so…”

“So let’s get you back to bed, and I’ll make you some tea,” Delilah said.

Back to bed? Tea?

“You aren’t throwing me out?”

Delilah prepared the tea kettle before Meta Knight’s bewildered stare. “Of course, not! It’s freezing outside! Only some sorta monster would throw someone out in this awful weather! And it being this close to Solstice…no, you’re gonna be our guest! Now, back to bed. C’mon.”

She offered her hand. Meta Knight didn’t take it, but instead, walked past her. She followed him into the room. Hesitantly, Meta Knight climbed into bed. Delilah pulled the blankets up to Meta Knight’s chest and, then, pushed the blankets more tightly around him. “What’re you doing?” he asked.

“Tucking you in,” she said, with a flutter of laughter. “Ain’t anyone ever done that for you?”
“What? Like I’m four?” Meta Knight froze, mortified. “I…I didn’t…”

“When people are hurt, sometimes, they lash out. It’s okay,” Delilah said. “Just relax, and I’ll bring you something to eat.”

She pulled a soft, fluffy blanket from the nearby wardrobe and added it to Meta Knight’s bed. Then, she left. Meta Knight stared at the door. This felt like a trap, but he didn’t know how. Still, the bed was warm, and the injuries from his fight with Marx hadn’t entirely healed yet. Meta Knight’s fever had lessened, but the flu was proving difficult to shake off. He grabbed Galaxia off the nightstand and put her under the blankets with him, being careful to hide her. If the duchess saw he had a sword, she might take her like Dedede had.

I don’t think she means you any harm, Galaxia offered.

“I can’t take that risk,” Meta Knight murmured. “I’m not strong enough to fight back if she does mean me harm.”

He pulled the blankets over his shoulders and grasped Galaxia’s hilt tightly. Of course, he wasn’t in the best shape or position to attack anyone, but Galaxia’s warmth and closeness made Meta Knight feel just a little safer.

Delilah returned with a silver tray, upon which sat a teapot, two cups, and a chunk of wheat bread. The duchess carefully set the tray on the nightstand and poured the tea into the cups before Meta Knight’s watchful gaze. The thin, familiar scent of mint wafted through the air. Meta Knight took the cup he was offered and curled his hands around the warm porcelain. Slowly, Delilah sat on the edge of the bed and sipped from her own cup.

“You ain’t gotta eat all the bread,” Delilah said, “But try and drink all the tea. The mint oughta help settle your stomach, and the honey oughta soothe your throat. You sound a little hoarse, pet.”

She’d taken her tea from the same pot, so it should be fine. Unless there was some drug or poison in it that she’d systematically built up resistance to, and—

And that was an absurd, irrational thought brought on by binge-watching too many fantasy
Meta Knight took a careful sip of the tea—sweet and warm—and received a charming smile in return. Delilah stood and patted Meta Knight’s knee through the blankets. “Get some rest, and if you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. We’ll getcha better real fast!”

“Thank you,” Meta Knight replied. “You don’t have to do this, and I realize that.”

“I’d have to be some kinda monster not to help you,” Delilah said. “Doncha think you’ve been beaten down enough, Meta Knight? ‘Sides, you saved Dedede, and I love Dedede more than anything in this world. One good turn deserves another.”

“I guess.”

Meta Knight drank a few sips of tea, trying very hard to finish it. Once Delilah left, though, he abandoned the cup in favor of curling beneath the blankets with Galaxia. His eyelids fluttered. He was so tired, and the bed was soft and warm.

“Can you wake up for a minute, pet?”

Meta Knight groaned in protest, even as he opened his eyes. Galaxia rested beside him, her blade shimmering in the gentle swaths of morning light. Meta Knight hadn’t wanted to keep her, but he needed her healing magic and her warmth. Her soft, gentle presence. “Good morning, Father,” Meta Knight said cautiously.

No, it isn’t Dark, Galaxia murmured.

Nightmare brushed Meta Knight’s bangs back from his face before kissing his forehead. The gesture was gentle, but Meta Knight’s heart still quickened with it. Considering what he’d been dreaming, Dark masquerading as his father might be preferable. Father would be upset if he knew Meta Knight had been dreaming of Dedede’s mother. Nova, Meta Knight ought to be upset he’d dreamed about her. He had a father. What right did he have to dream about someone else’s parent?

“Hush, now,” Nightmare said. “I’ll let you go back to sleep. I just wanted to let you know I’m returning to the office today. I’ve told everyone that you’re only allowed one guest at a time, but I don’t expect Dedede to follow the rules.”
Meta Knight rubbed his cheek against his pillow. He shouldn’t smile.

“Fae is already downstairs. She brought work to do while she sits with you, and I imagine Delilah will stop by, too.”

Meta Knight glanced at his father. Did he know?

“Why couldn’t she stay away?” Meta Knight muttered. “I’m keeping her from her work.”

“Her work is the least of her worries at the moment,” Nightmare replied. “For her flaws, she has done—admittedly—a decent job in improving Dreamlandic-Floralian relations. Otherwise, Alera would’ve stripped her of her titles long ago. It’s no secret Delilah and the Queen hate one another.”

“That’s high praise from you.”

“It’s grudgingly given.”

Meta Knight furrowed his brow. “Hate each other, though? I know they dislike one another, but that’s…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“It was before your time,” Nightmare said. “What do you know about King Daedalus?”

Meta Knight hummed. “He…became king of Dreamland through a legal battle, right? Technically, he was a distant descendant of Bikaia’s, but he came from a separate line from Alera. There was a succession crisis, and after he became king, he married the Queen, who was second in the line of succession anyway. It was complicated.”

“Very complicated, yes. However, Alera wasn’t Daedalus’s first choice. No, he was a bit of a romantic and fancied the young duchess of this little, backwater duchy along the Floralian border. Unfortunately, this duchess couldn’t bear the heirs Daedalus needed, and as the future king, it wouldn’t have been very wise to flirt with another potential succession crisis with Dedede.”
Nightmare smiled thinly. “I don’t imagine Alera likes it being brought up. She was the second choice, and she knows it. I think she really loved Daedalus, too. It’s quite tragic, really. She married the man she wanted and watched him long for another woman. Perhaps, that’s why she let him be killed.”

“That’s a conspiracy theory.”

“Is it?”

“A Halcandran man assassinated him,” Meta Knight replied. “It was part of an attempted overthrow. They tried to assassinate many nobles.”

“They did. But isn’t it odd that they managed to assassinate the king? Surely, you of all people know how tight the security in the palace is, especially around the king and queen’s chambers. It seems strange that a man with no ties to the royalty or nobility could so easily gain access to the king and kill him. Don’t you think?”

“But…”

“I don’t mean Alera actively tried to kill the man, but, perhaps, she saw an opportunity to grasp power and took it. And now, she reminds us of the poor king’s death every year, so we remember who to blame. That isn’t the sign of a devoted wife, Meta Knight. That’s the sign of a guilty conscience trying to persuade everyone she’s innocent,” Nightmare said, “And of course, there’s the added bonus of reminding Delilah just who she lost her beloved to.”

“I never knew that,” Meta Knight muttered.

“I imagine there’s much you don’t know about her,” Nightmare said, “But if it’s any consolation, I believe Delilah also wants Taranza’s opinion on a proposal of hers.”

“A proposal?”
“Something about educational reform to promote a cultural and intellectual exchange between her duchy and Floralia,” Nightmare replied. “I’m told that Sectonia is intrigued by this proposal, too, although I’m sure Alera won’t consider any of her input. Our dear princess will likely be on a short leash for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sectonia filed reports with A.M.B.E.R.”

“I don’t…?”

Nightmare stroked Meta Knight’s hair. “She ordered a dozen agents to safeguard a mirror in an antique shop and ordered that mirror moved to the castle vault. When she came to rescue you, she had her body-double with Taranza, and no one would’ve even missed her if Alera hadn’t decided to check in on her. Of course, once she was discovered missing, she had to admit to entering the mirror and facing an evil wizard—a wizard that could only be defeated by Galaxia, a weapon that’s been missing for years.”

Meta Knight stared blankly at his father. “I’m…in trouble?”

Nightmare shook his head. “Not yet. Evidently, Delilah and Sectonia convinced the Queen that it would be horrible PR for them to arrest the chosen wielder of Galaxia. However, Sectonia is being forced to resign. She’ll no longer direct A.M.B.E.R.”

Since its conception, A.M.B.E.R. had always been taken under the direction of the crown prince or princess when he or she turned eighteen. It was a rite of passage, a preliminary test of leadership. To be forced to resign was unthinkable. “This is my fault,” Meta Knight said.

“No. She chose to do a good thing and help rescue you. It’s just that sometimes good deeds are met with misfortune. Especially since…this good fortune of yours comes with a catch.”

"A catch?"

"Lord Perry Dee wishes to challenge you to a duel."
"And Waddle Doo is fighting in his stead, isn't he?" Meta Knight asked. "Why? Is it over Bandanna Dee?"

"I suppose that's the official excuse they'll use. You defeated a favorite member of Queen's Guard. Did you think that wouldn't eventually come back to haunt you? She won't arrest you, but humiliate you? That's another matter entirely. I'm certain she expects you to lose, but we'll worry about that when it happens. For now, you need to rest. If you need anything at all, tell Blade."

"Blade?"

"The new parlor maid. She'll be attending you when I'm unavailable."

"Thank you, Father," Meta Knight said.

"Of course, dearest. We're on the same team, after all."

The same team?

Nightmare's dream magic fluttered in the air, trailing behind the wizard as he left. It lulled Meta Knight to the edge of sleep.

The same team. That didn't sound right, but, then again, Nightmare was the only person left that Meta Knight didn't present a danger to. Not only was he a danger to everyone, but he'd ruined Sectonia's reputation. Possibly Delilah's and Dedede's, if Alera suspected they'd known about Galaxia all along. Bandanna Dee had died because of him, and no amount of reassurances would change any of it.

On second thought, maybe he and Father were a team. Maybe it was really for the best that they remain that way.

Inside Dreamland University's library, there was a tiny coffee shop. It was always either empty or
packed to the brim with students. Presently, it was quiet. Bandanna Dee sat at the table in the far corner of the room and held onto his phone as if it was his lifeline. His glassblowing class had ended half an hour before; Kirby’s class would’ve ended five minutes before. That meant he’d arrive at the café any minute.

Bandanna Dee kept opening his texts and gazing at them. When he wasn’t looking at his texts, he was looking at his reflection in the phone screen. In an attempt to bolster his confidence, Bandanna Dee had worn his favorite, powder-blue bandanna. It was a move inspired by Meta Knight, who always dressed extra nicely when he was nervous or feeling sad; he swore it helped. Bandanna Dee wasn’t sure dressing nicely was enough. Powder-blue was a peaceful color, a hopeful color. A silent wish for Kirby Stellarum, the classmate—his favorite classmate—that he’d only known for two months, to react better than Bandanna Dee’s own family had.

Because Bandanna Dee’s secret was out, and Kirby had already sent that terrible, foreboding text.

*Hey dee? Can we meet and talk about something?*

Kirby hadn’t needed to say what it was he wanted to talk about. Bandanna Dee had realized what it meant when he returned home, his shirt still unbuttoned and bloodied, but clearly displaying his sports bra to the world. He remembered standing before the bathroom mirror and praying to Nova that Kirby—*somehow*—wouldn’t have noticed in all the chaos with Dark Mind and the revelations about Meta Knight.

Kirby was the only one who really mattered.

Meta Knight and Dedede had already known Bandanna Dee was a transgender man. Nightmare had probably known or suspected because he was that sort of person. Sectonia might’ve guessed. But Bandanna Dee hadn’t particularly cared what they thought.

But Kirby Stellarum…

Bandanna Dee bit his lip. He’d still neither answered Waddle Doo’s texts nor told his friends about them. He hadn’t told them he was meeting Kirby either. And now, this meeting with Kirby felt like a terrible prequel to some terrible main event.

It wasn’t too late to text Dedede or Meta Knight for back-up. Dedede would come in a heartbeat, even if it meant skipping a couple classes, and despite his reservations, Meta Knight probably
would, too. If he was well enough. Although this being Meta Knight, he’d probably come for back-up if he was at death’s door.

Kirby walked past the windows. Bandanna Dee fidgeted with his phone, dropping it on the table. Kirby looked so adorable with his pastel pink hair fluffed by the autumn breeze outside and his oversized pink coat. Too soon, Kirby entered; the light behind him glowed like starlight around his head. He looked so friendly and so cute, and as he approached, Bandanna Dee felt like sinking lower and lower into his chair.

Bandanna Dee pretended not to notice Kirby’s approach. He fixated instead on looking outside at the bright blue sky and the cheerful sun. It was a gorgeous day on which to have his heart broken into a million pieces.

“Um…hey, Bandanna Dee,” Kirby said.

Bandanna Dee forced a smile and looked up. He managed the motion just right, just a small twinkling of oh, I really didn’t see you there. The gesture felt fake. Kirby’s smile looked equally fake.

“Do you want to sit?” Bandanna Dee asked. “Or did you want coffee?”

“Oh! Oh, yeah! Hold on! Uh…do you want anything?”

“No. No, thank you. I already drank my hot chocolate.”

Bandanna Dee watched Kirby closely, as he went to order. The warm lights of the café highlighted Kirby’s thin spattering of freckles, making them look like tiny golden stars. Although Bandanna Dee couldn’t hear Kirby’s exact words, he caught the distinctive chirp of Kirby’s voice. Kirby paid and waited.

It wasn’t too late to flee. Bandanna Dee could be out the door before Kirby could catch him.

Kirby returned with a cup of hot chocolate. He sat across from Bandanna Dee and cupped his hands around it.
“So what did you want to talk about?” Bandanna Dee asked.

As if they both didn’t already know. Still, it was probably best to let Kirby get in the first word. Then, Bandanna Dee would be able to breathe more easily.

“How…” Kirby trailed off, his eyes darting curiously over Bandanna Dee. “You’re a transgender man. Right?”

“Right.”

Kirby nodded.

Silence.

Bandanna Dee felt like he might actually break his phone in half if he grasped it any tighter.

“Am I allowed to ask questions?” Kirby asked. “I… I assume that’s the real reason your parents…”

“Yes. They didn’t think I was…” Bandanna Dee trailed off. “They didn’t think I was good for their reputation, essentially, and I wouldn’t comply with what they wanted. And I’m not really related to Dedede. He’s just terrible at lying when you put him on the spot.”

“Oh. So, um…Bandanna Dee is your…” Kirby trailed off. “Why did you choose that name?”

“I found it in a name book—sort of. It was spelled d-i, but it meant day. When I lived with my parents, they forbade me to spend time outside because it might tan my skin, and the aristocracy considers pale skin to be a mark of beauty. But when I left, I could do anything! I could go outside all I wanted! So it was celebrating my freedom in a way,” Bandanna Dee said, “And Dedede actually came up with the ‘bandanna’ part. My parents wouldn’t let me wear bandannas, and I discovered I really loved them. Dedede gave me the nickname, and it stuck.”

“Wow. That’s… that’s so poetic,” Kirby said. “I can’t imagine how you must’ve felt, though. To have to leave everyone like that and having to hide for all this time.”
“I wanted to tell you,” Bandanna Dee said quickly. “I just…”

“Have to be careful?” Kirby asked. “Because some people are really cruel?”

“Yes, exactly. And I like you, and I didn’t want to risk you not being my friend.”

“This doesn’t change anything,” Kirby said, his eyes wide and sincere. “I promise. We’re still friends.”

Still friends? Bandanna Dee sighed in relief, as giddy happiness filled him. It felt like a remarkable weight had been lifted. He didn’t have to worry extra about Kirby finding out. He didn’t have to second-guess how he looked in the mirror for Kirby anymore. “Best friends,” Bandanna Dee said.

Kirby’s face lit up. “Forever?” he asked.

Bandanna Dee nodded.

Kirby jumped from his chair and hugged Bandanna Dee around his shoulders. It was an awkward gesture, but heartfelt. Bandanna Dee relaxed easily into it. Maybe he’d been wrong about Waddle Doo. Maybe Kirby’s easy understanding was the prelude of something wonderful, and the cosmic forces had finally aligned and smiled down upon him. Yes, Bandanna Dee would respond to his brother’s texts as soon as he could tell Meta Knight and Dedede about them. With their support and Kirby’s support, surely, everything would be fine.

It was a dream, and Galaxia was there. At the sight of her, Meta Knight’s thoughts came to a crashing halt. Here she was, openly appearing in his dreams for no reason at all.

“You promised I’d be yours forever, and you’d be mine. I branded you as something sacred. You can’t go back on that, beloved,” Galaxia said, doubtlessly sensing his insecurities. “Come. Since your father is away, I think, perhaps, I might be the mistress of your dreams for a little while.”
Galaxia offered her hand. Meta Knight hesitated.

“I won’t hurt you, dearest.”

“I’m…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“Afraid of me? I know, and it’s fine. You’re trying to come to terms with who you are,” Galaxia said.

Meta Knight took her hand and let her link their arms together. “Tell me, dearest,” she said, as they began walking. “What started the Halcandran-Dreamlandic War?”

Meta Knight frowned. “Because…the early Halcandran-Dreamlandic relations were good, but King Sol of Halcandra desired a Dreamlandic queen named Katrice, who was already wed, so Sol abducted Katrice, confident that he could defeat any Dreamlandic forces that might rise against him. That started that war. The Dreamlandic King…King…”

“Adstellam.”

“Yes, he launched a full-scale assault on Halcandra, managing to slay their king. Then, the Dreamlandic forces stormed Sol’s castle, Katrice was dead, having been poisoned. Grief-stricken, King Adstellam refused to back down, and the violence persisted. Desperate to end the violence, Queen Estrella of Halcandra gave into King Adstellam’s demands and agreed to let her children be raised in Dreamland. He slaughtered them all, save one, and reignited the war, which went on for over a hundred years, right?”

Galaxia nodded.

“So King Adstellam summoned his most powerful sorcerers, and they managed to seal away Halcandra. This left many Halcandran people displaced, especially those that lived near the border with Dreamland. And then, Adstellam started his great hunt. Adstellam’s son, Noven, eventually rebelled against his father, but not because he was slaughtering the Halcandran people. It was…” Meta Knight trailed off. “I can’t remember. Something…”
“He was a cruel man in general,” Galaxia said. “And very careless with the money in the royal treasury. He was bankrupting Dreamland, and Noven knew there was a rebellion brewing. He sought to be on the correct side of it.”

“Right,” Meta Knight said slowly. “And in the ensuing rebellion, Sir Galacta Knight of Halcandra—who is a woman?”

“Yes. The title dame hadn’t been invented yet, and Galacta Knight was the first female knight.”

“So they called her Sir, and the historians assumed she was male.”

“I assume so, although I doubt Galacta Knight would’ve minded. She might've called herself gender-fluid if she'd had the vocabulary to do so. My mistress never really cared for what others said she ought to be doing.”

“But Mace Knight was a female knight—and wait. She was knighted two-hundred years after her death,” Meta Knight said. “I see. So Sir Galacta Knight of Halcandra found an opportunity to make the royalty of Dreamland suffer as the Halcandran royalty had; Galacta Knight abducted Prince Bikaia and held him captive for…”

“Bikaia doesn’t remember it that way.”

Meta Knight glanced quizzically at her. “I do not know all of Galacta Knight’s history,” Galaxia said. “Although she was my creator, she never bonded with me. She shared very few of her memories. I still don’t know where she came from, why Nova imprisoned her, or why Galacta Knight decided to slaughter so many people. I do, however, have Bikaia’s memories.”

The bushes rustled, and Bikaia emerged. The face wasn’t quite like the portraits always showed. He looked to be in his late teens with bright, blue eyes and hair that was thin and wispy like cotton candy, whereas his portraits always made him look stern with a sharp jaw and a strong brow. He also couldn’t have been more than five-feet tall. Meta Knight sensed Galaxia looking at him. “Cute kid,” Meta Knight said. “Where’s he going?”

“To find the Knight of the Slaughter.”

“To find her?”
“Yes. Perhaps, we should follow him, dear heart, and see how his little adventure ends.”
The forest was cold and dark, gripped in the first breath of winter. Bikaia wrapped his fingers more tightly around the sword he carried. The sword’s name was Galaxia, and only her soft whispers guided Bikaia through the thick wood. Galaxia had been left to guide Noven’s eldest son, Lune, to the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy. It had been a trade—Noven’s eldest son for Galacta Knight’s assistance in overthrowing King Adstellam before Dreamland destroyed itself. Noven had refused the trade, even as Galacta Knight offered him a fortnight to change his mind. Bikaia knew his father wouldn’t, so Bikaia himself had sneaked into his father’s room and stolen the sword. Bikaia was the youngest of the Dreamlandic princes and an illegitimate and cursed one at that. Of all Dreamland's princes, he would be missed the least if his father even noticed his absence at all.

It seemed to the prince that he'd followed Galaxia’s instructions for hours. Bikaia hoped she really knew the way and that this wasn’t some trick to lure him to his death. It was so quiet here, and Bikaia knew well of all the terrible things said to lurk in the woods. As fourth in the line of succession, his education had always been an afterthought. While his brothers—Lune and Quasa—frequently attended political meetings and diplomatic missions, Bikaia was most often left to his own devices. So Bikaia watched and talked to the castle servants, and in doing so, he’d heard more than his share of all the frightening creatures that lived in the woods: evil necromancers that could steal souls, mischievous forest spirits that could lead a careless traveler off a cliff, and monsters that thirsted for blood. None of those tales even accounted for the many enemies that the royal family had, many of which had fled to the forests for safety. Illegitimate or not, Bikaia knew he might be tempting prey for an angry criminal or for one of the many enemies King Adstellam had banished.

To Bikaia’s relief, the trees finally broke and made way for the crumbled remains of a palace, its walls covered with decrepit vines that would’ve been beautiful in the summertime.

*This is it,* Galaxia whispered, her accent that of a Dreamlandic noblewoman. *Good luck, Your Royal Highness.*
hued fire, and cast warm light upon the stone walls. The floors were covered in intricately embroidered rugs, and the entryway led into a small room. Books—more books than Bikaia had ever seen—remained stacked to perilous heights against a wall. Across from them was a pile of cushions in a myriad of colors. There were other things: shelves filled with a variety of unidentifiable and likely magical objects, a massive chest, a fireplace meant for cooking, and tapestries lining the scarce empty space along the wall. Overall, Bikaia’s impression of the room was that it was warm and clean, but cluttered with very expensive wares. It reminded him of a dragon’s hoard.

Bikaia’s gaze fell to the woman lounging on the cushions. The first thing he noticed was her wings. They were massive and as white and bright as sunlight sparkling upon a lake. She was a Halcandran woman, very tall with an elegant face. Her red curls tumbled past her shoulders and onto her long, pink chemise. When Bikaia stepped closer, he noticed that her irises were pink, her ears slightly tapered at the tips, and that a pair of shimmering gold horns rose from her temples; these were signs of a powerful magic user. Bikaia hadn’t known that Sir Galacta Knight had a wife, and Bikaia felt his face and ears warm at seeing such a high-ranking woman in only her night-clothes. He could see her ankles, which was grounds for a duel to restore the abused woman’s honor. Bikaia blanched at the thought of dueling Sir Galacta Knight, the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy.

Bikaia bowed and resolved to look only at the floor. “Good evening, my Lady,” he said.

Silence.

“I have come seeking an audience with Sir Galacta Knight,” Bikaia said. “I am expected.”

“You are Crown Prince Noven’s eldest son, Lune?” she inquired.

She had a nice, lilting voice. Very formal and regal.

Bikaia nodded. He heard, rather than saw, her approach. She swept around behind him like a songbird enjoying a breeze. “You’re a liar,” the woman whispered, her breath warm on his bare neck, “But then, you are Dreamlandic. That’s hardly a surprise.”

Bikaia winced. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Thought you’d deceive me?” the woman asked, holding out her hand. “Return Galaxia to me at
Reluctantly, Bikaia relinquished the sword. He dared to look at her and realized she was much taller than he’d initially anticipated. She was at least a foot taller than him, but to be fair, it was no great feat to be taller than Bikaia. The woman drew one hand down Galaxia’s blade, her slender fingers leaving no smudges on the mirror-finish.

“The people of Dreamland shouldn’t have to suffer when there is someone who can help them,” Bikaia said, gathering his steel. “I did lie. I’m not my father’s eldest son, but I am still the son of Prince Noven. You have a prince either way. Please, I beg of you, let me plead my case with Sir Galacta Knight—”

“You are already pleading your case with Galacta Knight,” the woman said.

Bikaia furrowed his brow. “You’re the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy?” he asked. “You’re… you’re a woman.”

“How observant of you.”

But women weren’t supposed to be knights. They weren’t supposed to see battle. Bikaia flushed in embarrassment. Maybe lady-knights were common in Halcandra. Bikaia hadn’t been allowed to learn about Halcandra, after all; for all he knew, everyone in Halcandra had flippers and gills. Still, he had to keep going. Dreamland was at stake.

“I am still a prince of Dreamland, the grandson of King Adstellam and the son of Prince Noven.”

“I asked for his eldest son.”

“Why?”

“My reasons are my own,” Galacta Knight replied. “You aren’t what I requested.”

“How can I refute your reasons if you won’t offer them?” Bikaia asked.
The knight laughed, and in that laugh, Bikaia heard centuries of regality and twinkling of stars. “Do you fancy yourself a rhetorician, little princeling?” the knight asked.

“No, but I shall try to be if Dreamland is at stake.”

“You can offer nothing of value to me,” Galacta Knight said. “You’re nothing. There’s nothing you can do that I can’t do myself, and you’re not even a proper prince, are you? You’re an ill-thought romp with a scullery maid.”

Bikaia hadn’t counted on her knowing who he was.

“She was a chambermaid.”

“Whatever she was, we’re finished here. See yourself out.”

“But I can—I can slay your foes for you! I can do—”

“I can slay my own foes.”

“Yes, but you—you have to fight to do it! See; I’m cursed! When people touch me, they die. Surely, that would be better for you than having to bloody your sword or lance. You could—I could—”

“You speak like a child who’s never slain another man,” Galacta Knight said.

“But I could learn. If that’s what you wanted—I’ll be anything you desire. Just, please—”

Without warning, Galacta Knight brushed her fingertips over Bikaia’s cheekbone. There was a faint pop of lightning. Bikaia backed away, horrified, but Galacta Knight seemed utterly unharmed. “But I don’t…” Bikaia trailed off.
“I’m not dead,” she deadpanned.

But she should’ve been.

“But I’ve never…touched anyone. You should be…”

She should’ve been dead. Bikaia had been cursed since he was born by a malignant enchantress. People died when they touched him. But Galacta Knight was still alive. And Bikaia…

Bikaia felt so strange. He felt lighter and more powerful. He felt as if he’d touched a goddess and lived to tell about it. He felt like Galaxia’s light curled inside him, but that was impossible.

“I don’t understand,” Bikaia said. “You should be…”

“Focus on your goal, little princeling. What will you do for me?” Galacta Knight asked softly.

Bikaia’s eyes met hers. Sea-grey and carnation-pink. “I’ll do anything.”

“Even follow in your parent’s footsteps?”

“Yes, of course. But I’m already doing as my father—”

“I didn’t mean your father, little princeling. I mean, your mother. The poor, little chambermaid who was dismissed and thrown out when your dear father decided he was finished with her. I mean, the poor, young girl who gave birth to a prince and was cast aside as nothing.”

“A chambermaid,” Bikaia repeated. “You want me to be your chambermaid.”

“I loathe domestic work, yet like clean spaces,” Galacta Knight said. “I want a servant to attend to my home, so I may devote my time to other pursuits. Do well, and I’ll treat you fairly. Do poorly, and you’ll be disciplined just as your poor mother would’ve been.”
“You want a prince of Dreamland to be your servant? You don’t…you don’t want to procure a good marriage for yourself or someone else. You don’t want a knight. You—”

“I want a Dreamlandic prince to be my indentured servant,” Galacta Knight said. “I’m tired of having to prepare my bathwater twice a day.”

“You bathe every day?”

“Yes, and if you choose to be my servant, I’ll expect you to bathe more than once a year.”

“But that’s unhealthy,” Bikaia said. “How have you not fallen ill with the plague? Or pneumonia? Or—”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’d want you to bathe twice a day, too. I only hope in doing so you’ll live for half as long as I have. And servants don’t question their masters, princeling. Servants know how to address their betters with respect.”

Bikaia’s heartbeat quickened. Did this mean she was agreeing?

“Seven years serving me, and, in return, I will grant your father’s request. If you can’t do it, you may leave at any time, but if you do, I am not obligated to honor our agreement any longer,” Galacta Knight said.

This was the deal. Seven years being a servant to this unfamiliar sorcerer-knight. Bikaia had talked with servants while they cleaned, but he’d never performed such tasks himself. Still, he knew well the punishments for failure. He blanched at the thought of being beaten or denied food. Or worse. One of the tutors had spent seven years in the dungeons for letting Lune read an unapproved collection of fairy tales. Dear Nova, what if Galacta Knight was really sadistic and enjoyed whipping her servants? Bikaia had an aunt that took pleasure in punishing her servants like that. She’d bragged about giving one of her scullery maid’s twenty lashes for dropping a plate. And those were only the punishments. Bikaia’s mind whirled with all the horrifying, humiliating things that this sorcerer-knight could make him do if he was her servant.

Seven years of enduring whatever she wanted him to in return for saving Dreamland. Seven years was the usual length of time for being indentured, but it seemed so absurdly long to Bikaia. Seven years to save Dreamland. Nova preserve him. Everything in Bikaia was screaming for him to run very far away and very quickly. His throat was thick and raw, and his stomach lurched. “I agree,”
he said. “Whatever you want.”

Galacta Knight’s home was significantly larger than any home owned by the peasantry. She had her own bathing room, a pantry, and a bedroom in addition to her sitting room, but this all still looked unreasonably small to Bikaia, who was accustomed to sprawling grounds and massive corridors. Bikaia tried very hard to fulfill all the tasks she’d assigned him, but he was still exhausted at the end of every day and fell quickly to sleep every night in their shared bed. Thank Nova, Galacta Knight hadn't made him sleep on the floor. Bikaia wasn't sure if his back would've been able to survive sleeping on the ground along with the newfound strain of scrubbing floors.

Galacta Knight had taken a week to teach him all the necessary skills, and Bikaia had thought he really might be able to manage them. How wrong he was. It took him most of the day to sweep and scrub the floors clean. It was fortunate that Galacta Knight’s bathing room had a seemingly endless supply of water. Bikaia called it magic; Galacta Knight called it plumbing. Either way, it meant Bikaia didn’t have to carry buckets to and from a nearby body of water, which was fortunate. He was already having difficulty in completing all the tasks, even with Galaxia’s additional guidance.

Bikaia kept waiting for Galacta Knight to lose patience with him for doing such a poor job, but aside from quiet comments, she rarely offered feedback. If anything, his efforts seemed to amuse her. She never screamed or threw things at him, and when she was around, Galacta Knight always prepared three meals a day for them. Initially, she’d given him little food, and Bikaia had assumed it was some sort of punishment. He’d said nothing and cleaned the floors as he’d been asked. But then, she’d made far too much on a day where Bikaia had performed terribly. Bikaia had realized that the knight was simply unused to cooking for two people and was struggling to figure out the proportions. Eventually, they settled out, and the amount of food he received remained about the same, which Bikaia was grateful for. Whatever her punishments were, Galacta Knight wasn't inclined to deprive him of food. He only hoped this wasn’t some sort of grace period.

He was on his hands and knees when Galaxia materialized beside him. She kept changing her appearance, but rather than asking why, Bikaia had simply assumed this was the way she was. He had enough to think about without adding another mystery to it. Bikaia still wasn’t sure why his new mistress wasn’t dead. Or why his mistress would leave and return exhausted, often spending days in her bedroom, dragging herself out only to cook because Bikaia still had yet to learn how.

_Mistress is home, Your Royal Highness_, Galaxia said.

Indeed, the elegant knight soon swept in. She was dressed like a very wealthy lady, like a merchant’s wife or a minor noblewoman. Her dress was pink velvet and her mantle white and
trimmed with fox fur. Bikaia hadn’t asked where a knight living in the middle of the forest managed to acquire all the lavish clothing she wore. According to Adstellam’s laws, Galacta Knight wasn’t even of high enough rank to wear velvet, but Bikaia still didn’t dare ask her much. Galacta Knight had proven to be far kinder than Bikaia had anticipated, and he wasn't sure where her boundaries were.

Galacta Knight looked at him for a long moment. Then, deliberately, she removed her cloak. Bikaia winced and hurriedly wiped his hands on his trousers. “I apologize, Mistress,” he said, hurrying to get the garment from her.

Galacta Knight’s gaze was thoughtful. “Your mother, the chambermaid. What do you know about her? You must’ve asked about her at some point.”

Why did she care? Bikaia furrowed his brow. “She was…” Bikaia trailed off. “I don’t know. I don’t think I was told the truth about her.”

Galacta Knight strode to her cushions and patted the space across from her. Bikaia sat, Galacta Knight’s fur mantle still in his arms.

“What were you told, then?” Galacta Knight asked.

“She was a chambermaid. I’ve heard she seduced my father, but I don’t know how true that is. It’s no secret that my father isn’t faithful to his wife,” Bikaia said, shifting uncomfortably. “Father says he can’t remember even remember my mother’s name when I ask him.”

Galacta Knight pursed her lips and seemed to internally debate something. “We’re going to start scheduling time for you to practice both swordsmanship and magic each day,” Galacta Knight said.

Bikaia blanched at the thought of adding more to his day. He floundered enough in just trying to complete his chores on time, and Galacta Knight insisted that everything be completed before dinner. Bikaia simply was not allowed to work past that point; instead, Galacta Knight insisted on having him discuss whatever had been on her mind throughout the day. They’d discussed a myriad of subjects, everything from philosophy to botany. It was nice, but Bikaia could've accomplished so much more if she'd been willing to give him just a few more hours in the evening.

“I…I’m cursed, though. That’s—“
“You aren’t cursed, little princeling.”

*What?*

“You’re wrong, Mistress. Everyone has said—”

“How many people have you killed?”

“None, but that’s because—”

“That’s because your family lied to you,” Galacta Knight said. “You don’t kill people when you touch them; you copy their talents.”

“I apologize for my impertinence, but you can’t possibly be correct, Mistress. My family would never—why would they tell me something so horrible like that?”

“I don’t know who your mother was, but I can tell you one thing about her: she wasn’t fully Dreamlandic. She probably wasn’t entirely Halcandran either, but Halcandran magic is very potent. Unpredictable, yes, but very strong. One Halcandran ancestor out of dozens could result in something like this. It’s even entirely possible that your father is responsible for this, but my bet would be on the chambermaid.”

“That’s impossible. Why—what does that have to do with anything? How do you know this?”

“Because Copy is a type of Halcandran magic. If you’ll let me, I can prove it to you.”

Prove it to him? Bikaia dug his fingers into Galacta Knight’s fur mantle. If he had been lied to, that meant Bikaia could’ve been…he could’ve been *normal*. He could’ve received the same petting and coddling that his siblings had received as children. His nanny could’ve kissed him good night. Bikaia couldn’t even remember a time in his life when he’d been touched—not without gloves or a layer of fabric between the other person and himself—except for when Galacta Knight had touched his face.

Having that meant his parents lied to him. It meant everyone had lied to him.
“You don’t need to answer right away, little princeling,” Galacta Knight said. “After all, you still have many years left in my service, don’t you?”

Right. Nearly seven years left to figure it out.

Galacta Knight seemed to wait for an answer, and when Bikaia offered none, she sighed softly. "Back to your floors, princeling. I'll be in my bed if you have need of me."

Bikaia felt profoundly like she was disappointed in him.

Bikaia hadn’t agreed to the magic lessons, but he had tentatively asked Galacta Knight if they could work on the swordplay anyway. She’d agreed, and after living and training with her for a year, Bikaia had become very good. He’d also learned finally managed to clean the house with respectable efficiency, although not without the occasional misstep, he'd learned to cook with minimal guidance, and he’d become very widely read. Galacta Knight had developed a tendency to disappear for weeks at a time, and she’d given Bikaia access to her impressive collection of books while she was gone. When Galacta Knight realized Bikaia liked fairy tales of the knights and princesses variety, she’d been bemused, but on her next trip to wherever she went, she returned with stacks of them.

“My father put my brother’s tutor in the dungeon for letting me read these,” Bikaia had said. “He called them too frivolous for a prince.”

“They are frivolous,” Galacta Knight had answered, “But I imagine your fairy tale princes present better models of behavior than the princes you’ve known.”

And Bikaia hadn’t really been able to argue with that. His brothers were war-mongers and liked to flaunt their power. The servants had loathed them because they were nuisances and enjoyed meting out punishments, and Bikaia had disliked them for that. However, that was as far as Bikaia’s feelings for them ever developed. They were his family, so Bikaia supposed he loved them, although he never saw them all that often. They were proper knights, frequently away from home, and despite Bikaia’s desire to be a knight like in the fairy tales, he hadn’t been allowed to join them. Bikaia had been taught to duel, but little of how to wage war. This suited him fine. He knew real knights weren’t the noble men in fairy tales.
All in all, living with Galacta Knight wasn’t bad, and she was every bit as clever, strategic, and strong as her title suggested. She was also the most educated person Bikaia had ever met—or perhaps, the most educated person to ever pay attention to him—and she was eager to teach him everything she knew about anything. They had long conversations about art, philosophy, and rhetoric. She taught Bikaia algebra, geometry, and Halcandran, although he still hadn’t mastered verb tenses. She taught him about the time before Halcandra was sealed away; Bikaia hadn’t been born yet when that happened. He’d never even seen anyone from Halcandra before Galacta Knight—not that he knew of, anyway. Halcandrans weren’t the great enemy they once had been; this was likely because most of the displaced populations had been slaughtered or fled Dreamland. Instead, a new enemy had risen, and that new enemy was Dreamlanders that were too poor, too angry, or too powerful.

Bikaia wondered sometimes about his alleged Halcandran mother. He didn’t look especially Halcandran, but why would Galacta Knight lie about something like that? She had no reason to, and if Bikaia really wasn’t cursed, that wouldn’t be very difficult to prove.

“Miss Galaxia, would you be opposed to a walk?” Bikaia asked.

Galaxia had never refused, but Bikaia still felt it was courteous to ask. She appeared. Galaxia looked more like her Halcandran mistress in those days, but her hair remained persistently blonde. Her eyes had become a dark, red-brown like garnets. Her dress was light and flowing, like the sort of dress the goddess Nova would’ve worn, but it was gold rather than Nova’s beloved silver.

*I’m ready when you are, dear.*

Bikaia adjusted Galaxia’s swordbelt, so she rested between his shoulder blades and over his cloak. Beside him, Galaxia smiled brightly.

It was almost winter again. Already frost had begun to coat the ground. Still, Bikaia’s spirits were high. With Galaxia nearby, he didn’t feel the cold, and the sun was bright as it filtered through autumn’s last grasp upon the forest.

“*You look very lovely today,*” Bikaia said.

*I usually do,* Galaxia replied.
“That is true,” Bikaia admitted with a laugh. “How does Mistress conceptualize you?”

As an attractive, young woman. I have dragon wings when she looks at me, Galaxia added.

“How does she conceptualize you?” Bikaia asked.

It’s because Landia lent Mistress his fire to forge with.

“How did she manage that?” Bikaia asked.

She paid a decade of servitude to him like you’re doing for her, but I wasn’t truly complete until I was blessed by Nova.

“Nova,” Bikaia whispered. “She knows Nova?”

You might call them lovers, Galaxia said, Although they haven’t seen one another in many years.

“Why not?”

Galaxia pursed her lips. Well, she said, After King Adstellam’s Queen was stolen, he feared that he couldn’t defeat the Halcandran forces. I don’t know that you would’ve been aware of it. You’re so very young. But Adstellam captured the goddess Nova and forced her to grant his wish.

Bikaia covered his mouth with his hands and stared wide-eyed at Galaxia. “Nova?” he whispered. “He…he couldn’t.”

And yet he did, Galaxia replied tiredly. She gave her aid, although she was very reluctant to do so.

Bikaia shuddered. He felt unclean. He didn’t want to think about it, but he could too easily imagine Adstellam doing it, imprisoning the noble goddess of Dreamland. How did a mere mortal force a goddess to do anything? The answer was something better left unsaid. Adstellam had a penchant for keeping his prisoners in cages and putting them on display, and those were only things Bikaia was aware of. His grandfather likely did much worse. But to do them to Nova. To have the audacity
and the thought to harm Dreamland’s noble patroness, the woman whose hand had blessed them thousands of years before, was unthinkable.

*Mistress didn’t blame Nova for helping Adstellam prevail. Mistress sneaked in by disguising herself as a cat and saved Nova, who lived with us for a few months. But one day, Nova simply disappeared and didn’t return. Of course, Mistress could summon her, but she hasn’t.*

“How do you summon her? I’m not going to try,” Bikaia said, at Galaxia’s arched eyebrow.

*You must harness a great deal of power, Galaxia said. From the fountains upon the stars. That is the sure way to do it, but if you make a wish to her, she might grant your request. She hears the desires of her people as she sleeps.*

“That’s it? You must be awake while she’s asleep?”

*That’s it.*

“That’s it.”

*Hmm.*

*Don’t do anything foolish, Galaxia said. Mistress won’t appreciate you interfering in her relationships.*

“I won’t,” Bikaia said. “I just wanted to know. It’s nearly Solstice, isn’t it? I wanted to make my wish to her.”

Galaxia’s lips curved into a smile. *And what would you wish for, Your Royal Highness?*

“I don’t know. Maybe for Galacta Knight’s success,” Bikaia said. “I assume she has the power to save Dreamland because Father went to her, but I’ve never really seen her use such power. Maybe she’d need help.”

*She didn’t gain the title of Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy with her beauty, Your Royal Highness.*
Bikaia laughed. “Point taken, although she is very beautiful, nonetheless,” Bikaia said.

The air shifted, and something very dark crackled in the wind. Bikaia froze. He had no practice in using his alleged magic. He still didn’t entirely believe he had magic. But he could sense its presence, nevertheless. There was someone powerful in these woods, and it wasn’t Galaxia. It also wasn’t Galacta Knight’s light magic.

*We may not wish to encounter this person*, Galaxia said.

“Agreed.”

Bikaia had gone walking with Galaxia often enough to know the way back, but while they neared Galacta Knight’s house, the magic felt persistently closer. Bikaia unsheathed Galaxia. They weren’t going to make it back.

Bikaia whirled around, and the wizard was there. The wizard, who wore all black and leaned up against a staff, was tall with dark hair and red eyes. Bikaia nearly laughed at how much he looked like the villain from a children’s story, but any laughter died in his throat. The man was unnaturally pale, even to Bikaia, who’d spent his entire life surrounded by courtiers who’d never seen the sun. When the wizard smiled, his face looked bleached and skeletal, as if he were some form of death itself.

He struck without warning, and Bikaia wasn’t even entirely sure how it happened. The wizard merely swung his staff—not even touching Bikaia with it—and pain burst in Bikaia’s chest. He dropped Galaxia and fell to his knees, his breath coming in quick, panicked gasps.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. It felt like something had snapped inside him, something deeper than his bones and muscles, something profound and unnamable—but Nova’s grace, he needed whatever it was. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. Bikaia thought he surely must die. Galaxia screamed and raged, but the wizard ignored her protests and the flames that burst from her blade.

*Bikaia! Bikaia, dearest—stop it! Leave him alone! Let him go!*

Bikaia fought back tears and leveled a glare at the wizard. Dear Nova, this hurt. This hurt so much. “What did you do to me?” Bikaia asked.
His voice trembled, and he trembled. This was so bad.

“I shattered your magic,” the wizard replied. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

Was this what dying felt like? This rolling, twisting pain in his stomach and chest? When the wizard grabbed Bikaia's hair, Bikaia clawed at the wizard’s wrist, trying to free himself.

“I don’t have magic.”

The wizard roared with laughter. “On the contrary, you have something very rare,” the wizard said.

“M—my mistress is the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy,” Bikaia said. “She’ll be furious. You don’t want to do this.”

“Ah, but she’ll have to find you first, won’t he?” the wizard asked.

The wizard hauled him to his feet. Bikaia held his hand out for Galaxia, who came quickly to him. Once the blade was in his hand, Bikaia twisted around and buried the sword in the wizard’s shoulder. The wizard hissed and recoiled.

*Run!* Galaxia shouted.

But the moment Bikaia was free, he collapsed to the ground. The world spun around him, and he was…so very tired. So—

When Bikaia woke, he was chained up in a drafty corner of a tiny house. The presence of a chains and old straw indicated that he probably wasn’t the wizard’s first captive, and since Bikaia and the wizard were the only ones living in the house, this didn’t speak well for his odds of surviving the ordeal.
The days were long and bled into one another. Bikaia seldom slept and waited with bated breath each morning to see if the wizard, called Necrodeus, would offer him scraps of breakfast. Bikaia didn’t trust the food the wizard gave him, but he had also learned very quickly the consequences for refusing it. Even if the pain hadn’t persuaded him to obey, the newfound, persistent gnawing in his stomach would’ve. There hadn’t been any food the first several days as punishment for stabbing the wizard with Galaxia, a wound that remained still only half-healed. If no scraps were forthcoming, Bikaia would be forced to wait until dinner, and often, that was the case.

Experiments usually followed. At first, they’d merely been demeaning, but they’d grown steadily crueler. Concoctions were forced down his throat. Sometimes, they had no discernible effects. Other times, it sent jolts of pain through his stomach and chest. He’d curl up and scream and cry, while Necroedus watched, face blank and ambivalent. That frightened Bikaia most of all; he’d seen cruelty before. He’d seen enjoyment derived from cruelty before, but he’d never seen ambivalence in the face of cruelty. Even punishments for Bikaia’s escape attempts and attacks seemed delivered with a sort of apathetic sense of duty.

Bikaia could no longer deny he had magic, but this realization wasn’t enough to help him. Necrodeus had shattered Bikaia’s magic, but his magic hadn’t stayed shattered. It’d snapped back together, his powers returning as if they’d never been harmed. This had drawn the wizard’s ire as much as it’d drawn his fascination. So he did it again. And again. And no matter how many times this happened, Bikaia still hadn’t managed to gracefully endure the pain of being ripped apart inside. And following the wizard’s experiments, Bikaia was finally allowed to clean the wizard’s space. He usually did it with a fierce headache, an empty stomach, and more than a few bruises.

Bikaia thought about Galacta Knight often. He wondered if the knight missed him, or if she’d tried to find him. Had she even returned home yet and realized his absence? She would’ve found Galaxia, and because she’d found Galaxia, Galacta Knight would—at least—know that Bikaia hadn’t simply left. He never doubted that Galacta Knight would try to find him, but he doubted her success. Sometimes, Bikaia thought of Dreamland. He could no longer deny that his family had lied to him his entire life. Even though Bikaia wanted to believe his father had lied to protect him, Bikaia couldn’t entirely make himself believe it. His life had fallen apart around him, and although Bikaia lay awake and thought about it most nights, he still couldn't make sense of it.

It was a blessing that the wizard had been gone all day. Bikaia spent the first few hours futilely trying to free himself, but after failing and exhausting himself, he lay on his side and stared blankly at the rest of the house. The fire had died, leaving the house dark, save for the slants of light drifting through the cracks in the walls. Bikaia curled and uncurled his fingers, trying to force some warmth into them.

The door opened. Bikaia shifted and sat upright as best as he could. A woman entered, framed by the light of the doorway. Her pale, flawless skin was pulled tight over her high cheekbones and pointed chin. There was something vaguely cat-like about her face, although Bikaia couldn’t pick out any singular feature responsible for the impression. Blonde curls tumbled onto her slender shoulders. Overall, Bikaia thought she was stunning in the same otherworldly way that Galacta
Knight was, but there was none of Galacta Knight’s warmth in this face. This woman looked as if she’d been crafted from ice. Bikaia gave a longing glance to her heavy, fur cloak. Nova’s grace, had he ever been warm? The sensation of warmth felt like a dream.

Necrodeus had never had company before, and it showed in his demeanor. There was a nervousness to his motions that wasn’t normally present. The wizard swept his cloak from his shoulders and placed it over the massive trunk that sat across the room. “Please, be seated, my Lady,” the wizard said, with a bow.

My Lady? That title offered few clues. She could’ve been anything from a knight’s wife to a duke’s daughter. Bikaia would’ve recognized her if she was Dreamlandic royalty or nobility. Sure, he’d only glimpsed her when she stood in the doorway, but…

Bikaia lowered his eyes before Necrodeus could catch him looking. The wizard didn’t seem to have noticed, though. He ignored Bikaia and started a fire. Bikaia yearned to be near the warmth, but he didn’t drift closer, for fear of drawing Necrodeus’s ire.

“Oranges, my Lady?” Necrodeus asked.

Bikaia didn’t see where the wizard pulled the fruit from. Necrodeus’s boots thudded across the floor, as he approached the lady, who’d taken a seat on the trunk.

“Who is that?” the lady asked.

“Just an experiment,” Necrodeus replied.

“Regardless, you might consider feeding him every now and then.”

A pause. “He’s naturally a small boy,” Necrodeus said.

She was Dreamlandic, too. Maybe she would help him. The woman walked towards Bikaia, who chanced a glance up at her. Her eyes seemed to contain all the fury of winter.

“King Adstellam likes to keep his prisoners where everyone can see them,” she said coldly. “How
very ironic to see one of his descendants in the same position.”

Bikaia felt all the color drain from his face.

“His descendants?” Necrodeus asked.

“You didn’t realize you enslaved a Dreamlandic prince?” the woman inquired.

The wizard slowly reached for his staff. “Regardless of your views—” The woman cut Necrodeus off with a wave of her hand.

“I had considered being merciful.” The woman’s voice was like ice.

“Excuse me?” Necrodeus asked.

“I might’ve shown you mercy if you’d known he was a prince and done this to him. I, myself, bear a grudge against the monarchy, but you didn’t know. You’d have done this to him regardless of who he was. He might’ve been an innocent farm-boy or a lost traveler. A poor dairy-maid. It wouldn’t have mattered to you, so I will ensure that you never hurt anyone else ever again. And I’ll show you what it’s like to be cold and scared and hungry. To feel hopeless and forgotten and have every shred of dignity stripped from you.”

Necrodeus waved his staff, but the woman dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “My magic is not shattered as easily as his,” she said.

The air shimmered around her, and the woman flicked her wrist, sending it arching towards the wizard. He recoiled, hissing, and waved his staff in an effort to stop her. They circled one another. Ice crackled on the floor, jagged and arching towards the woman. She merely raised her hand and diverted it back towards the wizard. He wasn’t fast enough to dodge.

The ice rose and crackled mercilessly. Bikaia watched, transfixed, as the powerful wizard was encased from the waist-down. There was blood, so much of it streaking the floor and coloring the ice. The woman approached, effortlessly waving away the wizard’s magic. Necrodeus screamed and fought still, even as the woman pulled his staff from his fingers. She strode away, regally and slowly, nearly taunting. Once, she paused and considered Bikaia. “Did he hurt you with this?” she asked.
Bikaia’s heart was in his throat. He felt himself nod. What more could he do? This woman—whoever she was—was glorious and horrifying. And Bikaia shuddered at the thought of such raw fury turned towards him. Never before had Bikaia seen such power tossed aside so easily. Ice settled in Bikaia’s veins. What if she wasn’t the savior he was hoping for? What if she was just as cruel as the wizard?

The woman turned away and murmured under her breath. A ring of shimmering, silver light appeared around the staff. Bikaia recognized the start of a sealing spell. Only the most powerful of magical users could accomplish such. Dear Nova, preserve him. Necrodeus looked up, fear etched on his face. “You wouldn’t,” he said. “You wouldn’t! Galacta Knight—”

“Would’ve been able to stop me from doing this. She would’ve shown restraint,” the woman said, deadpan. “But she isn’t here, is she?”

She brought the staff crashing down on Necrodeus’s head, and he shrieked. There was a burst of light, and the sorcerer vanished. The woman raised her hand and brought it down swiftly across the air, ripping between dimensions. Bikaia caught a flutter of snow, as the woman tossed the staff through and closed the rip. She glanced at Bikaia once more before striding towards the door.

“Wait—” Bikaia rasped, but his voice was raw and barely above a whisper.

She stopped regardless. “If you think I care about what happens to you, you’re very much mistaken,” she said.

With that, she left. For minutes or hours or days, Bikaia stared at the door. She’d really abandoned him. Bikaia broke down crying until no more tears would come, and although his eyes still burned when no more tears would come, he felt more level-headed. More able to do something. He tried again to escape, pulling and thrashing and scraping. There was nothing nearby to pick the locks with and nothing to cut them with, and the one person who knew where he was had vanished. He was going to die. This was it.

His grandfather was still going strong at one-hundred fifty with three-quarters of the country screaming for his blood, and Bikaia was going to die at eighteen because of some evil wizard and some cruel woman. Oh, and with shattered, useless magic. It was almost comedic. It was such an absurd way to die. But maybe—just maybe—his magic would repair itself in time, and he’d master it enough to escape.
The door opened, and at the sight of Galacta Knight in full armor, Bikaia’s thoughts halted and fell apart like a dropped pane of glass. Galacta Knight swept to the ground, as elegant and graceful as silk. Her hands were frantic, tracing his cheekbones and running through his hair.

Bikaia burst into tears. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I was so afraid you wouldn’t be able to find me, and—”

“It’s all right,” Galacta Knight said. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of you, and I promise this will never happen again.”

She fumbled with the locks, trying to force them open. Eventually, she unsheathed Galaxia and slashed through the chains, leaving Bikaia unharmed. Once free, Bikaia launched himself at Galacta Knight and hugged her tightly. Futilely, Bikaia tried to stop his shivering, as Galacta Knight stroked gentle circles over his back. She coaxed him into resting his forehead against her shoulder and letting his tears fall onto her cloak.

“I’m sorry,” Bikaia whispered, his voice shaking. “I’m so sorry. Thank you for saving me. Thank you.”

Galacta Knight seized her cloak and wrapped it around him. “Ssh. It’s fine, dear,” she said. “You’re going to be safe. I’ve got you now. Let’s go home.”

In the days after being rescued by Nova, Bikaia had seldom left the bed and its layers of fur and cloth, and Galacta Knight was always nearby to rouse him from his nightmares or soothe him when he woke crying. After a few weeks of being doted and petted on, Bikaia did seem something more like his old self. His enthusiasm for learning had returned, but even then, it was marred by his shattered confidence. There was an uncertainty when he said anything. Sometimes, there was flinching if he wanted to disagree with her. Galacta Knight had begun joining him in bed and reading books over his shoulder, while her fingers trailed through his hair. She liked to touch him. It was how Galacta Knight reassured herself that Bikaia wasn’t a ghost or a dream. He was really there. He was really safe. Whatever Nova had done to the wizard, he wasn’t going to reappear and abduct or hurt Bikaia.

Bikaia was asleep again, and the knight had settled beside him. Galacta Knight sensed Nova’s presence and reluctantly freed herself from the blankets. For a few seconds, the knight watched him. Poor creature, Galacta Knight had failed to protect him just as she’d failed to protect her own
child.

Galacta Knight padded over the floor and into the sitting room. Nova sat on a cushion with Galaxia, her face brightened at the appearance of Nova, whom she rarely saw. Galacta Knight joined them. “Speak softly,” she said, “Or you’ll wake Bikaia.”

Nova scowled, and Galacta Knight felt warmth coil and crackle in her chest.

“The poor child thought you’d left him to starve to death,” Galacta Knight said.

Nova tipped her chin up defiantly. “What did you expect? You knew the weight of what you asked me. Besides, I told you where he was. You found him. You’ve no right to judge me. The royalty didn’t put you in a cage and ruin the kingdom you poured all your love and magic into creating. They didn’t use your powers to wage a war that killed so many people.”

“I’m not going to argue which of us has suffered the most,” Galacta Knight said. “I have a plan to fix things, and I’d prefer you not sabotage it by intentionally abusing my charge.”

“Now he’s your charge? Didn’t you coax him into giving you his freedom?” Nova asked.

*I like the prince,* Galaxia offered.

“You’re very young, Galaxia,” Nova said tiredly. “You don’t know any better. Evidently, neither does Galacta Knight. I’ve spent my time among the common people of Dreamland, while you’ve hidden away in the forest. Do you truly believe Noven will be a better king? Sure, he can manage a budget fine, but he’s a monster. His children are monsters and remain hungry for bloodshed. Noven might delay a civil war, but there will be a war. Already the territories along the Floralian border are preparing for war with the monarchy. The Duke of the Stars refuses to give King Adstellam their refugees. What did Noven promise you in return for helping him, Galacta Knight?”

“He promised he’d stop hunting my people,” Galacta Knight said.

“And do you truly believe he’ll do that?” Nova asked. “Sure, he’ll make all the right gestures, but once he realizes how unequipped he is to rule Dreamland, he’ll turn on you. He’ll make you the villain behind his failures.”
“I can take care of Adstellam. Noven has agreed to help. I’m certain, at least, he’ll follow through that part of our bargain.”

“And then, we have Noven,” Nova said with a sigh. “You’ll trade one tyrant for another. Brilliant plan.”

“Once Noven becomes king, I foresee him being poisoned by his second-eldest son, who will be caught and set to be executed for the crime. He will flee Dreamland under the cover of nightfall,” Galacta Knight said softly, “Unless you interfere, that is.”

Galacta Knight’s gift for foresight took an incredible amount of magical power and left her exhausted for days, and her visions were only accurate for so long. They changed often, and Nova’s interference could render them all entirely useless. But this situation was something worth looking into.

“If I choose not to act, Adstellam’s eldest son, Lune, will take the throne, and he’s no better,” Nova said. “It won’t matter if Noven is poisoned or not. Your efforts to prevent another war are admirable, but we aren’t going to accomplish anything if the king of Dreamland comes from the same stock.”

“It’s a waiting game. In two months, Adstellam will declare war on the Duke of the Stars, and in the siege, Lune will be slain by the first arrow fired. He’ll be dead before Noven even takes the throne,” Galacta Knight said. “It would be nice if we could prevent the poor Duke from being executed. He may be helpful later.”

“Yes, he’s the best among them. And when this is all finished, Galacta Knight, who takes the throne?” Nova asked.

Nova followed Galacta Knight’s gaze towards the bedroom where Bikaia slept.

“He’s spent his life being neglected both as the illegitimate and youngest son of Prince Noven. Being third in the line of succession, he hasn’t been given as much attention as the others. He has a working knowledge of politics and philosophy, but he’s never been allowed to apply it.”

“Dreamland doesn’t need an inexperienced monarch.”
“He needs refinement, yes, but he’s spent his adolescence observing servants and reading to entertain himself. He’s more open-minded than the others. He’s braver and more compassionate than they are. Given a year’s time, I can set everything into motion. By next fall, Noven will have the throne. It could be Bikaia’s by the Winter Solstice.”

“You think very highly of this little princerling of yours.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t the least bit fond of him,” Galacta Knight replied. “He intrigues me. He traded his freedom to save Dreamland. He did what neither his father nor his brothers would do, and Bikaia has yet to back out of our arrangement. He’s a determined, little creature. Tell me, Nova, when was the last time you mentored the king of Dreamland?”

“A thousand years, at least,” Nova murmured.

“And wouldn’t it be nice to raise one again? He has Copy.”

Nova’s eyes widened. “Are you certain?” she asked.

Galacta Knight nodded. “We could have a Dreamlandic prince with Halcandran blood and magic. He’ll be powerful. So let’s teach him. We have the opportunity to raise a philosopher-king. A kind, benevolent monarch deserving of Dreamland’s people. We can build something great with him,” Galacta Knight said.

Nova pursed her lips. “Do you really think you can accomplish this?” she asked.

“I think this is the best chance we have,” Galacta Knight said, “And if he fails, we’ve not lost much. A year’s time, perhaps. If Bikaia cannot be the king we need and unite Dreamland, we can throw him to the wolves with the others, but I truly believe we can make my plan work. If we both offer Bikaia our support, he should succeed.”

“Then, we’ll try,” Nova said.

Once the goddess was gone, Galacta Knight crept into her bedroom where Bikaia slept peacefully. His cheekbones were too prominent, and dark bags hung under his eyes. Although she refrained,
Galacta Knight wanted to pet his hair, just to reassure herself that he really was there. He wasn’t an illusion or a dream. He hadn’t been taken again by a monster. Somehow, seeing him wasn’t enough, but she didn’t want to risk waking him. Everything that was about to happen would be horrible. Bikaia would lose his grandfather, his father, and all three of his brothers in the coming months. Even once Bikaia was on the throne, his problems wouldn’t vanish. It would be difficult enough to prove his legitimacy; he was only half-royal. This was much to ask a child to saddle; Galacta Knight knew that, but she also firmly believed Bikaia could accomplish it if he just had some proper guidance.

*My dear, beloved Meta Knight, I know history remembers her as the Knight of the Slaughter, but being imprisoned broke her. She wasn’t always like history tells you; she wasn’t a monster. She was like you, very clever and very brave.*

Meta Knight sighed. “That doesn’t make me feel better, Galaxia.”

Galaxia cupped Meta Knight’s face with her hands. *Dear heart, I didn’t know what would happen to my mistress, so I couldn’t help her avoid her fate. But knowing what I do now, I will die before I allow the same fate to befall you. I waited a thousand years for you. I love you, and I know that when the time comes, you’ll do the right thing.*
Sectonia Steps down as Head of A.M.B.E.R.

Chapter Summary

Trigger warnings for transphobia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Meta Knight’s painkillers had dulled the pain and left him worn out and tired. When he woke, he waited for a few minutes, hoping the muscle strain and aches would magically vanish. They didn’t, of course. His magic was still suppressed, but fortunately, even suppressants weren’t powerful enough to block his bond with Galaxia. Not like Dark Mind’s handcuffs. Meta Knight shivered involuntarily and hugged Galaxia against him. Don’t fret, dear. I’m here.

Fae sat by his bed, her head was bent towards her sketchbook as she drew. Meta Knight watched her for a few minutes. Her long, night-dark hair hung in two braids down her slender back and over her red, silk blouse. Fae’s skin was very pale and smooth, the product of her impressive skincare regime and good genetics. She switched her grey marker for a purple one. Meta Knight winced and slowly sat upright. Fae raised her hand, and without looking at him, ran her fingers through Meta Knight’s hair. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Tired. What are you sketching?”

“Armor,” she said. “For you.”

“Fae, I—”

“Are you happy?” she asked.

She turned away from her sketch and met his gaze. Fae had a very fond, discerning way of looking at people. It was as if she could see everything about you, everything wrong you’d ever committed, and yet this feeling was coupled with soft sympathy. She wasn’t really Meta Knight’s friend. She was a friend of Dedede’s, and Meta Knight had never been entirely sure whether Fae’s fondness was an act of obligation or sincerity. Whichever it was, Meta Knight didn’t dislike her. They both had some common interests, and neither of them was Dreamlandic. Fae dealt with people assuming she was submissive and delicate, and Meta Knight dealt with people assuming he was Dedede’s trophy rather than his friend. People approached Fae on the street and spoke to her with butchered
Ripplese, and Meta Knight was always susceptible to extra scrutiny when going into the palace, except—of course—for the times when Dedede was with him. Fae and Meta Knight had bonded over their shared experiences and swapped stories about the worst ones. Their relationship was mostly superficial and courteous, but there were times when Fae dug in just a little too deep.

Are you happy?

Meta Knight thought back to the summer spent on Delilah’s estate. He remembered the time spent with Dedede and Bandanna Dee—sunny days spent swimming and wandering aimlessly around downtown, late nights spent marathoning movies, and weekends spent visiting children in hospitals or doing whatever weekly charity project Delilah had assigned them. There had been no long-lost brothers, no evil wizards from parallel dimensions, and no tricky politics. Meta Knight hadn’t even really had to worry about Father. Nightmare might be willing to take on Delilah in the capital, where Queen Alera had the final word in every conflict, but he wasn’t willing to fight the duchess in her own duchy where she held all the power.

Happy? He had been.

“I’m content.”

“Then, you should do what makes you happy,” Fae said. “How do you know that you haven’t been reincarnated to have a second chance of making everything right?”

Meta Knight sighed. “Dedede told you. Who else did he tell?”

“His mother,” Fae said.

Meta Knight had expected as much.

“She’s here. She just went into the bathroom.”

“I wish she wasn’t,” Meta Knight replied.

Fae’s wings twitched.
“I’ve upset you,” Meta Knight said.

“I’ve never understood why it makes you so uneasy to learn that people love you.”

“Maybe I’m not worthy of being loved,” Meta Knight replied bitterly. “I just don’t...understand. Galaxia showed me some memories of Galacta Knight, and now, I’m even more confused. Is it better or worse that Galacta Knight wasn’t always a monster?”

“You’re never going to be a monster,” Fae said.

“You can’t know that.”

“You can’t know that I’m wrong.”

They looked at one another in silence for a few seconds.

“We’re at an impasse,” Meta Knight said.

“So it seems.”

There was no point in fighting a battle that neither of them could win.

“When are you going back to Ripple Star?” Meta Knight asked, choosing to change subjects.

“I haven’t decided yet. It’s nice to see Dedede again. I mean, we text all the time, but it’s not the same as really seeing him.”

“Have you considered rekindling your relationship with him?”
Fae furrowed her brow. “Why would I do that?”

“You were happy with him, and you’re happy now that you’re getting to spend time with him,” Meta Knight said. “He hasn’t dated anyone in years, and he lost touch with the one person he did date. But he never lost touch with you. He clearly loves you.”

“I’m certain someone else holds Dedede’s heart,” Fae replied.

“There isn’t,” Meta Knight insisted. “There never was. I would know.”

“Yes, I suppose you would.”

Fae’s face was strange. She looked as if she knew something Meta Knight didn’t, but Meta Knight couldn’t imagine what that might be. If Dedede was in love with someone, Meta Knight would know; his Lord wasn’t subtle. Instead of elaborating or arguing further, Fae turned her sketchbook towards Meta Knight. “What do you think?” she asked.

The armor was silver and black. She’d chosen to opt for a more fashionable armor—replacing the old-fashioned helm with a mask and using black to break up the metal. In the margins, Fae had sketched a series of floral designs, likely meant to be etchings. Above those, Fae had sketched a stylized ‘M’ with a sword intersecting it.

“I’m thinking of adding some gold coloring along the edges of the pauldrons and along some of the lines,” Fae said, “So it’ll match Galaxia.”

“What material did you envision for the black?”

“Leather over the metal,” Fae replied. “Perhaps, with embossing.”

Meta Knight pointed to the flowing, purple cape, which appeared to connect near the clavicle before swooping beneath the right arm and attaching somewhere in the back.

“That looks like a problem,” he said.
“I thought of that. It'll attach with magnets, so you can pull it off. If anyone tries to grab it, it'll come off in their hands.”

“It’s stunning.” Meta Knight said, “But this is too much. You could never make this for me.”

Fae rolled her eyes. “It’ll be your birthday present. Or Saint Knight’s Day. I’ve been thinking about doing some armor for a while, anyway. I could take commissions for some of the Queen’s Guard. I’d love to design something for Garlude, but do you know how many designers are clamoring to dress Dame Garlude? So if I can’t dress the first woman to head Queen’s Guard, I can at least dress you.”

Meta Knight ducked his head and kneading his fingers into his bedspread. Galacta Knight wasn’t a monster, but she’d become one. There was no proof that the same wouldn’t happen to Meta Knight. He didn’t deserve all this love from his friends. They ought to be abandoning him and rallying around Kirby, the reincarnation of King Bikaia.

“Meta Knight!”

Delilah had returned. She practically ran to the bed and hugged him gently, minding the burns healing on his back and his still aching ribs. Delilah kissed his forehead cupped his face with her hands, while her eyes moved as if memorizing and drinking in every aspect of his face. Meta Knight was reminded of Galacta Knight when Nova returned Bikaia to her. There had been the same frantic joy and worry, the same sort of raw feeling. It was so unlike Father, who’d been so composed, even as he’d been proud and relieved. “I was so worried about you. I’m so glad you’re okay,” Delilah said. “I dunno what I would’ve done if something had happened to you!”

“You’d have been fine. You’d have moved on.”

Delilah’s face went white. Her eyes were wide and horrified. It’d been the wrong thing to say, and Meta Knight had realized his mistake far too late.

“Because you’re strong like that,” Meta Knight elaborated. “That’s all.”

Delilah had already hugged him again. Meta Knight let himself settle into the embrace, trying to make amends for saying something so insensitive, but that hug made his skin crawl. This was the way parents hugged their children, and Delilah wasn’t his parent. Meta Knight shouldn’t enjoy
how warm and soft she felt against him. He shouldn’t take comfort in the familiar lavender-ylang-ylang scent of her perfume or the gentle way she brushed his hair with her fingers. This was wrong. He should only accept such attention from his own father. And this was wholly Meta Knight’s fault. He had never told Delilah that her affection made him uneasy.

“Maybe that would’ve been for the best, considering…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“No,” she said with a surprising amount of passion. “No. You’re still Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura, and you always have been. I don’t give a damn who you were in some kinda past life or whatever. You are kind and compassionate and brave, and if anyone can change fate, it would be you.”

“Your Grace, your son is—”

“My son loves you more than anything in the world,” Delilah said.

“Even so, I’ve already caused you too much trouble. What did the Queen want from you in return for my freedom?”

Delilah sat back on the edge of the bed. “It don’t matter,” she said. “I can deal with Alera.”

“But you shouldn’t have to. Father said she has a vendetta against you anyway because…” Meta Knight trailed off, unsure whether or not mentioning the dead king of Dreamland was insensitive.

“Because of Daedalus? Yes, your father is right, but if the Queen wants to make my life difficult, she’ll do it,” Delilah said, “With or without involving you.”

“And we’ll deal with whatever we have to because we love you,” Fae said, placing her hand on Meta Knight’s forearm.

“That’s right,” Delilah said, squeezing Meta Knight’s hand, “So let us do what we can to support and protect you. Letting people help you isn’t a weakness, pet. It’s a sign that you’re mature enough to recognize when you need help.”
“You’re both too good for me,” Meta Knight said.

There was a series of light knocks on the door. It took Meta Knight too long to realize he needed to say something; he wasn’t used to people knocking before entering his room. “Come in?” he said.

It was an attractive young woman with thick, red hair and sharp, green eyes. Meta Knight could tell from the knee-length navy dress—high-collared and probably easily washable—and white apron that she was probably the parlor maid. If she’d been doing harder work, she’d have worn slacks. Her curtsey was awkward. “Lord Meta Knight,” she said. “Your phone. It’s Lord Dedede for you? Lord Ni—Duke Night—your noble father did say that you shouldn’t be disturbed unless it was important, and I thought—”

“Dedede is important. Thank you. Blade, was it?”

She nodded and handed Meta Knight his phone. Blade turned away too quickly and paused against the door.

“Oh, um—did you want anything? Tea? Cookies? Maybe pain medicine or someone to change your bandages? I mean, Lord Nightmare has—um—a doctor that can come, but I’m certified in first aid. And I took a training course in battlefield medicine, so…”

Since when did Meta Knight’s father hire such unpolished servants? Normally, they were cold and professional and certainly never this nervous.

“I’m fine,” Meta Knight said. “Thank you, Miss Blade.”

If possible, that seemed to fluster her even more. She curtsied again before scurrying out.

“She seemed a little…odd for an employee of Father’s,” Meta Knight said.

“She was like that with me earlier,” Delilah replied. “This is her first serving job.”

Then, why had Father hired her?
“Magic?” Meta Knight asked.

“I didn’t sense anything,” Fae replied.

Meta Knight put his phone on speaker; whatever his reasoning, Father could hire whoever he wanted. “You’re on speaker, Dedede,” Meta Knight said.

“Who’s all there?”

“Her Grace, Fae, and me.”

“Oh. In that case, Mety Knighty! How’s my favoritest pet knight? Is he being good, Mom?”

“Good enough,” Delilah said. “I think he’s feeling a little down.”

A pause. “This might not be the best time, then,” Dedede said. “Meta, we gotta talk.”

“I’m not moving back in,” Meta Knight said. “I—”

“It ain’t about that. So Dee gave Kirbs the—uh—talk about being a transgender man today.”

“How did it go?” Meta Knight asked.

“Well, you ain’t gotta help me bury a body,” Dedede joked. “It went good, Dee said. Super good!”

Meta Knight sighed in relief.

“That’s great,” Delilah said.
“Definitely!” Fae exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

“Yeah, well, that ain’t all. Apparently, Doo’s been texting Dee about meeting up and talking.”

“Was this before or after Lord Perry decided he wants Waddle Doo to duel me?”

“Where’d you hear that?” Delilah asked.

“What?” Dedede practically shouted. “You cain’t fight no one! For Nova’s sake, you were tortured —”

Meta Knight tightened his grip on Galaxia. "I hadn't noticed," he said.

“I’ll fight ‘im in your place if it comes to that,” Dedede said.

“Hold on! There ain’t no one fighting anyone yet,” Delilah interrupted. “Y’all ain’t even s’posed to know about that. I ain’t even sure if Waddle Doo knows about it. It’s his dad that’s been driving all this!”

“Well, Waddle Doo texted Dee a while ago, but Dee texted ‘im today. And Doo said he wants to meet,” Dedede said. “I thought we could tag along for Dee, and if something goes wrong, we’ll just —y’know—”

“You’ll take Bandanna Dee home and eat ice cream,” Delilah said. “I cain’t have either of you rushing into fights right now. Not since Alera knows Meta’s got Galaxia. My lawyer’s looking at trying to find a loophole, so Alera cain’t just charge Meta with high treason whenever she wants. For Nova’s sake, y’all gotta stay outta this at least for a couple weeks!”

“Dear Nova. Sectonia told her?” Dedede asked.

“She didn’t have much of a choice,” Delilah said. “If y’all wanna accompany Dee and keep an eye on things, that’s fine, but be very careful.”
“I’ll have to text Father and see if he minds me leaving the house,” Meta Knight added.

Dear Nova, how awkward that would be. What if Father was angry with him?

“Meta Knight, you’re twenty-freaking-one.”

“Yes, but I’m living with Father now. It’s his house and his rules.”

“So I’ll call ‘im and say it was my idea,” Delilah said. “Problem solved.”

“Wonderful,” Meta Knight said. “Thank you.”

Meta Knight’s heart swelled with relief. He wasn’t entirely sure he was allowed to call his father about things like this, and he didn’t want to get in trouble. Even if Father had been very wonderful the past few weeks, Meta Knight still knew he ought to tread softly. The threat of punishment was always present, even if Nightmare hadn’t followed the threat through in a while. Hopefully, Nightmare was feeling generous.

*Oh, dear heart, Galaxia said. Children aren’t supposed to fear their parents.*

To most, the man standing in the camera room was the infamous Scarlet Magician. He was either a petty Halcandran thief—his Halcandran heritage always had to be mentioned—or a debonair vigilante, a veritable Robin Hood, depending on who was asked. The man liked to steal expensive things. He’d begun his illustrious career as a jewel thief, and over the years, he’d developed a vast clientele of wealthy, often aristocratic people, demanding a whole host of priceless artifacts.

Over the years, Daroach had lined family vaults and estates with a number of priceless artifacts. He’d stolen rare diamonds for a duke, so he could be reset into a necklace for this mistress. He’d stolen paintings, rare furs, marble sculptures, and even the Queen’s favorite strand of pearls once. For Daroach, the sky was the limit as long as the other party paid.
Now, it wasn’t easy to find Daroach without the appropriate connections; most people didn’t even know his real name. Even less knew that his hideout was in a shady-looking bar in the worst part of downtown. This bar was the general gathering place for many criminals, kept odd hours, and had exorbitant prices so as to deter any law-abiding customers.

Presently, Daroach had his arms crossed and his hat tipped low over his face. His gold eyes remained focused on the camera screens, all of them displaying a young woman with magenta hair and blue eyes. “I don’t recognize her, boss,” said Spinni, who sat before the screen of cameras.

Daroach nodded, acknowledging the younger man’s words.

One of the cameras zoomed in over the folder of documents held open before the woman. Daroach tilted his head, trying to read them upside down. “Meta Knight Nocturne de Brillante Armadura. Hm.” Daroach’s attention flickered to the photo beneath the name. “He’s kind of hot. I’d do him.”

“With a name like Nocturne, I’m not sure that’d be wise,” Spinni replied.

“Well…maybe she'd be willing then. I like her choice in hair color,” Daroach said, grinning.

“That paper says he’s a class A,” Spinni said, pointing. “Subclass reality warper and elemental.”

“Dimensional powers,” Daroach read. “I thought those were purely theoretical. Interesting. It’s also interesting that she has those; they look like A.M.B.E.R. documents.”

“How do you know, boss?”

Daroach shrugged. “I recognize the typeset and the way the information is written. She must have a mole in A.M.B.E.R., but if she has the connections to get classified files from A.M.B.E.R., why does she need me?”

“You might run into trouble if she wants you to find him,” Spinni said.
Daroach pursed his lips and twirled his primary weapon, the fabled Triple Star wand, between his fingers. “I don’t know how I feel about hunting down a Halcandran. The Dreamlanders are making things difficult enough for us,” Daroach said, “But I suppose I’ll go see what she wants. It’s showtime, Spinni!”

With a tip of his hat and a dramatic flare of his cape, Daroach strode downstairs to meet his client.

Susie’s life had fallen apart when she was fifteen, and it was all because of Nightmare Nocturne. He and Father had been the best of friends, and they’d spent their teens making plans to create Star Dream, the wish-granting machine. Eventually, the details were planned and finalized. Star Dream was constructed, and all that was left was to program the admin, M-7110. Or, as Nightmare—at the behest of the admin’s mother—had named him, Meta Knight.

Everything would’ve gone well if Meta Knight had accepted his role of being the one to power Star Dream, a plan that had been sixteen years in the making, but then, the impossible happened: Nightmare refused to surrender his child.

He and Father had argued over it, while Susie had eavesdropped from the stairwell. Father’s anger was explosive and loud. Nightmare hadn’t started angrily. He’d pleaded softly for Max to understand. “You wouldn’t be so quick to do this if you were being asked to sacrifice Susanna,” Nightmare had said.

So reasonable. But Susie remembered hot anger flushing through her face and blotching awkwardly across her clavicle. She was born to be her father’s pride and joy. Meta Knight was bred to be a tool, an experiment in magical eugenics meant to power Star Dream and fulfill Father’s dream of ruling Dreamland and of destroying the corrupt aristocracy that had spent years thriving on the backs of those whose only crime was in not being the blood descendants of Bikaia. Father had spent decades planning to change the world, and Nightmare wanted to back out for the sake of one teenage boy.

“Susanna wasn’t planned to be our admin! This was M-7110’s entire purpose! We planned this, and now, when we’re almost there, you want to back out?” Max had snapped. “Why?”

“I love Meta Knight,” Nightmare had said quietly. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“You’re not capable of loving anyone,” Max said. “Besides, you can have another child.”
“Children aren’t machine parts! They can’t just be swapped around!”

“And what? You think you can walk away from this and start a happy family?” Max asked. “It doesn’t work that way. I’ll never let you, and there’s nothing to stop me from just taking Meta Knight, anyway.”

“Stay away from my child.” Even then, Nightmare hadn’t raised his voice, but his words carried the same unspoken threat as a snarl.

“We went through this before with the Armadura girl,” Max said. “You wanted out, then, too. You remember what happened, then?”

“Her name was Asteria de Brillante Armadura. She wasn’t just some girl,” Nightmare had hissed.

Susie hadn’t known about Asteria at the time, but once she’d been employed as her father’s secretary, she’d found out all about Meta Knight’s ill-fated mother. Who’d known that Father could be so ruthless?

“Eventually, you’ll give up,” Max said.

Nightmare hadn’t. Father had refused to halt the Star Dream project, and with Star Dream’s destined admin gone, Susie’s father had decided to admin the machine himself. Things had backfired horribly, and Susie had found herself sent to another dimension, one she’d only managed to escape by way of a mirror and a lot of luck. It’d taken her years, and when she’d returned to Dreamland, her father was dead. He still lived, of course, but he didn’t remember her. He didn’t remember any daughter, and he didn’t act like her father.

Susie knew that she could never replace her father, but love didn’t really exist. She didn’t really love her father; she loved how her father made her feel. She loved that her father had made her feel protected and adored, and from there, the seed of an idea was planted.

She could find someone to make her protected and adored. She’d toyed with the idea of finding a romantic interest, but organic relationships could sour unpredictably. No, to achieve her goal it was best to eliminate any chance of failure. Instead, she would make someone who loved and adored her, and if she was going to engineer her own, perfect partner, why not handpick every aspect of them to her liking?
Star Dream could accomplish such a task; Susie just had to find someone that could survive Star Dream. She knew from tests and her own father that Star Dream was capable of breaking and rebuilding anyone, but surviving Star Dream took a strong will and an incredible amount of magical power. Then, she’d seen Meta Knight for the first time in over a decade.

Susie remembered Meta Knight as a chubby, mischievous child with wild hair, and sometime in the past decade, he’d grown into a moderately attractive man. She’d idly requested his A.M.B.E.R. files from their mole, and she’d leafed through them with growing interest.

She’d read through his file and slowly became enamored with the idea of Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura being the template for her new protector. He was confident, strong, and—she’d been told—quick-witted and intelligent. His looks were adequate, although Susie wasn't particularly picky. She could change what she didn't like. All his flaws could be fixed to please her, especially since her father had agreed to fund her project. Besides, Meta Knight had been meant to power Star Dream. He was the product of Dreamland’s most powerful wizard, and his mother had been carefully chosen from a list of A.M.B.E.R.’s most powerful witches.

So really, this was only fair. Meta Knight had taken her father from her, so it seemed reasonable that he, himself, should provide the replacement. Of course, Susie didn’t expect him to willingly subject himself to Star Dream; she’d have to force him to. This meant taking every precaution to subdue his incredible magical powers. Suppressants would be adequate enough, but Meta Knight’s medical records revealed that his body reacted poorly to them. Those bad reactions might worsen if he used suppressants in the long-term, so an alternative was needed.

Besides, Susie had something better in mind. For that, she needed a thief. She straightened when she saw the tell-tale red top hat from across the shop.

The Scarlet Magician took the seat across from her. “I heard you were looking for me,” he said.

“I have a job for you,” she said, unfolding a sheet of paper from her purse.

The Magician looked at the paper for a second. “Interesting. What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a collar forged in dragon’s fire,” Susie said. “It has certain magical properties, but none you need to worry about—unless you put it on. It locks, so I’d also like to have the key for it. If you can find it, it’ll make my life easier, but if you can’t, it’s fine. I plan on making some alterations to it anyway.”
“And who has it?” the Magician asked.

Susie smiled and folded her hands over Meta Knight’s A.M.B.E.R. files. “Nightmare Nocturne, so I hope you’re up to the challenge.”

They went to a coffeeshop in the mall and selected a table towards the back. Meta Knight returned with a whipped-cream laden Frappuccino, a hot chocolate, and a hot cup of mint tea. He placed the hot chocolate before Dedede and the tea to Bandanna Dee. Sir Jecra sat in the table across from them. Nightmare had agreed his son could visit with his friends—but only if Jecra came as an escort. Bandanna Dee, even when he’d been a noble, had never spent much time with Jecra. They’d had maybe one conversation in the past decade. Dedede kept shooting Jecra glares over Bandanna Dee’s head. Fae and Delilah had decided to go shopping together, so they could catch up

Meta Knight’s eyes were fixed on the TV hanging in the corner. Bandanna Dee had glanced at it once, just to confirm what was so interesting. Princess Sectonia had just announced her resignation, and reporters were demanding answers.

Meta Knight’s face looked very cold and still, like a Classical statue.

“It ain’t your fault,” Dedede said. “Quit obsessing.”

“It is my fault.”

“You didn’t ask to get kidnapped by your evil twin,” Dedede replied.

“She must feel so humiliated,” Meta Knight said.

“Yeah, well, that’s what the Queen does,” Dedede replied. “She humiliates anyone that disagrees with her.”
Bandanna Dee took a sip of his tea, delighted the Meta Knight had remembered to add in honey. “I’ve been doing research on Landia,” Bandanna Dee said, trying to distract from his frayed nerves.

“Yeah?” Dedede asked.

“Landia loaned Galacta Knight his fire in return for her becoming his indentured servant,” Meta Knight said. “Did you know that?”

“No,” Bandanna Dee said. “Where did you read that?”

Meta Knight averted his gaze. “Galaxia showed me some of Bikaia’s memories.”

“That’s freaking cool!” Dedede exclaimed. “Does he look like me?”

Bandanna Dee and Meta Knight exchanged a bemused look.

“Well, I is his direct descendant,” Dedede countered defensively.

“He was tiny. Very thin and very short,” Meta Knight said, “Five-feet tall. Maybe. He was… adorable. Brown hair, large blue eyes. Very brave. He traded Galacta Knight his freedom in return for her saving Dreamland from civil war. I’m fairly certain she assassinated King Adstellam.”

“He wasn’t abducted?” Bandanna Dee asked. “Kirby will be delighted.”

“So what were you like?” Dedede asked. “Was Nova there?”

“She was,” Meta Knight said. “You were awful. I was…I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Dedede asked, ignoring Nova completely.

“She was…a trickster,” Meta Knight replied. “She wasn’t bad per say. I think she actually did care
about Bikaia, and she actually cared about Dreamland.”

“So there!” Dedede exclaimed, slamming his hands on the table. “You ain’t gotta worry ‘bout turning evil or nothing!”

“But if she was nice, that means I should worry more,” Meta Knight replied. “Anything might happen to me.”

“But y’know that if you change your mind, you can come back, right?” Dedede asked. “We ain’t gonna hold it against you.”

“I know, but everything is fine for now.”

Bandanna Dee took another sip of tea. His eyes darted between Dedede and Meta Knight, waiting to see if other of them would pick up the argument.

“Everything is fine,” Meta Knight repeated.

“Mom had to ask permission for you to come out,” Dedede said.

“Father is concerned. In case you’ve forgotten, I was tortured last week.”

“Yeah, but a guy that’s your dad in a mirror universe!” Dedede retorted. “And you’re just gonna go cozy up with him after that? A bit of kindness don’t make up for a lifetime of abusing you, and I’d be willing to be my left arm that you suspect Nightmare o’ doing something under-handed, too. I betcha get up every morning and gotta reassure yourself that your dad’s in the right—”

“You have no idea—”

“Oh, I got an idea,” Dedede said. “I got an idea when I came to see you, and your loving, doting dad gave me a lecture ‘bout how to handle you—like I ain’t dealt with you being injured before! Like I don’t know how to act towards someone I’ve been friends with for years! I cain’t stand him, and dad or not, I don’t know how you do!”
Meta Knight’s face never changed, but Bandanna Dee caught the subtle curling of his fingers.

“You’re not allowed to talk about my father like that.”

“Why? You do!”

“Because he’s my father, and—”

“Yeah, well, as far as I’m concerned, your mom did most o’ the work!” Dedede snapped.

“Meta Knight, if you’re happy, it’s fine,” Bandanna Dee said, hoping to avoid a full-fledged argument. “It’s just that—if something does happen—you can come back.”

“Yeah. Right. That. You might be worried sick ‘bout this Galacta Knight thing, but don’t none of us care. I ain’t ever gonna be scared o’ you, pretty-boy,” Dedede said.

“I know that,” Meta Knight said. “I just need to think it through. I…I am—well, I feel uneasy about it, and I feel like I’m causing everyone more trouble than I’m worth. The Queen can swoop in an arrest me whenever she wants, and I’ve publicly humiliated Sectonia.”

“And I’m sure she ain’t taking it to heart,” Dedede said. “Besides, what’s she got to worry about with all her magical powers and being Nova?”

“Me killing her, for one,” Meta Knight deadpanned.

“Even if you wanted to, you’d have to take care of her security,” Bandanna Dee pointed out. “Let’s say—hypothetically—that you wanted to kill the princess. You’d have to get through all of Queen’s Guard first. She’d know you were coming and have time to prepare.”

Meta Knight frowned and leaned back in his chair.
“And I doubt you’d plan such an endeavor anyway, as you’re so concerned about her,” Bandanna Dee said.

“But I might in the future.”

“Yeah, and in the future, I might be the king o’ Dreamland,” Dedede said, rolling his eyes.

Meta Knight chuckled and smiled slightly. “You’re going to assassinate over thirty members of the royal family?” he asked.

Dedede leaned forward, Meta Knight’s laughter having coaxed a smile. “No, we’re gonna run away together and found our own country. I’ll be the king, and you’re gonna be my best knight,” Dedede said. “And we’ll just spend all our time playing music and going swimming and doing charity work for Mom. Going to balls, sneaking sweets from the kitchens, late nights watching movies…”

“That sounds like a summer on your mother’s estate. If you’re the king, you’ll need to govern,” Meta Knight said.

“I’ll leave it to you and Dee,” Dedede replied. “I fancied myself as bein’ more of a figurehead, anyhow.”

A young man entered. His hair was short and auburn like Bandanna Dee’s. His face was much the same, too, only shades paler. One of his blue eyes was milky and blind, the result of a wayward sword blow. Bandanna Dee froze. His throat felt constricted.

“He’s here.” Bandanna Dee had meant it as a normally spoken sentence, but it emerged as a high-pitched whine.

Meta Knight’s shoulders squared. Dedede cracked his knuckles.

“Remember what your mother said,” Meta Knight said. “If he does anything offensive, don’t do anything foolish.”
“It’ll be fine,” Bandanna Dee said, digging his nails into his cup. “Fine, fine, fine.”

Oh, Nova. It wasn’t going to be fine. Why was the room so hot? Why was it so small? All the confidence he’d built on the foundation of Kirby’s acceptance faltered in the stark, harsh reality of having to face his brother.

He couldn’t do this. He wanted to bolt, but his feet seemed glued to the floor. It seemed like another Bandanna Dee was watching Waddle Doo, the Queen’s darling of Queen’s Guard, cheerfully greeting Jecra.

Waddle Doo approached. Meta Knight stood and bowed; somehow, he managed to make even the submissive gesture look threatening.

“How flattering,” Waddle Doo said.

“Flattering…?” Meta Knight trailed off.

“Lord Meta Knight,” Waddle Doo replied pointedly, inclining his head slightly. “Lord Dedede. Bandanna Dee, I thought we might have our own table for this conversation.”

“That sounds great,” Bandanna Dee said, sliding from the booth.


Bandanna Dee squeezed his cup so hard that the lid popped up. He hadn’t known that his brother called Meta Knight that. With shaking hands, Bandanna Dee sat across from his brother. The brother he hadn’t seen in two years.

“It’s Bandanna Dee, right?” Waddle Doo asked.

“Yes. Or just Dee. Either one is fine.”
Waddle Doo stared at him. “So how is living with Dedede and Meta Knight?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“Even with all the recent problems?” Waddle Doo asked.

Something about the phrasing caused Bandanna Dee’s stomach to lurch. “Yes, even with everything,” Bandanna Dee said. “They’ve been great.”

“Would you consider…not living with them?” Waddle Doo asked.

“Not living…?”

“I thought you might want to live with me,” Waddle Doo replied. “Be my…brother.”

Be his brother? His…brother. Bandanna Dee inhaled sharply. He could have his family again.

“I mean, you can’t even imagine how terrible it’s been,” Waddle Doo said.

Those words destroyed the brief moment of elation and encouragement that Bandanna Dee had felt.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you all this time, but I didn’t want to anger our parents. They still refuse to speak about you.”

But…but Waddle Doo hadn’t been the one thrown out and disowned. He hadn’t been the one who’d become homeless. He wasn’t the one who’d lived off a train pass until Meta Knight arrived. He wasn’t the one living off the charity of the duchess of a failing house, and although Delilah would never, ever say Bandanna Dee was a burden, he still felt that way sometimes. Because she paid to feed and house him. She paid for his tuition.

Bandanna Dee felt a sense of wrongness and this isn’t fair. This was Bandanna Dee’s brother, inviting him back into his family. This was Bandanna Dee’s brother, talking about how badly he’d
“It took you two years,” Bandanna Dee said dully.

“I was young and building my career. I needed our parents to survive until I’d built a reputation and was earning a pension in Queen’s Guard,” Waddle Doo said. “Surely, you can’t blame me for that.”

Bandanna Dee didn’t know how to handle anger; it was so foreign and seldom-experienced. He wanted to swear. He wanted to cry. He wanted to demand that his brother acknowledge how he’d just abandoned him and sided with their parents. No, not only sided with their parents. Sided with their parents and challenged Meta Knight to a duel, hoping to humiliate him.

“Do you know about…” Bandanna Dee trailed off.

Waddle Doo raised an eyebrow. “About the real reason Sectonia is stepping down as the head of A.M.B.E.R.? About Galaxia?”

Bandanna Dee swallowed. “This duel that Father wants you to fight with Meta Knight. Are you going to do it?”

“Probably, but that has nothing to do with you.”

Yes, it did. The original offense had been incurred by Meta Knight trying to defend Bandanna Dee’s honor. And…and this meant that Waddle Doo still wanted to be in their parents’ good graces. He still was willing to do their dirty work for them.

“Think about all you can do if you’re living in the palace again,” Waddle Doo said. “I’m sure I could procure you a small title. Maybe even a position in Queen’s Guard if you wanted it. I just want you back in my life so badly.”

Was it fair to want Waddle Doo to disown their parents like they’d disowned their child? Yes. Yes, because they were terrible people. But they were his parents. But no, they’d left their only child with nothing. That surely was greater than any familial relationship they might have to Bandanna Dee. Because Waddle Doo, even as he offered Bandanna Dee back a piece of his family and lifestyle, would leap at the chance to defend their father’s supposed honor. All those things ached
in Bandanna Dee’s chest. He needed to say them. He wanted to say them. His friends would’ve said them, but—but this was Bandanna Dee’s brother.

“I just…I can’t do this. Not now,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Can’t do what?”

“I don’t know. I want to be your brother, but I—this doesn’t feel right. And I don’t…” Bandanna Dee trailed off and picked at his cup. “I don’t trust you. That’s it.”

“I see.”

“I’ll think it over, but I—I can’t just…I love Dedede and Meta Knight. I like being their roommate and going to university with them,” Bandanna Dee said. “They’ve accepted me and taken care of me since the beginning.”

Bandanna Dee waited for his brother’s explosion of anger, but Waddle Doo calmly stood and nodded. “I expected you might need time to think about it. It’s fine. The offer is on the table. I’ll see you later.”

He walked away without waiting for Bandanna Dee’s answer. Slowly, Bandanna Dee put his forehead on the table. He thought he might throw up. In that instant, he imagined everything he'd wanted to say. He imagined standing up and releasing all the pain he felt. He imagined telling Waddle Doo how wrong he was and how he was making it all about himself. Bandanna Dee imagined scoffing and walking away, having successfully expressed all the anger and pain he felt, and yet he'd missed the opportunity. He'd ended it all with a weak assurance that he'd think about it. All his fire and fury smoldered. He wanted to cry. Maybe throw up and then cry.

“Do I need to go and kick ‘is ass?” Dedede asked, sliding across from Bandanna Dee.

Bandanna Dee shook his head. “He told me about how hard disowning me was on him,” he said, his voice muffled against the table.

“I’m gonna kill ‘im,” Dedede said, sliding from the booth.
“Dedede,” Meta Knight said.

“Move, Meta Knight.”

“Bandanna Dee, is that what you want?” Meta Knight asked gently.

Bandanna Dee raised his head. Why hadn't he said something? Why hadn't he just told Waddle Doo how awful he'd been? “No, I just—I’m mad at him. And at me. It’s my own fault for not telling him how…how much it hurt. I just…”

Meta Knight put his hands over Bandanna Dee’s. “He’s your family, so it’s different,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede sat back in the seat. “It ain’t your fault your brother’s a selfish son of a scarfy,” Dedede said.

“But is it selfish for him to want to…be in our parents’ good graces, too?” Bandanna Dee asked. “I feel like…like I should forgive him, but I don’t…I feel like that would hurt me. I’m so confused.”

“No, you don't have to forgive everyone who wrongs you, especially if doing so will hurt you. Yes, it’s selfish for him to want to be in his parents’ good graces,” Meta Knight said. “If they’re the sort of people that abandon their own children for not meeting their expectations, he should leave them. They’re terrible people.”

Bandanna Dee’s breath hitched.

“Yeah, and maybe you—uh—get your thoughts together and tell ‘im later. If you wanna be involved with ‘im,” Dedede said, looking at Meta Knight as if to see if the advice was approved. “You ain’t obligated to do nothing for him, though, okay?”

“I know,” Bandanna Dee. “I just…really thought…he might have changed. I thought he might really want to be my brother because he loved me. I feel like he was just trying to assuage his own guilt, though.”
“I know,” Meta Knight said, edging beside Bandanna Dee and pulling him into a hug. “I think, were any of us in your position, we’d hope for the same.”

Bandanna Dee hesitantly leaned his head against Meta Knight’s chest and breathed in the subtle scent of vanilla fabric softener and the floral hints in Meta Knight’s cologne. Meta Knight always smelled so nice, and although his hugs were rare, they were always warm and pleasant. Dedede leaned across the table and squeezed Bandanna Dee’s shoulder. “You deserve more than some half-hearted acceptance,” Dedede said. “Okay, Dee?”

“I know. Thank you,” Bandanna Dee replied.

Heels clicked on the floor. Delilah had arrived, Fae in her wake. “Oh, Nova,” Delilah said, her gaze focused on Bandanna Dee’s face. She must’ve seen on his face just how badly it’d gone. “Dee, I’m so sorry.”

Bandanna Dee forced a smile. “It’s…” Bandanna Dee trailed off, noting that a very disgruntled Nightmare, arms laden with shopping bags, followed the women.

Bandanna Dee felt Meta Knight’s muscles tense. Slowly, Bandanna Dee lifted his head. Meta Knight didn’t remove his arm from around Bandanna Dee’s shoulders, though. Instead, he rubbed Bandanna Dee’s bicep, as if to assure him that he meant to remain right where he was.

“Oh, Dee,” Fae said. “You poor thing.”

Nightmare brusquely dropped his bags on the table, nearly spilling Bandanna Dee’s tea.

“Why’re you here?” Dedede asked.

“I came to check in on Meta Knight,” Nightmare said, placing a quick kiss on Meta Knight’s cheek.

“And he graciously agreed to carry our bags,” Delilah said, her tone heavy with warning. “Dee, I know there ain’t nothing that’ll make this better, but I bought you some clothes. D’you wanna look?”
Bandanna Dee really wanted to go home and sleep. Or stare at a wall. Just something in the dark and quiet. But the gesture was nice.

“Or perhaps, you and your friends should go shopping?” Nightmare asked. “Obviously, that won’t make the situation better, but there’s no need to ruin your entire day, is there? Familial relation or no, some people aren’t worth agonizing over.”

“You’re one to—” Dedede cut off with what sounded like a pained grunt.

Bandanna Dee suspected Meta Knight had kicked Dedede beneath the table.

“Is that something you’d be interested in, Bandanna Dee?” Nightmare inquired, as he pulled out his wallet.

“I…I don’t know,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Maybe you’d rather go home?” Delilah asked. “Y’all could watch a movie?”

Nightmare handed Meta Knight a sleek, black credit card.

“I’m aware there are hurts that material possessions are unable to remedy, but you might, at least, get something out of this…abhorrent turn of events. Perhaps, you might invite Kirby to join you?”

“I…I might like to spend time with my friends,” Bandanna Dee replied, unsure of whether he ought to accept Nightmare’s offer.

“Take it or leave it. Stay under a few million, children,” Nightmare said, with a flippant wave. “Keep your phone on, Meta Knight. And remember that you aren’t allowed to consume any alcohol. Jecra will accompany you.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Nightmare patted Meta Knight’s head and strode away. Meta Knight flipped the credit card
between his fingers.

“Do you want to?” Meta Knight asked. “I promise it's fine if you do. Father is right in that being surrounded by your friends is a good way to…assuage wounds.”

Bandanna Dee ducked his head. This wouldn’t change everything. This wouldn’t make everything fine, but maybe…maybe it would make him feel just a little better to spend time with the people who did love him. Even if they didn’t buy anything and just ended up aimlessly wandering around.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. I *promise* things get better for Bandanna Dee.
Kirby and Bandanna Dee, each of them with armfuls of clothing, had entered the fitting room together. Dedede had initially joined them, although he’d since left and returned to the racks of clothing, while Fae and Delilah had gone to the women’s fitting room. Meta Knight sat outside the fitting room, guarding the shopping bags. Jecra sat beside him, which caused Meta Knight’s insides to flutter in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. A small part of him, conditioned from years of courtly etiquette, really wanted to begin groveling. Even if Meta Knight now technically outranked Jecra, he still wasn't in any way the other man's superior. Nova's grace, the things Jecra could do with a sword. Meta Knight had seen every single duel and tournament Jecra had ever been in; Meta Knight wasn't even fit to polish this man's armor, much less casually sit beside him. Even if Meta Knight practiced every hour of every day for the rest of his life, he still probably wouldn't surpass Sir Jecra of Queen's Guard.

*I like to think that my champion is every bit as good as Jecra of Queen's Guard,* Galaxia said.

Sure, but she’d chosen him. Of course, she would say that.

*You impertinent, little imp! Claiming I would choose a subpar swordsman. For shame.*

Meta Knight, knowing that she wasn't really offended, smiled. "I apologize," Meta Knight said.

"Huh?" Jecra asked.

"I was talking to Galaxia."

"Oh! You can speak with her even when she isn't present?" Jecra inquired.
Meta Knight nodded. "I can speak to her no matter where she is."

Except for when he'd worn Dark Mind's handcuffs. Meta Knight suppressed a shudder at the memory of how cold and quiet that had been.

"I wouldn't mind if you left," Meta Knight said, daring a glance in the knight's direction. "I mean, I know you work for Father, but I also know who you are. I'm sure you feel this task is beneath you."

"Beneath me?" Jecra asked. "Watching after a charming creature like yourself?"

Charming. Jecra thought he was charming. Meta Knight's face warmed. "Why are you working for my father?" Meta Knight asked.

Jecra reached beneath his shirt and pulled out a locket. He opened it, revealing the picture of a child—maybe five or six years old—with dark eyes and a cloud of unruly, blond hair on his head. "My son, Knuckle Joe," Jecra said, "My pride and joy. He’s been sick his entire life. In and out of hospitals every few months for surgeries."

"I’m sorry to hear that."

"It’s not how I’d choose to have him spend his childhood," Jecra said, "But he’s a real trooper! He’s so brave about it!"

"I’m sure."

"Yes, well…it's very expensive, but it wasn’t much of a problem when I was the Knight Commander of the Queen’s Guard. The pay was unbelievable, but then, I had to step down."

Right. He’d been in a car accident. The tabloids had speculated that Jecra would never walk again. He’d proven them wrong, but that hadn’t been enough for Queen Alera.
“Well, it was resign or be dismissed. I chose the former, and suddenly, I was left with nothing,” Jecra said.

_Oh._ “You're like Duchess Delilah. You have a title and no money,” Meta Knight said.

Jecra smiled sadly. “And like the good Duchess, the magical gene skipped my generation, so I didn’t even have the option of remaining in the Queen’s service as a sorcerer. I’ve been trying to hide how badly my estate is failing, but I’m sure some of the court already knows. And then, your father came to me. The CEO of a company that specializes in studying magical genetics and its pharmaceutical potential. I don’t know how he knew about Joe, but how could I refuse?”

“He’s paying the expenses for your son,” Meta Knight said.

“It’s…it’s really a generous move. My son’s medical bills are into the billions, and Nightmare is navigating uncharted territory to a degree. There are research and experimental treatments involved, combinations of magic and medicine that we’ve never seen before. Your father is creating a miracle, and no other employer would devote so many resources, free of charge, to saving my child. It’s only fair that I would work for him, and it’s…nobler than supporting Alera’s regime.”

“That sounds like extortion,” Meta Knight said. “I imagine if you quit, my father would be less generous.”

“That _is_ how it works,” Jecra replied. “If you stop working for someone, you lose the perks. He’s not a bad employer.”

“So what do you do for him?”

“I’m primarily a security guard, but for now, I’m guarding you. I don’t mind the change of pace,” Jecra replied, adding a wink. “You’re much more interesting than watching security cameras and accompanying your father to business parties.”

“You think I’m interesting?”

“I think there’s a lot to you,” Jecra said. “If Galaxia finds you worthy, you must be an extraordinary individual.”
Jecra of Queen’s Guard thought he was *interesting* and *extraordinary*. Meta Knight glanced away and tucked a loose bit of hair behind his ear. “Well, I wouldn’t say all that,” Meta Knight replied.

Without warning, Dedede threw his arms around Meta Knight from behind. “Hey, gonna give you a fair warning. Kirbs and Dee were chatting in the fitting room, and it turns out they ran into Magolor. Kirbs texted ‘im a time or two. I…uh, may have said something kinda colorful ‘bout it, so don’t be stunned if they bring ‘im up.”

Great.

“Thank you for the head’s up,” Meta Knight replied.

“If it makes it any better, I didn’t tell ‘em ‘bout what he did,” Dedede said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be okay with that.”

Meta Knight shrugged. “It was my own fault for believing he actually liked me.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Dedede replied. “We done went through this. You cain’t just…pretend you like someone as a joke. That’s wrong. That being said, if you run into ‘im ‘round campus, and he upsets you, I’ll kick his ass halfway to another dimension. Kay, princess?”

“Dedede…”

Dedede casually draped his right arm over Meta Knight’s chest, his fingers tapping the signet ring hanging from Meta Knight’s necklace. “Did you want it back?” Meta Knight asked.

“Uh, no. I *gave* it to you. Keep it. Nothing wrong with getting a little *royal* privilege, eh?” Dedede asked. “Mi caballerito.”

Meta Knight wondered if Jecra knew enough Halcandran to figure out the nickname. Although Meta Knight would never admit it aloud, *caballerito* was a…tolerable pet name. Maybe a little more than tolerable. Maybe it was sort of endearing. But it was the sort of pet name Dedede probably shouldn’t use in the presence of such a prestigious, actual knight.
“Come try some clothes on, pretty-boy,” Dedede said. “You cain’t just sit here while the rest o’ us is gettin’ our style on! I’ll bring you back some stuff to try on, kay?”

“Sure?” Meta Knight said.

Why did Dedede suddenly care so much?

“Five minutes,” Dedede said, calling over his shoulder as he sauntered away. “There’s an empty stall there by Dee.”

Meta Knight frowned after him. “He’s either going to bring back something really great or really horrific.”

“I think he’s a bit jealous,” Jecra replied.

“What would be jealous of?” Meta Knight asked.

Jecra laughed. “You really haven’t picked up on it?”

Meta Knight stared at Jecra, trying to find hints on the other man’s face. Despite Jecra’s obvious mirth, however, Meta Knight still had no idea. Then, the significance of Jecra’s words slowly sank in. Never once had Meta Knight considered Dedede might have a crush on Jecra of Queen’s Guard. When had that happened? It made sense, of course. Jecra was attractive, intelligent, witty, and the greatest swordsman in Dreamland. Yes, Meta Knight definitely saw the appeal. This was Dedede’s passive-aggressive plan to get Jecra alone, so they could talk. Okay.

For some undecipherable reason, the thought that Dedede was interested in Jecra caused Meta Knight’s stomach to twist itself in knots. Of course, Dedede could like whoever he wanted. Meta Knight had seen him through two different relationships, but lately, Meta Knight’s thoughts concerning Dedede had been…muddled. Meta Knight sighed. There was no point in trying to untangle them. Dedede was the goddess Nova. They would never work out.

But Dedede and Jecra being boyfriends wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. It might even be healthy since Meta Knight was supposed to be limiting the amount of time he spent with his
Meta Knight had miscalculated. When Dededede returned with a massive amount of clothes, Dededede had steered Meta Knight into the fitting room and insisted on staying. Either Jecra had been wrong about Dededede being jealous, or Meta Knight had missed something crucial. Or maybe Dededede did plan on going to talk with Jecra, but was trying to be subtle about it.

Still, Kirby and Bandanna Dee had reacted excitedly to Meta Knight agreeing to try on the absolutely horrific clothing Dededede had picked out. Normally, Meta Knight would’ve refused, but Bandanna Dee needed something to cheer him up. Therefore, Meta Knight was—at least—more willing than usual to provide the entertainment. Even if that meant squeezing into studded and ripped black jeans and a sleeveless shirt that was tight and left very little to the imagination.

“Is this your way of telling me that I need to join some edgelord garage band?” Meta Knight asked, leaving the stall and spinning around before Dededede.

“I ain’t got a problem with that,” Dededede joked. “Your abs look great.”

“I know. You’d better remember how they look, too. I’m never wearing anything like this ever again.”

Both Kirby and Bandanna Dee opened their stalls to see. Meta Knight turned around and flipped his hair with exaggerated haughtiness. “What do you think, boys?”

Kirby put his hand over his mouth and unsuccessfully tried to cover his laughter. Bandanna Dee didn’t even try to hide his. He nearly doubled over with the force of his laughs.

“I think I should add a fedora,” Meta Knight said.

Dededede brushed Meta Knight’s ponytail aside and put a choker around his throat. It was black velvet and embezzled with silver, glittering stars and small rhinestones. “Perhaps, this instead. For special occasions,” Dededede said. “What d’you think?”
“I love it,” Meta Knight said, raising his fingers to touch it, “But Father wouldn’t. He says chokers make me look cheap. You know that.”

“You gonna let your ol’ man dictate how ya dress, too?” Dedede asked.

“I’m not going to intentionally provoke him,” Meta Knight said. “We’re having fun. Don’t ruin it.”

With a sigh, Dedede unclasped the choker and placed it back in its velvet box. “Promise me one thing, won’t you? Promise me you ain’t gonna let him convince you to cut off all your pretty hair. And you ain’t gonna let him talk you into dying it black or blond or something.”

“I promise.”

“Great. Y’know, I’ve been thinking about going blue, too. We could match!”

“You’d have to bleach a few times first,” Meta Knight said. "It's hard to go from black to blue."

“Yeah, well, I’m still thinking it over. I could always go red instead.”

“You’d look terrible with red hair,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede gasped, feigning as if he’d been mortally wounded. “But Mety Knighty—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’ll call you whatever I want. Princess. Drama queen. Schnookie-poo. And if I knew what kinda terms of endearment you use over in Traumwald, I’d use those, too.”

“Why Traumwald?” Kirby asked, picking at the door of his fitting room stall.
“It’s where Father is from,” Meta Knight replied, “And where I grew up.”

“I wonder how the local politics are with your father getting a title,” Bandanna Dee said, as he stepped back in his stall.

Kirby furrowed his brow, clearly confused.

“Kirby, you know how Dedede’s mother is the Duchess of the Stars, and she controls the Duchy of the Stars?” Meta Knight asked.

“Right?” Kirby replied.

“Most of Dreamland is like that. It’s divided into dukedoms, earldoms, countships, and so forth.”

Kirby nodded. “And each place gets a representative in parliament, and they’re allowed to do pretty much anything they want,” Kirby said. “In their areas.”

Dedede rolled his eyes. “Unless Alera gets involved, which she does a lot.”

“Right,” Meta Knight replied. “Traumwald isn’t quite like that, though. They’ve been part of Dreamland for centuries, but they’re ruled by a governor hand-picked by the reigning monarch. It’s a similar situation with Patchland.”

“Is that bad?” Kirby asked.

“Well, the chosen governor has never been someone from Traumwald, so it’s…complicated,” Meta Knight replied. “I can’t imagine the Queen giving Father Traumwald, but now that Father is technically a lord and from Traumwald, he probably would be the most qualified candidate.”

“I never knew Dad was from there,” Kirby replied.

“I imagine there’s much you don’t know about him,” Meta Knight said. “If it’s any consolation, Father doesn’t tell me everything either.”
Meta Knight edged back into the stall to end the conversation. Before Meta Knight could latch the lock, Dedede stopped the door with his hand and walked in, too. Meta Knight frowned and edged back against the wall. He didn’t really mind Dedede being in the room with him, but the room was very small.

“D’you remember what you were when we met?” Dedede asked, lowering his voice. “D’you remember bein’ that malnourished, raggedy street-kid?”

“That isn’t something you forget.”

“My point’s that I started liking you, then. I liked you when you were picking pockets and wild and grungy. When you were Meta Knight Nocturne, the bratty kid from Traumwald. You ain’t always been Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura, subject to the Duchy of the Stars. So why does the whole Galacta Knight thing really matter? It’s just another change. You’re still Meta.”

“Because that one might actually hurt you. Don’t you just think your life might be better if you’d never met me? That you might—”

“That’s bull, and y’know it. There ain’t nothing more important to me than our friendship,” Dedede said.

“Today is supposed to be about Dee.”

Dedede grasped Meta Knight’s arm. “I know what happened in the Mirror World hurt you,” Dedede said, running his thumb along the bruising still on Meta Knight’s wrist, “But you cain’t just push everyone away. I ain’t gonna stand for that.”

“Then, sit down.”

“You got a line for everything. Doncha, brat?”

“Of course.”
Dedede sighed.

“Come on,” Meta Knight said. “Let’s save this for another time, so we can focus our energy on cheering up Bandanna Dee.”

“Yeah,” Dedede replied. “I cain’t believe Waddle Doo had the nerve…”

“I know. I hope I do get to duel him,” Meta Knight said. “We both know who’ll win.”

Dedede patted Meta Knight’s shoulder. “Yeah! I want front-row seats to that, but fine, you don’t wanna talk ‘bout this now. I’m still buying you this choker, and I still expect you to try on all the others clothes I brought you.”

“Fine,” Meta Knight replied, putting a hand on Dedede’s chest. “Now get out of my fitting room, you degenerate, before I call your mother.”

Dedede gasped. “Not my mom!”

Mockingly, Dedede ran from the stall, as if his mother might somehow materialize from the walls and deliver a scolding. Maybe, then, he’d make his move on Jecra. Dedede and Jecra. Meta Knight leaned against the stall’s open door and shook his head as Dedede ran all the way out of the fitting rooms.

“Never a dull moment,” Meta Knight said.

“No,” Kirby replied, peeking out of his room. “Speaking of, Meta Knight, I—”

“Is this about Magolor?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby bit his lip and fidgeted with the hem of the soft, pink sweater he’d decided to try on. He really did look like Bikaia when he did that. Kirby had the same blend of shyness and determination. And the same pale eyes, although Kirby’s were far brighter and bluer than Bikaia’s sad, sea-grey. “Um…I didn’t know. I’m sorry,” Kirby said.
“Of course, you didn’t know. I didn’t tell you,” Meta Knight said, “But it isn’t that big of a deal. We used to live together when we were teenagers, and he…pretended he liked me. It was a bet he’d made with a couple of other friends of ours. And I was kind of infatuated with him. That’s all. I was a foolish teenager and made a mistake. I’m wiser for it.”

“That’s awful,” Kirby said.

“I haven’t seen him in five years. Maybe he’s different now,” Meta Knight added. “If you want to keep talking to Magolor, it’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but Meta Knight was not going to admit how much Magolor’s little bet still bothered him.

"He’s very charming and intelligent," Meta Knight added. "I would know.”

The door of Bandanna Dee’s stall slowly opened. “Sorry to interrupt,” Bandanna Dee said, stepping out, “But what do you think?”

Bandanna Dee wore jeans and a sunset-orange button-up, and although Meta Knight hated that shade of orange with every fiber of his being, he saw how bright Bandanna Dee’s face was. “It looks very handsome on you,” Meta Knight said.

“It’s such a happy color!” Kirby added. “You should get it!”

“Thanks!” Bandanna Dee replied, pausing to look Meta Knight up and down. “That shirt is…very tight.”

“Dedede picked it out,” Meta Knight replied, poking his stomach through the material, “Although as tight as it is, you might want to try it. It’s very flattening.”

Meta Knight pulled it off and passed it to Bandanna Dee, who took it and darted back inside his fitting room.
“The choker Dedede wants to buy you is really pretty,” Kirby said suddenly. “If you want it, you should buy it.”

“Only if you let me buy you that sweater you’re wearing,” Meta Knight said, “On our father’s card. You look really adorable wearing it.”

Kirby’s smile was radiant, and even as Meta Knight returned the gesture, his shoulders slumped. This wouldn’t work. There was no way Meta Knight could ever make himself spend less time with his friends. To make himself miss this. No, he could never hope to distance himself from everyone and return to being lonely and friendless. Maybe they were all right. Maybe being Galacta Knight wasn’t the big, terrifying deal he thought it was.

“Only if you’re going to buy those pants!” Kirby exclaimed.

“Let’s not put Father in an early grave,” Meta Knight replied.

“I don’t understand why he cares,” Kirby said. “He’s never cared what I wore. I mean, my mom cares, but…how could anyone look at you and say you look cheap? You’re so beautiful and elegant.”

“Maybe it’s different because he didn’t really raise you. It’s a moot point, anyway. These aren’t even my style; Dedede picked them out.”

Kirby rocked back on his heels and pursed his lips. “You’re really strong,” he said, “And I mean, well, obviously. Considering who you are. But when I had your powers, I was suddenly so good at swordplay. I had these awkward urges to go jogging early in the morning, so maybe we could…do that together sometime? I’d probably slow you down, but…I mean, if we are destined to fight one another, how do we know that us pushing one another away isn’t the thing that causes it?”

“We don’t, but Father—”

“There’s something wrong with our dad,” Kirby said. “I don’t mean—it’s difficult to explain. When I saw him beside me in the Dimension Mirror, I saw…I don’t know. I saw us, but somehow, it wasn’t him. It was like there was someone else wearing our dad’s face, and I don’t know why.”

“You don’t think he’s our father?”
“No, I think he is, but there’s something wrong with him, Meta Knight. Something unnatural.”

“Perhaps, he looked that way because of Dark Mind’s influence on the Mirror?” Meta Knight suggested.

“I don’t know,” Kirby said. “Just…I don’t know anything anymore.”

That made two of them.

Even though Nightmare had an important dinner party that would likely run very late into the night, he still insisted upon Meta Knight eating dinner with him. Father had mercifully chosen only a five-course meal. Meta Knight didn’t feel much like eating. His back had been aching for three hours, and he really just wanted to sleep. He’d hoped Nightmare would dismiss him once dinner was finished, but he’d insisted on them talking instead. Meta Knight kept quiet about how tired he was, not wanting to ruin his father’s good graces.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Nightmare asked, idly running a finger around the rim of his wineglass.

Meta Knight pulled his father’s card from his wallet and slid Nightmare’s card across the table. “I did. Thank you, Father,” Meta Knight said. “I have receipts of what I spent if you need them.”

Nightmare waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t particularly care how much you spent.”

“What did you want in return for this?” Meta Knight asked.

“I’m not allowed to do something nice for my dearest child?”

“It’s not like you not to press every advantage you can.”
“I think the entire affair is absurd,” Nightmare said. “Gender is a performance, dearest, and while watching a performance, it’s not unreasonable to expect something to change, is it? It’s so easy to transition from a sonata to a nocturne. Why would you abandon your child for that? But if it puts your mind at ease, I do have plans to pull the receipts if Bandanna Dee’s family proves too troublesome for me. Your friend might be unwilling to hurt his family the way they’ve hurt him, but I am not nearly so noble.”

Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek. Bandanna Dee would never want someone to willfully plot to humiliate his family; that wasn’t who Bandanna Dee was. Bandanna Dee was kind-hearted and gentle. Nightmare arched an eyebrow, clearly expecting an answer. “Thank you, Father. I think Bandanna Dee enjoyed it,” Meta Knight replied. “I did, also.”

Nightmare smiled, and he slid the card back across the table. “Keep it,” he said, with a rueful smile. “You’re so paranoid, dearest. Haven’t I shown such admirable restraint here, lately? Surely, I deserve some of your trust.”

Perhaps.

Meta Knight toyed with the card. It was strange to have that much money in his hands again. “I’m looking forward to going back to school again,” Meta Knight said. “I miss learning.”

“You always were a clever boy,” Nightmare replied. “Even as a child, you never stopped asking questions. I liked that about you. Kirby was never so curious.”

“No?”

Nightmare shook his head. “No, he was a sweet child. Very naïve and clingy. Every time I turned around, Kirby was there, begging for my affection.”

But wasn’t that how most children were?

“You were a dream, though,” Nightmare said. “Very quiet and mature for your age.”

“How old was I when you took my dreams from me?”
Nightmare raised an eyebrow. “Took your dreams?”

“My nightmares about being Galacta Knight. I know you took them from me when I was little. How old was I?”

Nightmare furrowed his brow. “Four or five,” he said.

“Was Mother around, then?” Meta Knight asked, carefully judging his father’s reaction.

“No, she left before your second birthday,” Nightmare replied. “You…remind me of her sometimes. She was very quick-witted and curious, too. Stubborn, though. So stubborn.”

Father was in a suspiciously amicable mood.

“Is Kirby’s mother similar?” Meta Knight asked.

Nightmare chuckled and took a sip of wine. “Are you trying to figure out if I have a type, Meta Knight?”

“No, I’m just trying to figure you out. I’ve been…very confused lately,” Meta Knight replied. “That’s all.”

“I’m sure, but you have plenty of time to figure it all out, my dearest child. If it makes you feel better, I can have Jecra stay with you while I’m away tonight.”

Meta Knight shook his head. “That isn’t necessary, Father. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Meta Knight had always chided Dedede for waiting until last minute to finish his homework assignments, advice which Dedede had always ignored. Dedede’s last minute cramming for the next day’s Dreamlandic Literature II test was going horribly, as evidenced by the fact that he’d read the same sentence three times and kept idly checking his phone for texts from Meta Knight.
Meta Knight had probably gone to bed already. It had been a long day, particularly for someone who’d been through everything he had. Dedede tried underlining a sentence that seemed especially important, but his pen had finally given up the ghost.

With a scowl, Dedede set the book aside—resisting the urge to throw it—and trudged into Meta Knight’s room. He couldn’t help but look at the neatly made bed with its thick, soft blankets. He thought of Meta Knight sleeping there, always on his side, and he thought of how beautiful Meta Knight’s blue hair looked, even disheveled, around his face.

Dedede pulled open a drawer on Meta Knight’s desk, searching for a pen. Something round shined in the moonlight. His brow furrowed, Dedede picked up the glass orb. Why would Meta Knight keep such a beautiful paperweight hidden away in a desk drawer? Dedede picked it up and twisted it in his hand, watching the light play over the metallic stars embedded in the swirls of blue and purple.

The wizard stood in the Fountain of Dreams, the once-sacred waters still and dark around his calves. The Star Rod was broken; it would prevent the wizard from accomplishing more but at a great cost. “Hello, little goddess. Did you miss me?”

Nova rolled her shoulders back and jutted her chin defiantly up. If they fought, she knew she would lose, but she couldn’t back down. Not to this monster. There were gaps in her memory from the time she’d spent as the wizard’s captive, but she remembered enough to send shivers down her spine. “What do you want?” she asked.

“Being the patron goddess of Dreamland grants you certain powers,” the wizard replied.

The wizard strode closer, but still, Nova refused to back down. She was the goddess of Dreamland. Her people needed her strength and fortitude. Dear, gentle Bikaia needed her strength and fortitude; he was breaking beneath the weight of kingship without Galacta Knight’s guidance. Bikaia needed Nova the Wish-granter. Nova the Star-Goddess. With her half-broken powers, Nova could never achieve that, but she had to try.

“So it does,” Nova replied.

The wizard swept behind the goddess and wrapped her hair around his hand. Nova’s pulse quickened as the wizard pressed his cold, thin lips to her neck. “I want to be the god of Dreamland,” the wizard breathed, “But unfortunately, I can’t simply kill you and take Dreamland
as my own. The magic doesn’t work that way. How about a wager, little goddess? If you win, I’ll grant you back enough of your powers to seal me away, I’ll restore the waters of this Fountain, and I’ll return your memories to you.”

“You’ll tell me where Galacta Knight is, too,” Nova said. “I know you’ve done something with her.”

“And, of course, if you lose, I’ll become the god of Dreamland.”

This was the sort of wager that couldn’t be backed out of. Nova’s breath caught in her throat. This was a chance to end the wizard for good and to restore Dreamland. This was a chance to find Galacta Knight and save everyone.

“Leave Bikaia out of this.”

“I’ll never understand your attachment to him. We once had the same goals, didn’t we? Let Dreamland tear itself apart and rise from the ashes,” the wizard said.

“I didn’t know Bikaia, then,” Nova said. “He gave me hope for the first time in hundreds of years, and he isn’t like the others. I’ll die before I give you him.”

“Yes, he probably would. Bikaia was soft-hearted and kind. He’d never let anyone suffer because of him.
“What is your challenge?” Nova asked.

“The Star Rod is in five pieces. You may have five champions to protect it. The first of us to reassemble those pieces gains dominion over Dreamland. I choose the field.”

Nova took a deep breath. If she lost…

If she lost, Dreamland was lost. Bikaia was lost. Everything they’d worked so hard for would be swept away so quickly.

“I accept your terms.”

Dedede dropped the paperweight, which fell unharmed to the carpet. He shivered and rubbed his forearms. Slowly, Dedede drew his eyes to Meta Knight’s bed. He’d almost expected someone to be there—Nightmare or Dark Mind or even Meta Knight himself—but there was nothing save shadows and darkness.

There’s someone here.

Galaxia’s warning stirred Meta Knight from his sleep. He grabbed the sword and padded from his room. Because of the suppressants, he couldn’t sense anything, but Galaxia could.

“Are they strong?”

Yes, but they aren’t as powerful as you. They’re going into your father’s room.

Meta Knight had never been in his father’s room before; he wasn’t allowed in there. Still, Father would probably prefer Meta Knight interfere than allow some stranger to wander around their house. He silently walked to Father’s room and listened through the door. He heard only silence, but Galaxia couldn’t possibly be wrong.
Meta Knight opened the door and cautiously edged into the dark room. “I know you’re here! Show yourself!”

The lights blinked on.

Nightmare’s room was very luxurious. Everything was royal blue and silver. There were photos on the wall—one of Nightmare and Meta Knight, one of Kirby, and one of Nightmare and a beautiful young woman. His mother. That was Meta Knight’s mother. At the foot of Nightmare’s bed, there was a massive silver chest, gilded with gold, and a massive red spinel set in it. The room seemed to spin. Meta Knight recognized that chest. That couldn’t be. Meta Knight had never seen it before and had never been in this room before.

But there was something about it. Something familiar and awful.

“My, my, pictures don’t do you justice,” a voice drawled. “Surprised to see me?”

The Scarlet Magician strode in from Nightmare’s connected bathroom and without missing a beat, threw himself over Nightmare’s massive bed.

“Not really,” Meta Knight replied, shaking his head.

This clearly wasn’t the time to worry about his father’s choice in décor.

“This isn’t even the strangest thing to happen to me this week,” Meta Knight added.

“Oh, you’ve had a rough week?” the thief asked, patting the space beside him. “Why don’t you come sit down and tell me all about it?”

“Are you hitting on me?”

The Scarlet Magician gasped and put his wand against his chest as if the question had caused irreparable harm to his delicate sensibilities. Then, the thief grinned. “Well, I’ve always fantasized
about being caught by some attractive nobleman’s son, and instead of calling A.M.B.E.R.—”

“Get off the bed now. I will not stand here and let you flirt with me and burglarize my father’s house!”

The Scarlet Magician slid off the bed and twirled his wand between his fingers. “Careful, Meta Knight,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“A pity I don’t have the same regard for your safety,” Meta Knight replied.

The thief’s gaze landed on Galaxia.

“But it looks like you’re a thief, also,” the Scarlet Magician said. “Stealing the Sacred Galaxia from her pedestal. You bad boy.”

“She’s a replica.”

“Please, do you know who you’re talking to? I know more about magical objects than anyone, and I can just imagine how this will go down. You’ll cut me to ribbons, and I’ll leave you with third-degree burns. No, no, why don’t we negotiate instead, hm?”

The thief had almost moved within range of Galaxia. Meta Knight knew he was still weaker than usual, so the best approach was probably to make the thief let his guard down and strike then.

“I’m listening,” Meta Knight replied.

The Scarlet Magician grinned. He reached beneath his hat, and Meta Knight’s breath caught in his throat before he even fully processed what the object was. The thief twirled the collar around his finger. It gleamed silver and blue, deceptively benign and lovely. “I’m not letting you put that on me,” Meta Knight said.

“You have experience with this?” the Scarlet Magician asked, his dark eyes very clever. “Did your father ever use this on you? Poor thing, if he did, you’d be stripped of all your powers and left at his mercy.”
Dear Nova, he was absolutely right.

“Father would never,” Meta Knight replied.

He absolutely would.

Meta Knight didn’t realize he’d dropped Galaxia until she fell to the carpet with a muffled thud. The room was spinning. Everything was too bright and too hot and too confined. His heart raced, and shakily, Meta Knight lowered himself beside Galaxia. He couldn’t think and was thinking about everything at once at the exact same time. His body felt numb, but somehow, he registered the fact that he might throw up.

And dear Nova, Father would do it, wouldn’t he? And Meta Knight felt like he was back in the Mirror World, and Dark Mind was there. And Dark Mind looked so much like Father. And—

*Meta Knight, it’s all right.*

Galaxia. Galaxia knew everything. Galaxia was there. It would be all right if Galaxia was there.

“I’m so sorry,” Meta Knight said.

Sorry for being so weak. Sorry for feeling sick.

*Breathe, dear heart. It’s fine.*

The Scarlet Magician nudged Galaxia away with his boot. The sword crackled and hissed in response, and Meta Knight scrambled to his feet. “Stay away from me,” he said.

“Hey,” the thief said. “I’m not going to hurt you. It’s all right. I—are you having an anxiety attack? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”
“I don’t have anxiety attacks,” Meta Knight said.

Dear Nova, was it an anxiety attack? Meta Knight flushed in embarrassment. Really, was there anything worse than having Dreamland’s most infamous criminal stop burglarizing and take pity on him?

“Oh, the Scarlet Magician said. “Look. It’s clear that something bad happened to you, and it has something to do with this collar. Why not let me take it away? I can make this look like a break-in. No one even has to know you saw me. We can pretend you slept through everything. I need this because my client wants a pretty piece of jewelry. She isn’t magical like we are. It seems like this could be very mutually beneficial.”

This was very bad. Meta Knight knew he should call Galaxia to him and run the Scarlet Magician through right there. He should prevent this criminal from stealing Nightmare’s possessions. He should fight. He should stop this man.

Meta Knight slumped against the wall, his energy suddenly gone. “Sometimes, Father frightens me,” he admitted quietly.

The Scarlet Magician’s face softened. He pulled off his hat, which Meta Knight then saw, had several pockets sewn into it. The thief dropped the collar into one of them. “I’ll take it away,” the Scarlet Magician promised. “No one will ever use it on you again.”

Meta Knight couldn’t speak past the lump in his throat. He really was pathetic, wasn’t he?

The Scarlet Magician paused by Galaxia. Meta Knight tensed as the thief swept his cape from his shoulders and balled it up around his hands. Hands protected, he carefully lifted Galaxia.

*He doesn’t intend to take me, dear heart,* Galaxia said soothingly.

The Scarlet Magician approached and offered Galaxia. Meta Knight grasped her hilt and held her against his chest. “I’m sorry. I thought I’d distract you until I thought of a better plan. I didn’t realize you have true horrors in your past. A pretty, rich boy like you. If you ever need a favor…” the Scarlet Magician trailed off. “Well, I’m not inclined to offer them, but get in touch. We Halcandrans must stick together, after all, eh?”
“What favor could I possibly need?” Meta Knight asked.

The Scarlet Magician winked. “Maybe you’ll change your mind and decide you want me to steal this back. Maybe you’ll decide you want me to steal you,” he said, as he strode over to the open window beside Nightmare’s bed.

“We’re on the second-story.”

The Scarlet Magician climbed into the window sill and grinned. “So?”

Then, the thief fell, and by the time Meta Knight reached the window, the Scarlet Magician had vanished without a trace.

In Meta Knight’s peripheral, the air shimmered. Galaxia appeared in all her glory. She raised her hand and ran it through Meta Knight’s hair. Poor boy, you’re absolutely shattered, aren’t you?

“I’m sorry.”

Hush, now. Strength doesn’t mean you never hurt. Strength means that when you are hurt, you keep going. You are hurt, but you’re trying to figure it out. You aren’t weak, Meta Knight. Being traumatized doesn’t make you weak.

“I’m going back to bed,” Meta Knight said.

I’ll join you.

“More of Bikaia’s memories?” Meta Knight asked.

No, I don’t think you’re ready for that tonight, Galaxia murmured, placing a gentle kiss on Meta Knight’s cheek. Instead, I think I’ll let you choose. We can go anywhere you want, Meta Knight. Anywhere that makes you happy.
WANTED: Paid Interns for Haltmann Works

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unquestionably THE darkest chapter in this entire fic. It lightens up considerably in the next chapter, and I think once you get to the end of this one, it's pretty clear where things are going to go. But this one is really dark for both plot and character reasons.

Trigger warnings for child abuse. You can avoid it by skipping the sections with Meta Knight and Nightmare (although the one with Nightmare and Dedede, the absolute last scene of this chapter, is *really* important).

Duchess Delilah, Lady of the Stars, sat in her downtown office. It was a massive room which she decorated far more conservatively than her wealthy ancestors had. It held a large desk and chairs for herself and three guests. The furniture looked expensive, but it really wasn't. Even at a young age, Delilah had perfected the art of hiding her family's quickly dwindling wealth. She had no pictures of her sisters or parents, but she kept photos of Dedede, Meta Knight, and Bandanna Dee on her desk along with an ever-present stack of papers, always on the verge of toppling into a mess.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Delilah said.

Sir Axe Knight peered in. He was a tiny, stocky man. When he and the duchess posed in photos together, Delilah often had to sit or lean awkwardly just to keep them both in the frame. Although tiny, Axe had been a knight for the Duchy of the Stars since Delilah first became duchess. Axe wasn’t even from her region, but he’d decided to settle there because he liked the place and, being the younger son, had no land or duties of his own. Though he was going on fifty-five, Axe was still a force to be reckoned with. His one weakness was that he wasn’t a good strategist, and this hardly mattered when one considered the knight’s strength, wit, and good humor. He’d been invited several times to join Queen’s Guard, but instead, he—and his fiancé Mace—insisted upon remaining in Delilah’s duchy.

“Your Grace,” Axe said, with a bow. “You have a …unexpected guest.”

“Oh?”
“President Haltmann and his secretary,” Axe replied. “If you want, I can escort them out.”

Delilah twisted a bit in her chair. Aside from making small talk at the occasional party, she’d never spoken to Haltmann. Her duchy had never had business with him either.

“They wouldn’t tell me anything,” Axe said.

“Oh, were they rude to you? Want me to give ‘em grief over it?” Delilah asked.


“Send ‘em in,” Delilah said, shrugging. “I’ll see what they wanna say.”

“Will do.”

Axe ducked out, and Delilah straightened in her chair. Although her interactions with Haltmann were few, it was well-known that he’d once been a valuable ally to Nightmare Nocturne, and Delilah’s feelings for _Nightmare_ were best left unsaid in polite company.

President Haltmann strode in, his secretary following. Delilah stood and gestured to the chairs before her. “What a pleasant surprise,” she said. “Good thing my schedule was clear, huh? I’d have been awful sad to miss y’all.”

Delilah caught Axe’s smirk as he stood by the door. Honestly, Haltmann had some audacity in thinking he could just show up unannounced before a _duchess_.

“Would y’all like some refreshments?”

“Coffee would be lovely,” Haltmann replied, taking his chair. “Your Grace.”

Axe left to get it without being asked. Delilah smiled pleasantly. “I believe the last time we talked was at last year’s winter ball,” Delilah said. “How’ve you been?”
“Very well,” Haltmann answered. “And you?”

“I cain’t complain.”

“Who are these lovely young men?” Haltmann asked, taking a picture off Delilah’s desk.

It was of Dedede, Meta Knight, and Bandanna Dee from the summer, and it’d taken Delilah no small amount of puppy dog eyes and a little bit of bribery to get them all to sit for a professional photographer. Dedede hated sitting still, Meta Knight could be unpredictable about professional portraits, and Bandanna Dee had been both eager to be photographed and wary of it.

“My boys,” Delilah replied.

Haltmann placed the picture back on the desk. “Well, I won’t bore you with pleasantries. I’ve no doubt you’re a busy woman. As it is, I’m here on a business venture which I think you’ll be very enthusiastic about.”

Haltmann’s secretary placed an open folder of papers on the desk. Delilah leaned forward and looked at it, her brow furrowed.

“We’ve discovered a new metal called Haltonium. It has a higher tensile strength than tungsten, the hardness of diamond, and—unlike them—does not shatter easily. It’s a miracle metal, nearly indestructible. It takes an incredibly delicate and arduous process to shape it, but it can be done.”

“And what’s this got to do with me?”

“You’ll forgive my intrusion, but I hired a private contractor to survey some of the lands in your duchy. You have a massive span of land—a deeply forested area on the Floralian border—which we believe may be ripe with Haltonium. I’d like to make a deal with you to mine it. This could be a great economic opportunity for your duchy.”

“Outta the question. All the land on the border’s protected forests. You cain’t mine it.”
Axe returned with coffee, setting it all up on the desk, before returning to his spot by the door. Although Haltmann had requested it, he made no move to get any. “But surely, Delilah—”

“It’s Your Grace to you, and my answer is final. I know I can let you mine it if I wanna, but that land is a valuable piece of my duchy’s history. When King Adstellam was slaughtering the Halcandran people, my ancestors refused to participate. Instead, they smuggled Halcandran refugees into this duchy, and they hid them from the king in those forests for years. Those woods take their name after the goddess Nova, and I ain’t letting no one go in and tear ‘em all up.”

“But surely, an opportunity for economic growth is worth sacrificing a few trees? It’s the place that holds historical significance—not the trees themselves,” Haltmann said, “And surely, your people would benefit all the more from an economic boost since Queen Alera has resolved to cut the amount of funding allotted to your duchy for the coming year.”

“I’ve worked with a tight budget before,” Delilah replied. “I ain’t agreeing to it, and there ain’t nothing you can say or do to change my mind.”

“I see,” Haltmann said, standing. “Perhaps, I’ll leave the file for you and see if you change your mind. I would be willing to pay you something under the table as well.”

“Axe will see y’all out.”

After they left, Delilah grabbed the file and flipped through the pages of survey records and estimates. This did look like a promising enterprise. Very profitable.

“They’re gone,” Axe said.

Delilah beckoned for him to sit, and once he had, she offered the file. Axe furrowed his brow as he read. After a beat of silence, Delilah prepared herself a cup of coffee and curled her hands around it. “Alera recently contracted Haltmann Works to improve the defenses around the palace,” Delilah said.

“Interesting,” Axe said. “What do you think she wants that for? As far as I’m aware, there have been no threats against the Queen, and she has the whole of Queen’s Guard there.”

“The recent protests have gotten her worried she’s gonna be assassinated,” Delilah said, “And the
revelation that Meta’s the Wielder of Galaxia didn’t help none. She’s terrified of ‘im. Even overlooking the whole Galacta Knight thing, the last known wielder of Galaxia was Bikaia himself.”

“It still seems a bit much to assume Meta Knight is her enemy. He’s just a kid.”

“I suspect she knows somethin’ she ain’t telling,” Delilah said. “Meta’s records are all classified. I couldn’t even get them to tell the kid who his mom was.”

“But Meta Knight could get them, couldn’t he?”

“Yeah, but he refuses to. His dad doesn’t want Meta to know ‘bout the past, so Meta’s respecting his wishes. But that ain’t odd. The odd thing is that I, the Lady of the Stars, cain’t get access to the records of someone living in my own duchy. A.M.B.E.R. ain’t got no reason to keep those from me unless they’re trying to hide something.”

“That may be true, but it’s still not unusual for the Queen to overreact,” Axe said, “And I think we can both agree she’s gotten significantly worse since Daedalus died.”

“Well, she was always awful. I mean, Daedalus was still alive when Alera threw that baby on me. She ain’t got worse; she’s just got less shy ‘bout hiding it. But I don’t trust Haltmann. Neither does Dom Woole.”

Axe whistled. “You’ve been talking with Patchlandic intelligence, have you?”

“Restoring the rightful heir to the Patchlandic throne’s the least I can do, but Dom Woole is concerned Alera might be plotting something else.”

“Like what?”

“Dom Woole has a connection at Haltmann Works, and according to this connection, the company is working on something big. Some sorta weapon. Dom Woole thinks Alera’s preparing for some kinda war or conquest.”
Axe stood abruptly and paced across the floor. “War,” he said, “Do you think she’s…”

“I don’t know,” Delilah said, “But y’know what came outta Daedalus’s death. ‘Fore that, we’d never seen such mistrust leveled towards Halcandrans or common-blooded magic users. It does seem like a reach, but I also ain’t got no reason to doubt Dom Woole. I’m the one Dreamlandic ally they got ‘side from Sectonia, whose hands are pretty much tied now that she ain’t heading A.M.B.E.R. She cain’t do more than make empty promises and hope Alera’s in a good enough mood to indulge ‘er. There ain’t no reason for Patchlanders to lie to me. But Haltmann manufacturing weapons is alarming ‘cause I seriously doubt they’re making swords and armor. We’re talking ‘bout the kinda stuff that can topple cities if Dom Woole’s right.”

Axe paused in his pacing and stared hard at the file. “So what are we going to do?” he asked.

“Well, y’know what they say. Better the enemy you know than the one you don’t. I’m gonna take this information Haltmann so graciously left, and I’m gonna put it in the hands of someone I hate—but who’s also capable of actually doing something.”

“Nocturne?”

When Delilah nodded, her face was grim.

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Are you in class yet?

Meta Knight.

Dedede texted back. Yeah. Wats up?

Meet me in the bathroom.

“Gotta go to the bathroom!” Dedede declared as he edged past Kirby and Bandanna Dee.
“You don’t need to announce it to the world,” Bandanna Dee replied.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna anyway!” Dedede declared. “Be back ‘fore class starts.”

It took all Dedede’s self-control not to run to the bathroom. Once he opened the door, Meta Knight grasped his wrist, pulled him inside, and locked the bathroom door behind them. Dedede frowned, confused as to why Meta Knight had suddenly started wearing super dark glasses indoors. “Migraine,” Meta Knight explained, having evidently anticipated the reaction.

“From the concussion?”

Meta Knight nodded. “The medicine is great for everything except the concussion,” he replied. “I thought about staying home, but I wanted to talk.”

“Yeah?”

“We only have a few minutes until Jecra comes,” Meta Knight said. “I left my wallet in the car. He went to get it.”

Dedede whistled between his teeth. “Your old man’s having you followed to class, huh?”

“I don’t need it,” Meta Knight said, “But it’s easier not to argue. I’m trying to remain in his good graces.”

Dedede narrowed his eyes. “Has he hurt you?”

Meta Knight shook his head. “No,” he said, “But I may have made a mistake. A big one.”

“You’ll move back in,” Dedede said. “I—”

Meta Knight walked to the sink and braced himself against it. With a small smile, Dedede stepped behind Meta Knight and teasingly tugged on his lovely, blue ponytail. “I kinda miss having to fight you for the bathroom,” Dedede said.
Meta Knight sighed. “I’ll consider it.”

“So what happened?”

Meta Knight’s shoulders slumped. He looked at his reflection rather than at Dedede. “The Scarlet Magician broke into my father’s estate over the weekend.”

Dedede’s jaw dropped. “What? You ain’t kidding? Holy—what’s he like?”

Meta Knight laughed. “I didn’t realize you were a fan.”

“Ha. You. What’d he want?”

“The collar Father sent us,” Meta Knight replied. “It’s like the handcuffs Dark Mind had. He once used it to control the goddess Nova and strip her of her powers. I mean, I haven’t verified that myself, but I recognize the metalwork as the same. Shadow said there were collars, and I’ve no reason to disbelieve him.”

“So Nightmare’s keeping ‘round a collar that can strip you of all your powers. That ain’t exactly a comforting thought.”

“He was,” Meta Knight replied. “I let the Magician take it, and it was…so embarrassing. I just…I don’t know what happened. I think I might’ve had a panic attack even. It’s so humiliating.”

Dedede pulled Meta Knight into a hug, and although Meta Knight rolled his eyes, he settled into it all the same. “Dear Nova,” Dedede whispered. “Caballerito.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“I ain’t gonna. Nova’s grace…what does Nightmare think ‘bout it all?”
“He doesn’t know,” Meta Knight replied. “He thinks it was just a break-in, and he hasn’t even figured out what was stolen yet. I claimed that I didn’t notice anything amiss. It’s a good excuse. Some of the medication I’m on makes me sleep very heavily.”

“Good enough for your dad?”

Meta Knight shook his head. “I don’t know. He hugged me and petted me some. He seemed legitimately concerned, but…I don’t know. Even when I feel like he’s being sincere, I can’t help but doubt him.”

“That ain’t unreasonable. I mean, Nova, he’s acted like the concerned parent before. Remember that time he showed up at Mom’s apartments?”

“How could I forget? The noble Duchess Delilah threatening Dreamland’s most powerful wizard with a letter opener. She was so out-matched.”

“Yeah, well, if your dad had kept overstaying his welcome, she’d have put out his eye with that letter opener. He only showed up once, after all.”

“You’re right. She’s a match for Father. I hope someday I am,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede rubbed his thumb up Meta Knight’s jaw. “I love you, Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight laughed. “Sure. What do you want?”

You.

“Your immortal soul,” Dedede joked, “And everlasting loyalty.”

“Aren’t you gracious?” Meta Knight asked. “That’s all?”

“You to move back in,” Dedede added.
“I’ll think about it,” Meta Knight said. “Despite everything, it’s nice seeing you. Being back in class, too. It’s nice being normal.”

“Professor Drawcia’ll be over the moon,” Dedede replied. “She keeps asking ‘bout you.”

“Great. I’ll see you in class, then. We can’t let Jecra see you with me. As great as he is, he still works for Father.”

Dedede raised his hand and ruffled Meta Knight’s hair. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of words hanged just at the tip of Dedede’s tongue, but he dismissed them all. He left the bathroom silently.

When Meta Knight walked into the kitchen, Nightmare sat at the table and drank benignly from a bottle of mineral water. The wizard’s whip was curled on the table within reach. “You were whip-cracking?” Meta Knight asked.

“I like to stay in practice.”

“Maybe next time, I can join you?” Meta Knight asked. “Like when I was a child. I always enjoyed doing it with you.”

The wizard twirled a long, slender finger around the rim of his bottle of water. “Would that make you happy, Meta Knight?” Nightmare asked.

Meta Knight rocked back on his heels. “Yes.”

“We’ll see.”

It wasn’t quite a rejection. That was a good sign. Meta Knight walked across the kitchen and opened the cabinet where he’d been keeping the truly embarrassing amount of medicine he was on. His suppressants were there—quickly identifiable by their massive size—but there was nothing
else. Meta Knight took a deep breath and leaned his head against the cabinet.

When Meta Knight turned around, Nightmare arched an eyebrow. “What did you do with my medicine?” Meta Knight asked.

“You’re stealing my things. I think it’s only fair that I steal yours, don’t you? It seems I’m already raising a thief. I don’t need you to be a drug addict, too.”

Meta Knight froze. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play coy, Meta Knight. What did you do with it?”

Meta Knight’s eyes darted to the whip. “I don’t know what you mean,” Meta Knight said, edging around the kitchen table.

Nightmare stood and cracked the whip with practiced ease. “Is this making you nervous?” the wizard asked, placing the whip on the table and nudging it towards Meta Knight. “Please, I don’t need a whip to beat you into submission. Without your magic, I could break you in half with my bare hands. Do you want it? I can give you a fighting chance.”

Galaxia was upstairs.

I can be there in seconds, Galaxia said.

But that’s what he wants, Galaxia. He wants me to pick up a weapon, so we can fight. He wants me to escalate this, and I refuse.

“You’d offer it to me and hurt me for taking it,” Meta Knight said. “No, I’m not fighting. I’m done.”

“Are you?” Nightmare asked. “Let me guess. Your plan is to return home and play the good, demure servant for Dedede and Bandanna Dee? I thought I’d raised you better than that.”
“Fuck you, Father,” Meta Knight said.

Nightmare moved more quickly than Meta Knight could counter. Meta Knight reeled back, registering the pain throbbing along his cheekbone and the taste of blood in his mouth. It took him a second to realize his father, who’d always favored backhands and grabbing throats, had punched him.

Nightmare grasped Meta Knight’s arm. Lightning crackled, and Meta Knight screamed when he felt the full force of his father’s power. He clawed at Nightmare’s wrist, and when that did nothing, Meta Knight punched the wizard in his jaw.

The wizard shoved Meta Knight against the counter. Pain jolted up his back and to his ribs, rivaled only by the deep throbbing and the scraping of Nightmare’s nails digging into Meta Knight’s biceps.

“You don’t get to walk away this time,” Nightmare said calmly. “Not unless you want me to hurt your friends.”

Meta Knight kicked Nightmare’s knee, hoping to break his grip. Instead, Nightmare grasped Meta Knight’s throat. Meta Knight gasped and struggled, but he had no magic and half-healed injuries wearing him down.

“Where is it? What did you do with it?” Nightmare snarled.

“Just let me go, Father! I—I can explain…” Meta Knight trailed off.

Meta Knight could still speak, so he must still be breathing. But Nova, it hurt, and dark spots clouded the edge of his vision.

“You no longer have the privilege of speaking to me,” Nightmare said. “Do you understand?”

No, not at all. Nightmare had just demanded answers. Meta Knight nodded quickly and jerkily.

“Remember, child; we love that which submits to us. But I don’t suppose you’d recognize the
beauty of that quote. Philosophy never was your strong suit.”

Meta Knight! Let me help!

No, don’t provoke him. Don’t make things worse.

Nightmare pinned Meta Knight against the sink, so the edge of the counter dug into his stomach. When Meta Knight tried to free himself, Nightmare put a threatening hand on Meta Knight's back and shoved his shoulder blades down. “Father—”

“I said you no longer have the privilege of speaking to me, and you agreed that you understood. Clearly not. I don’t know how the product of two very intelligent people resulted in such a stupid, useless child, but evidently, that’s the case. Now be quiet.”

His forehead struck the faucet, and Meta Knight blinked rapidly, dazed. Nightmare grabbed a handful of Meta Knight’s hair and pulled hard, forcing his head back. “Father, what’re you—”

Meta Knight saw the knife and thought for a brief second that Nightmare had decided to slit his throat. Instead, the knife pressed against the nape of Meta Knight’s neck. “Behave yourself, and this will be the last of it,” Nightmare said. “You lost. You can be honorable and accept your defeat with grace and dignity, or you can act like a rabid dog. And if you do, dear, I have a cage ready for you.”

Nightmare hacked through Meta Knight’s hair, and Meta Knight let himself lean limply against the counter. This was almost a relief. There were so many other, more creative things Nightmare could’ve done with that knife. Meta Knight bit his tongue and tried not to make a sound. It was hard because his eyes burned, and his body trembled with exhaustion and barely contained sobs. He was proud that he actually kept from crying.

Dark had been right. The moment Father was displeased was the moment all his affection faded away. Meta Knight had tried so hard not to let it escalate this far, but Nightmare kept pulling Meta Knight’s hair hard and twisting it even as he cut. And who knew if he would stop there?

Galaxia, Meta Knight thought. Please.

Meta Knight hadn't even formed a concrete thought of what he expected Galaxia to do, but she
understood, regardless.

Meta Knight's head felt uncomfortably light, and only then, did Nightmare’s grip loosen. Meta Knight made to dart away, but Nightmare grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back. Before the wizard could make a move or a threat, Galaxia was there. Her blade was in Meta Knight’s hand, and she materialized before him. Never, had Meta Knight seen Galaxia this angry at someone. “Let him go, or I’ll burn this entire estate down,” Galaxia said.

“Meta Knight wouldn’t let you.”

Meta Knight tried to twist around and stab his father with the sword, but one kick to the back of his knees sent Meta Knight to the ground. And there was a knife in his shoulder. Meta Knight bit back a yell as his father pulled it out. Meta Knight had called Galaxia too late. He was too weak and beaten to fight anymore.

"Do not touch my champion!"

Galaxia’s blade erupted into flames so high they reached Nightmare's knees and threatened to consume the counter. Nightmare mercifully stepped back.

“My Lord!”

The world seemed to stop. Even Nightmare froze at the new, unexpected voice. Jecra? Why was Jecra there? He'd left once Meta Knight was back home. Meta Knight gasped for breath, torn between fleeing from his father and begging Jecra to help him. Jecra was once a noble knight, wasn’t he? No, he worked for Father. Everyone either worked for Father, or they were in danger of Father.

“Jecra, escort Meta Knight to his room. We’ll discuss his poor behavior later,” Nightmare said. “It’ll be a pain to clean this place up. I wonder if the cleaning staff can come in early.”

“Blade!” Jecra shouted.

Footsteps racing down the stairs.
“What are you doing?” Nightmare asked.

“We’re going to talk. Now,” Jecra said.

Blade rounded the corner, and although her jaw dropped, she recovered quickly. She asked no questions, only took Meta Knight’s arm and linked it with hers. In his other hand, Meta Knight tightened his grip on Galaxia, whose flames slowly died.

“To his room,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight nearly sighed in relief because Nightmare’s attention remained on Jecra. Nova, this was how horrible he was? Wanting his own father’s fury to be directed towards others?

“Yes, Your Grace,” Blade replied. “Come along, Lord Meta Knight.”

She led him through the great hall, and when she passed the staircase, Meta Knight realized she wasn’t taking him to his room.

“Where are we going?” Meta Knight asked.

“Away from here,” Blade said, tears falling down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t stop him. I—I called A.M.B.E.R. I called Jecra. I—I…”

She’d done something. She hadn’t ignored him. Meta Knight didn’t know whether to cry or throw up. This didn’t make sense. The servants always ignored him.

“You called A.M.B.E.R.?” Meta Knight asked.

She’d called Jecra. He’d been their distraction. Oh, no.

“Yes, they’re on their way, but we’re going to go. We can get you safe, and then, we can talk to them. I—I keep a first aid kit in my car for emergencies.”
There wasn’t a need for it because when Blade opened the front door, a half-dozen A.M.B.E.R. agents were there. Blade froze and dug her nails into Meta Knight’s arm, and even though he knew the action was likely to provoke them, Meta Knight tightened his hold on Galaxia’s hilt. It took him a few seconds to recognize Adeleine. “Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll take care of this. You’re going with Falspar. Royal summons.”

Like that would make him worry less.

A.M.B.E.R. was efficient if nothing else, or at least, they had good medics. Meta Knight had been ushered into the back of a van, and he’d thought for a few, very long minutes, that someone might just murder him. It might even be a relief with as much as everything hurt. They’d paired him with an agent named Falspar who was far more cheerful than any man stitching up a shoulder should be, but as Falspar stitched up Meta Knight’s shoulder and bandaged his injuries, Meta Knight had slowly settled into the welcome complacency that no one was going to kill him.

Meta Knight almost missed Falspar when he left, offering wishes of good luck and wink. It was too quiet. Idly, Meta Knight looked over the pristine back of the van. He sat upright, even though Falspar had insisted on Meta Knight laying on the van’s stretcher. Galaxia was a comfortable presence; Meta Knight had set her across his thighs and kept tracing around the ruby set in her crossguard.

The doors opened again, and the absolute last person—no, probably second-to-last if he was being honest—walked in. Princess Sectonia. The doors closed behind her.

This wasn’t how he wanted to talk with Sectonia. Disheveled and stripped from the waist-up, shaking from the pain of his injuries, and desperately clinging to Galaxia. His only saving grace was that while his body hurt so badly, his mind seemed to have found a sort of dull numbness.

Sectonia dropped the bottle of water she’d been holding. When she went to pick it up, her movements were slow. “Blade said Nightmare took your pain medicine,” Sectonia said. “We couldn’t do much on short notice, but I accessed your medical records and pulled a few strings.”

Sectonia opened her purse and pulled out a medicine bottle. “It’s everything you would’ve taken,” she explained. “Give me until morning, and I can get you proper prescriptions for it.”
Meta Knight sighed. “I don’t want them,” he said, even as he opened the medicine and the bottle of water.

There was a metal shelf which ran around the walls of the van. Sectonia sat there within reach of Meta Knight’s knee. “I’m sure it’s hard for a proud man like you,” Sectonia replied, “But you don’t need to tough it out. You were already hurt. Your father made it worse. Do you need to go to the emergency room?”

"Do I get a choice?"

Sectonia sighed. "It hasn't been formally announced yet, but Yamikage has been taken off Queen's Guard. He's the temporary head of A.M.B.E.R., and he's very devoted to the agency's mission of solving magical crimes and enforcing laws."

"So if I don't press charges, you can't make me do anything?"

"You're tired. I expect you to go to the ER in the morning if not tonight. I asked primarily as a courtesy."

She didn't have the power to make him go; that's what she really meant. “If you aren't in A.M.B.E.R., why are you here?” Meta Knight asked.

“I’m an extraordinarily powerful magic user.”

Meta Knight finished swallowing the medicine, ending with a swig of water that did little to alleviate the bitterness in his mouth. “Great. So they sent you out in case I need to be subdued, right? They didn’t need to bother. I’m on suppressants, too.”

But, of course, they already knew that. The first thing Falspar had done was inject Meta Knight with them, just in case.

“I’m trying to help you right now. Our arrangement is simple, Meta Knight. You don’t harm me, and I won’t harm you,” Sectonia said. “Decide to take advantage of that arrangement, and I’ll unleash a fury upon you the likes of which you’ve never seen.”
“I’m sure you would.”

“Why are you being so obnoxious? For Nova’s sake, I’m not the villain here. I can help you! Your father is clearly abusing you, and the kitchen is trashed. I can take you away from him. Don’t you see? This is an opportunity for you to leave, and I promise I’ll make these charges stick. He can’t treat you this way, and I’m sure Mother would love to hang your father with something like domestic abuse, aggravated assault...I’m sure we can probably find a few more things, too. We can put him away for a very long time.”

The thought of Nightmare in prison made Meta Knight’s stomach lurch.

“You don’t care about me. You just want to take my father down,” he said, “And...and you weren’t there. You don’t know what really happened.”

“We do know what happened,” Sectonia said, “Because your father’s parlor maid called us screaming and crying about how Nightmare was beating you to a pulp in the kitchen.”

Meta Knight felt a sharp pang of guilt for trying to lie for his father. They’d escorted Blade to her brother’s apartment; she couldn’t go back to working for Nightmare after this. “She misread the situation,” Meta Knight said, his throat dry.

“How can you possibly defend Nightmare after this?”

“I don’t need to defend him. He didn’t do anything to me.”

“Did your father hurt you?” Sectonia asked, putting a hand against his throat where Nightmare’s fingers had left marks.

“It’s nothing that I didn’t deserve.”

“I didn’t ask if you deserved it. Did your father hurt you, Meta Knight?”
Why did she keep asking? She knew the truth.

“No.”

“Meta Knight, I can take you with me right now. I can take you anywhere you want to go. I can take you to Dedede—”

Why wouldn’t she just stop and leave him alone?

“It doesn’t matter where you take me. Father has dream-magic.”

“Has he hurt you in your dreams?” Sectonia asked. “Why didn’t you ever file a report with us? We would’ve done something.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that neither the aristocracy nor A.M.B.E.R. is particularly useful in situations like this.”

“Just because you don’t like something we did when you were a toddler—”

“When I was a toddler? I’m talking about when I was sixteen! What did you do to me when I was a toddler?”

“We agreed with a recommendation to institutionalize Asteria.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Your mother,” Sectonia said. “For Nova’s sake, he didn’t tell you?”

His mother’s name was Asteria. Asteria de Brillante Armadura. And Sectonia knew about her. Father didn’t…want him to know about her. “Why?” Meta Knight asked.
He half-expected Nightmare to materialize and beat him for asking.

Sectonia looked like she desperately wanted to be somewhere else. “It’s complicated, Meta Knight. The decision was controversial even when we made it, but my mother pushed it through. She was the head of A.M.B.E.R. then.”

Institutionalized? She hadn’t abandoned him. Maybe.

“Father said she didn’t want me,” Meta Knight said dully.

"She abducted you."

"What?"

“Your father lied to you,” Sectonia said. “That shouldn’t come as a surprise. I wasn’t involved in it, and I no longer have my A.M.B.E.R. clearance. I can’t give you all the details, but she was saying things that didn't make sense. Delusional, Mother said. Dangerous. But...I don't know. I was just a child when it happened, and I've never looked over all the interviews and transcriptions for her case. You should ask Drawcia if your father won't tell you. Or Delilah. She probably knows more about it than me.”

Meta Knight couldn’t put to words what he felt just, then. Maybe it was a bit like being slapped by his father. “Her Grace lied to me, too?” Meta Knight asked.

“No, no. She...she didn’t realize what was being asked of her,” Sectonia replied, “But when A.M.B.E.R. was trying to figure this...situation out, they took you into custody. You weren’t even two years old, but you were Halcandran and magical. A.M.B.E.R. couldn’t just put you in the foster system, especially with your parents as powerful as they were. Nightmare wasn’t as much of a threat, then, but Max Haltmann was. And we all knew they were close.”

Sectonia took a deep breath.

“So Mother was the head of A.M.B.E.R. because my father was still alive then. She needed someone she could trust not to be bullied or threatened. Anyone in A.M.B.E.R. was suspect; she knew the organization had been compromised by Haltmann Works. We were and still are playing it to our advantage; Mother always hated him. And there were surely better alternatives, but Mother
chose to do something very cruel.”

“She gave me to a woman who’d learned she could never have children again.”

Sectonia nodded. “Of course, she wasn’t allowed to know anything about you—not your name, not your parents’ names. It was, essentially, here’s a child. Take care of him for an indeterminate amount of time. It ended up being only a year or so.”

“Of course, she agreed. Did she ever realize it was me?”

“She asked once if it was you. I had never really given your file more than a cursory glance before your duel with Waddle Doo, but after that fight, Mother summoned Delilah. I looked, then, and when Delilah asked, I told her ‘no.’ I don’t know whether or not she believed me, but she’d clearly had her suspicions for a while.”

“Why did the Queen want to talk to Duchess Delilah after the fight? What did she say to her”

“She wanted Delilah to get rid of you, or there would be consequences.”

“And were there?”

“Of course, there were,” Sectonia replied.

Why did everyone who tried to protect him end up paying for it? “I’ve caused her so much trouble.”

“No, your father and my mother have caused her trouble. It had nothing to do with you.”

“Still, I don’t know why she’d bother.”

Sectonia’s composure slipped. Her brow furrowed, and her eyes narrowed. “Are you truly this oblivious? She loves you, Meta Knight, and because of that, she’s willing to make sacrifices to ensure your happiness—you know—like a good parent should.”
“She is not my mother. Don’t go there.”

They’d institutionalized his mother and left him with Nightmare.

“Not your mother. Hasn’t she taken care of you for over four years? Hasn’t she made sure you had food, clothes, a roof over your head, and anything you wanted? Didn’t she pay your university tuition?”

“I’m Dedede’s personal assistant. It’s a job. She has to pay me.”

“And is that your job because you only see Dedede and his mother as your employers, or is the job a hollow excuse for being allowed to accept their charity? That’s it, isn’t it? You’re too proud to accept their help unless you’re giving something back. Because your Nova-damned Father never gave you anything without expecting some sort of payment.”

No. No, no, no. His mother was gone. His only parent was Nightmare Nocturne. Delilah didn’t even belong in this conversation. She was Dedede’s mother. “Stop—”

“Stop? And continue to let you be a spoiled brat towards the perfectly decent mother-figure you have? Your father beat you and took a kitchen knife to your hair, and yet you still defend him. And then, you have this perfectly lovely, supportive adult in your life, and you refuse to accept her kindness. And you know what? If I called Delilah right now and told her this happened, she’d be on the next plane out of her duchy because unlike your father, she actually cares about you!”

“Are you finished lecturing me?”

“Lecturing you? Well, forgive me if I can’t stand such blatant disrespect being leveled towards the woman who argued with Alera for hours over whether or not we were going to arrest you for the theft of Galaxia! She didn’t have to do that!”

“I didn’t ask her to!”

“You know what? You’re just as bad as your father! You’re incapable of actually loving or appreciating anyone!”
Meta Knight felt like she’d physically hurt him, and he wasn’t entirely sure why. Maybe it was being told he was as bad as his father. Or maybe it was because Meta Knight himself had laid awake before and legitimately wondered if he was capable of loving anyone. He lowered his head and choked back a sob. It would be catastrophic if he cried in front of Princess Sectonia, and it was such a ridiculous thing to cry over. Why now?

“I…I’m sorry,” Sectonia said. “I didn’t mean that. I went too far. It’s just…dealing with you is too close to home.”

“Because you think I’m one step away from a monster?”

“No, I just…I know what it’s like to love somebody who hurts you,” Sectonia said, “And it’s frustrating to watch you and see how loyal you are to your father. Because I’m the same way with my mother.”

When Meta Knight ventured a look at her, he was struck suddenly by how close they were in age. He’d known she was the same age as Dedede, but the significance of that had never really registered before. “I didn’t know that,” Meta Knight said quietly.

“Of course, you didn’t. I hide it, and Mother doesn’t leave marks the way your father does.” Tentatively, Sectonia tapped the tip of Meta Knight’s nose, staying far from his throbbing jaw. “He really did a number on your face. We’ll get you some ice.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

Sectonia sighed. “We’re not going to arrest you if that’s what you mean, but you can’t go back to him. We need to put you somewhere temporarily. He’ll still be able to access your dreams, but if you give me a couple days, I can put a stop to that.”

No more nightmares from Father? “You can really do that?”

Sectonia nodded. "Now, here's what I want. I want you to get as good of a sleep as you can tonight. In the morning, I want you to get up and go to the doctor, and I want you to rethink whether or not you want to press charges."
Meta Knight could never press charges, but he was too tired to argue about it.

“I can’t go back to Dedede.”

“I agree,” Sectonia replied. “Blade said he threatened them. You can’t go to the palace either; your father’s apartments are right across from Delilah’s.”

Of course, they were.

“Is there anywhere else you can go? Do you have anyone Nightmare doesn’t know about? If you don’t, I can persuade A.M.B.E.R. to set you up somewhere.”

Meta Knight took a deep breath. He didn’t want to be set up by A.M.B.E.R. He didn’t trust them. Who did he know, then? Was there anyone he knew that Nightmare probably wouldn’t go after? Someone that might’ve fallen through the cracks. “It might take some persuasion to get him to agree,” Meta Knight said.

Sectonia raised an eyebrow. “That sort of friend, hm?”

“I know he goes to DLU, but I don’t know where he lives.”

“We can find out.”

Magolor de las Estrellas hadn’t changed much. He was still pudgy with brown, curly hair that had always reminded Meta Knight of cumulus clouds. His eyes were gold like sunlight, and Meta Knight vaguely recalled being jealous of that once. As a teenager, Meta Knight had hated his blond hair and grey eyes; he’d hated being too Dreamlandic and not Dreamlandic enough at the same time. And, of course, Meta Knight had been constantly reminded that his father had the same eyes. “Is this about Kirby?” Magolor asked, nervously peering around his doorway.

Meta Knight shook his head. He awkwardly fidgeted with Galaxia’s hilt, stopping when Magolor’s
gold eyes darted towards the blade. “May I come in? It’s dark out,” Meta Knight said.

“Come in?”

“I’m spending the night. I don’t have anywhere else to go, and the four A.M.B.E.R. agents behind me and Crown Princess Sectonia agreed I could stay with you.”

Magolor flinched and peered around Meta Knight’s shoulder.

“Well, friends should help one another out regardless of their scary government friends,” Magolor replied cheerily. “Come in! I think it’s Lord Meta Knight these days?”

Meta Knight needed no further urging. He strode past Magolor and into a tiny apartment. Clearly, Magolor was living like most working-class university students—very poorly. There were no divisions between the bedroom and kitchen. Magolor’s tattered sofa was pushed right between the fridge and his bed. Everything was a mismatch of blues. It looked old and cheap, but clean.

“Are you wired?” Magolor asked.

Meta Knight lifted his shirt—two sizes too big and borrowed from an A.M.B.E.R. agent—up to prove he wasn’t.

Magolor wolf-whistled. “Looking good, Meta Knight! What happened to you?”

“I made Father angry. He threatened to hurt people I care about, so I’m here.”

Even though Meta Knight dropped his shirt back down, Magolor’s eyes remained on his chest, seemingly still fixated with the bruises he could no longer see. “Spending the night with the one person you don’t care about, huh?” Magolor asked.

“Whose fault is that?”

Magolor’s face fell, and Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek, refusing to feel any sympathy.
“Don’t worry. Father won’t come after you,” Meta Knight said. “He knows he can’t use you as leverage. He probably won’t go after Dededee either; he’s a duchess’s son and has too many protections. It’ll be Kirby or Bandanna Dee.”

“We were kids, Meta Knight. I really am sorry, but hey,” Magolor said, waving his arms. “I don’t expect your forgiveness. I just think we ought to get everything in the open. Clear the air! Want something to drink? I have sodas.”

“Whatever is fine.”

Magolor bowed and—with infuriating cheerfulness—led Meta Knight to the kitchen. It was tiny and old. The stick-on floor tiles were peeling up, the sink and counter were both cracked, and the single window was repaired with duct tape and a plastic bag. Water was dripping around its edges. However, as delapidated as it looked, Magolor had clearly scrubbed everything within an inch of its life. Normally, Meta Knight would’ve perched by the sink, but he feared it might break beneath his weight.

“What happened to your window?” Meta Knight asked.

“Someone threw a rock through it,” Magolor replied, passing Meta Knight some strange-looking ginger-flavored soda. “They wrote a really nice message on it, too.”

“I don’t have that problem much,” Meta Knight said, popping open his drink. “It’s mostly passive-aggressive remarks about being Dededee’s boy-toy.”

“So nothing’s changed, huh?”

Meta Knight shrugged. “Believe it or not, I’m getting beat up less.”

“I suppose that happens when you have royal backing,” Magolor replied.

Meta Knight narrowed his eyes. “I worked hard for that royal backing.”

Magolor held up his hands to show he didn’t intend to press that matter. “Your shoulder looks
“bad,” Magolor said. “Those stitches are awful.”

“I can’t even feel it. There’s probably some nerve damage.”

“Your face looks bad, too.”

Meta Knight resisted the urge to look at his reflection in the window. “Father punched me and knocked my head into the kitchen faucet. I had a concussion, a back injury, and fractured ribs already, and I’m sure Father’s treatment didn’t do them any favors. It isn’t a big deal. I can pass it off as a car accident.”

Magolor raised a hand but let it drop and curl back around his drink. “Did he cut your hair while he was at it?”

“Yeah, but it’s fine. It’ll grow back.”

“It isn’t fine. He broke your heart, Meta Knight. I’m so sorry.”

Yes, and it hurt. It hurt so badly, and this was a mistake. Meta Knight wanted nothing more than to go home to his friends. Dedede and Bandanna Dee would hug him and reassure him and make everything okay. He couldn’t think about that. He couldn’t even consider it. Of all the people Meta Knight would grudgingly allow himself to look weak in front of, Magolor wasn’t going to be one of them.

“Meta Knight—”

“I need sleep,” Meta Knight replied. “I’ll take the sofa. If I start screaming, make me get up. Do whatever you have to.”

Meta Knight wasn’t on Magolor’s sofa curled beneath downy fleece and cotton sheets. He was dreaming. Meta Knight stood in Father’s study, and Father himself sat in a chair by the fire. At the
moment, Meta Knight’s father seemed content to study his son in silence.

“I hate you. I hate you so much for doing this to me,” Meta Knight said.

“Is that why you let a complete stranger burglarize my house?” Nightmare inquired. “I always knew you were defiant and impulsive, but I’d never imagined you’d participate in criminal behavior. Not again. Five years and here we are. I didn’t realize I’d raised trash.”

Meta Knight shook his head.

“I don’t want to fight,” Nightmare said, “And I…I am sorry I lost my temper with you. I wanted to say that. What do you want, Meta Knight?”

He wanted to know if it was over and if he was forgiven. He wanted to know if his father was going to hurt him again. He wanted to know why he was so foolish and selfish and why he cared so much for a father who mistreated him.

“Sit,” Nightmare said, gesturing to his side.

Meta Knight settled onto the rug beside his father and after a few seconds of hesitation leaned his head against his father’s knee. Nightmare didn’t move away. Instead, the wizard placed his hand on Meta Knight’s head and gently petted his hair.

_Nightmare had hacked off his hair, and Meta Knight wanted to turn around and punch his father right in the face for doing it._

It didn’t seem to be a rejection. Thank Nova, it wasn’t a rejection.

“It’s all right. You can talk to me. I’m sorry, dear child. I was a bit too harsh, wasn’t I?” Nightmare asked.

A _bit_? Meta Knight wanted to scream and fight and break everything, preferably starting with his father. Except maybe for Jecra. The poor man who’d been their distraction and might’ve just lost his job and his son's medical care. And Blade. The poor parlor maid who’d just lost her job and her
tuition for medical school. It would’ve been so easy for her to do like every other one of Nightmare’s servants had. It would’ve been so easy for her to hide or look the other way. But Meta Knight couldn’t win. He knew he couldn’t win. No, the best he could do was be the obedient, docile child Nightmare wanted and hope his father wouldn’t hurt him anymore. That wasn’t giving in, was it? Wasn’t that just surviving? Surely, there shouldn’t be shame in that.

“It’s understandable that you’re upset,” Nightmare continued. “I just…couldn’t bear the thought of you going back to him. You know he’ll hurt you. He’s destined to hurt you, and poor thing, you didn’t know any better. But what would I do if he hurt you, Meta Knight? Just imagine what Sectonia and Dedede will do to you.”

No, Meta Knight had been wrong. He wanted someone to hug him and pet on him and reassure him. Hesitantly, Meta Knight took his father’s hand and placed it against his cheek, hopefully devoid of tears. Nightmare’s face seemed to soften. “My dearest child,” the wizard murmured. Dearest child. Right. Sure. Why couldn’t Nightmare always be the father that held him and supported him? The father who’d fought tooth and nail against Dark Mind to save his child? Why couldn’t his father just decide if he loved him or hated him? Why couldn’t Meta Knight just stop being so disobedient?

Nightmare pulled him into a tight hug, and Meta Knight let his forehead rest against his father’s chest. “Kirby is a weak child, unlike you, but he wants so badly to be the hero. He’d do it if they asked him to. They may not have Galaxia, but I’m sure they have some other Nova-blessed weapon Kirby could use. Do you remember how it felt being branded by Galaxia?” Nightmare murmured, rubbing a gentle hand over Galaxia’s mark. “Or do you need a reminder? I could dredge up that memory for you.”

The memory of Galaxia’s merciless, sacred fire. Meta Knight managed a feeble shake of his head, even though his heart ached for Galaxia’s warm presence. Nightmare was so very cold. If Meta Knight wanted to, he could call her, and she’d come. That would make Nightmare angry. Still, Meta Knight returned his father’s embrace, as if only the person who’d hurt him so badly was capable of making it all better. As if the exact opposite of Galaxia’s sacredness could achieve the same effect.

“Or maybe a beheading. That’s how they used to execute traitorous knights. You’d better hope the blade is sharp. Otherwise, it might take them a few tries. Of course, it’s painful even if the blade is sharp. You don’t die instantly; there’s still oxygen. And you know how Alera loves a spectacle.”

Traitorous knights. Knights who abandoned their loving friends and accepted the affection of cruel and terrible wizards, who beat them and made them cry. He wanted to forget it all, to create a world where his father was in the right, but he couldn’t. Meta Knight couldn’t silence the insidious
little part of him that insisted *he hurt you, and you didn’t deserve it.* Dedede wouldn’t have done this to him.

*Dedede was the reincarnation of the goddess Nova. Of course, he’d do this. He’d do worse.*

No, that wasn’t right. Was it? Did it even matter? His father was hurting him *now.*

“But don’t worry, dearest child. You’re safe with me. You just need to be a little more obedient, and I’ll be a little more patient. I—I realize it must be difficult to be living with me again after so long. You don’t remember all the rules,” Nightmare said thoughtfully. “Yes, that’s fair, isn’t it? Just give me the obedience you owe me as your father, and I won’t have to punish you anymore.”

It might be easier that way. Just stay with Father and not have to worry about Dedede, Bandanna Dee, Kirby, or Sectonia. He could just focus on pleasing Father, so he didn’t hurt him. That was a nice, singular goal. A realistic goal.

Just forget and repress and destroy everything he was in order to please his abhorrent, Nova-damned father.

But even as Meta Knight mumbled his agreement and rubbed his cheek against Nightmare’s knee, he thought of his friends and how much they loved—had loved, maybe still loved—him and of Galaxia’s warmth and affection. Meta Knight felt something strong and hot towards his father, but he wasn’t sure if it was love. He wanted his father to pet on him, and he wanted to bite his father and punch him in the face and scream and throw things.

“And you…you’re stronger than I remember,” Nightmare said. “I’m actually pleased, although I think we need to focus on turning all that energy towards a worthy goal. What I’m doing is making Dreamland better. Safer. This is all for you, dearest.”

And he was hurt, and Nightmare would have him pinned to the ground or the wall in seconds. This was settling or defying destiny, and Meta Knight didn’t know which. He just didn’t want his Father to hurt him anymore, and there was nowhere Meta Knight could go that Father couldn’t find him. Sectonia couldn’t help—even if she said she could.

Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek and silenced the tiny, insistent part of him that desperately wanted his friends. But Meta Knight didn’t deserve friends or much of anything else. “I’ll do whatever you ask of me, Father,” Meta Knight said. “I swear it.”
Meta Knight let his eyes drift to the mirror on the wall. Didn’t he look so pathetic with all his bruises, his swollen jaw, and his hacked up hair? Meta Knight stifled his sob, and for a split second, he thought his reflection might’ve shifted. Changed. So that it was Dark’s reflection instead. Meta Knight felt his blood run cold, and silently, he begged Dark not to interfere.

Seconds later, Dark was gone, leaving Meta Knight unsure if he’d seen him at all.

“I hope you’re good for your word, pet,” Nightmare murmured. “It won’t end well for anyone if you aren’t.”

Dedede stood in the Fountain of Dreams, the sacred waters lapping around his calves. Some dreamy, too-aware part of his subconscious knew what he was dreaming and what was about to happen. The chiming of water, the sound of fabric flapping.

The wizard had entered. He tilted his head as if puzzled. Dedede’s heart wrenched with the gesture. Meta Knight did the same thing, but Dedede had never realized the habit came from Nightmare. The resemblance ended there. Nightmare lacked the same softness and vulnerability that Meta Knight showed with the gesture.

“I wondered when you was gonna show,” Dedede said.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been preparing for this day,” Nightmare said, “Although I’d anticipated a worthier opponent.”

“How’s this for an opening move? I ain’t playing. Whatcha gonna do then?”

The wizard smiled. “I can taint this fountain. I can make the good people of Dreamland suffer endless nightmares until you comply,” Nightmare said. “I’ll break you, and you’ll hardly be a challenge, then. I’m, at least, giving you a fair challenge.”

“It ain’t fair.”
“It’s as close as you’ll get. Are you playing, or shall I begin?”

Dedede sucked in a deep breath. “We split the Star Rod into five pieces, guarded by my five chosen champions. The first to reunite the Star Rod wins Dreamland. Your goal is to take their pieces; mine is to bring them together.”

“Five? I imagine that’ll be Kirby, Sectonia, Bandanna Dee, and you. There are only four of you. Either you’re poor at math, or you’ve forgotten that Meta Knight is mine.”

Dedede kept the wizard’s gaze. Meta Knight might be with Nightmare for the moment, but Dedede believed in Meta Knight more than he believed in anyone else in the world. In Dedede's mind, a plan began to form. A very risky plan.

“Galaxia has a soul and can take human form,” Dedede said.

Nightmare bowed mockingly. “Very well, Dedede. Let the game begin.”
The game had begun, and all of Dreamland slept, held in an endless slumber by Nightmare’s magic. They would wake only when the game was finished and not a moment sooner, but although the pieces were all almost placed, there was something else Nightmare needed.

Meta Knight’s friend lived in the same sort of house Nightmare’s parents had lived in. It was small and cramped. Everything was second-hand, from the neat stacks of textbooks to the dying coffeemaker. Meta Knight would’ve lived like this if he hadn’t had Dedede’s money at his disposal. Nightmare’s lip curled in distaste. He’d have rather Meta Knight live like this and have some dignity than to be the kept pet of that foolish, worthless royal.

Meta Knight slept on a ragged sofa, buried beneath soft blue fleece and a heavy, floral comforter. Nightmare drifted closer and silently observed the pale smudging of bruises dotting Meta Knight’s throat and the darker bruising on his cheek; judging by the state of the injuries, Galaxia was clearly working very hard to heal them. Already, the swelling in Meta Knight’s cheek had disappeared.

Meta Knight’s hair was a mess—horribly uneven and curling at the tips. That hair had gone past Meta Knight’s shoulder blades, and now its longest strands barely reached his jaw. And maybe Nightmare shouldn’t have done that. Even if Meta Knight’s hair was too long and that awful color, maybe Nightmare shouldn’t have cut it. Maybe he should’ve been more diplomatic about it—made Meta Knight trade his hair for his pain medicine. Not that it mattered much now.

Nightmare felt Galaxia’s gaze on him. When Nightmare looked at her, he saw that she looked even crueler and colder than usual. Her skin was whiter, her cheekbones sharper, and the irises of her eyes unapologetically red. Her flowing, silk dress was spotted with red as if the garment had been dipped in blood. She was beautiful and cruel and monstrous.

Nightmare deliberately traced his thumb over Meta Knight’s jaw. Galaxia’s brow furrowed, and her eyes almost imperceptibly narrowed. She would know that it was a taunt—and a childish one at that—but Nightmare suspected it would still bother her. “If you hadn’t taken him from me, I wouldn’t have to hurt him,” Nightmare said. “You took my child from me. You made him disobedient and filled his head with all these fantasies of being your knight in shining armor.”

_I didn’t take him from you. You pushed him away._
“He would’ve come back if you hadn’t interfered. You’re nothing but a self-serving bitch, Galaxia.”

You act as if I ensnared him, and yet you forget that Meta Knight has been my champion for years. If he wanted to free himself of me, I’m sure he would have asked for his freedom, and because I love him, I’d have given him that. You’re the self-serving one. If he disobeys you, you beat him. Only a monster would treat his own child so shamefully.

Nightmare smiled darkly. “I see now where he gets his attitude from. I’ll have to fix that mouth of yours once I’ve won. See; you’re going to be my queen, Galaxia,” Nightmare said. “The trophy of my conquest. Isn’t that wonderful? You’ll still get to see dear Meta Knight. The same can’t be said for Bikaia, though.”

Kirby, you mean?

“Yes, of course. Slip of the tongue.”

Galaxia narrowed her eyes like she was piecing something together. And you wonder why both of your children detest you, Galaxia replied.

“Oh, isn’t that wishful thinking? Meta Knight adores me,” Nightmare said.

Indeed, Galaxia replied. But is his adoration for you stronger than the love he feels for his friends?

It was one of his father’s dreams. Meta Knight sighed, rolled over in bed, and screamed into his pillow. And—he recognized this place. It was his room in Duchess Delilah’s palatial apartments. Meta Knight lifted his head and gazed at the door connecting his room to Dedede’s. Why would Father bring him here? And why did he have to make the dream so cold and quiet?

Galaxia. He didn’t feel Galaxia.
Meta Knight dug his fingers into the pillow beneath him. Suddenly, it was like being back in Dark Mind’s castle and being so, so lonely. Galaxia was gone. Meta Knight bolted from the bed, even though his body shrieked desperately for him to not be so fast and careless, but he hardly noticed with his racing pulse. Where was Galaxia? Why was she gone? What had Father done?

Father’s magic was thick in the air, confirming that Meta Knight had full access of his own powers. He could sense magic and fight if he needed to, even though he wouldn’t stand a chance against Father. Nightmare lounged on the loveseat in the parlor; his black suit looked too stark against the white cushions. “Meta Knight,” Nightmare greeted. “Why don’t you play something for us?”

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“Galaxia. What did you do to her?”

“She’s around. I thought your connection with her would be more of a hindrance than a help.”

So he just took it? “The bond I share with Galaxia will never be a hindrance!”

“Don’t take that accusatory tone with me. Need I remind you that you agreed to do whatever I asked?” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight’s stomach lurched. Nightmare had never even alluded to doing anything to Galaxia. He crossed his arms and kept a good five feet between his father and himself. “What have you done, Father?”

“You know your history, don’t you? I wish to ascend to godhood, so I’ve corrupted the Fountain of Dreams and placed the people of Dreamland in eternal slumber while Dedede and I compete for the Star Rod.”

This wasn’t happening. No way. Meta Knight burst into nervous, edged laughter.
“That wasn’t a reaction I’d anticipated,” Nightmare said, “But I’m being completely earnest. I’m going to become the god of Dreamland, and you, my dearest child, are going to be my heir apparent.”

“No, I’m not. This is—you are absolutely…you can’t be serious.”

“What part of this are you failing to understand?” Nightmare asked. “You’re well-educated. You must know that a wizard once before tried to usurp the goddess Nova as—”

“And that wizard failed!”

“Yes, but I’ve no intention of failing.”

“None of this has…why do you need this? You’re already the most powerful wizard in Dreamland. You’re the CEO of a major corporation. You already have wealth and power. Why do you need to be a god, too?”

“Because when I’m a god, I can shape the world! Not just the world of dreams. But the world. I can alter it to meet my every whim, and you’ll be my heir, my second-in-command. Can you imagine the power you’ll have? There’s nothing redeemable about most of the people in this kingdom. You can be their superior. You can make them do whatever you want!”

“But that’s not what I want! I was perfectly happy being an astrophysics student! I don’t need to shape the world, Father. All I want is to finish out the semester without someone—” Meta Knight cut off abruptly.

He’d been going to say without someone beating me, but Nightmare surely wouldn’t have taken that comment well.

“Only because you’ve never tasted real power, Meta Knight. You’ve no ambition. Don’t you understand? These people are beneath you. They’re beneath us. They’re just…mortals.”

“You sound like Dark Mind.”
“He had a point,” Nightmare said, “And just think of all the good you could accomplish! Besides, if I’m a god, I can protect you! From everyone and everything!”

“I’m not in any danger!”

“You are. You just don’t realize it yet. You have no idea what you were bred to be.”

“I…Father, I can’t do this. And you want me to fight Dedede? And Galaxia?”

“Dedede, Galaxia, Sectonia, Kirby, and Bandanna Dee. Each of them bears a piece of the Star Rod. Whoever gathers the pieces and summons the Star Rod first emerges as the winner and god over Dreamland.”

“This is…this isn’t…”

“You agreed to do whatever I ask of you,” Nightmare said.

“And why would I ever even consider that you wanted me to help you become a god?” Meta Knight asked.

“You said—”

“You hurt me! I said what I thought wouldn’t upset you.”

Nightmare swept across the room and seized Meta Knight’s arm with bruising force. “I see. Well, then, I suppose there’s no need to feel guilty about my contingency,” the wizard said.

“What? You’re going to kill me?”

Brusquely, Nightmare strode across the room, dragging Meta Knight behind him. “Oh, no, dear boy. I’ve put too much effort into you. However, I’ve no such qualms about killing the people around you. Ridding you of any dead weight, so to speak. Will you be so eager to defy me if that comes at the expense of someone else’s life? Hm?”
Meta Knight’s heart sank. “Whatever it takes,” he said.

Nightmare smiled. “Wonderful. Then, you can have the honor of telling Dedede that he’s an orphan. I don’t particularly care if Delilah’s blood is on my hands. She’s been a nuisance since the beginning. But can you bear that, Meta Knight?”

Delilah. Oh, Nova. Not her. “Father, you don’t need to bring her into this,” Meta Knight said.

“No one has to die,” Nightmare said, “But that’s up to you. I do love you, child. If I didn’t, I would’ve killed you already. This is all for your sake.”

“It’s not for my sake! Her Grace has never been anything but kind to me! If you were going to spare anyone, it should be her.”

Nightmare threw open the door to the study with a wave of his hand. Meta Knight’s heart was in his throat because Delilah sat by the fireplace. Handcuffs around her wrists gleamed when they caught the firelight. As they entered, her eyes widened. “Oh, no,” she said. “Meta Knight, did he hurt you?”

Yes, but he wasn’t handcuffed to a chair and about to be slaughtered.

“You have five minutes to speak with her,” Nightmare said. “When I return, I’ll hear your decision.”

Nightmare patted the top of Meta Knight’s head and vanished. The moment Nightmare was gone, Meta Knight rushed to the duchess’s side. “Are you all right, Your Grace?” Meta Knight asked, dropping to his knees beside her.

Obviously not. Nova, what an awful question.

“I’m fine, pet,” she said, handcuffs clinking as she raised her hand to stroke Meta Knight’s hair. “Did he do this to you?”
Meta Knight nodded.

Delilah’s face reddened. “You ain’t gonna do this. You’re gonna walk away, Meta. You cain’t keep letting him treat you like this,” she whispered. “You’re gonna go and find your friends and stop him.”

“I can’t leave you,” Meta Knight said. “It would break Dedede’s heart! Mother, it would—”

Mother. Meta Knight put his hands over his mouth as if somehow that could reverse time and make the words so they’d never been spoken, but beyond the mortification, there was another feeling. A softer, more sentimental feeling. A horrifying, forbidden sort of feeling that Meta Knight had been denying for a very long time. Because—maybe when he thought about what Sectonia said—it did seem true that Delilah really had treated him something like a mother. And Meta Knight had so foolishly agonized over what Nightmare might think about Meta Knight thinking of another person as being a parent to him.

Worse, Delilah was a better parent than Nightmare. Delilah was a better parent to Meta Knight than Nightmare. Even when Meta Knight had been younger and colder and so much of a brat, she’d been a better parent. So patient and kind. She’d never struck him—even when he was a bad child. She’d faced down Nightmare for him.

And if she was hurt, it would break his heart, too. Meta Knight scrambled to force his thoughts into a logical order, but they were like autumn leaves tossed in the air. The only coherent, identifiable thought was that he would never be able to live with himself knowing that Duchess Delilah was hurt and—dear Nova—killed because of him.

“I love you so much,” Delilah said, her face and voice softening.

Loved him? “Even though I really messed up?”

“You cain’t really say you love someone if they never mess up,” Delilah said. “If they ain’t ever messed up, it means you don’t know ‘em as good as you think.”

Meta Knight edged closer and buried his face in her shoulder; his eyes burned, and he didn’t want her to see him break down into a crying mess. Delilah rubbed circles on his back as best as she could. “I’m sorry he hurt you,” Delilah murmured, “But you’re gonna be okay. It’s all gonna work out.”
Nightmare drew nearer, so Meta Knight reluctantly climbed to his feet. He rubbed his eyes and took a shaky breath. “I won’t let him hurt you. I promise,” Meta Knight said.

“Meta Knight—”

The door opened, and Nightmare peered in. “Come along, Meta Knight,” he said.

“You sorry son of a scarfy,” Delilah said. “You’re real screwed up, you know that, Nocturne?”

“As the youth say, it takes one to know one. Now I can see where Dedede gets his deplorable manners from.”

“Deplorable manners? Says the man who’s got a woman handcuffed to a chair!”


Meta Knight obeyed. He felt like he was in some sort of custody battle, and one party was very clearly outmatched. He needed to get his father out of the room before he lost his temper.

“You don’t owe him a damn thing, Meta,” Delilah said.

“I raised him for sixteen years,” Nightmare said. “Forgive me for expecting—”

“Yeah! How dare Meta Knight not just worship the ground you walk on ‘cause you for did the bare freaking minimum it takes to raise a kid?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“He didn’t ask to be your kid. When you chose to have ‘im, you made a commitment, and guess what? I ain’t giving you no points for doing the very basic stuff any parents shoulda done! And Meta shouldn’t either!”
Nightmare seized Meta Knight’s arm and pulled him out behind him. “Who does she think she is?” Nightmare snarled.

The wizard slammed the door behind them so hard that it shook on its hinges. Nightmare, whether intentionally or unintentionally, tightened his grip on Meta Knight’s arm.

*You don’t get points for doing the bare minimum.* And…

Meta Knight had been giving Nightmare those points for years.

“I ought to march in there right now and just finish it,” Nightmare said. “I should.”

“You promised you wouldn’t,” Meta Knight replied, “As long as I do what you want.”

They fell into silence. It was thick and awkward until Nightmare’s cackling laughter shattered it, and Meta Knight had never hated the sound of someone’s laughter so much. His hands curled into fists; he’d have reached for Galaxia if he’d had her.

Meta Knight might be a bad person who’d made some mistakes, but *Delilah* wasn’t. Delilah was a good woman who cared for her son and her people. Delilah was a good woman who’d taken care of Meta Knight for almost five years and who’d taken in Bandanna Dee after his family abandoned him. Delilah was a good woman who didn’t deserve to be held hostage by Nightmare Nocturne. Meta Knight’s pulse quickened, and his magic responded to it. The wind hummed beneath his fingertips, and his powers boiled over.

The wind’s roar was deafening, rivaled only by the cacophony of shattering glass. The entire floor-to-ceiling window behind Nightmare exploded. The wizard raised his hand, and the glass froze in midair. Another wave of his hand and the glass slowly fell to the ground.

“I’m almost impressed,” Nightmare said. “A pity you’re doing this for that useless, pathetic aristocrat.”

Meta Knight wanted to step back, but instead, he squared his shoulders and tilted his chin up. “I will do what you ask,” Meta Knight said. “But if you hurt her—”
“You’ll break everything in sight? What a loyal thing you are,” Nightmare said. “My task for you is simple. You will do what I tell you, and I won’t snap her neck. Or for that matter, harm any of your friends. You will first accompany me in capturing Dedede. From there, we will return here and increase our defenses. After all, if we have one of the champions, the others will have no choice but to retrieve him from us.”

Of course, it would be Dedede. It couldn’t have been Sectonia or Galaxia, who probably could’ve knocked him into next week if she wanted to. “Yes, Father,” Meta Knight said.

“And then, you’ll need to battle Kirby, of course,” Nightmare continued.

“Why Kirby?”

“An emperor only needs one heir. I expect the two of you to figure out who that will be.”

“And if neither of us want to be your heir?”

“Oh, dearest child, I’ll be a god,” Nightmare replied, shrugging. “I could make you forget everything that’s happened since you’ve left home—even betraying your so-called friends. It isn’t as if you’d remember to care. Aren’t I generous? You won’t even have to live with the guilt.”

Meta Knight suppressed a shiver. “All right. I’ll do it. All of it. Just don’t hurt anyone.”

Not that it mattered. Nightmare couldn’t possibly keep from hurting everyone. If he won and became the god of Dreamland, everyone wouldn’t just accept it. Meta Knight’s only option was to bide his time and hope a miracle happened.

Nightmare’s lips quirked into a pleased smile. “Good boy,” Nightmare said. “Now, let’s get you into something more appropriate.”

Nightmare waved his hand, and Meta Knight’s perfectly comfortable pajamas were replaced with armor. Meta Knight blinked rapidly, unused to having his clothes just...abruptly changed like that. Then, Meta Knight bit back a pained yelp as his wings, entirely of their own volition, unsheathed themselves from between his shoulder blades. They scraped against the metal plate armor, and
even though Nightmare had clearly anticipated the wings when he created the armor, it still wasn’t entirely comfortable. Evidently pleased, Nightmare swept around, observing his handiwork. “What do you think?” Nightmare asked.

Meta Knight found the mirror hanging on the wall and stared at his reflection. If the armor proved anything, it was that Nightmare Nocturne should never be allowed to design armor. While Meta Knight normally loved wearing new armor, this armor looked like it’d been designed by a small child who’d been fed a diet of bad science fiction movies and that one really bad animated series about Bikaia. The armor was black, bulky, and very pointy; it lacked all the smooth lines, elegant engravings, and silver of his usual armor. Meta Knight felt like the effect was supposed to be awe-inspiring, especially with the way his wings flared out behind him, but really, the only thing Meta Knight could think about was how many times he could’ve potentially stabbed himself if he’d had to physically don his own armor.

Meta Knight’s second problem was with the sabatons. Dreamlandic knights didn’t wear sabatons because they didn’t fight on horseback. Instead, they wore boots with wide platform heels that alluded to Dreamland’s equestrian past and to King Bikaia’s favoritism towards high heels. Because of this, Meta Knight had been woefully unprepared for their weight. In general, the armor was just too heavy, and this might present a problem since Nightmare was insistent that Meta Knight use his wings.

Meta Knight’s wings would lift him off the ground, but it remained to be seen whether or not they could lift him and an absurdly heavy suit of armor off the ground.

When Nightmare returned and stood before Meta Knight, it became apparent that the wizard had changed, too, and replaced his business suit with long, flowing robes. Nightmare tipped Meta Knight chin up and stared at him for a solid minute. “Yes, I like you like this,” Nightmare murmured.

That made one of them.

“All we need now is a sword for you.”

Meta Knight nodded, and Nightmare produced a bundle wrapped in black velvet. There was something dangerous and eager about Nightmare’s smile, and Meta Knight took the bundle as if it might produce a live snake. He opened it and found the sword, sheathed in its scabbard. Its hilt was silver with a gleaming blue jewel—sapphire or maybe spinel—set in the crossguard. Meta Knight felt sick as he unsheathed the blade. He was staring at an exact duplicate of Galaxia, but silver in color rather than gold. “Father, I—”
“Don’t argue. You are going to use it,” Nightmare said.

“But this is…”

Sacrilege. Wrong. Disgusting. A mockery of everything Galaxia was.

“It’s just a sword, Meta Knight. You’d better become accustomed to it because you’ll never wield Galaxia again.”

“That’s her choice to make.”

“She won’t be making decisions much longer.”

“What do you mean?”

Nightmare swept behind Meta Knight again and trailed his hands over the membrane of Meta Knight’s wings. “She’s going to be my queen,” Nightmare whispered. “You’ll finally get the mother you always wanted. Aren’t I generous?”

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There was little in the world the Dedede hated more than Nightmare Nocturne, although Bandanna Dee’s parents came in as a very close second. There were many reasons to hate Nightmare Nocturne. He was abusive, cruel, arrogant, and monstrous. Dedede had known that for years, but this was something else.

Nightmare had chosen to dress Dedede like a court jester. Dedede had abandoned the jester hat with its obnoxious, twinkling bells hours before, even crushing it beneath his feet. It made him feel slightly better even if he still ended up wearing poofy polka dot pants and a matching shirt. Screw Nightmare. The creep probably thought he was so clever and funny.

Scowling the whole time, Dedede tromped through a damp, musty-smelling forest in the midst of autumn. How did Nightmare, the son of a scarfy, ever produce children like Meta Knight and
Kirby? Dedede’s chest ached when he thought of Meta Knight. Of course, Dedede worried about them all; he’d forced them into this game, and they’d landed in a dream-world with no idea of what had happened.

But he was forcing Meta Knight’s hand with this game. Dedede had known very early on that Nightmare was abusive, even if it took a lot of coaxing to get Meta Knight to divulge even the barest of details, but the day it’d really hit home was when Meta Knight had finally agreed to stay in the palatial apartments. He’d just turned seventeen; Dedede was nineteen. It’d been just a couple of months past the Winter Solstice, and Dedede and his mother had done everything possible to make Meta Knight comfortable. It was difficult because the palace wasn’t really a welcoming place towards people like Meta Knight, who ticked off all the wrong boxes—Halcandran blood, powerful magic, no titles to his name, the child of Nightmare Nocturne.

But Dedede and his mother came from a long line of people who never gave up. Meta Knight had eventually settled in, and Dedede had happily watched his new best friend’s stuff accumulate in the apartment. Essentials at first, quickly followed by little bits of luxury—blue hair dye, cologne, books, the odd pieces Delilah kept adding to his wardrobe and half-facetiously claiming she knew nothing about. Meta Knight, embarrassed by it, had taken to cleaning the apartments even though they had maids. He’d kept offering to do Delilah favors, and sometimes, she sent him on idle fetch-quests because she, much more than Dedede, understood how guilty it all made Meta Knight feel.

Meta Knight both liked and hated being taken care of, and no amount of reassurances that he was a child and should be taken care of were enough to assuage his guilt over it.

Meta Knight had been alone in the apartments, and when Dedede and his mother returned, Nightmare was just there. Nightmare, so elegant in his mannerisms, had stood and greeted them, but Dedede hadn’t noticed Nightmare as much as he had Meta Knight. Meta Knight, who had looked so painfully blank. And after Nightmare was gone, Meta Knight, even though he was on the verge of tears, had said, “He didn’t do anything I didn’t deserve.”

That was when the full weight of Meta Knight’s situation really sank in.

Since then, Dedede had tried to deal with Meta Knight’s abuse like all the books said. He’d offered soft reassurances—when his emotions didn’t get the best of him, as they often did—and tried to coax Meta Knight into seeing a therapist or, at least, opening up. Dedede never felt like he was getting very far, but he loved Meta Knight and kept trying. But now, something had to give. Dedede had done the one thing that he’d sworn he would never, ever do; he’d forced Meta Knight to choose, and not only that, but Dedede had created a plan that was so heavily dependent on Meta Knight choosing him over his own father.

The bushes rustled. Dedede spun around, and suddenly, Meta Knight was just there and wearing
the most over-the-top, spiky black armor possible. He looked absurdly small in it, and even Meta Knight’s massive, outstretched wings did little to make him look like anything threatening.

Meta Knight snorted and covered his mouth in his embarrassment. “Dear Nova,” Meta Knight said. “You look... interesting.”

“Laugh it up, Mr. Edgelord,” Dedede said, crossing his arms. “Your dad might not gotcha walking 'round lookin’ like a clown, but that armor’s pretty bad.”

Dedede strode closer and halted abruptly. Meta Knight’s mask kept Dedede from seeing half his face, but not his silver-grey eyes or his sapphire-blue hair. “What happened?” Dedede asked. “You cut off all o’ your pretty hair.”

“My father did that.”

“Your father…” Dedede trailed off.

Dedede raised a hand and ran his fingers through the raggedy-edged bangs. It looked awful. When Dedede lifted his hands to remove the armored mask, Meta Knight tilted his head back. “Don’t be angry with me,” Meta Knight said.

Once the mask was removed, the uneven tips of Meta Knight’s hair curled around his face. The blue color stood in defiant, cheerful contrast to the dull smudging of bruises on the right side of his face. Something clanked, and with a strange detachment, Dedede looked down and realized he’d dropped the piece of armor onto the ground.

“How dare he? Nova, your face, Meta Knight! And your hair! Did he do it with a pair of freaking hedge clippers?”

“A kitchen knife. But it’s just hair. It’ll grow back.”

“It ain’t just hair! You’ve been growing it out for years! And—and you dye your roots like, I
dunno, twice a month. An’ Dee spends hours fixin’ it anytime you gotta go somewhere important! You’re so proud of your hair, and he just—just hacked it all off!”

Dedede pulled Meta Knight into a tight embrace, ignoring how uncomfortable the armor was against his stomach. How cold and unyielding. Dedede lowered his head against Meta Knight’s hair and breathed in the familiar spicy cologne and the scent of freshly fallen rain; at least, Nightmare hadn’t changed that. “D’you know what’s goin’ on here?” Dedede asked.

“This game of yours? I know.”

“Huh. I’m kinda surprised Nightmare gave you actual armor. I figured he’d put us all in joke outfits.”

“That’s because I’m working for him.”

Dedede felt like he’d been punched in the stomach. “Why? Meta, you can’t stay with him? Look what he does to you! You—”

Meta Knight placed his hands against Dedede’s chest and pushed lightly, creating some distance. “Let me talk,” Meta Knight said.

“Nova, look at your face! My—”

“Dedede, if your father with near limitless magical powers dropped you into a world of his own creation, announced that he was going to make himself a literal god and reshape all of reality, asked you to be his second-in-command—”

“You can’t—”

“And held your liege’s mother hostage, would you refuse?”

Dedede opened his mouth to retort, but no words came. He stared at Meta Knight’s face, waiting and hoping for Meta Knight to reveal it was just a mean-spirited joke. The world around Dedede spun. “If he hurts my mom, I’m gonna kill ‘im,” Dedede said. “I swear to Nova, I’m gonna—”
“He said he won’t harm her as long as I do what he wants,” Meta Knight replied.

“And what? Put all of Dreamland at risk? We cain’t!”

Dedede stormed away and began pacing. Dimly, he was aware of Meta Knight watching, but this was all wrong. His mom wasn’t supposed to even be part of the game. It wasn’t fair, and Dedede had known Nightmare wouldn’t play fair. But to use his mom. To use his mom against Meta Knight. With a frustrated growl, Dedede plopped onto the ground, and after seeing Meta Knight’s hesitance patted the space beside him.

“I can’t. I’m here to capture you,” Meta Knight said.


“I know.”

“Why you always gotta take his side, Meta?”

“Because he’s holding your mother hostage, Dedede!”

“But you always take ‘is side, and he treats you like trash! He ain’t ever gonna change!”

“I know, all right? Forgive me for thinking he actually might! You don’t think I’ve been beating myself up over that since he brought us here? Honestly, Dedede…”

“I’m sorry. I know,” Dedede said.

“The problem is I’ve realized it too late, and now I can’t back out.”

“He’s gotcha collecting us all up? And told you to come after me first, huh?”
“No, he just needs one person with a piece of the Star Rod. Then, he can force the confrontation. To win, you’ll inevitably have to fight him. He’s probably on his way here now. The only reason we stopped was because the wolfwrath can’t cross the river. You may come quietly and avoid harm,” Meta Knight said, unsheathing his blade.

Dedede raised an eyebrow. “He got ya replacin’ Galaxia, too, huh?”

Although Meta Knight moved into a fighting stance, he didn’t raise his blade.

“And the other option’s fightin’ you?” Dedede asked. “Right? I’m s’posed to beat on you with you already so beat up?”

Meta Knight vanished, and before Dedede could react, Meta Knight was behind him. He’d grabbed Dedede’s lift arm and forced it behind his back. The edge of Meta Knight’s blade pressed against Dedede’s bare throat.

“He’s coming,” Meta Knight whispered, his breath a warm puff against Dedede’s neck. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to do.”

Dedede knew he should attempt to free himself. He might be able to do it. Meta Knight was heavily armored, but his wings were fragile and his face still bare. They’d sparred before, and Dedede knew that one good punch to Meta Knight’s jaw was usually enough to stun them. Meta Knight was fast and powerful, but he didn’t take blows well. But how could Dedede possibly hurt Meta Knight? Dear Meta Knight who—of them all—had been victimized the most. Dear Meta Knight who Dedede trusted with his life.

It was time to put that trust to the test.

The click of the handcuffs was foreboding and loud. Dedede shifted his wrists, not testing them as much as he was trying to find a more comfortable position. There wasn’t one. “Be careful,” Meta Knight said. “If you shift around too much, they really dig in. I’ll take them off as soon as I can.”

Meta Knight walked back around and searched the ground for his mask.
Now or never.

“Te amo, caballero,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight looked over his shoulder and offered a sad smile. Then, the mask went back on, obscuring half Meta Knight’s face and part of the bruises. “That’s the wrong one,” Meta Knight said softly. “You want te quiero.”

“Te amo,” Dedede insisted.

Meta Knight shook his head. “While they both mean ‘I love you,’ te quiero and te amo aren’t interchangeable. Te quiero is meant for your friends and family, whereas te amo—”

Nightmare clapped mockingly as he stepped from the trees. Dedede burst into laughter at the wizard’s elaborate robes. It wasn’t that they looked bad per say; it was just that they looked so stereotypically evil wizard. This was only accentuated by the massive gold headpiece Nightmare had also decided to wear.

“Well-done, Meta Knight,” Nightmare said.

“Oh, Nova, where’s your beard?” Dedede asked. “You cain’t pull off that look without a beard!”

“Oh, yes, mock my outfit, why don’t you?” Nightmare asked, smirking.

“Ya know; it’s kinda creepy that you changed everyone’s clothes,” Dedede said. “Ya got me dressed like a clown, your own kid dressed like some kinda edgelord…I shudder to think whatcha put everyone else in. What’s Galaxia wearin’? A thong bikini?”

“I’m appalled,” Nightmare replied. “Galaxia is wearing a very classy wedding gown.”

“Oh, ‘cause that ain’t creepy,” Dedede said. “You sure are totally un-creepy.”

“And yet…” Nightmare trailed off and ran his hand through Meta Knight’s hair.
Dedede leveled his fiercest glare at the wizard, but Nightmare only smiled a trailed his hand down Meta Knight’s cheek. When Meta Knight tried to turn his head away, Nightmare twisted a handful of Meta Knight's blue hair in his hand. Dedede climbed to his feet, although with his hands in his handcuffs, he knew there was very little he could do. “You’re so predictable, Dedede,” Nightmare said. “It’s a pity you couldn’t get some of your mother’s intelligence.”

“‘It’s done,’” Meta Knight said. “‘You don’t need to taunt him, Father.’”

“I didn’t ask you,” Nightmare said.

“No tengo una pieza de la Varita Estelar,” Dedede said slowly, working hard to get the language just right.

Meta Knight's eyes widened. It was impossible for Dedede to know if Meta Knight understood all the implications of his confession. Even if he didn’t, Meta Knight was smart; he’d figure it out. Everything was riding on this. This was how Dedede would know which side Meta Knight would really choose.

“What did he say?” Nightmare asked sharply.

“Nothing important, Father,” Meta Knight said. “He said only that I’m a traitor, and you’d be a fool to trust me.”

That might be true, but it also wasn’t anything close to what Dedede had said.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Sectonia finds a strangely familiar mirror, and Kirby meets a strangely familiar dragon...

—

Te amo: I love you. (Usually considered the stronger 'love,' as in for a serious romantic interest or significant other)
Te quiero: I want you. (Like I love you, but the one you'd say to your friends, family,
etc.)
No tengo una pieza de la Varita Estelar: I don't have a piece of the Star Rod.
Queen Sectonia sat on her balcony and watched the festivities of the Winter Ball beneath her. Everyone, clad in green and red and black, danced beneath her. When she’d been alive, Queen Alera had sat up here with Sectonia, and the two of them—but mostly Alera—had discussed political rivals. Beside her, Dedede remained still. His blue eyes were glassy and enthralled by Taranza’s powers. This meant Dedede would do whatever she asked, but it’d also made him a terrible conversationalist.

Sectonia tapped her fingers on the arms of her chair and quietly observed the festivities. There was Meta Knight, easy to locate because of his glossy, blue hair. Meta Knight, the Knight of the Slaughter, the Wielder of Galaxia.

Galaxia had chosen Meta Knight over a Dreamlandic princess. Sectonia dug her nails into the palms of her hands. Meta Knight with his dark magic and his dirty blood.

Alera had been wrong about a lot, but she hadn’t been wrong about how much trouble Meta Knight might present. “Dedede,” Sectonia said.

Being the Queen of Dreamland meant making difficult decisions. It meant making the first move always.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Dedede asked.

“I need you to bring me Meta Knight’s heart,” Sectonia said, “Assuming he has one.”

Evidently, he did. Dedede brought it to her that night, and Sectonia had stared at it. Somehow, she’d expected Meta Knight’s heart to be something…more. But it was so ordinary.
For a while after Meta Knight’s death, everything was wonderful. Meta Knight, the Wielder of Galaxia, was dead. Nightmare was a broken man and because he believed Haltmann was responsible for killing Meta Knight, was determined to take down Haltmann's entire business. Dedede, who remembered nothing of what he’d done, and Fae Queene seemed closer to one another, and Sectonia had thought that might blossom into a romance. Fae was a far preferable partner to Meta Knight.

But then, everything fell apart. People just wouldn’t stop caring. Dedede became obsessed with trying to find Meta Knight’s killer and worked himself to exhaustion. Delilah recovered more quickly than the others, or so Sectonia had thought; it’d become quickly apparent that she was just putting on a brave face. Kirby took Galaxia, and he and Bandanna Dee got an apartment somewhere in Traumwald. Nightmare had died in a car accident, resulting in protests and rumors that Sectonia was the cause of it. That she hadn’t worked hard enough to find Meta Knight’s killer. That she’d wanted Meta Knight to die and impeded the A.M.B.E.R. investigations. That she’d sabotaged Nightmare’s car, trying to kill him. It was just hearsay, but it was too close to the truth.

What choice did Sectonia have but to quell that criticism?

It caught up with her, eventually. She sat alone in the throne room when Kirby stormed in, Galaxia sparking and crackling in his hand. Something about the set of his face and the determination in his eyes reminded Sectonia so much of Meta Knight that it took her breath away; she’d almost forgotten that Kirby and Meta Knight were half-siblings.

“You killed Meta Knight,” Kirby said.

“And?”

“And? And I loved him! And you just—you murdered him!”

“I executed him,” Sectonia said. “I eliminated a political rival to strengthen my position. It happens. After all, isn’t that how Bikaia became king? Galacta Knight and Nova eliminated his rivals for him.”

“I challenge you,” Kirby said, moving into a fighting stance. “I challenge you for taking my brother and my father from me. From all of us.

Sectonia arched an eyebrow. “You would risk your life for two dead men? You would stand against
me, the ruler of Dreamland?”

“Yes.”

“Very well,” Sectonia said, calling her powers to her. “You will bow before me, Kirby Stellarum, or you’ll die just like Meta Knight and Nightmare.”

It might be best that way. Sectonia could destroy everything Nightmare had ever created. She could destroy his entire family line.

Galaxia hadn’t enjoyed trudging through the heavily forested area of Traumwald in stiletto heels. In the dream-world, she was closer to being human than she ever had before. This meant that she’d experienced all the problems that came with trying to walk in high heels for the first time. Eventually, she’d taken them off and tried going barefoot, but the forest floor was uneven and had too many briars for comfort. Finally, the forest had grown slightly less dense and had opened to reveal a massive and familiar manor.

Meta Knight’s childhood home. It looked like a fairytale cottage—with bricked walls, tempered glass windows, and a high, steepled roof—but significantly larger than any cottage. She wandered through the familiar rooms—the parlor where Meta Knight had learned to play piano and the violin, the kitchen where Nightmare and Meta Knight had baked cookies during the Winter Solstice, the ballroom where Meta Knight had learned to waltz. Galaxia faltered at the drawing room where sixteen-year-old Meta Knight and Nightmare had their last fight before Meta Knight fled. This room had been trashed, but now, it looked lovely and pristine. The glass table Nightmare had thrown Meta Knight through was absent. Galaxia swallowed past the lump in her throat and headed upstairs.

Galaxia, more than anyone else, understood Meta Knight’s feelings towards Nightmare, but she couldn’t stand by and bear to watch her champion’s abuse. Not when she was so close to human now. Not when she could kill Nightmare Nocturne on her own and liberate her beloved. Meta Knight would hate her for it, but he wouldn’t hate her forever.

Meta Knight’s room! Galaxia entered, her eyes drinking in the blue and silver room. So elegant. So Meta Knight. This was the place where Meta Knight had grown up. Galaxia approached the tall, silver-framed mirror that stood in the corner of the room. She grimaced.
While it was true that Galaxia’s appearance varied depending upon how an individual perceived her, she’d always had some measure of control over it. Rarely did anyone have an exact idea of what she’d look like. They had vague—sometimes contradictory feelings—and Galaxia picked the ones she liked best. For example, when she’d first appeared to Meta Knight, she’d noted that he imagined her to be a beautiful Halcandran swordsman. So Galaxia had shifted through Meta Knight’s thoughts to figure out what he considered beautiful. And some of that had been at odds with his idea of what an accomplished swordsman would be. Long hair was beautiful but impractical for sword fighting. Meta Knight imagined beautiful women as wearing elaborate dresses but he imagined swordsmen in armor, so Galaxia had picked and chosen the details she liked and crafted herself around those. And sometimes, she still did. Ever so often, she’d borrow an image of an outfit Meta Knight had seen and wear it just because she liked it.

Now, she couldn’t change anything. This image of Nightmare’s was both familiar and disturbing. Galaxia had never seen this woman before, but she felt as if she had. Such a cold, cruel face, though. Galaxia slowly ran her fingers through her hair and turned her head this way and that. Tentatively, she ran her hands down her sides, her fingers skimming over the lace. It was a lovely dress, something she might’ve enjoyed wearing if she—or even Meta Knight—had chosen it, but the sight of it now and the knowledge of who had chosen it made her feel sick.

Even though—logically—Galaxia knew it was, at least, a tasteful wedding dress, she didn’t like how much of her cleavage it showed or that it showed off absolutely every curve she had. The five-inch stilettos were bad, too, but at least she could fantasize about stabbing Nightmare with one of them. “Well, beloved,” Galaxia said. “It seems that your father is a creepy, old man in addition to his many, many other vices.”

Galaxia turned away from the mirror and decided to raid Meta Knight’s closet instead. Sixteen-year-old Meta Knight’s dress slacks were too tight on Galaxia’s thighs and his undershirt too tight across her chest, but the outfit was still infinitely better than the dress. Once she was clothed more practically, Galaxia sat on Meta Knight’s bed. She’d seen this room in Meta Knight’s memories, but she’d never before had the experience of walking through it.

The walls were a cool grey and the carpet a deep cobalt blue. One wall was covered with a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the forest. Most of the other three walls were covered with bookshelves. Adolescent Meta Knight had been a child with eclectic tastes. Leather-bound collections of fairy tales warred for space with classical novels, textbooks, chivalric romances, and little knick-knacks. Galaxia’s eyes roved over the shelves. “Oh!” she exclaimed.

Delighted, she pulled a set of familiar books from the shelf; these were Meta Knight’s journals. Nightmare had gotten Meta Knight the first one when he was ten, and Meta Knight had dutifully written in them every night. When Meta Knight ran away, he’d written a long letter to his father and left the journals as a record for all the reasons he’d left.
Galaxia opened the first one. Her face lit up at the sight of ten-year-old Meta Knight’s sloppy handwriting. Goddess, what an adorable boy he’d been! Galaxia read several pages of her champion’s musings. He’d been such a curious, enthusiastic child, and Galaxia couldn’t help but feel a surge of warm affection towards Meta Knight. And Nova, hadn’t he grown into such a lovely, young man?

She’d nearly made it through the year. Meta Knight had written about a present that Haltmann had given him, one that he wasn’t allowed to open until his father had looked at it first. Nightmare returned near Solstice, and Meta Knight was very happy. The writing on the next page was smudged and the paper wrinkled. Galaxia faltered at the tear-made splotches.

*Father hit me today. I don’t know why he suddenly hates me.*

But after reading what she had, Galaxia didn’t understand either. Nightmare had been a doting father before that entry, and the more memories Galaxia flitted through, the stranger the transition seemed. She closed her eyes and called the memory to her.

The first time Nightmare Nocturne had ever struck his child.

*Tears welled in Meta Knight’s eyes, and half in shock, he raised a hand to burning cheek. “You hit me,” he said. “Why did you hit me?”*

*Nightmare scowled. “Tears are a sign of weakness. Don’t you dare cry, you brat.”*

Galaxia pursed her lips. In all of Meta Knight’s previous memories, Nightmare and Meta Knight had spoken primarily in Traumwaldian rather than Dreamlandic. They did so, then, but Nightmare had always used the informal tense to speak to Meta Knight. Here, he’d used the formal.

“But you aren’t supposed to strike me!” Meta Knight protested. “That’s—”

“Be quiet!”

*Meta Knight stepped back when Nightmare raised his hand, and the movement served only to anger the wizard.*
Galaxia didn’t watch when Nightmare struck again, but she heard the sound of it and Meta Knight’s muffled whimper of pain.

“Things are going to change between you and me,” Nightmare said. “You’re going to begin giving me the respect I deserve. You are too old to be coddled any longer.”

Galaxia waved her hand again, backing up. She chose another memory—one from the day before.

Nightmare, back from a long stay in the capital, had barely stepped into the manor when Meta Knight bounded down the stairs. “Father!”

“Kleine Fledermaus!” Nightmare greeted, pulling Meta Knight into his arms. “My, how you’ve grown!”

“Father!” Meta Knight exclaimed. “Guess what? Guess what?”

“What, dearest?”

Meta Knight took a step back and scrunched his face up in concentration. Nightmare waited as the air between them shimmered. A spot of red appeared and materialized into an apple. Nightmare held out his hand as the fruit dropped into it. Meta Knight clapped his hands together and smiled brightly. “Are you happy? Did I do good, Father?”

Nightmare stood and took a bite of the apple. “Hmm,” he said, clearly pretending to consider the question.

“I did something impressive,” Meta Knight said, grinning. “Didn’t I?”

Nightmare turned the fruit over in his hands and offered a rare, genuine smile. “Yes, you did. Well-done!”

Meta Knight beamed at his father. “I’ve been practicing really hard,” he said. “Someday, I’ll be as good at magic as you are!”
“No, you’ll be better,” Nightmare replied.

“Uncle Haltmann sent me a present while you were gone,” Meta Knight said, “But Stella wouldn’t let me see it until you came home!”

Meta Knight crossed his arms and adopted a pouting expression. Galaxia caught Nightmare’s worried frown, but Meta Knight seemed to have missed it. “That’s right,” Nightmare said. “Don’t be cross with her. I told Stella to do that; I want to be sure Max and I don’t buy you the same present.”

“Oh!” Meta Knight brightened. “That makes sense.”

Nightmare chuckled and swept Meta Knight into his arms again. “I’m so happy to be home with you. Happy Solstice, happy birthday, little bat.”

Galaxia swept a hand across the room and waved the memory away. The pieces began to fit together in her mind. There was a mysterious present that Meta Knight never received. Suddenly, Nightmare had become violent and completely changed the way he spoke to his child. And the more Galaxia looked, the more changes there were. Nightmare’s greetings went from joyful hugs to cold inspections. It all seemed like too much to be a coincidence, but Galaxia wasn’t sure what the significance of it was.

But the more she shifted through Meta Knight’s memories, the more it seemed that Nightmare Nocturne—overnight—had become a completely different person. Meta Knight had always thought it’d been a gradual change, but it really hadn’t been. Galaxia waved her hand again and let the memories fade away.

She knew something was wrong but not what it was or how to fix it. She could try confronting Nightmare over it, or she could tell Meta Knight. Either one would bring her closer to Meta Knight but also closer to the absolute last person she needed to be near.

Meta Knight unlocked Dedede’s handcuffs and winced in sympathy at the red marks around Dedede’s wrists. They were in Dedede's room, where he would be kept with Nightmare’s magic, just like Delilah.
Meta Knight toyed with the handcuffs and guiltily avoided looking Dedede in the eye. “I have five minutes alone with you,” Meta Knight said, “If you want me to use them. If not, I can go.”

“No, I don’t want ya leaving yet,” Dedede said, putting his hands over Meta Knight’s. “Look. I love you, Meta.”

Reluctantly, Meta Knight forced himself to meet Dedede’s deep blue eyes. “I know,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think ya do, Meta. You ain’t gettin’ it. Remember when I said I only wanted to kiss ya ‘cause I was upset ‘bout the Yin-Yarn thing?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I lied.”

“Lied?”

“I jus’ said it to make you feel better. Really, I wanted to kiss you, and I’ve wanted to kiss ya ever since.”

“But you—”

“And I know the difference between te amo and te quiero, and I said the one I meant, Meta,” Dedede said. “I dunno how many different ways I gotta point it out, but I love you. I’m in love with you, and if you ain’t in love with me, it’s okay. But I gotta tell you that.”

Meta Knight stared incomprehensibly at Dedede. Not because Meta Knight didn’t understand. Oh, he understood the confession, but he couldn’t figure out when this had happened and how he’d missed it. He couldn’t figure out how to react. “You…love me?” Meta Knight finally said although it came out more like a question.
“Goddess, more than anything! And when the time comes, I trust you to do the right thing.”

But why would he trust Meta Knight to do anything? He wasn’t important. Not unless—

Meta Knight felt like an illusion, something insubstantial and barely there. “Dear Nova, you gave it to me,” Meta Knight whispered. “You shouldn’t have.”

“But I trust you, Meta. Why wouldn’t I give it to you and put Nightmare’s defeat in your hands, caballerito?”

“But you know what I am.”

“Yeah, I know whatcha are,” Dedede said, running his fingers through Meta Knight’s ruined hair and letting them linger there. “You’re my bestest, favoritest knight, and it don’t matter if you’re Mety Knight or the Knight of the Slaughter or some jumbled place between the two. I’m always gonna want ya.”

Meta Knight didn’t feel like he could breathe. Even after he’d messed everything up so many times, even after he’d taken Nightmare’s side so many times, Dedede still believed in him. Dedede loved him. Meta Knight was torn between fleeing and laughing because he didn’t understand how this could happen, and he didn’t know if he wanted it to happen like this. Or maybe he did and didn’t want it, but nothing made sense.

When Meta Knight tried to speak, he only managed a faint sort of choking noise.

“I dunno why you’re the only one who cain’t see how loved you really are,” Dedede said, “And I don’t just mean in the romantical kinda way. Mom and Dee and me. Kirbs. We all love you, but you don’t seem to get that. Or maybe you don’t wanna get it.”

“No, I get it. I just don’t understand it.”

Meta Knight hesitantly put his hand on the back of Dedede’s neck. He steeled himself and leaned forward. He half-missed Dedede’s mouth, and it wasn’t so much of a kiss as it was an awkward, butterfly-like peck. Meta Knight jerked back like he’d been burned, and even as he did, he felt warm and light and like there were swarms of butterflies in his stomach. “I’m so sorry,” Meta Knight said.
Meta Knight called his magic to him and teleported away. These were someone else’s chambers, and Meta Knight flopped back onto the bed amidst the metallic creaking of his armor. He stared blankly at the wall for what felt like an eternity. There was a massive, framed portrait of Queen Alera in her full, royal regalia. She looked deceptively serene. Her blue eyes were wise, her skin pale, and her brown hair artfully pulled back.

Meta Knight’s throat felt thick and tight, and when he thought of kissing Dedede, warmth flooded his face. This was bad, very bad. But it was so freeing. Dedede loved him. Really, really loved him. Meta Knight’s heart raced because he thought he might...actually...love Dedede back. This was the worst thing that possibly could’ve happened.

If Nightmare won, they wouldn’t work, and if Nightmare didn’t win, it wouldn’t work. Despite Galaxia’s reassurances, Meta Knight knew it wouldn’t be easy. He knew what people would see—some conniving Halcandran sorcerer who’d seduced a man with royal blood. And Alera would never approve of such a marriage. Sure, she no longer had the power to prevent it—Bikaia had taken away that right—but her condemnation would be enough to damage Dedede’s house beyond repair. There would be retaliation against Delilah for that, too.

And Meta Knight dared to consider that his father might be a better ruler. Anyone would be better than Alera. But Meta Knight knew, too, that he wouldn’t be happy in Nightmare won either. No matter how obedient, no matter how submissive, no matter how perfect Meta Knight was, it would never be enough.

Meta Knight stared at Queen Alera’s portrait and took a deep breath. “You’re a miserable, old woman, you know that?” Meta Knight asked.

Her portrait, of course, didn’t answer. ”I love you, Dedede,” Meta Knight said quietly, testing the words.

Those words sounded right. Too right. Meta Knight took a shuddering breath. He’d never been in love before, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought that he really did love Dedede.

And then, there was the matter of the Star Rod. Meta Knight had a piece of it, and Nightmare didn’t know. Even if Nightmare gathered everyone together, he’d only have four pieces—unless Meta Knight offered the fifth. And it didn’t really matter who gathered the pieces. It was all in who assembled them and grasped the Star Rod first. Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek and thought it out. He could flee, of course, but that would leave Dedede and Delilah at Nightmare’s mercy. The best choice was to press his advantage, to pretend he’d truly decided to fulfill his father’s wishes. But Meta Knight didn’t know where the others were. What if they were already together
and waiting for Dedede to join them—erroneously assuming he had a piece of the Star Rod? Maybe Meta Knight could persuade his father to let him leave the palace, though. If he could, he might be able to help at least a little. There was only one reason Nightmare would let him leave, at least, only one that Meta Knight could think of. How, then, was Meta Knight supposed to explain that he’d suddenly decided he wanted to fight Kirby?

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_**Kirby’s screams had died down to whimpers and gasps as Sectonia’s vines wrapped around him. He was asphyxiating, unable to move enough to draw breath. It was a slow way for someone to die, an unnecessarily cruel way for someone to die, but Kirby had defied her. Defiance was dangerous. Defiance had to be destroyed and punished.**_

_Sectonia had returned to her throne and watched as the reincarnation of dear, noble Bikaia slowly died. Galaxia was encased in Sectonia’s crystals, unable to help, although Galaxia still screamed in Sectonia’s mind. After a few moments, Sectonia strode past them and gazed into the Dimension Mirror. She didn’t remember how long the Mirror had been in her throne room, but she liked it there. Sectonia tilted her chin up and gazed at herself—her violet eyes, her dark hair, her pale skin. She looked beautiful, glorious even. The warrior queen that Dreamland deserved! The doors burst open behind her, and Dedede, hammer in hand, entered. Sectonia didn’t bother to turn around; instead, she watched his reflection._

_Dedede ran over to Kirby and futilely pulled at the vines. “What’ve ya done?” Dedede yelled._

_Sectonia sighed wearily._

_Meta Knight stepped from the Mirror and pulled her aside. Sectonia, her eyes dazzled, stared at him. He couldn’t be there. He couldn’t be alive. She’d killed him. She had, she had, she had. Sectonia shoved Meta Knight away._

_She’d killed Meta Knight. She was killing Kirby Stellarum, the young and innocent reincarnation of King Bikaia. She would kill Taranza, the only man she’d ever loved, the loose end. She’d kill Dedede. She would kill every threat she’d ever had, and dear Goddess, what had she done? What was she doing?_

_“Sectonia,” Meta Knight said._

_Why were they in the A.M.B.E.R. vault? Sectonia scrambled backward, nearly tripping on the hem_
of her massive gown. She didn’t recognize the gown, and was there a hoopskirt beneath it? What was happening? Meta Knight was dead. These weren’t her clothes. She’d been in the throne room.

This was Meta Knight’s fault somehow. She’d kill him.

Goddess, no!

She’d done it before.

“Meta Knight,” Sectonia snarled.

Meta Knight laughed. “Not quite. Although since you mention him, I’ve been thinking about taking his hair—well, what his hair once was.” As he spoke, Meta Knight brushed his hands through his hair. A blue, oil-like sheen spread across his hair until it was all midnight blue.

That wasn’t right. Sectonia put a hand to her forehead and tried to force her thoughts into a logical order. That wasn’t Meta Knight, was it? No. No, but she did know him. Who was he?

“Surely, you didn’t forget my eyes,” he said, closing the distance between them. “True beauty is control, princess. Control your powers. Control your thoughts. You know I’m not dear, honorable Meta Knight, don’t you?”

The man’s good eye gleamed as he bowed and lifted Sectonia’s hand. She flinched but made no move to stop him as his lips brushed her knuckles. “Dark,” she whispered, “From the Mirror World.”

He grinned and twirled a strand of his newly blue hair around a finger. “Got it! See? You’re not so far gone!”

“But I killed—”

“You didn’t kill anyone. I don’t know what you think you’ve done, but you didn’t do any of it,” Dark said. “It’s all right. Everyone is fine.”
Sectonia furrowed her brow.

“The Dimension Mirror shows you…truth. Your fears, your desires, your innermost self,” Dark said. “It doesn’t necessarily show you reality.”

“I saw myself kill Meta Knight. I tried to kill Kirby and Dedede, too,” Sectonia said. “I…I could be—”

“That doesn’t mean you will be,” Dark replied. “So maybe you’ve thought of killing Meta Knight. Maybe you’ve even thought out how you’d do it. That doesn’t mean you’re actually going to go through with it. People think hundreds of thoughts every day that they don’t really mean or intend to carry out.”

Sectonia swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I’m turning—” she cut off as the feel of too-familiar magic swept over her.

The Nightmare Wizard and Meta Knight. And something else, something light and fiery.

“Come with me,” Dark said, taking her hand.

“It’s the Star Rod, isn’t it?” Sectonia asked.

Dark nodded and pulled her through the Mirror with him. The world rippled around them; it felt like pushing through water. It was cold and dark, and in an instant, they were on the other side.

Dark dropped Sectonia’s hand. “Have you ever noticed anything…odd about Meta Knight’s father?” Dark asked.

She hadn’t done anything to Nightmare’s car. Nightmare was fine. “Odd? Not really.”

Dark nodded. “I have the same dimensional powers as Meta Knight, but unlike his, mine are bound to reflective surfaces. Most things will do, but I prefer the Dimension Mirror because it also has
certain magical qualities.”

“Like showing you...”

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve fantasized about breaking Meta Knight’s arm before and listening to his screams,” Dark said, his voice far too cheerful for the subject he was discussing. “I have violent thoughts about almost everyone.”

“That’s comforting,” Sectonia said, casting Dark a wary glance. “Does that include me?”

“The less said about you and me, the better,” Dark replied. “But the Mirror has other uses. Primarily, it reveals illusions. It’s also much stronger than the average mirror, so I know I can’t break it with my magic. There’s little worse than using your powers and receiving a face-full of glass shards.”

Dark tapped the Mirror, and Sectonia watched, transfixed, as the mirror-surface shimmered and rippled like liquid silver. In a blink, the mirror-surface was gone. They were looking inside the A.M.B.E.R. vault.

Meta Knight, wearing an absurd suit of armor, moved into view. Sectonia and Dark exchanged a shared look of mutual horror. Not only was Meta Knight’s armor design an aesthetic nightmare, but it might also get him killed. His breastplate looked too tight, especially around his waist, and Meta Knight’s pauldrons, while they looked imposing, were poorly constructed. If Meta Knight was stabbed in the shoulder, Sectonia doubted those pauldrons would even turn a blade. The poor boy looked like a child playing dress-up.

Sectonia tentatively put her fingertips to the Mirror. Relief blossomed in her chest at the sight of Meta Knight moving around, being alive, and not covered in blood and deathly pale. “Does he know we’re here?” Sectonia asked.

“I don’t know,” Dark said. “He can’t see or hear us unless I allow that, but he may know we’re watching.”

“But if he does—”

“Meta Knight won’t do anything,” Dark said.
“He’s sided with Nightmare,” Sectonia said.

And why wouldn’t he? Sectonia wasn’t worthy of Meta Knight’s loyalty.

“No, I don’t think so,” Dark replied. “He’s biding his time. When the time comes, I’ve no doubt he’ll do the right thing. That’s what I did.”

Meta Knight bent down. When he stood again, he held a happy red-furred puppy in his arms. At least, Sectonia thought it might be a puppy. It was really just a giant ball of fluff. Sectonia couldn’t imagine Nightmare giving Meta Knight a puppy out of altruism, but Meta Knight smiled slightly when it licked his cheek. He set it down again, although Sectonia caught flashes of red where it bounced around, begging to be picked up again. Then, Meta Knight looked straight at the Mirror and put his hand against it. The surface of the Mirror rippled like quicksilver.

“Oh, he’s testing the waters,” Dark said, quickly putting his hand over Meta Knight’s. “Are you coming through, darling?”

Meta Knight’s eyes looked very tired, and while his mask covered half his face, it didn’t entirely obscure the bruises trailing down his face and neck. And Sectonia had killed him and had felt such wonderful relief when he was dead. But here he was. Dark’s fingertips touched Meta Knight’s.

“Don’t!” Sectonia exclaimed. “If he comes through—”

“He can sense us, but Nightmare can’t. Not through the Mirror. I’d bet my life that Meta Knight won’t reveal us,” Dark said.

“Don’t bet on that! You can’t—"

“He’s a good man. He’s just in a terrible situation.” Dark paused and smiled mischievously. “Maybe I ought to make him my prisoner and remove him from that situation.”

“That might be a mutually beneficial choice,” Sectonia said, mulling the option over.
Have Dark abduct Meta Knight and keep him away from everyone. Keep him away from Nightmare, keep him away from *her*.

Dark arched an eyebrow. “Are you concerned about having to face him?”

She’d asked Dedede to bring her Meta Knight’s *heart*. How poetic, how terrible. “He’s a liability,” Sectonia said.

“And yet the thought of killing him upset you so much,” Dark replied.

Meta Knight turned his head and spoke, although his words didn’t travel past the Mirror. Sectonia grasped her rapiers tightly, waiting for Meta Knight and his father to emerge. But could she bear to face either of them? That didn’t happen. Instead, Meta Knight’s knees suddenly buckled.

Before Meta Knight could hit the ground, a man stepped close and caught him around his waist. Sectonia’s jaw dropped, although she uttered no sound. She was too stunned to scream. That man wasn’t human. His skin was unnaturally flat and black like a shadow rather than real skin and his irises red. The man had hair, but it seemed to move of its own accord, as if by the will of an unfeelable wind. He looked like a dead man. No, not even a man. Like the shadow of a skeleton. No living creature could possibly be so thin. When the man placed a finger beneath Meta Knight’s chin, Sectonia swore she could see light filtering between the joints in that twig-thin finger. Sectonia shuddered.

She wanted to look away, to somehow burst through the mirror and scream, but she remained immobile. Meta Knight was seemingly fast asleep, and that man—that creature—kept touching him, petting his hair and face. While Sectonia had fallen into something akin to stunned silence, Dark only seemed to grow angrier. He clenched his fists and glared at the Mirror as if trying to destroy it with the strength of his gaze.

Suddenly, the Mirror rippled, and cracks spread across its surface. The sound of glass shattering filled the room.

“He broke the Mirror,” Dark said. “As if I’d let *that* stop me.”

“What is that?” Sectonia asked, her voice very quiet. “What on Pop Star has Nightmare summoned?”
“I have no idea, princess, but I suspect this man hasn’t been Nightmare Nocturne in a very long time.”

Kirby was still half-caught in his dream. Everyone had been in Kirby’s Dreamlandic composition class which didn’t make sense, as neither Meta Knight, Bandanna Dee, nor Dedede took that class with him. But in the dream, Bandanna Dee had plopped down beside Kirby, panicking about a composition quiz that Kirby had completely forgotten about. Desperate, Kirby had flipped through his textbook and tried to find the three rhetorical appeals.

Then, Dedede had waltzed in. Literally waltzed. Meta Knight had tried to follow but been hindered by a massive pair of white, feathered wings. Rather than folding them behind his back or simply teleporting into the room, Meta Knight had dutifully followed Dedede’s increasingly outlandish—and ultimately failed—schemes to get Meta Knight inside the classroom.

Kirby’s nose tickled. He sneezed, startling away a large, orange butterfly. Slowly, Kirby sat upright. He was in a stretch of grass. There was a very modern-looking building made of metal and glass behind him. A light breeze ruffled his hair. These weren’t his clothes.

Kirby wore what appeared to be a mint green cape and tunic, the hems of both richly embroidered with golden swirls and stars. Red leggings. Those were surprisingly comfortable. Kirby lifted a foot and gawked at his boots; they looked to be made of glass and were embellished with gold swirls. They had thick, high heels. Kirby carefully stood and looked over his shoulder, observing the rest of the outfit. There was a hat that matched the cape. Kirby pulled it off; it was made like a windsock and decorated with stars and wings. Very pretty. Kirby placed it back on his head and unsheathed the sword from his scabbard. It was a rapier and like the boots appeared to be made of glass. He sheathed it again.

Where was he? Was it another dream? It felt too real to be a dream. Kirby pinched himself; it hurt. What was this? Kirby walked into the building, his heels clicking on the black tile floor. He’d entered a lobby. Behind the receptionist’s dark wood desk, the moonlight caught the gleaming silver words engraved into the black wall: Haltmann Works Inc.

Was he in the capital? That was where Haltmann Works’s main headquarters was, but Kirby knew they had other buildings in Dreamland. One was in Mekkai—somewhere Kirby had never been—but he knew there were more.
Wherever he was, this building seemed completely abandoned.

He froze when he saw his reflection in the pristine glass of the windows. When he stood there and looked fully at himself, he recognized this outfit. These weren’t his clothes; these were Bikaia’s. Kirby recognized the outfit from one of Bikaia’s many royal portraits, but what Kirby didn’t recognize was the brown hair. This was, indeed, Kirby’s face and body and hair, but his pink locks had been replaced with brown.

This had to be a dream. Why didn’t it feel like a dream?

Kirby walked slowly and carefully, his heels trying to slip on the polished floors. All his instincts screamed at him. There was something wrong, something very wrong. “Hello?” Kirby asked. “Anyone?”

Something hot and powerful edged in Kirby’s mind. It was the same sensation he’d felt when Galaxia spoke to him, but Kirby knew immediately this wasn’t Galaxia. Kirby gulped and waited, continuing to gaze at his reflection. The more he looked, the more he didn’t feel like himself.

Kirby? Bandanna Dee’s voice broke tentatively through his thoughts.

Kirby started. “Bandanna Dee? Where are you?”

Bandanna Dee’s breath hitched. Behind the receptionist desk. I’m coming. I don’t know what’s happened.

Receptionist. Kirby had passed that. He turned around and made to backtrack, but the sight of a red dragon halted him in his tracks. Oh, Nova. Kirby’s hand went to his sword, and the dragon froze. Kirby, it’s me.

Slowly, Kirby drew his hand away from his sword’s hilt. “Bandanna Dee, y—you’re a dragon!”

Meta Knight ran his fingers through his damp hair. He’d washed it and tried to even it out, but he wasn’t a hair stylist. Even if he had been, no amount of cutting would return his hair to its former
glory. And wasn’t it just so selfish to worry about his hair? Father was trying to conquer Dreamland. Father was holding both Dedede and his mother captive. Father wanted Meta Knight and Kirby to fight—possibly to death.

And Meta Knight was still bothered by his hair.

Meta Knight lowered his head and turned away from the bathroom mirror. He toweled his hair dry as he entered his room and sat on the edge of the bed. Despite being Dedede’s servant, he’d never taken up residence in the antechamber of Dedede’s bedroom, as was custom for servants of aristocrats. Instead, Meta Knight had always been given his own room at Delilah’s insistence. She’d believed Meta Knight needed his own space.

Meta Knight winced. Poor Delilah. Poor Dedede. Locked in their own apartments, guarded by Nightmare’s magic, and unable even to speak to one another.

Magic. A delicate blend of flowers and alcohol wafted into the air, and Meta Knight scrambled backward, pushing aside the handkerchief that’d nearly been shoved in his face.

Dark’s single red eye glowed with amusement. “Surprise.”

“Did you—is that chloroform?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yes.”

Meta Knight slipped off the bed, keeping it between them. “And why are you trying to shove chloroform in my face?”

Dark tilted his head, mirroring the same gesture Meta Knight made when he was puzzled. “Because I’m abducting you,” Dark said. “I thought it’d be a nice surprise. You wake up in the Mirror World, and—”

“What? No! That would be horrifying! And besides, chloroform? It takes five minutes to knock someone out with that. Were you seriously going to pin me to the bed for five minutes?”
“Well, as hard as this may be to believe, I don’t drug and abduct people that often,” Dark admitted, looking vaguely put-out. “I told one of my doctors that I needed to render someone unconscious, and he gave me chloroform. I’m more curious about how many people you’ve drugged with chloroform since you know so much.”

“I paid attention in chemistry,” Meta Knight replied.

“I knew I should’ve taken potion-making more seriously,” Dark said, sighing dramatically. “I don’t suppose you’ll willingly crawl into the flour-sack I brought with me?”

“You were going to shove me in a flour-sack?”

Dark pulled the flour-sack from beneath his tunic and looked ridiculously proud of himself. “How else was I supposed to carry you? Last time, I had Dedede carry you over his shoulder, but he’s away from court. And I thought I’d surprise Shadow and Sectonia with you!”

That flour-sack might have been large enough to hold Meta Knight, but it certainly wouldn’t have been very comfortable. "Sectonia?” Meta Knight asked. "I did sense her, then."

"She's not bad company," Dark said, "And she's going to be my guest for a while. An actual guest. Not...how Father defined guests."

That's where one piece of the Star Rod was, then. “So you were just...going to put me in that and carry me through a mirror,” Meta Knight said.

“I don’t know if I would’ve been able to carry you. I’d envisioned more dragging, actually, and hoping you weren’t too badly bruised by the endeavor.” Dark paused. "Although looking at you, I don't think I could do much more damage."

Meta Knight very consciously didn’t let his jaw drop. “Are we sure you’re my reflection?” he asked.

“Indubitably,” Dark replied, “But it’s fine. I can persuade you. I’ve been reading about rhetorical and diplomatic strategies ever since Father died.”
“No, you should leave. Father might be unable to decipher our individual magical signatures because of what we are to one another, but he still might check in on me.”

“Poor Meta Knight, you probably can’t even pass water without your father’s observation.”

“Pass water?”

Dark arched an eyebrow. “I hadn’t thought you to be a man who would be so embarrassed by his bodily functions.”

“I was unfamiliar with the euphemism.”

“Oh! It means—”

“I get it now. Thank you.”

Meta Knight wasn’t particularly embarrassed by his bodily functions, but he really didn’t want to talk about them with Dark.

“And that’s really hypocritical coming from someone who’s been spying on my dreams,” Meta Knight added. “Have you been—did you watch me shower, too?”

“I’m literally a reflection of you. There’s no part of you that I haven’t already seen.”

“That isn’t the point!”

“But I wasn’t,” Dark said. “I just sort of listened in and waited. I wouldn’t have been able to see you anyway; your water must’ve been hot enough to boil you alive with as much steam—anyway, look. Shadow worries about you.”

“Then, tell Shadow I’m fine.”
“But that would be *lying*.”

“Because I’m sure you’ve never lied before in your life,” Meta Knight replied.

Dark looked at his handkerchief and shoved it in his coat pocket. “Did Nightmare take your magic from you?” Dark asked.

“My magic is fine,” Meta Knight said.

“Of course, it is. You’re in a dream. I mean, *outside* of the dream.”

Meta Knight shook his head. “I’m on suppressants anyway until I’m better.”

“That’s just odd,” Dark replied. “To willingly strip yourself of your powers.”

“It beats heart failure.”

Dark looked like he had several questions about that. “Did Nightmare cut off all your beautiful hair?” he asked instead.

“It’s just hair. It’ll grow back.”

Dark rolled his eyes. “How often did you wash it?”

“That’s none of your business, creep.”

Dark ran his fingers through his hair, using his magic to make it resemble the hair Meta Knight once had. Although Meta Knight fought to keep his face expressionless, he wanted to throw up. Was it unreasonable to really miss his hair? It just looked so long and bright and *nice* on Dark. “It was very lovely,” Dark said. “How long did it take to grow it out like that?”
“Years.” Meta Knight’s mouth was dry.

“So shiny and silky, too. I bet you washed your hair every night. Of course, you must’ve dyed it often, too. Dye fades, after all. Years of care suddenly gone because your father didn’t like it.”

“You weren’t even there. Maybe I cut it,” Meta Knight said.

“Right. I’m sure you would’ve cut it and left it jagged and uneven,” Dark snapped. “No, I can guess exactly what happened. You did something your father didn’t like, so he took something you cared about. And even if your hair will grow back, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s your hair. It’s a form of humiliation, and I know that because my father used to cut the hair of his prisoners—and sometimes his female servants—as a form of punishment.”

“Did you come here just to give me a lecture?” Meta Knight asked. “I know what he did was awful. I know I was wrong to trust him. I get it now. But do you have any idea how difficult it will be to leave Father? Do you realize—”

“Well, kill him! Look; diplomacy is nice. I’ll admit that I enjoy having the freedom to solve my problems without bloodshed, but this situation with your father isn’t going to be one of those instances. Sometimes, the best solution is to put a sword through someone’s face,” Dark said.

“I don’t know if I can,” Meta Knight said, dropping onto his bed. “I don’t have Galaxia. I don’t have the Star Rod. I know he’s too powerful if it’s just me, and he’ll be more powerful now that we’re in the dream-world.”

“Then, you’ll reunite the Star Rod for Dedede and choose another battlefield. If Nightmare isn’t in the dream-world, he won’t be as powerful.”

Meta Knight grimaced. “That wouldn’t work. In Dreamland, I’m on suppressants and injured. The moment I left the dream-world with Father, I’d be completely at his mercy and unable to get back. Besides, I can’t defeat him on my own. I’d have to take multiple people from the dream-world at the same time, and I don’t know if I could manage that.”

“I didn’t mean Dreamland. I meant we trick him into entering the Mirror World. Find a mirror and shove him into it.”
“You want my father waging war in your kingdom?”

Dark grinned. “Do you know what it takes to become a god, Meta Knight?”

“It’s a competition between a god and another powerful being, but it’s complicated. Both parties have to know there’s a challenge and accept it. You can’t just declare that you’re challenging a god to a bake-off and declare yourself the winner.”

“So with Father deceased, the god of the Mirror World became his vanquisher,” Dark replied, “Although I suppose goddess would be the more accurate title.”

“Galaxia,” Meta Knight replied, wide-eyed. “Galaxia is your goddess?”

Dark nodded. “Yes, which means that her powers are greater in my world. Because of your bond with her, your powers might be greater as well.”

Meta Knight felt his father’s presence draw nearer, and he tensed at it. Dark edged close to Meta Knight and patted his head; the playfulness the gesture might’ve held was lost in Dark’s furrowed brow. “I know you love him, and I know you’re scared and confused,” Dark said, “But mull it over, Meta Knight. You don’t have to face him alone.”

“You’re not going to try abducting me again?” Meta Knight asked.

“Oh, that was just for my amusement. I thought it’d be entertaining if I succeeded,” Dark replied cheerfully, “But even if I’d abducted you, I didn’t have any intention of keeping you against your will. Do remember that, darling Meta Knight. Your father forced you into this situation and coerced you into compliance, but I gave you a choice.”

Dark sauntered back to the mirror and paused. He turned around, his gaze contemplative. “Meta Knight, your father…” Dark trailed off.

“What about him?”

Dark opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. He finally sighed and shook his
head. "Nothing, darling."
Meta Knight had little he needed to do and little he could do without his father hovering over his shoulder, so he thought he’d pass the time researching all he could about the Star Rod and Nova’s contest with the wizard centuries before. It was frustrating because Meta Knight knew that—since this contest involved Bikaia—Galaxia would probably have all the answers. It’d occurred to Meta Knight, though, that even if he’d managed to join everyone else, he had no idea how to summon the Star Rod. Was it enough to get everyone in a room together, or did everyone need to be at the Fountain of Dreams? Was there an incantation? Nightmare obviously knew, but Meta Knight didn’t think it wise to pry into that. Nightmare might question his loyalty over that sort of inquiry.

Instead, Meta Knight went to the palace library. The library encompassed an entire wing of the palace and took up four floors. Aside from the books, the library also housed the largest collection of Classical Dreamlandic art in the entire kingdom. Admittedly, Meta Knight had never taken much interest in it, but perhaps he appreciated it a bit more after listening Drawcia talk about it. He’d missed a quite a bit of her classes, but he still knew enough to recognize the different styles and a couple of the artists.

However, while he’d once been ambivalent towards the popular depiction of Galacta Knight as a mostly nude warrior, those same depictions now made him very uncomfortable. Meta Knight was still bothered by Galaxia’s appearance as a slender, Dreamlandic woman, but at least the Classical art hadn’t put Galaxia in a chainmail bikini like that one bad fantasy movie Meta Knight had watched with Kirby.

The library looked emptier than usual, and at first, Meta Knight couldn’t really discern why. That was until he realized there was no sign of Bikaia, Dreamland’s most famous king, and Meta Knight knew there once had been. The library had contained at least six portraits of the famous king, and they were all missing. Meta Knight tried to recall if he’d read anything in the news about those portraits being removed for cleaning, but he knew also that he probably wouldn’t have noticed a story like that.

Bandanna Dee would’ve probably mentioned it, though.
Nightmare’s magic crept up Meta Knight’s spine like the first cold breath of winter. As he waited to see if his father would make an appearance, Meta Knight wandered around—systematically searching the glass cases for any sign of Dreamland’s favorite king. One case claimed to house Bikaia’s crown, but it was empty, too.

“Doing some reading, dearest?” Nightmare asked.

“I was thinking about it. You’ve been redecorating, Father?”

That was the alternative; if the portraits and artifacts weren’t being cleaned, Nightmare must’ve done something with them.

Nightmare’s gaze flickered to the empty space on the wall across from them. “When I win, I’m going to erase every trace of Bikaia,” Nightmare said. “It will be as if he never existed. I thought beginning early would be cathartic, and it was.”

“What did you do to them, though? Just take them down or destroy them?”

“I didn’t realize you were so interested in Dreamlandic art.”

Meta Knight shook his head. “I’m thinking more about how much this collection is worth,” he lied.

Although any one of those portraits was probably four years of tuition at DLU. The palace didn't keep copies. Those portraits were as old as Bikaia, and while there were many reproductions of them, the originals were in very limited supply.

“The portraits I slashed apart. I’m saving Bikaia’s crown for something…different.”

“But why?”

“Monsters are created from man’s fear of the unknown, Meta Knight, but there is little more monstrous than human beings. Human beings and all their fickle emotions. They’re so quick to
turn on one another and vilify anything that doesn’t fit into their ideal view of what the world should be.”

That didn’t really answer the question, or maybe Meta Knight just wasn't putting the puzzle pieces together in the right way.

“You’re a man, too,” Meta Knight said.

Nightmare laughed harshly. “No, I’m going to be a god, dearest. I’m going to bring order to this world. Kirby is a threat to the first world I can create, but then, you’ve never had his powers used on you. How could you possibly understand?”

But when had Nightmare? Hadn’t he always insisted that Kirby never touch anyone?

“Kirby has used his powers on me. He’s Copied my swordplay before.”

“Your swordplay? Oh, Meta Knight, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Bikaia is a creature of infinite power. He surpasses both of us, or he will if he learns to master his powers.”

“Kirby, you mean,” Meta Knight said.

“Right. Of course. Kirby Stellarum.”

“Then, why am I your second-in-command?” Meta Knight asked. “If Kirby is so powerful, why wouldn’t you prefer him?”

“Because you’re just like me,” Nightmare said. “We’ve both suffered. We both understand the injustices in the world. What would a child like Kirby know about moral complexity? His world is black and white.”

Meta Knight privately thought that suffering had made him a bitter, nervous wreck in need of a good psychiatrist, but he didn’t dare say so. Instead, he was trying to pick apart his life and all the terrible things that had happened. He was trying to figure out how many of those his father might’ve been the driving cause for, and in the end, it didn’t really matter. The fact that Meta
Knight felt the need to consider how much his father might’ve purposefully hurt him said everything.

“But what has Bikaia done to you? He’s the noblest king Dreamland ever had. Even if you won, Father, the people of Dreamland wouldn’t just allow you to erase someone like Bikaia.”

As he said it, something in Meta Knight’s mind clicked into place and cast the world into an entirely different light. Bikaia was very similar to Kirby. Meta Knight had known that already, of course, but he hadn’t noticed the similarity quite in *this* light before. Kirby was like Bikaia because they were both brave, determined, and lively. And that was Meta Knight’s brother. If Nightmare wasn’t around, Kirby and Meta Knight could be proper siblings. They could be like a real family! A real family and not Nightmare’s warped idea of a family. Maybe the whole time Meta Knight had been trying to earn the love of the wrong family member. Maybe he should’ve spent more time learning about Kirby and more time hanging out with him.

Maybe Meta Knight could learn something from Kirby, who was so receptive to friendship. So cheerful and compassionate. Kirby, who upon learning about Meta Knight’s abuse, had immediately taken his side and believed him. Meta Knight gave so few people in his life chances, much less second chances. He continued to hold grudges against Marx and Magolor, even though those offenses had occurred when they were all teenagers. And if he was honest with himself, Meta Knight knew that he hadn't exactly been a great person either. Brave enough, strong enough, and honorable enough for Galaxia. But he hadn't been a good man or a good friend, really. Galaxia looked for a warrior. Not a saint. Or maybe Galaxia looked for potential, and she’d seen what Meta Knight was and what he *could be*. Meta Knight had been scrappy and picked fights with everyone, even when he knew that was a bad idea.

For all Dedede had said about *Meta Knight* changing *him*, that had really worked both ways. Meta Knight had liked Dedede and his mother, who were the first people in a very long time to really *take care* of him in such a long time. There were other little offenses, too, and Meta Knight had treated all of them the same. People who wronged him, even if it was just once, weren't worthy of forgiveness, and yet he’d chosen Nightmare far too many times and for far too long.

“They’ll submit to my will, or they’ll die,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight looked at his father, who he feared more than anyone else in the world. If Meta Knight survived this, he resolved to be far less like his father. He would make an earnest effort to be more like Kirby and to try really hard to rely more on the love and support of his friends. To rely on people who were worth such devotion.

“Would it make you happy if I fought Kirby?” Meta Knight asked. “Because, with your blessing, I’m willing to try.”
Kirby lay back against Bandanna Dee’s smooth scales. Bandanna Dee wasn’t a particularly large
dragon, being only about the size of a twin-size bed, but he was very sleek and lovely. His scales
and wings were a rich, amber-red color and warm to the touch. They’d settled on the lobby floor
after exhausting all their other options. Calling for help? The phones were dead. Going somewhere
else? It was night. Asking for help? No one else seemed to be around. Gathering supplies? Nearly
all the offices were locked. Instead, they’d salvaged what food they could from the employee
lounge, reasoning that it would quickly go bad without proper refrigeration, and decided to try
something else in the morning.

Wandering around aimlessly wasn’t really something Kirby wanted to do either; he’d hurt his ankle
when trying to walk in Bikaia’s glass boots. His ankle wasn’t swollen but kept throbbing, and he
thought it might be sprained. Curse Bikaia’s shoes.

This is sort of interesting, Bandanna Dee said. I always wanted to be a dragon-knight when I was a
child. Until I learned dragons aren’t so common anymore.

“That’s cool,” Kirby said. “I always wanted to be a prince. But not…an actual prince. More like a
fairytales prince. A noble, fairytales prince. Not one of the ones that sexually assaulted unconscious
women.”

You wanted to be like Fluff, Bandanna Dee replied.

Thinking about Prince Fluff’s warm, brown eyes and dazzling smile made Kirby’s insides flutter in
the most pleasant way. “Yeah! Exactly like Prince Fluff.”

When we…aren’t here anymore, you should ask him to do something with you, Bandanna Dee
said. Or with us. I think he’s nice, too. I was considering going to the Duchy of the Clouds during
fall break. The College of Arts and Sciences is hosting a trip to visit the major historical sights—
Raisin Ruins, White Wafers, and a couple others. Dedede and Meta Knight were talking about
going. You and Fluff could come with us. It’d be fun.

“But surely, he’s too busy. He’s a…Mr. Important Prince-Guy,” Kirby said.
But right now, he’s a prince without a country, and he might appreciate not being under Alera’s eye so much. The Queen can be very exhausting.

"Maybe," Kirby said, "Although I wonder if I'm mostly just...besotted with the idea of what he is. I really like princes."

And here you are, dressed like King Bikaia.

Kirby inwardly cringed as he recalled the struggle it’d taken to get Bikaia’s boots off. Although they’d looked very nice and initially been fine, Kirby had quickly realized that heels that high weren’t comfortable. He’d also realized he couldn’t bend his knees and that glass held condensation very well. It’d been especially difficult because after Kirby hurt his right ankle, and his foot wouldn’t bend properly. “Well, I wish it’d been a different outfit,” Kirby said.

Seriously, there were only hundreds of portraits of King Bikaia, including ones where he was dressed much more practically. Why couldn’t Kirby have Bikaia’s elegantly etched armor and soft-looking, velvet cape? Or the clothes Bikaia wore adventuring? Almost any of his outfits would’ve been better than something so uncomfortable, which was probably only meant to be worn for a single portrait.

If you’re dressed like Bikaia, and I’m a dragon, do you think Dedede and Meta Knight are dressed like Nova and Galacta Knight?

“Maybe.”

Bandanna Dee groaned. I’m imagining Dedede dressed as a Classical statue of Nova.

Kirby winced. Classical depictions of Nova were typically nude from the waist-up, and below that, Nova typically wore what looked like a bed sheet. It wasn’t just any bed sheet, though; it was a bed sheet that clung to every curve of the goddess’s legs, as fit with the so-called “wet drapery” style of the era.

Not that Classical depictions of Galacta Knight would be much better, Bandanna Dee mused.

No, because Galacta Knight hadn’t even received a glorified bedsheets in the Classical era. In the best-case scenario, her shield and lance preserved her modesty.
“Do you think this is something Dad’s done?” Kirby asked.

Bandanna Dee tensed.

“He is one of the two people who know what we all are,” Kirby replied.

_That we know of._

“He also has dream-magic,” Kirby said. “I just…wonder what he’s trying to do. I think I hate him. Is that bad? I want to think that he…might have some hope for redemption, but the way he treats Meta Knight…”

_Oh, Kirby._

“And Dad just acts like I don’t…I haven’t mattered to him since I came to DLU. I thought if I moved closer to him, we’d be closer, but that hasn’t happened. Instead, I just…it hurts when Dad…”

_When he what?_

“When he slipped up and said Meta Knight was his only child,” Kirby said. “I know that’s a silly thing to be upset over, but it’s like…I don’t know. I feel like he really does think of Meta Knight as being his only child. I’m just an obligation, and I feel so selfish for thinking that way.”

_Kirby, people can change,_ Bandanna Dee said, _But they have to want to change. And with a man like Nightmare, I don’t think that’s ever going to happen. He’s never going to be a better father. He’s never going to be the father you deserve._

“I think I know that. But what do I do?”

_You cut ties with him and make your own family. You surround yourself with people who love you,_ Bandanna Dee said.
“That’s easier said than done, though.”

_Trust me. I know._

Kirby sighed. “Is that what you did?” he asked.

_It’s what I’ve tried to do, Bandanna Dee said. Come on. I’ll show you my parents._

Bandanna Dee climbed to his feet, and beside him, Kirby did the same, tentatively putting weight on his injured foot. It ached, but he felt like he could walk. “Your parents?” Kirby asked.

_My father is Count Perry, the Lord of Halfmoon, Bandanna Dee said._

Kirby’s eyes widened. His knowledge of the aristocracy wasn’t great, but even he had heard of Count Perry. “But I thought you were related to Dedede.”

He _could_ walk, but he limped a bit. Bandanna Dee paused and lowered his wing. _Do you want a ride?_

Kirby brightened. This opportunity would probably never present itself again. Carefully, he climbed onto Bandanna Dee's back. "Is that all right?" Kirby asked.

_You're as light as a feather! Don't worry. Now, what were we talking about?_

"Your family."

_Right. Bikaia. Technically, I am related to him if you go back far enough, Bandanna Dee said. We all eventually trace our lineage back to Bikaia—even if it’s very convoluted. I’m the several times’ great-grandson of Bikaia’s youngest daughter’s second husband’s eldest son._

Bandanna Dee folded his wings and edged warily through the doorway.
I have so much sympathy for Fae now, Bandanna Dee said. Those wings must make everything so much harder.

“You’ve been here before, though?”

Yes, Bandanna Dee replied, But most aristocrats have, at least, a passing relationship with the Haltmanns. Haltmann Works main office is in the capital, of course, but he still does a lot of his work in Mekkai and Hotbeat.

"Have you been here often, then?"

Yes. My parents met with Haltmann here sometimes. When I was a child, I was never interested in those meetings, so I usually spent my time with Heavy Lobster. He worked in tech. You’re probably more familiar with his son Brad.

“Brad?”

He’s better known as Computer Virus. Bandanna Dee said. He took down the whole A.M.B.E.R. server a few years ago. He works for Nightmare now.

“How isn’t he still in jail?”

Bandanna Dee’s laughter echoed in Kirby’s mind. Never underestimate the power of a good lawyer. Or in your father’s case, a good team of lawyers.

They continued around the corner, Bandanna Dee’s new claws clicking along the tiles. Portraits lined the walls, illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows across from them. Kirby recognized Max Haltmann, Queen Alera, Princess Sectonia, Dame Garlude, and Sir Ebrum, the head of the cabinet and Minister of the Treasury. Past them was a painting of an elegantly dressed Dreamlandic couple. The woman in the picture wore a long, flowing dress that was clearly meant to harken back to the Bikaian era, and the man wore modern, polished armor. The plaque beneath the portrait announced them as the Count and Countess of Halfmoon.
This portrait was painted by the court painter, Elline Lux Nova. She's the youngest person to ever become the court painter in Dreamland. She painted me also, and I sort of wish, now that I've transitioned, that I could commission her to paint me again.

"She's very talented," Kirby said.

She's partly why I became interested in art, Bandanna Dee said. She and her partner Claycia.

"Partner as in...? Sorry. I don't know much about contemporary artists."

As in, they work together, but they're also together. Claycia works in sculpture. Not for the Queen, though.

Firelight burst into the lobby behind them. Startled, Kirby drew his rapier. Bandanna Dee, quick and lithe, twisted around and spread his wings.

A massive wolf with thick, red fur and large, glittering teeth padded through the lobby. Kirby’s jaw dropped. It took him an incredibly long amount of time to realize there was a black-armored knight riding the wolf.

“You have a dragon?” the knight asked.

Kirby knew that voice and lowered his rapier.

It's me.

“Bandanna Dee?” Meta Knight asked. "You’re a dragon. Well, I suppose there goes my plan for a mounted sword-fight."

As I recall, equestrian sports aren’t your strong suit.

“Is that an outfit of Bikaia’s?” Meta Knight asked, clearly in a transparent attempt to change the subject. “From his...curses, we read about it.”
“Right. Dear Nova, did you have to wear the shoes?” Meta Knight asked.

“Uh-huh.”

Meta Knight became silent as if he needed to physically process what he was being told.

You look like a character in that really bad Bikaia cartoon. That armor is dreadful, Bandanna Dee said.

“There was a cartoon?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight dismounted the wolfwrath and petted its side. “There is, and Dedede loves it. It’s so bad, though,” Meta Knight said. “Down, girl.”

In the blink of an eye, the wolfwrath shrunk to the size of a small lapdog. She barked happily and danced around Meta Knight’s feet until he picked her up and held her. “I was hoping for a duel,” Meta Knight admitted. “For fun.”

"I think I twisted my ankle," Kirby said, "So that's probably not a good idea."

Meta Knight, what's going on?

“Father has challenged Dedede for the godship over Dreamland. They’re in a competition to retrieve the five pieces of the Star Rod, held by five champions. As far as Father knows, those five are the two of you, Princess Sectonia, Dedede, and Galaxia.”

As far as he knows?

“I have Dedede’s piece.”
“So we just have to put those people together?” Kirby asked, still unsure whether or not he was dreaming.

His dad really wanted to usurp Nova and become the god of Dreamland?

“Not quite. We have to put those five people together and summon the Star Rod, and I’ve honestly no idea how to do that. I assume Galaxia would, though. She was there the first time this happened,” Meta Knight replied.

*Wait. Can we back up? Nightmare wants to be Dreamland’s god?*

Meta Knight nodded.

*A god. The god of Dreamland.*

“It’s a long story, but that’s what is happening. Why don’t we commandeer Haltmann’s office and swap information?” Meta Knight asked.

“If you can get in,” Kirby said. “All the offices are locked, and we didn’t want to break anything.”

Meta Knight's lips quirked into a small smile. “Well, teleportation *does* have a couple advantages.”

Sectonia was grateful to be in a shirt and pants, even though her desire to wear something aside from Nightmare's massive ballgown seemed utterly baffling to Dark. The king of the Mirror World hadn't seemed rude, necessarily, but when Sectonia had commented that she hated the dress, Dark had launched into an enthusiastic lecture about how lovely the dress was. How elegant the gold embroidery on the midnight blue velvet was, how nicely the bodice was shaped, and how wonderful the hoopskirt was crafted. Apparently, Nightmare Nocturne could’ve had an incredibly profitable career in designing historical costumes for women.
Dark stood when Sectonia entered their vast dining hall. Dark sat at the head of the table, as was custom for the most highly ranked royal, and pulled out the vacant chair to his right. Sectonia sat and let him push her in. She really hadn’t anticipated such gentlemanly behavior. “I will apologize in advance, princess,” Dark said, beckoning to his servants. “It seems Shadow is tardy, and I anticipate him interrupting us. Surely, he wouldn’t want to miss your visit; we so seldom have guests that don’t want to kill us. Shadow used to be so punctual, but since I’ve taken the throne, he’s become quite lax in his duties.”

Sectonia was beginning to wonder which was worse—the Meta Knight who was the son of Nightmare and the reincarnation of the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy or this impish king. Meta Knight was at least familiar, and A.M.B.E.R. had a psychological profile on him. Dark wasn’t really nice, but he wasn’t really a monster either. He was just kind of odd. Like an overly-enthusiastic, purposefully over-friendly cashier you’d find at a store selling alternative fashion. “I see,” Sectonia said.

“He’s happier, though,” Dark added. “Not so nervous these days.”

Servants arrived with wine and bowls of potato soup. It seemed that formal dining conventions really didn’t differ much. That was a relief.

“Long live the Queen,” Dark said, cheekily raising his goblet in a toast.

“Nova willing, I won’t be a queen for many more years,” Sectonia said.

And who knew what state Dreamland would be in when her mother was finished with it? How funny that Sectonia had spent her whole life trying to be exactly what her mother wanted—only to despise herself for succeeding. Even what her mother wanted wasn’t enough, though. The Queen had made that quite clear.

“Well, you never know when lightning will strike a liar,” Dark replied. “I imagine people in your circle lie often and flirt with fate each time.”

Shadow, wearing what looked like some strange, pastel hybrid of a jester’s outfit and a mage’s robes, skipped in. “How kind of you to join us, Shadow,” Dark said.

Shadow approached his brother and bopped the tip of his nose with a magic wand.
Dark scowled. “I know where you sleep at night. And where you bathe.”

“Oh, Dark, you do pay attention to me!” Shadow exclaimed.

“Don’t even—”

Shadow leaned in and kissed Dark’s scarred cheek. “I love you, too, my king,” Shadow said.

“We have a guest, Shadow. A lady,” Dark said.

Shadow turned his attention to Sectonia. He swept into a deep bow. “Hi! It’s great to see you again!” Shadow chirped, as he swept into the seat across from her.

Servants hastened to provide their prince food and drink.

“Add some belladonna to his wine, won’t you?” Dark asked, smirking over his goblet.

“They can’t,” Shadow replied. “The palace maids have already purchased and used all the belladonna in the kingdom.”


Shadow nodded enthusiastically. “Some young women put drops of it in their eyes to make them brighter!”

That sounded like a very bad idea.

“So how is Meta Knight?” Shadow asked.
“About the same,” Dark said. “We’ve been plotting together.”

“Ooh,” Shadow said, “And you left me out?”

“I’ll include you next time,” Dark replied.

“Did you tell him that his father is being possessed by something?” Sectonia asked.

“No,” Dark said, “Because there’s no point in that. Meta Knight is already going to face his father. Why would I make the task even more difficult for him? Why would I choose to saddle him with the guilt that he didn’t realize it wasn’t his father all these years? The best possible way for this to play out is for Meta Knight and Kirby to slay their abuser and end it. What harm is there in letting Meta Knight believe that this is his father and always has been his father? Between his father and mine, I think Meta Knight has been through enough.”

Sectonia pursed her lips. “But it might be the evidence he needs to choose the right side,” Sectonia said.

“No one knows what he’s thinking better than me,” Dark replied. “Someday, princess, your lack of trust in people is going to return to haunt you.”

“I don’t have the luxury of trusting people.”

“I’ll wager you’re a popular dame at parties,” Dark said, resting his cheek in his hand. “So quick-witted! So optimistic!”

“Please, don’t fight at the dinner table,” Shadow said.

“We aren’t fighting,” Dark answered. “Don’t worry, darling. I couldn’t live with myself if I marred such beauty.”

“What are you talking about?” Sectonia asked.
Dark ran his finger around the rim of his goblet. “Our father was terrible to everyone, but he had this particular fixation with maiming beautiful, young women. Considering what he was willing to do to me…” Dark trailed off and trapped his scarred cheekbone. “You can only imagine how bad it was for people who Father considered disposable.”

“You strike me as a vain man,” Sectonia said.

“Incurably so. What of it?”

“You could make yourself look like anyone, and yet you choose this form.”

“Why would I be ashamed of a scar I earned protecting my dear, little brother?” Dark asked. “Besides, Dedede doesn’t seem to mind, and he’s the one who really matters right now.”

“You’re in love with Dedede?” Sectonia asked.

“In love with him? He’s my king-consort,” Dark replied, showing the gold band on his hand. “That shouldn’t surprise you, considering whose reflection I am.”

Since when was Meta Knight in love with Dedede? Sectonia had assumed they were good friends and nothing more. If Meta Knight and Dedede were in a romantic relationship, Alera would be furious when she inevitably found out. Even if Dedede was only half-Dreamlandic, that half was blood from Bikaia. The Queen would never approve of a half-Halcandran man dating one of her own royal-blooded kin, and yet a relationship with Meta Knight might be incredibly beneficial to Dedede. If Sectonia knew one thing very well, it was of the pining and heartache that came with being unable to court the person she really loved. No matter how much she cared for Taranza, no matter how devoted he might be, it still wasn’t enough.

For a crown princess, power came from how well she could play the field and how many men she could convince to do her bidding. It meant leaving open every potential suitor until she absolutely couldn’t anymore. It meant brittle, fake smiles over extravagant dates and tolerating the fake pleasantries of men that she wasn’t—and never would be—attracted to. How could Sectonia, with a clear conscience, ever cause someone else that same pain?

“What is Kirby like?” Shadow asked, drawing Sectonia from her thoughts. “I haven’t really spoken to him much.”
In her vision, she’d killed him. Sectonia winced. “He’s nice enough,” she replied.

Shadow frowned and furrowed his brow. “How so?”

“Well, I don’t really know him,” Sectonia said.

“You don’t really…know him?” Shadow asked. “But he’s King Bikaia, the Highest of Kings, the First Chosen Wielder of Galaxia, Master of the Star Rod, the Bane of Dark Matter, Slayer of Galacta Knight. Why wouldn’t you want to know everything about him?”

Because Kirby wasn’t a threat. Why would anyone spend time learning and worrying about Kirby? As the future queen of Dreamland, Sectonia worried about threats. People like Nightmare, Max Haltmann, and Meta Knight. But Kirby? Kirby was too predictable and too honest to be a threat.

“Our father forbade us to even speak Bikaia’s name,” Dark said, “So my brother has—lately—become quite the Bikaia scholar.”

Shadow beamed at his brother. “It’s been really difficult trying to find information on Bikaia,” he said. “Father destroyed much of the records regarding him, so I’ve really taken to rare book-hunting. When this world was first created, a very devoted cult of Nova arose, and they recorded everything about Bikaia before Father revised history.”

Dark’s smile was very bright and genuine. He seemed utterly enthralled by his brother’s enthusiasm. “Perhaps, you might allow my brother to peruse some of your manuscripts,” Dark said. “I can have my scribes copy them.”

Dreamland and the Mirror World weren’t supposed to mix. Sectonia searched for a tactful way to refuse, but she couldn’t find one. There didn’t seem to be an advantage to a lasting relationship with the Mirror World, but she didn’t want to be rude. If Dark wanted to waltz into Dreamland, it wasn’t as if Sectonia could actually stop him. “What would be in it for me?” Sectonia asked.

She’d gotten the tone just right. Serious enough that she’d be taken seriously but teasingly enough that she could write her statement off as a joke if Dark wasn’t receptive.

“In it for you?” Shadow asked, looking towards Dark.
“Depends on what you want,” Dark said. “I think the relationship between our worlds could be mutually beneficial. Surely, you aren’t going to deny us that when our goddess is Galaxia of the Sacred Flames?”

“Galaxia’s powers are only for her wielder,” Sectonia replied. “Furthermore, you seem to forget that you owe us a debt. We helped your overthrow Dark Mind. Thus far, the only things you’ve done are abduct one of my citizens and trespass on palatial grounds.”

“I’m helping you defeat Nightmare,” Dark said. “I imagine that makes us even, or do I need to personally disembowel the Nightmare Wizard for that?”

“I’m sure as a king, though, you realize that all your allies should bring something to the table, don’t you?”

“My father would agree with you, but I really think that I should care regardless. Do you realize that I’ve no stake in this game? Thus far, Nightmare has shown no interest in the Mirror World. I’m helping because—for once in my life—I have the opportunity to do the right thing. It’s that simple.”

“I hadn’t expected that sort of thinking from you,” Sectonia said.

“I’m a work in progress,” Dark replied. “I want to make my kingdom something great, and your world has resources I never would’ve imagined.”

“I can get you an audience with the Queen,” Sectonia said, “But I can’t guarantee anything more than that.”

That wasn’t, perhaps, a very wise promise. Sectonia knew her mother would be more likely to attempt conquest of the Mirror World than to become its ally.

“I’ll take your audience, then,” Dark replied. “Let me know the details.”

“I shall, and perhaps I might be willing to part with a few Bikaian artifacts.”
“Wonderful!” Shadow exclaimed. “Thank you!”

“I want something in return, however.”

Dark sighed. “You’re all about trading favors, aren’t you? What do you want?”

“With your powers, you can scry, can’t you? You can watch people through mirrors, correct?”

Dark narrowed his eyes. “Yes.”

“Can you transport me to Galaxia within the dream-world?”

Dark frowned. “I could if I could find her. I checked before dinner, and I couldn’t find a trace of her. I could find Dededee, Kirby, and Bandanna Dee. Meta Knight has moved. I don’t know where he is now, but he wasn’t in the palace when I saw him last. Galaxia, though? I have no idea.”

“Then, you could take me to Kirby, at least.”

“Provided he’s somewhere near a mirror and not in the middle of a forest or something, certainly,” Dark replied, “But you realize that—without Meta Knight—Nightmare can’t reach you here, don’t you? Not unless you’re sleeping. If you leave, you’ll be putting yourself in danger.”

“I have to be in the dream-world to end the game. I need to protect the others. We need to communicate. You said you can’t find Galaxia. Maybe I can. Besides, Nightmare does have Meta Knight, and even if Meta Knight is on our side, I still doubt that’s enough to keep Nightmare from coercing him into working against us.”

Dark sighed. “I can do that,” he said, “But for Nova’s sake, be careful. Nightmare hasn’t done anything to me, but I wouldn’t put it past him to find some way to stop my interference if he suspects just how much I’m doing.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” Sectonia said.
Dark smirked. “Princess, I never underestimate my opponents.”

Meta Knight sat in an office chair with the wolfwrath in his lap and his feet propped up on Max Haltmann’s desk. If the situation hadn’t been so dire, Kirby might’ve laughed at how awkward Meta Knight’s pseudo-fantasy armor looked in the contemporary office space. Already, Meta Knight’s flowing cape had been caught twice in the wheels of his rolling chair. Kirby sat across from him with Bandanna Dee curled up on the floor; Bandanna Dee had tried to sit in a chair and broken it with his weight.

He hurt you again, Bandanna Dee observed.

Meta Knight looked askance and slowly nodded. “I’m probably going to be in a lot of pain when we all wake,” he said, cupping his cheek. “Because of Father’s powers, I don’t feel much of my preexisting injuries here. Hello, concussion. I missed you so.”

“Dear Nova,” Kirby said.

“But after this, I’m finished with Father,” Meta Knight said. “There are people in my life that deserve second chances so much more than Father, and yet he’s the one I’m the most forgiving towards. Comparatively speaking, Father’s done far worse to me than anyone else. I’m going to make a lot of changes once this is all over.”

Good for you!

Meta Knight smiled tentatively. “Yeah! And I’m going to be a better friend and a better brother.”

Kirby brightened. “Really?” he asked.

Meta Knight nodded, and although the task before them was daunting, everything suddenly felt so doable to Kirby. Just one thing. All they had to do was end the game, and everything would be fine.
“If only we knew how Bikaia did it,” Kirby muttered.

“Bikaia,” Meta Knight echoed. “Have you ever noticed that our father has this very strange fixation with King Bikaia?”

“Not really,” Kirby said.

**Strange how?**

“As in, he’s gone through the palace and destroyed every portrait of Bikaia there is. Do you remember when you said there was something wrong with our father? You’re right, Kirby,” Meta Knight said.

He abuses you, Bandanna Dee said. **Is that what you mean?**

“Yes, but there’s something else,” Meta Knight replied. “He has this—I don’t know—obsession with Bikaia’s powers. I don’t remember him having it when I was a child, so maybe it’s a recent development. But he wants to remove every trace of King Bikaia. That isn’t normal. He said you used your powers on him?”

Kirby shook his head. “I was never open about my magic until I met you guys. My mom is very traditional about stuff like that. A common boy like me has no business having something like Copy. Well, I thought I was normal. She did, too. I definitely never used them on Dad, though.”

“I wonder…” Meta Knight trailed off. “I don’t know. It’s like Bikaia personally hurt him somehow. He can’t differentiate between the two of you. The way he talks, you’d think you were literally the same Bikaia.”

Maybe it’s because Bikaia originally won the last time this happened?

“I thought about that, but why would you try to erase someone from history? That seems too excessive,” Meta Knight replied, “And he’s become just…aggressive about it. I don’t understand it. When I was in the Mirror World, they weren’t allowed to speak of Galaxia or even Bikaia. It
made sense for Dark Mind to do that; Nova and Bikaia sealed him away. *Personally* sealed him away. But why does our father need to do that? Bikaia has never done anything to him. *You* have never done anything to him, Kirby.”

“We have to stop him whatever it is,” Kirby said.

“Yes.”

*But will that be enough?* Bandanna Dee asked. *Even if we win, I don’t imagine Nightmare will back down. I don’t want to be the one to voice it, but—*

“But we’ll have to kill him,” Meta Knight said. “Sectonia is right. He’s dangerous.”

“Meta Knight…” Kirby trailed off.

“I knew you wouldn’t like the idea,” Meta Knight replied, “But after everything he’s done…”

“It isn’t that. I want to be a good brother, but I don’t really know how,” Kirby said. “I don’t really understand violence. I’m rarely even angry. I feel like I should want to kill him, but I—I don’t know. Part of me thinks that it’d be better if he was just imprisoned.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Meta Knight said. “Just stay out of the way, and I’ll take care of it. I know I’ve let everyone down a lot here lately, but I can do this. I’m ready now.”

Kirby slowly nodded. He felt like a coward for wanting Meta Knight to do it. “Do you…do you ever feel like something was robbed from us? Like we might’ve had an incredible childhood together?”

Meta Knight arched an eyebrow. “Between my powers and yours, we’d have been terrible children.”

“I wonder if I could Copy your wings,” Kirby said, shyly touching the membrane. “Could you imagine that? Exploring other dimensions when we were teenagers. Trips to the beach together. I’ve told you before, Meta Knight, if we have each other, I think I’ll be fine.”
“That’s…” Meta Knight abruptly removed his feet from the desk and stood. “Sectonia?”

“Sectonia?”

Bandanna Dee climbed to his feet. *Should we greet her?* he asked.

Meta Knight slowly sat. “I imagine she’ll come to us.”

“That means we have four pieces of the Star Rod!” Kirby exclaimed.

“Sure, but it’s no good if we don’t have all five,” Meta Knight replied.

*That means Galaxia. Can’t you contact her still?* Bandanna Dee asked.

“No,” Meta Knight replied, “Although she may be able to hear me still. I doubt even Father could control Galaxia’s powers.”

The doors to the office opened, and Sectonia, rapiers ready, burst in. She paused abruptly, her fierce entrance ruined by the suddenly baffled expression on her face. “Hi!” Kirby chirped.

“Is that a dragon?” Sectonia asked.

“Yes,” Meta Knight replied, “And it’s Bandanna Dee.”

“You’re missing a few heads,” Sectonia said. “Why…?”

*I’m assuming because I was once Landia,* Bandanna Dee said.

“Well, I don’t want this conversation to just drag on,” Meta Knight said, “So—”
That is the worst joke I’ve ever heard, but I suppose I applaud you for trying.

“Dedede would’ve loved it,” Meta Knight replied, with a half-hearted smile.

“I’m sorry. I was expecting a battle,” Sectonia said. “What’s going on?”

“Overall?” Meta Knight asked.

“No, in regards to you three.”

“We’re plotting to face Dad,” Kirby answered. “We only need Galaxia, and we’ll be able to get the Star Rod.”

“I have Dedede’s piece,” Meta Knight added, presumably to answer Sectonia’s confused expression.

“It’s not quite that simple, though,” Sectonia said. “To summon the Star Rod, we’d have to be at the Fountain of Dreams. We’ll have to sneak into the palace or another dimension to do it, and Nightmare is based at the palace.”

“Another dimension?” Meta Knight asked. “Dark and I had discussed trying to have the battle in the Mirror World. Because Galaxia’s powers are stronger there, we’d have an easier time of it.”

Sectonia sheathed her rapiers and gestured to Meta Knight. He left his seat and instead perched on the edge of the desk. After a few seconds, he seemed to realize that was a bad idea and stood instead. Delicately, Sectonia sat in the vacant chair. “You realize that armor contains several design flaws, don’t you?” Sectonia asked. “That mask of yours would do better if it had a ridge to help deflect blows. As is, one good hit to the face, and it’ll probably snap in half.”

“I’m aware.”

Sectonia nodded and placed her rapiers back into their sheaths. “Dark didn’t discuss that plan with
me, but…it occurs to me that we could use the Mirror World as a way of traveling. Because it’s a mirror of our world, if we can find the place where the Fountain of Dreams is, we should be able to travel right to the Fountain. We won’t have much time before Nightmare finds us, but that would be safer than trying to traverse the palace.”

“And because we don’t need Dedede or Delilah to finish the game, we’d have no reason to wander into the palace,” Meta Knight replied.

“Delilah?” 

_Nightmare is holding her hostage, Bandanna Dee replied, To force Meta Knight into compliance._

“Be careful, Dee. I’m sure if you get too close, Father will force you into compliance using her, too. He’s found the _one person_ that the three of us really care about,” Meta Knight replied. “Father has no qualms with hurting her if any one of us makes him angry.”

Bandanna Dee’s tail swished across the carpet. _What would we do without her?_ he asked. _She…she took me in when no one else would._

“Nothing is going to happen to her,” Kirby said, “Because we’re going to stop Dad! We can’t keep letting him dictate our lives.”

“We need Galaxia, then,” Sectonia replied, “And it might be worthwhile to contact Dark in the Mirror World. Curses. I just had him with me.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t stick around,” Meta Knight said.

_So what do we do now?_ Bandanna Dee asked. _It seems like finding Galaxia should be our top priority._

“And I can’t contact her,” Meta Knight said, responding to Sectonia’s confused look.

“We could possibly use some sort of location spell,” Sectonia mused. “We use them in A.M.B.E.R. sometimes in the Missing Persons unit. Typically, such spells only track _people_, but we might be
able to utilize one to find Galaxia. She is quite exceptional. We would need something of hers, although you might work, Meta Knight. Either it’ll work, or you’ll…become damaged.”

“In what way?” Meta Knight asked.

“Tracking spells can be fickle. Explosive, even. Don’t worry, though. If we just get some of your blood or maybe a few cells, that should work. Some of your hair even.”

Kirby self-consciously patted his own hair; he really missed the bubblegum pink. It occurred to him, too, that Bikaia’s hair was brown. A shiver shot down Kirby’s spine. Dad really wanted him to be Bikaia, the ancient king, and it didn’t seem to be for any noble reason.

“The other alternative is asking Dark to find her,” Sectonia said, “Although there may be a price to pay after our…conversation. He can scry for people but only if they’re near something reflective. He says Galaxia isn’t near anything reflective.”

“What happened during your conversation?” Meta Knight asked.

“Dark desires a relationship with our world,” Sectonia said, “And I think that might be an unwise decision.”

“Why?” Kirby asked.

“It’s complicated, and it’s not my decision to make anyway,” Sectonia replied.

Meta Knight headed towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Sectonia asked.

“The bathroom?”

“Oh,” she said.
Meta Knight walked out, Sectonia watching him with an expression that was vaguely abashed.

“What happened on your end?” Kirby asked. “Er…Your Royal Highness? If you want to share?”

“I’d prefer you tell me about what happened to the two of you first,” Sectonia replied.

So they did. Kirby told Sectonia about how he’d woken up in Haltmann Works, with Bandanna Dee interjecting ever so often. Sectonia was mostly quiet and rarely offered any feedback. When Kirby was finished, the princess steepled her fingers together and pursed her lips. “I woke in the Mirror World,” she said, “And Dark brought me here.”

“How is he?” Kirby asked.

“Fine.”

Kirby bit the inside of his cheek and looked towards Bandanna Dee for some sort of guidance. Talking to the princess of Dreamland was nerve-wracking, and Kirby wished he’d paid more attention in his etiquette classes.

Sectonia suddenly bolted from her chair and drew her rapiers. “Nightmare,” she hissed.

Kirby scrambled to unsheathe his sword, and Bandanna Dee climbed to his feet. Before anyone could do much else, the room fell into darkness. Kirby floundered blindly around, although everything seemed to have fallen away. Then, light snapped back into the world. Kirby was in the lobby. He twisted around, searching for Sectonia or Bandanna Dee, but they were both gone. Nightmare, wearing a billowing set of wizardly robes, appeared.

Kirby acted on instinct and lunged forward. Even with his injured ankle, it was a good move, a fast move, but it still wasn’t enough. Electricity jolted up through Kirby’s arm and through his body. His back hit the wall. Kirby gasped as deep, throbbing pain ignited up his spine and between his shoulder blades. He dropped his rapier and tried to draw energy from Nightmare’s lightning.

Kirby had never tried that before, but Bikaia had been able to do it. Then, Nightmare was suddenly there. Kirby yelped as the wizard easily tossed him aside with another bolt of lightning. Blindly,
Kirby groped for the wall that he knew must be there; his ankle gave out beneath him, and he collapsed to the tile floor instead. Kirby groaned and shakily tried to stand. His knees wouldn’t support his weight, and he fell back to the ground. He wondered if something was broken or merely bruised. Kirby had never before had any injury that was more than a bruise or a scrape, and this was agonizing.

“Is this the best you can do, Bikaia? I’d expected you wouldn’t bore me, at least,” Nightmare drawled.

“I’m not Bikaia,” Kirby said between gasps for air.

The wizard strode closer, and Kirby stumbled away, desperate to put distance between them. Nightmare paused by Kirby’s rapier and picked the sword up. For a heartbeat, Nightmare seemed to observe the way the light played along the blade. Then, the wizard struck.

Nightmare seized Kirby’s hair and pulled forced his head back. Kirby clawed at his father’s wrist and struggled, trying to free himself. He wore gloves; of course, he did! Otherwise, Kirby could’ve taken his powers. He couldn’t reach his father’s exposed face, although he tried. In Nightmare’s other hand, he held Kirby’s dropped rapier.

Meta Knight stepped into view, although he didn’t seem to be doing anything. He just stood there, whether from shock or ambivalence was impossible to tell. But Meta Knight was still armed, and he had the wolfwrath pacing around behind him. Meta Knight could fight back and do something. “Meta—”

Nightmare pressed the blade against Kirby’s throat. Kirby froze in an instant.

“He has more value to you alive, Father,” Meta Knight said. “If he’s alive, you can use him as leverage until the game is finished. Once that is done, you can make an example of him; you’ll need a few in order to subdue the populace. He’s the perfect example, isn’t he? Young and pretty. That soft, delicate face and those love-me-blue eyes. He’s the sort of victim that would make parents fear for their children, and when people are afraid, they turn on one another. If you’re going to kill the reincarnation of Bikaia, surely that’s a situation which requires more nuance, isn’t it?”

Kirby felt as if his blood had turned to ice. Meta Knight couldn’t possibly have meant that; it was surely just an attempt to stay Nightmare’s hand. Would it work? Dear Nova, it had to work.
Nightmare was silent for what felt like an eternity. Then, the wizard laughed. As quick as a falling star, the sword sliced through Kirby’s throat. The wound stung, and hot blood dripped like liquid fire onto Kirby’s throat. Kirby gasped and clambered to put a hand on the injury. His dad had slit his throat. He’d really done it. He was going to bleed out and die.

Nightmare uncurled his hand from Kirby’s hair. “I must’ve slipped,” Nightmare said. “Clean up this mess, won’t you, Meta Knight?”

Then, the wizard strode away, dropping the rapier as if to add insult to injury.

Kirby was going to die. He couldn’t breath. Oh, Nova, he hadn’t imagined it happening like this. He didn’t want to die! Despite his best efforts, tears sprang to Kirby’s eyes. Dimly, he knew he ought to be dignified in the face of death, but everything hurt. Meta Knight crouched down and grasped Kirby’s wrists. “Hush now,” Meta Knight murmured. “You’re fine. You’re not going to die.”

“Meta—”

Firmly, Meta Knight drew Kirby’s hands away from the injury. “Father just wanted to give you a good scare,” Meta Knight said. “You don’t pull back someone’s head when you’re trying to slit their throat. No, you push their throat onto your blade. You might have an unsightly scar, but you aren’t going to die.”

“Dee?” Kirby asked. “S-sectonia?”

“About the same as you,” Meta Knight replied.

Kirby took Meta Knight’s hands in his, wordlessly trying to communicate his urgency and terror. Blood dripped down Kirby’s collarbone, staining his skin and a shirt that wasn’t his own.

“Don’t worry,” Meta Knight whispered, squeezing Kirby’s hands. “Everything is going according to plan.”
Dreamland burned. Galacta Knight and Nova both lay dead outside the city gates. Landia, the Master Crown having been forced from the noble creature’s head, was wounded and on his last life. Bikaia held Galaxia unsheathed, the light of her sacred fires mixing with dragon’s fire burning around him. The young king of Dreamland paused as he entered the palace. He knew it would be wise to wait for help, but he also knew help was unlikely to come.

And even if it did, how many more lives could Bikaia put at risk?

I am with you, Galaxia said.

The king gathered his composure and stormed into his throne room. He’d expected a monster or a dark sorcerer, but there was none. Still, Bikaia’s blood ran cold at what was there. Lady Elise, the Heiress of the Stars, sat on Bikaia’s own throne.

Not Elise. Anyone but her.

Bikaia had imagined Elise sitting at his side more times than he would like to admit, but he hadn’t made a proposal yet. No woman would refuse a marriage to the King of Dreamland, and Bikaia had wanted to be absolutely certain that she truly loved him. It was foolish to marry for love; Bikaia knew that. Being a king, he knew he ought to look for the best alliance, but he also knew he was too soft-hearted. Bikaia couldn’t bear the thought of having a bride who didn’t really love him, and he’d hoped he would win her over, to prove himself to be worthy as a partner and potential match.

And she looked stunning there, just like the queen Bikaia had always fantasized about her being. She wore her violet, satin dress—Bikaia’s favorite—and over that, Bikaia’s own dark blue, ermine-
trimmed mantle, the one reserved only for visits by foreign dignitaries and Winter Solstice celebrations. Her long, golden curls were arranged around Bikaia’s own crown, which caught the shifting light of the torches on the wall.

Bikaia heard Galaxia’s blade fall to the ground with a sharp ringing noise. He was barely aware of dropping the sword and took a step forward. “Elise,” Bikaia rasped. “Elise, why?”

Elisa stepped from the throne, her silk slippers soundless against the marble floor. She was absolutely dwarfed in Bikaia’s mantle, although it’d always been massive for Bikaia, too. “Poor Bikaia,” she said, putting a hand on his chest.

Galaxia whispered a warning, but Bikaia ignored it. He was too shaken and too startled to think of anything except Elise’s gloved hand on his chest, right over his heart. He hadn’t even noticed that she’d called him Bikaia rather than the usual Your Majesty.

“Is your heart breaking right now?” she asked.

His breath caught. “Yes,” Bikaia said, reaching to put his hand over hers.

Elise drew her hand back and brought it down on Bikaia’s cheek. The sharp stinging that blossomed across his face didn’t hurt nearly as much as the fact that she’d struck him. Bikaia had been slapped before. He’d been hurt much worse before, but this was different. This was Elise.

“Elise…”

“Isn’t it glorious? Landia, Galacta Knight?” Elise asked.

“What did you do to them?”

Elise smiled. “ Wouldn’t you like to know everything, sweet king?”

“You aren’t Elise.”
Bikaia hoped she wasn't Elise.

"Oh, I'm Elise now," the woman replied. "But I was Dark Nebula, god of the Underworld."

It wasn’t Elise. Hope blossomed inside Bikaia’s chest. He could handle monsters and eldritch abominations, but he wasn’t sure he could've survived having Elise turn on him.

“I don’t like this new Dreamland of yours, this peaceful kingdom, so I thought I would…spark a few changes. Do you like it?”

He had to save Elise.

“Let her go,” Bikaia said.

“Why should I?” Dark Nebula purred. “During your father’s reign, my kingdom was so powerful, and now, you. Behold, your beautiful, peaceful Dreamland, Bikaia! Isn’t she lovely?"

“You’re a monster.”

Dark Nebula put a hand to her chest and feigned being deeply offended. “Why, Bikaia, what a terrible thing to say to the child of one of your dearest allies!”

“What do I have to do to make you free her?”

“What do you have that I could possibly want?” Dark Nebula asked. “I already have your kingdom.”

Bikaia steeled himself. “What about me?” he asked softly. “Take me in place of Elise.”

Dark Nebula smiled and put her hand on Bikaia’s chest once more. “Take you,” she said. “How nobly offered!”
“I’m not playing games,” Bikaia said. “If you take this kingdom as Elise, everyone will seek to destroy you. If you take it as me, there are no witnesses save Elise. I’m sure destroying a handful of memories is within your power. Take me instead. Surely, you must envy Copy.”

“Copy is tempting,” Dark Nebula mused, “But that’s not enough. I need something to sweeten the deal.”

“Such as?”

Dark Nebula’s hand caressed Bikaia’s cheek and down his throat as far as she could go with Bikaia wearing full armor. “Would you beg me for this favor?” she asked softly.

Bikaia’s breath hitched. In the back of his mind, Galaxia roared. She wanted Bikaia to lift her from the stones and slay this monster. But would slaying this monster also slay Elise?

Galaxia had no answer.

Bikaia slowly got to his knees, the plates of his armor clanging and scraping together. He lowered his head and kept his eyes focused on the floor. “Please, take—”

“Lower.”

Bikaia paused and looked up, uncomprehendingly.


Bikaia, don’t, Galaxia whispered.

Bikaia trembled, but he did as lowered himself as best as he could in full plate armor. His heart was in his throat, and there didn’t seem to be enough air. It didn’t matter. Save Dreamland, save Elise. He could only see the stone floor and the hem of Elise’s dress. “Please, take me instead of her,” Bikaia said. “Please, release her.”
Dark Nebula wrapped Bikaia’s hair around her hand, and Bikaia nearly lifted his head. “No, no, stay down, dear king,” Dark Nebula said. “I want to see how badly you really want this.”

Well, this monster wasn’t subtle, was he?

But tyrants never were, were they? Bikaia was no stranger to watching people beg. He’d been neglected more than his brothers, but he’d still been born a Prince of Dreamland. He’d seen his grandfather King Adstellam delight at public floggings, put foreign dignitaries in cages, and make condemned men and women beg just for a quick death.

“Whatever you want,” Bikaia said.

“I like you on your knees,” Dark Nebula said, sounding excited, “But then, I suppose it’s fitting. I forget sometimes just how dirty your blood is. A Halcandran chambermaid. My, your father didn’t have high standards, did he? You were never good enough for the throne anyway. You should’ve spent your life scrubbing floors and begging for scraps from your blue-blooded masters.”

Galacta Knight had made him do that once. Clean for her, that was. She’d never asked Bikaia to beg for anything; Galacta Knight would’ve never asked that of anyone. Bikaia felt his heart hurt when he thought of her. Goddess, she’d been so patient with him. So lovely and kind! And she’d saved him so many times from so many people, and if she’d been herself and been alive, this would’ve never happened. Bikaia drew a shuddering breath. Kneeling in armor for that long made Bikaia’s muscles ache.

“Behold, the noble king of Dreamland!” Dark Nebula exclaimed.

But had Bikaia ever been a noble king? He didn’t think so, but he’d tried, hadn’t he? Surely, that counted for something.

“Please, let her go,” Bikaia rasped. “I did what you asked.”

Elise collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Bikaia looked up in time to catch her before she struck the floor. In the same instant, Bikaia’s stomach lurch. He felt Dark Nebula inside him, trying to wrap itself around Bikaia’s magic and bind them together.

Instead, Dark Nebula shrieked in pain, burned not only by Galaxia’s fire but by Bikaia’s own Copy
ability, a power that had recognized Dark Nebula as a parasite and sought to destroy it.

And Bikaia himself? He’d been mentored by Galacta Knight, the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy and the Knight of the Slaughter, and by Nova the Wish-Granter, the Star-Goddess of Dreamland. Dark Nebula was powerful, but he’d underestimated Bikaia’s own powers. And he would pay dearly for underestimating them. Bikaia had trapped Dark Nebula inside him.

Let me go! Dark Nebula roared.

“I’ll take you with me to the grave if I must,” Bikaia said. “You chose the wrong kingdom to conquer.”

Galaxia laughed. Her purpose was to judge and punish the unjust, and Dark Nebula was a monster of the darkest sort.

Bikaia held Elise in his arms and brushed her hair back from her face. After what felt like an eternity, Elise’s eyelashes fluttered. When her grey eyes opened, they were dazed.

Dark Nebula continued to scream and thrash in pain, bound by Bikaia’s powers.

“Elise,” Bikaia whispered. “Elise, can you hear me?”

“Bikaia…I…I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Bikaia replied, bending his head and placing a soft kiss on her blonde curls.

“But Bi—Your Majesty, isn’t that—isn’t that thing inside you?”

“Yes,” Bikaia replied, “And he’s unable to escape me. I need you to listen very carefully, Elise. I need you to bring me a chest. I’m going to seal it away. He’s never going to harm anyone ever again.”
Kirby snapped awake with unnatural abruptness. He jerked upright, scattering blankets on the unfamiliar bed. Pain jolted through his wrist, and Kirby froze. He was handcuffed to the bed’s headboard, but he still tried to dart away when he realized his dad sat at the foot of the bed.

“Is something the matter?” the wizard asked.

“What was that?” Kirby asked.

Nightmare patted Kirby’s cheek. The silk of the wizard’s glove made for a mockingly gentle caress, and reminded of Bikaia, Kirby flinched away. The wizard held a whip coiled in his other hand, and Kirby felt sick.

“You weren’t a hero,” Nightmare said. “You were a monster, too. Just a monster on the right side of history.”

“I’m not a monster,” Kirby rasped, “And my friends and I are going to defeat you.”

“Your friends? Let me tell you about friendship, Bikaia,” Nightmare sneered. “All it takes is a few choice threats here and there to destroy friendship.”

“My name is Kirby!”

“It doesn’t matter who you are. What matters is what you’re capable of doing. And I? I will not lose to you. Not now, not ever.”

“I’m your son.”

“Meta Knight is my son! You’re a mistake.”

Kirby’s breath hitched, and although he wanted to be brave and fierce, he only managed a small whine. A mistake. His dad had called him a mistake.
“You know nothing about me. Or about my friends,” Kirby said, his voice wavering.

“Nothing? Oh, Bikaia! Why do you think you grew up so lonely?” Nightmare asked. “I made it quite clear to everyone in that little, backwater village what would happen if…well, if anyone associated with you. It wasn’t that hard, admittedly, with how traditional those people are.”

“But…”

“And I used my powers to curse that whole little village,” Nightmare said, “So no one could refuse me. I ensured that no one would ever care about you. Sure, it wasn’t perfect. Lord Ebrum’s children weren’t affected because they didn’t live in the village, and even my powers weren’t enough to break the bond between mother and child. But it was enough, wasn’t it? To make sure you grew up lonely and too afraid of your powers to even consider honing them. And I terrorized your poor mother every holiday to make sure everything would go exactly as I wanted. I removed all records of you from the A.M.B.E.R. databases to ensure that no agent would ever come looking for you. Training magic users is part of their job; you know.”

Kirby’s eyes burned with tears. He’d always thought he and his powers were the reason no one liked him, but somehow, learning that it was this…this creature’s fault was so much worse.

Nightmare sighed. “Of course, it didn’t all go perfectly. When Meta Knight went to A.M.B.E.R. talking about abuse, they started digging a little deeper. Drawcia, in particular, thought it was strange that I had two children, and only one had magical powers. That didn’t make sense to her. Poor woman, if she hadn’t been fired, she probably would’ve figured out what I did to Pupupu Village. She’d already launched an investigation to see if I’d been somehow altering the files on A.M.B.E.R.’s databases. She even made plans to visit you.”

“My…my professor?”

Nightmare nodded. “She was one of those rare agents who actually cared about people. It broke her heart knowing that poor Kirby Stellarum, neglected by his father, didn’t have anyone he could go to for magical guidance. And if she’d actually managed it, she’d have surely figured out what I’d done. Drawcia was always too clever for her own good. It’s a pity I couldn’t buy her out; she could’ve had an illustrious career working for me.”

“Y-you’re that creature, aren’t you?” Kirby asked. “Dark Nebula?”
When Nightmare uncoiled his whip, Kirby’s blood ran cold. He heard the crack a half-second before sharp, stinging pain burst through his shoulder and down his ribs. Kirby yelped. It hurt so badly that his head spun. He thought he might faint.

“No,” Nightmare replied. “I’m Nightmare Nocturne.”

Was that the truth? Was it a trick? Kirby’s mind whirled. He couldn’t think. He didn’t want to think. He just wanted everything to stop, for this all to be some horrible dream. His dad had just whipped him. Like…like they were in the pre-Bikain era. Kirby didn’t try to prevent the tears falling down his face.

“Meta—”

“He isn’t coming to your rescue,” Nightmare said. “How cute that you even considered that possibility.”

It hurt. It hurt so badly that Kirby thought there must be some serious damage—a torn muscle or a bruised bone. “No. No, how many people’s lives did you ruin to hurt Meta Knight and me?” Kirby asked.

Dear Nova, what if his Dad struck him again? Kirby was suddenly all too aware of the blood dripping down his shoulder and of how the whip was mere feet away from him. Goddess, it hurt more than Kirby could’ve ever imagined.

“As many as it took,” Nightmare replied, “And I’ll destroy more if I must. When I win, you’re going to be locked away for a very long time. Put in a tower like some forlorn princess. Then, one day, I’ll grow bored of you, and when that day comes, I’ll tear you apart.”

Kirby gulped at the thought of his dad tearing him apart, but his resolve to put on a brave face didn’t waver. It didn’t matter what Nightmare’s plans were because he wouldn’t succeed.

His shoulder hurt really badly.

“We will stop you,” Kirby insisted.
Nightmare sighed. “I very much doubt that, Bikaia,” the wizard said, twirling his wrist. “But for now, I’ll leave you with a little nightmare, just to tide you over until I’m ready for you. Galaxia has arrived, so I have other concerns.”

Kirby’s head fell back to the pillow.

Sectonia had been chained in the Fountain of Dreams along with poor Bandanna Dee, who as a dragon, barely managed to keep his head above the water. Initially, he’d tried freeing himself, too. He’d taken flight, his powerful wings causing waves in the water, but the chains binding him to the fountain didn’t budge. He’d worn himself out and instead sat in the water, making a token effort to free himself every few minutes.

Despite her best attempts, no amount of pulling or twisting could break the chains around her wrists. They were bolted firmly to the base of the fountain, and Sectonia’s efforts to free herself did little more than cause her to flounder in the water. Nightmare had changed the more practical clothes she’d borrowed from Dark. Now she wore a magenta dress, the skirt layered like the petals of a flower. The corseted top was uncomfortably tight, but Sectonia didn’t have enough experience with corsets to know if it was ill-fitting or merely awkward.

She’d waited a very long time, and once or twice, she’d given in to the temptation to sit in the sacred waters. Sectonia regretted it the moment she stood up again. The water was chest-high when she sat, and it’d soaked into her corseted top and refused to dry. Sectonia dug her nails into the palms of her hands and silently cursed Nightmare Nocturne. The chains were probably magical in nature because she couldn’t even call her powers to her.

Finally, Nightmare entered, but Sectonia’s attention remained on the woman behind him. She was beautiful and ethereal, pale and blonde, and despite her incredible beauty, there was something undeniably cold about her proud countenance. At least, she would’ve been beautiful, Sectonia imagined. If there hadn’t been blood streaked across the fabric of her dress and new bruises already forming on her face. The wedding dress she wore was very form-fitting and sheer in several places. It was a stunning dress, but Sectonia doubted this woman had a choice in choosing it. This woman likely didn’t have a choice in much, as Nightmare lead her in with a leash, pulled taut to keep her right at his heels. Sectonia recognized the bejeweled collar as being similar to the restraints Dark Mind had used in the Mirror World.

And Sectonia had an idea of who this was, especially when she looked at the redness of burns
forming on the side of Nightmare’s face, neck, and chest and the burned edges of his clothes and hair. The woman looked bad, but Nightmare looked half-dead. Sectonia’s stomach lurched, and bile rose in her throat. Galaxia was a sacred being. To do this to someone like her was unthinkable. Sacrilege. For the first time in a very long time, Sectonia felt what might’ve been an inkling of fear.

Meta Knight followed with Kirby, who also looked worse for the wear. His clothes were flecked with blood and his throat caked with it.

Kirby remained very still while Meta Knight chained him up in the fountain.

“Dear Goddess,” Sectonia whispered.

Nightmare smiled as Meta Knight returned to his side. The two men stepped into the Fountain’s waters, Nightmare dragging Galaxia behind him. She watched stony-faced as Meta Knight pulled the shackles from beneath the waters and locked them around her slender wrists.

With the snap of Nightmare’s fingers, Dedede materialized, chained up with the rest of them.

Sectonia’s heartbeat quickened. Everyone was there. If Meta Knight chose to take his father’s side, he could end everything.

Then, Nightmare and Meta Knight left the fountain and stood at the edge of it. “Welcome, everyone,” the wizard said.

“Fuck you!” Dedede shouted.

“I see your royal breeding is serving you well,” Nightmare said.

Dedede scowled and flipped Nightmare off.

“Shall I discipline him for you, Father?” Meta Knight asked.

“No,” Nightmare replied. “He isn’t worth it.”
“Meta Knight... Bandanna Dee murmured.

“Let us finish this,” Nightmare said. “I call upon the power of the Star Rod. Unite!”

The waters churned and shimmered, glowing around Sectonia like liquid silver. She tried to scramble back, but the chains prevented it. “No!” she shouted.

Light gathered before her, at the very center of the fountain. There was a burst of whiteness, and then, as the light slowly faded, Sectonia was the Star Rod shining brightly in the Fountain’s center.

Sectonia had expected the Star Rod to be missing one piece, but it wasn’t.

It was missing two.

For a moment, everything was silent. Then, abruptly, Nightmare turned towards Dedede. “What have you done?” the wizard asked, his voice frighteningly quiet.

The wizard clenched his fists. The air around him crackled, the waters of the fountain churned, and the room darkened.

“I will tear you apart with my bare hands,” Nightmare hissed.

“But I don’t know what happened!” Dedede protested.

The wizard stalked towards Dedede, only to be intercepted by Meta Knight, who put his hands on the wizard’s arms. “It’s clearly a trick of some kind, and flying into a rage isn’t going to help you figure it out,” Meta Knight said. “Father—”

“Did you know?” Nightmare asked.

Meta Knight started and stared at his father with wide eyes. It looked to be a very convincing
display. “Do you really think they’d still trust me enough to tell me something like that, Father?” Meta Knight asked, sounding legitimately wounded by Nightmare’s insinuation.

Nightmare trembled in rage. He pulled free of Meta Knight’s grip and paced fiercely behind Galaxia, who—despite it all—looked completely serene, and there was something else about her face, a soft pulling of her lips. She looked as though she was enjoying a private joke.

“I will kill your mother if you don’t make those two pieces of the Star Rod materialize right now!” Nightmare snapped, pointing a trembling finger at Dedede.

Galaxia’s calm composure cracked, replaced with concern. It was uncomfortable, seeing sacred Galaxia act so human. Sectonia had always imagined Galaxia to be above any and all emotion. The princess had imagined Galaxia being cold and stony, like the same marble statues depicting her.

“But I ain’t got a clue where they are! Everyone that had a piece is here! D’you think for one second I wouldn’t tell you if it meant savin’ my mom?” Dedede asked, straining against the chains.

“Apparently, she doesn’t mean that much to you,” Nightmare sneered. “I don’t believe for a second that you don’t know exactly where those two pieces are.”

“But I don’t!”

“He doesn’t know,” Galaxia said. “There’s no need to kill the duchess.”

And because she’d spoken, Nightmare suddenly whirled around, having found a new target for his fury. “You test my patience, Galaxia,” the wizard said. “You’re going to be my wife, and I expect your obedience.”

“So you’re a misogynist as well as a child abuser. How charming,” Galaxia replied.

“You said if I behaved, you wouldn’t hurt Delilah. I’ve done everything you’ve asked,” Meta Knight said, grasping his father’s elbow.

“The game has changed,” Nightmare said, shaking off Meta Knight’s touch. “If you interfere, I
will beat you half to death, and I’ll still execute her!”

Meta Knight backed down without further argument.

With a wave of the wizard’s hand, Delilah appeared, handcuffed to a chair. Her eyes were wide and her face frantic. “Dedede! Bandanna Dee!” she shouted.

“Mom!” Dedede exclaimed. “Mom, I—don’t hurt my mom! I don’t know where the other pieces are!”

“Last chance,” Nightmare said.

Dear Nova, Nightmare really was going to kill Duchess Delilah.

_He doesn’t know!_ Bandanna Dee yelled.

Sectonia had never seen anyone executed before. She looked towards Galaxia, hoping she would somehow magically solve the problem. But she didn’t.

“Meta, stop him!” Dedede yelled.

“Do what you gotta to survive, pet,” Delilah said, her voice so drowned out by Dedede’s cries and Bandanna Dee’s screams of rage that Sectonia just barely heard, despite the fact that the duchess stood mere feet away. “I don’t want him to hurt you.”

“Mom!”

“Nightmare, don’t,” Galaxia said.

_Sé que no tu eres Meta Knight y no la amas. ¡La amamos! Por favor_, Bandanna Dee said.
Sectonia didn’t understand Halcandran and only caught Meta Knight’s name, and whether or not Bandanna Dee’s words had any effect on Meta Knight himself was impossible to determine.

“What?” Dedede blurted out.

Sectonia looked towards Meta Knight; he smiled, seemingly amused. “Interesting,” Meta Knight finally said. “Aren’t you clever?”

“What did he say?” Nightmare snapped.

Meta Knight strode around the fountain and paused beside Bandanna Dee, who twisted around as best as he could to keep Meta Knight in view. “How did you know?” Meta Knight asked.

*Meta Knight isn’t left-handed.*

And yet Meta Knight held his sword in his left hand.

Nightmare visibly tensed. “You’re that mirror-creature,” the wizard said.

Dark bowed dramatically. As he did, light rippled over his hair, making it short and inky black. His eyes shifted from grey to burning red, and Sectonia could just see the hint of scarring peeking from beneath his mask. “Oh, well-done! It took Bandanna Dee a few minutes, and I’m sure my Lady Galaxia knew all along. And yet it took you mere hours to realize I wasn’t your child!” Dark exclaimed.

Nightmare froze, and for a split second, he really did look like a concerned parent who’d lost his son. But that was gone an instant, any worry and softness replaced with a cold sneer.

“What have you done with him?” Nightmare asked.

“I chained him to a wall,” Dark said brightly, “After taking care of his powers, of course. Poor Meta Knight, caged and collared like a wild animal. All alone in the cold and the dark. I gave him the opportunity to come with me, but he refused. So I thought I would…try a more direct approach. But you need not worry. I haven’t done more than give him a good beating for fighting back, but
that shouldn’t bother you. You do that sort of thing all the time, after all.”

“You hurt Meta Knight?” Dedede asked.

Dark laughed. “I beheaded my own mother. Do you really think I care about Meta Knight?” Dark asked. “I’ve slain far nobler men and women than him. Now that everyone knows I have dear Meta Knight, I’m sure some…negotiations are in order?”

Dark continued his way around the circle and paused to ruffle Kirby’s hair.

“I’m distraught that you didn’t have to wear Bikaia’s glass boots into the fountain,” Dark said. “That would’ve been entertaining. Watching you walk around like a new foal.”

“You’re terrible,” Kirby said.

“You overestimate how much I care for Meta Knight,” Nightmare replied.

“You should care about him,” Dark said. “He has the last two pieces of the Star Rod, and he’s imprisoned in the Mirror World. And I’ve no intention of releasing him. Go ahead. Kill me, and you’ve just made the last piece of the Star Rod completely inaccessible. I don’t care if you’re stalemated in this little game with the Dreamlanders, but if you think I’ll let you win without some sort of insurance that the Mirror World will remain safe, you’re mistaken.”

“Meta Knight will have to dream eventually,” Nightmare replied.

“Not if he’s dead,” Dark said, “And I’ve left orders for his execution should I not return. But even dead, you’d still need his corpse, wouldn’t you? You have to make him stand in this fountain.”

“You’re bluffing. You wouldn’t kill Meta Knight,” Nightmare said.

“To save the Mirror World? You don’t think so?” Dark asked, raising his sword. “Would you like a demonstration, then? Proof that I’m willing to kill as many people as it takes to secure my realm?”
“What’re you doing?” Kirby asked.

“Sorry, darling,” Dark said.

Sectonia’s shout died in her throat as Dark drove his sword right through Kirby’s back. Kirby yelled and dropped to his knees. There was a lot of blood. It was so sudden, so merciless. And this creature was a reflection of Meta Knight? Sectonia felt her breath quicken.

Bandanna Dee thrashed beside Sectonia, trying to get to Kirby. Dedede screamed.

“As you can see,” Dark said, “I’m quite prepared to kill if that’s what I must do.”

“Very well,” Nightmare replied, appearing completely unbothered that his younger child was dying. “We’ll speak in the throne room.”

“Wonderful!” Dark replied, cheerfully patting Kirby’s hair, before striding out to follow Nightmare.

Once they were gone, there was a burst of struggling and chains clanging, but no one could get free to help. Not that anything could really be done. Kirby was dying and dying quickly, his body shaking and his breath hitching. They’d failed.

Kirby came to awareness very slowly. He was in a bed, a very soft one with layers of blankets. A gentle hand stroked through his hair, so Kirby kept his eyes closed, wanting just a few more minutes of that. His dad hated him. His dad had hurt him. And it might not even really be his dad. Just some sort of monster. Despite Kirby’s best efforts, he couldn’t prevent a small sob from escaping him. The hand stopped. “Are you going to whip me again?” Kirby asked, blinking back tears.

“No, Kirby,” Meta Knight replied.
It was then that Kirby realized the pieces didn’t add up. His back, shoulder, and throat didn’t hurt, and surely, they should. And what was this room? The walls and floor were made of shimmering, crystalline mirrors that reflected both the twilight outside and the torch-fire burning from the walls. Kirby sat up, his head nearly colliding with Meta Knight’s. They weren’t on a bed, but rather a square slab covered with piles of blankets and marigold petals.

Meta Knight’s pseudo-fantasy black armor was gone, too. It’d been replaced with inky black armor, engraved with delicate floral patterns, and a scarlet cape, but this set looked much more functional than the one Nightmare had created for him. He lacked a helm and a mask, and—more shockingly—Meta Knight seemed to have regrown his hair, or at least a significant portion of it, as he’d managed to pull it back, braid it, and coil it back at the nape of his neck.

“My injuries…” Kirby trailed off.

“You’re in the Mirror World. Galaxia is the goddess here, so her powers are augmented in this world. One of those powers is healing, remember? Usually, Galaxia’s powers are only for her wielder, but I imagine she makes an exception for you,” Meta Knight said.

Kirby put a hand to his throat and felt nothing. When he opened his mouth to speak, it didn’t hurt. “My injuries are healed.”

“Yes.”

“Are yours?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight nodded. “I wish I’d known sooner,” he said, smiling wryly. “I’ve been dealing with broken ribs and a concussion when I didn’t have to.”

Kirby nodded like he understood, but everything was still a little fuzzy. “Your hair is back,” Kirby said.

“A goddess has the power to warp reality, and I am Galaxia’s most humble servant,” Meta Knight said with a sort of mischievous self-deprecation. “It’s something I figured out while you were asleep.”
Asleep. But Kirby didn’t remember having the bad dream Nightmare had promised.

“I made yours pink again, too,” Meta Knight said. “It suits you more. I need practice, though, to do much more. Unfortunately, you’re still dressed as Bikaia. Unless you want to raid Shadow’s wardrobe. We might have time.”

“No, thank you. I’m sorry. I’m…” Kirby trailed off. “This is pretty. Where we are.”

“This used to be Dark Mind’s torture chamber,” Meta Knight said. “He’d decorated it like one of Nova’s temples, and he’d bring her here to torture her.”

“Is…is this where he tortured you?” Kirby asked.

Kirby knew Meta Knight had been tortured, and it’d involved his back. But Kirby hadn’t heard all the details.

An expression—maybe fear or pain—crossed Meta Knight’s face, but it was as fleeting as a shooting star. There one instant and gone the next. “Yes, here,” Meta Knight said.

“Oh, Meta Knight.”

“After Dark Mind’s death, Dark and Shadow remade it into a temple for Galaxia.”

Kirby drew a shuddering breath and flung himself at Meta Knight, pulling him into a hug. As his fingers kneaded the fine silk of Meta Knight’s cape, Kirby was certain that a tree would be more receptive to his embrace, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. It was Meta Knight, his brother, and after everything, Kirby just really wanted to be close to someone. Meta Knight slowly and carefully returned Kirby’s embrace with a strange, respectful sort of caution.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you,” Kirby said, “And I—I wish Dad had been better to both of us. This is too much, Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight pulled back quickly, but he smiled tentatively. “You’re going to be fine,” Meta Knight said.
“Is Dark here, too?” Kirby asked in a very obvious attempt to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Kirby felt like he’d already been through so much and learned so much all at once, and even though he’d been the one to mention their dad, he didn’t want to talk about Nightmare. It was easier to focus on Dark and Shadow and the Mirror World.

Meta Knight shook his head. “Remember when I went to the bathroom? I never came back,” Meta Knight said. “We thought Father would have an easier time keeping Dark away than keeping me away, and besides, if I was here, that would be a piece of the Star Rod that Father couldn’t access.”

“But he’ll notice I’m gone—”

“Shadow took your place, and I brought you here,” Meta Knight replied. “We’re waiting for Shadow to return. Once he does, we’ll enter the fountain and end the game.”

A plan. There was a plan.

“Do you hate me?” Kirby asked.

“Why would I hate you? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I don’t know. I guess after everything, I’m just questioning stuff. I just want you to…” Kirby trailed off.

“What do you want from me?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby clasped his hands in his lap. “I want you to like me,” Kirby said hoarsely. “I’ll do anything!”

There was the merest hint of a smile on Meta Knight’s face. “Anything?”

“Anything for you, Meta Knight,” Kirby said.
Meta Knight paused. “Then…perish the thought that you need to do anything. I do like you. I’m just not very good at showing it.”

“Thank you,” Kirby whispered.

Meta Knight nodded. “We have to stop our father,” he said. “You know that, right?”

“I know, and we can win, Meta Knight,” Kirby said. “If we have to fight him, we can take him on together!”

“Kirby…”

“And we’ll have the support of our friends, too,” Kirby said. “We can win. And we can make amends for everything Dad has done to us and everyone around us! Love conquers all, right?”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Don’t you?”

“No,” Meta Knight replied, “But if I was going to let anyone convince me, it would be you, Kirby.”

The sound of glass shattering split the air. Kirby jumped, and Meta Knight stood, moving into a fighting stance. The air before them shimmered, and with a sharp screech, Shadow appeared. “I’m going to kill him!” Shadow hissed. “Dark didn’t say he was going to *shatter* me! Ow!”

It was both comforting and worrisome that Meta Knight looked as baffled as Kirby was. “Are you all right?” Meta Knight asked.

“I’m sore,” Shadow said, sinking to the ground, “And weak. But. Nightmare has left the fountain and gone with Dark. If you do this quickly, you can avoid a confrontation with the Nightmare Wizard.”
“Thank you,” Meta Knight replied. “We are in your debt for such kindness.”

Shadow’s smile looked pained. “It’s the least we can do after everything you and your friends endured for our sake,” Shadow said.

“Kirby,” Meta Knight said, offering his arm. “We might be able to reunite the Star Rod. However, I’ve no idea what Father might try once we’ve won. Enough time has passed that my suppressants have worn off. Thus, my powers have returned, but if we’re forced to fight, it won’t be easy.”

Kirby nodded and shyly put his hand on the inside of his brother’s elbow.

“Good luck,” Shadow said.

The air around Kirby rippled. There was a sensation like pushing through water, and suddenly, the world fell away. He and Meta Knight stood in the Fountain of Dreams, and all their friends were there in chains. Kirby flinched and felt hot anger twist in his stomach. How dare his dad do this? Kirby’s eyes locked with Princess Sectonia’s. Her jaw dropped.

“Is it…uh, really y’all?” Dedede asked, heavy chains clinking from his wrists. “Because…uh, Kirby just died.”

“Hello, beloved,” an unfamiliar woman said.

Kirby hadn’t expected to see a woman covered in blood and wearing a wedding dress, but there she was. Through the process of elimination, Kirby knew this must’ve been Galaxia.

Meta Knight waded across the fountain and took her hands in his. “Galaxia,” he said. “Goddess, what has he done to you?”

Galaxia’s face softened. “It’s nothing, beloved. Kirby,” Galaxia said, her eyes flickering to him. “Once I say the incantation, you must grab the Star Rod.”

Kirby looked at the Star Rod, glowing brightly in the fountain’s center. Carefully, he walked towards it.
“I, Galaxia of the Sacred Fire, call upon the power of the Star Rod to purify these waters.”

The fountain waters shimmered, and with a sharp, melodic sound, the Star Rod’s pieces united. Tentatively, Kirby stepped forward. His fingertips touched the shining, golden star, and the world faded away.

Kirby’s eyes fluttered open. Blearily, his eyes focused on the hardwood surface beneath him. He sat in a chair with his chest and head pressed against his table. Kirby tilted his head. Meta Knight, his long, blue hair still pulled back from his face and wearing Dark’s armor, lay curled up on the table, Galaxia held against his chest.

Books. There were books here. This was…this was his university’s library.

“Oh! You’re the loveliest of all! What a handsome, young man!”

A figure leaned over Bandanna Dee, who lay sleeping on the carpet.

Kirby’s head shot up. “Get away from—”

The figure turned around, and Kirby gawked as he stood face-to-face with King Bikaia. For a few seconds, Kirby stood still and drank in the face he’d seen in countless portraits and textbooks. This Bikaia didn’t quite look like Kirby had expected, but the resemblance was close enough for Kirby to catch it. Mortified, Kirby sank to his knees and bowed his head. Of all the monarchs to witness his poor etiquette, it had to be Bikaia.

“I don’t know that’s really all necessary,” Bikaia said. “Please, stand, Kirby Stellarum. I apologize for startling you. I had only wanted to see how my old friends looked these days.”

Kirby hesitantly raised his head, but he didn’t dare stand—even if Bikaia had said he could. Bikaia’s face was kind. “Your friend, Bandanna Dee, has the marks of greatness on his face.”
“Greatness?”

Bikaia nodded enthusiastically. “In my time, it was believed that beauty marks indicated something of their owner’s personalities. He has a mark on his cheek, the mark of courage.”

“Oh.”

The king’s face grew wistful as his eyes swept over Kirby’s sleeping friends: Dedede by the window, Sectonia in front of a bookshelf, and Meta Knight on the table. “And it’s difficult to see, but I can catch just the barest hint of my sweet queen Elise in Dedede’s face. He is her descendant if you recall. And Sectonia, so beautiful and so different from what I’d expected! And Meta Knight—I’ve never seen my mentor so young! Does he treat you well, Galaxia? Let me see how Meta Knight envisions you!”

I’m rather fond of him, yes.

When Galaxia appeared, she smiled radiantly. Kirby’s breath caught at how stunning she was. Never before had Kirby seen such skin, dark and dappled with spots of gold. Her hair looked as though it’d been spun from sunlight, and her remarkable eyes were the color of rubies. She was so different, so much warmer and more glorious than the woman in the wedding dress had been.

“How lovely,” Bikaia said.

Bikaia bowed, took Galaxia’s hand in his, and kissed her knuckles. Bikaia, Galaxia murmured warmly.

“Miss Galaxia,” Bikaia replied, his eyes bright with mischief.

Then, Bikaia grasped Kirby’s hands in his. “And you…you have pink hair! How delightful! And such beautiful blue eyes. I’m so happy seeing you all.”

“Is it really you?” Kirby asked.
“In a manner of speaking. I was the last to wield the Star Rod, so some traces of my power remain affixed to it. And besides, you are an incarnation of me. That makes it easier.”

Kirby let Bikaia help him to his feet.

“I…I don’t know what to say,” Kirby said. “Did we win? Do we get to go home now?”

“Yes and no. You’ve won the game, but Dark Nebula won’t give in so easily,” Bikaia replied, his face darkening, “So I thought I would prepare you for a battle.”

Dark Nebula? Galaxia asked.

“Fortunately, yes,” Bikaia replied.

Oh, no. This was exactly what Kirby had feared and dearly hoped wouldn’t happen. “He’s controlling Dad,” Kirby said.

“That’s right,” Bikaia answered.

Dark Nebula was controlling his dad. Kirby shivered.

“I have the utmost confidence in your ability to best him,” Bikaia said.

“But how?” Kirby asked. “I don’t even know how to use my powers! I’ve never practiced with them. They just happen! I’m not you! I’ll never be as good as you.”

“You don’t have to be me. You’re enough,” Bikaia replied, “And do you believe your friends will make you challenge Dark Nebula on your own?”

“No,” Kirby admitted.
Light shimmered in Bikaia’s hands, forming into a magical wand. “The legendary Triple Star,” Bikaia said, pressing the wand into Kirby’s hands. “You may use it to defeat Dark Nebula. You’d best be quick, though.”

“Thank you,” Kirby said. “I’ll do my best, Your…Your Grace.”

“It’s Your Majesty,” Bikaia said gently, “But I’ve no doubt you’ll succeed. Good luck, Kirby. Until we meet again.”

“Will we?” Kirby asked.

A shadow passed over Bikaia’s face. “Great king or no, I had my failures, too,” he said quietly. “I’ll see you in the end-game.”

Meta Knight blinked rapidly, trying to figure out why he was in his university’s library. Why they were all in the university’s library.

“Is this DLU?” Sectonia asked.

Meta Knight did a double-take at the princess’s appearance. She sat against a shelf full of books wearing clothing that was at least two-hundred years out of fashion; it must’ve been something of Dark’s. “It’s not a dream,” Meta Knight replied, “But why here?”

And there was his father. For a split second, Meta Knight watched the wizard flee.

I’m going to kill him, Meta Knight thought.

Meta Knight leaped to his feet and darted after the wizard, Galaxia held tightly in his hand.

“Meta Knight, stand down!” Sectonia yelled.
The princess stumbled upright and grasped his arm, but Meta Knight teleported out of reach and resumed running. They were on the third floor, and the battle must’ve weakened his father, for Nightmare ran down the stairs rather than simply teleporting. Dimly, Meta Knight was aware that Kirby ran after him.

Second floor. There were other people here, frightened and confused, because they’d fallen asleep for hours and just woken up to the Nightmare Wizard being chased through the library.

Meta Knight was so focused on his father that he didn’t even see Shadow until he was right in front of Nightmare. With a sharp cry, Shadow swung his wand and sent a bolt of crackling energy at the wizard. Nightmare easily dodged it.

“Meta Knight! Kirby!” Dedede shouted, coming from behind.

There was a terrible sound, a sharp, fierce screeching, and the entire ceiling-to-floor window behind them burst. Meta Knight grabbed Kirby and teleported them across the room. Dedede had been blocked by the stairs and avoided being injured. Sectonia and Bandanna Dee crouched behind him. Shadow hadn’t been so fortunate and crumbled on the ground, bleeding and muffling sobs.

And Nightmare kept running.

“I’ll rip your throat out!” Dark screamed, emerging from behind a desk.

Meta Knight hesitated, torn between catching his father and helping Shadow, but Bandanna Dee was already at Shadow’s side. And if Nightmare escaped, he’d hurt more people.

“Let’s go!” Dark ordered, without waiting to see if anyone was following him.

He’d get himself killed if no one went with him.

With Kirby behind him, Meta Knight raced downstairs to the ground floor. Dark unsheathed his wings and dove at Nightmare, managing to catch the wizard off-guard. Nightmare crashed into the circulation desk, drawing screams from the people hiding behind it.
A bolt of ice split the air, but Nightmare swept away. He seemed more interest in fleeing than fighting, and they ran into the parking lot. Dark took flight, attempting to overcome the wizard, who swept his hand back and unleashed a bolt of crackling lightning.

Dark shrieked and fell to the ground, one of his wings smoldering and smelling of iron and smoke. He sheathed his wings as Kirby released a volley of lightning. Nightmare dove aside, and the lightning crashed into someone’s motorcycle.

Nightmare was distracted, and Meta Knight saw an opening.

Meta Knight lunged forward and swung Galaxia at the wizard’s chest. Galaxia struck true and tore through Nightmare’s skin, but then she stuck on something that shouldn’t have been there.

Flash.

The brat was crying again. Dark Nebula scowled as Meta Knight’s sobs, not entirely concealed by running water, drifted through the wall. This was the legendary Galacta Knight, the Knight of the Slaughter. Even reincarnation hadn’t managed to diminish the distinctive aura of the legendary warrior, an aura which misted gently over Dark Nebula’s new body. As Dark Nebula stared at the bathroom door, he thought of teleporting to the other side and really giving the brat something to cry over.

Deep inside Dark Nebula’s new mind, Nightmare Nocturne hissed and snapped. This body’s former occupant just refused to lay down and die. Instead, he remained loud and persistent. Dark Nebula curled the—his—nails into the palms of his hands. “Does it upset you, knowing that you can’t protect your child?” Dark Nebula asked softly.

If the wizard was going to be such a parasite, Dark Nebula would ensure Nightmare suffered for it. Predictably, the wizard’s anger flared like freshly forged metal, bright and hot, but it was edged with fear. Concern.

Just leave him alone, Nightmare murmured. He’s a child.

Who cared? The goddess Star Dream had said to keep the brat alive, and as infuriating as it was to have to bargain, Dark Nebula would keep Meta Knight alive if it meant getting this new body. But alive didn’t mean happy.
Kirby Stellarum’s diamond-bright aura swept over Dark Nebula. No, he was Nightmare Nocturne now. He was becoming Nightmare Nocturne, taking his name, past, and powers. The man who’d once been Nightmare was just a Whisper now.

This child. This happy, cheerful child felt just like Bikaia. Nightmare’s stomach lurched.

The Whisper’s anger abated, for a moment replaced with wonder. *My son*, the wizard thought. *I have another child.*

And the Whisper thought longingly of how happy they could be—Meta Knight, Kirby, and himself.

*Bikaia!* Nightmare snarled.

And the Whisper was thinking of Star Dream and how Star Dream might’ve influenced this, might’ve somehow resulted in Kirby having the rarest and most powerful of magical abilities. Meta Knight would’ve been a toddler when Kirby was born, and when Meta Knight was a toddler, the Whisper had still been working on Star Dream. He’d still been pretending that he’d forgotten about Asteria—*oh, Asteria!*—and had chosen Haltmann.

Ten years of pretending only to be brought so low. Only to have his body inhabited for three years by a monster.

Nightmare laughed. How *long* had he been sealed away and thought of taking his revenge on that accursed king? And here he was, reborn in new flesh. It would be like last time. Bikaia and Galacta Knight fighting to the death while *he* watched Dreamland burn. But *this time!* This time, he could win! He could stack the deck in his favor!

He could train Meta Knight to be the great warrior he was supposed to be, and he could make Bikaia weak. And *oh*, Nightmare could make Bikaia suffer. So, so much.

*Flash.*
The whisper’s voice was growing quieter by the day, but something else was happening. It was becoming harder for Nightmare to sort through where his feelings began and where the whisper’s ended.

And one day, Nightmare realized that he did love this child, and maybe instead of fulfilling Haltmann’s wishes, he could rule the land of the living. Nightmare could take the place of Nova. Nightmare could keep Meta Knight at his side, and they could be a family. After all, wasn’t being a god so lonely?

Yes. Star Dream had broken Max Haltmann and Asteria de Brillante Armadura. It would break Meta Knight, too. But if Nightmare could spare him from that…

It wasn’t a choice Nightmare took lightly, but he liked playing a god again. He liked the thought of having the Great Warrior in the Galaxy’s life in his hands to do with as he wished. And he decided, yes, Meta Knight was worth saving—provided he could be coaxed or beaten into obedience. But Bikaia?

Bikaia was a creature Nightmare could never demean himself by loving.

Flash.

The villagers of Pupupu Village were already superstitious and narrow-minded. They didn’t appreciate someone like Nightmare Nocturne, with his common blood and potent magic. They whispered that it wasn’t right. Only the royals ought to hold such power.

Nightmare heard the rumors as he softly wove his magic into the very fabric of that tiny village, and the more magic he wove, the worse the rumors grew.

It didn’t bother Nightmare, of course. He didn’t live in that village, but Kirby did. And after coming every few months to renew that spell, Nightmare had assured that Kirby—for all else he might be—would grow up very lonely. The villagers might smile when they saw him, but behind those smiles, there was sharp and angry fear. They would greet Kirby and in the same breath, usher their children away.

And with his work done, the wizard often returned to Kirby’s house. He might as well slip the child a few nightmares while he slept. The foolish child had yet to make the connection between
his nightmares and his father’s powers.

So Kirby grew up without any friends—except for Sir Ebrum’s brats every other summer—and without any idea of how to use his powers.

*Flash.*

The plan fell apart when Meta Knight turned sixteen. Yes, Nightmare had told Meta Knight that he was worthless and welcome to live on the streets if he wanted to complain, but Nightmare hadn’t thought Meta Knight would actually do it.

But he had. And even worse, he’d gone to A.M.B.E.R. looking like he’d been hit by a bus. This was a headache Nightmare didn’t need, so he’d went to the A.M.B.E.R. headquarters and waited for Special Agent Drawcia to arrive.

According to Nightmare’s resources, she was the one spearheading this mess.

She jumped when she entered, but she didn’t turn away. “Nocturne,” she said, recovering quickly. “I wasn’t aware we had an appointment scheduled.”

Nightmare smiled. “I’m told you spoke to my son.”

“So this is how we’re going to play it,” Drawcia said.

The witch sat serenely behind her desk and made a show of shuffling her papers. Rather than taking the empty chair, Nightmare perched right on the edge of her desk.

“It’s my word against Meta Knight’s,” Nightmare replied. “I didn’t do anything to him. He’s a spoiled brat who ran into some trouble and is trying to blame me for his recklessness.”

“Then, you won’t mind being fingerprinted?” Drawcia asked, “So we can compare your prints to the ones on his neck?”
“You expect me to just bow before your whims? You have nothing on me.”

“This isn’t just about the abuse. Are you aware that all magically-inclined children are required to be registered in A.M.B.E.R.’s database, so they may receive free counseling in how to use their powers?” Drawcia asked. “And are you also aware that this counseling must be waived annually?

“Meta Knight is registered.”

“I wasn’t referring to Meta Knight.”

Nightmare narrowed his eyes, calculating the best way to approach this.

“Because you are his father and he is a minor, I am required by law to inform you that I am planning to visit your son,” Drawcia said, “Kirby Nocturne.”

“It’s Stellarum,” Nightmare spat.

If she went to Pupupu Village, Drawcia would see very quickly that it’d been cursed. She would realize that Kirby had Bikaia’s trademark power and that he’d been taught to hate it. Even though some of the world would be horrified to discover anyone had Copy, the most powerful of all magic, A.M.B.E.R. didn’t work that way. They believed that all gifts ought to be celebrated and controlled. Better to have a magic user who could control their powers than one who couldn’t.

“If I discover this error is our fault, you will—of course—receive a full apology for our mistake. However, if it appears that you withheld information about your son or altered his file in the A.M.B.E.R. databases, you will be charged with perjury for knowingly failing to provide information to a federal agency.”

“Name your price,” Nightmare said.

Drawcia leaned forward and deliberately shook her head. “There is no price you can pay that will make me turn a blind eye to this,” she said.

“I’ll destroy your career!” Nightmare sneered. “I know the details behind your little mission in
Those were details that no one was supposed to have, but Nightmare’s spies were very good.

“I’m sure you’ll try,” Drawcia replied, “And if you succeed, at least I’ll know I tried. I’ll tolerate many things, Nightmare Nocturne, but child abuse isn’t one of them. And I’m no kinder towards child neglect. There’s no reason for Kirby not to have been offered counseling for his magic.”

Flash.

Meta Knight hadn’t learned his lesson the way Nightmare had hoped. He was surviving. He had friends. How disgustingly saccharine. Nightmare watched Marx and Magolor huddled beneath an abandoned building and just out of the rain. They were waiting for Meta Knight; he’d taken to charming food out of some spoiled nobleman—a relationship that was obviously doomed from the start. At least, Nightmare didn’t have to worry about Dedede, Heir of the Stars, ruining things.

It seemed like the perfect time to strike. Nightmare descended. The boys started, Marx moving into a fighting stance and Magolor taking a step back. “Hello, children,” Nightmare said. “We’re going to have a little talk about Meta Knight.”

Flash.

When Kirby began searching for colleges, Nightmare Nocturne, ever the doting father, offered the child full tuition to DLU and rent in the dorms. After all, only the best for his son.

Kirby had jumped excitedly and thrown his arms around his father. Nightmare patted the top of Kirby’s head and locked eyes with the boy’s mother. Kristiana Stellarum didn’t know of Nightmare’s plans, but her eyes were wide with concern.

“I thought you might be excited,” Nightmare said. “Only the best for you, dear.”

“Thanks, Dad!” Kirby exclaimed.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to go to school somewhere closer to home?” Kristiana asked.
“He’ll be near me,” Nightmare replied smoothly. “Don’t worry so much. I’ll take good care of him!”

For a little while, anyway. With their polar-opposite personalities, Nightmare was sure Meta Knight and Kirby would be at one another’s throats within a month, and if not, Nightmare could always nudge things along. Jealousy was a very powerful weapon if used effectively; Queen Alera was proof of that.

*Flash.*

Hundreds, thousands more snippets of this monster’s life as Nightmare Nocturne fell like hail, making Meta Knight’s mind whirl. This monster hurt him. And Kirby. And their mothers. And Marx and Magolor and Dedede and Delilah and Drawcia. And Galaxia—

When Meta Knight pulled Galaxia free, a stream of inky blackness followed. Nightmare fell to the ground, and Meta Knight rushed to his side. When he put his fingers to the side of Nightmare’s neck, he felt a pulse.

Kirby screamed.

The blackness pulled itself together, and a man emerged. But it wasn’t quite a man, more like a shadow brought to life.

“What the deuce is *that*?” Dark asked.

“Dark Nebula,” Kirby said, sounding faint.

How did Kirby know that? Meta Knight filed the information away to ask about later.

Meta Knight rose to his feet, Galaxia held ready. “You took the wrong children’s father!” Meta Knight snapped.
“Took your father? I am your father now, you brat! I am Nightmare Nocturne, and I raised you for a decade!”

“No, you are not my father, and you are not Nightmare Nocturne! Stealing his body, his memories, and his powers doesn’t make you him! Kirby and I had a father who loved us, and you took him away! And you didn’t raise me for a decade! You abused me for five years and harassed me the rest of the time!”

Nearby, Dark stood in a fighting stance and held his sword ready. The surface of his blade shimmered, light rippling unnaturally across it.

“I’m not afraid of you, Meta Knight,” Dark Nebula said, lightning sparking between his fingertips. “Or of Bikaia. And certainly not that mirror-abomination.”

Dark Nebula released the lightning, and Meta Knight deflected it with Galaxia. It struck a nearby car, setting off its alarm. “You should be afraid,” Meta Knight replied. “I’m the Knight of the Slaughter.”

“This ends now!” Dark shouted. “Enough talk!”

Dark launched himself forward first. Dark Nebula vanished before Dark’s sword could connect and left a strange, metallic shimmer in its wake.

“He’s just going to keep teleporting,” Meta Knight said.

“Then, we’ll have to catch him off-guard,” Dark replied.

A howl split the air. “Is—is that the wolfwrath?” Kirby asked, turning around with a wand held aloft in his hand.

Meta Knight hadn’t really looked at it before, but now, he realized he recognized that wand. “Where did you get that from?”

“It’s the Triple-Star. Bikaia gave it to me.”
The Scarlet Magician was probably going to be very unhappy that an undead Dreamlandic king had stolen it.

Despite the howls, the wolfwrath hadn’t appeared. Dark Nebula hadn’t either, but his magic sparked at the edge of Meta Knight’s awareness. Of course. The parking lot was bordered by one of the university’s nature trails, a highly forested area with more or less marked paths. Where else would a terrible wizard hide? Meta Knight knew those trails well, and with a look towards Dark, Meta Knight slowly walked towards the forest edge. Fire flashed through the air, singeing trees and filling the air with the smell of smoke. Dark swore and backed towards Kirby.

Meta Knight sensed Dark Nebula and turned around. Galaxia’s blade barely deflected the lightning. It struck a tree and split it in half. With a growl, the wolfwrath leaped into battle. From the corner of his eye, Meta Knight caught flashes of the wolf’s fire. Dark Nebula approached. Meta Knight took a step back, nearly slipping on the ground. Ice? It was too warm for ice.

Dark Nebula was no longer possessing Nightmare, so he didn’t have his powers. There was no way to know what to expect.

Meta Knight called his dimensional powers to him, feeling the fabric between the worlds. The air around him rippled as lightning arced towards him. Meta Knight vanished, pushed, and reappeared behind Dark Nebula. He swung Galaxia, her sacred blade tearing through Dark Nebula as easily as she might’ve torn through the air. But the wizard still darted back, wounded but still fighting.

Kirby screamed. The wolfwrath had wrapped her jaws around his wrist, and Meta Knight lunged forward. He grabbed a handful of her thick fur and tried to pull her away. “Stop!” Meta Knight shouted.

The momentary distraction was all Dark Nebula needed. Lightning struck Meta Knight so hard that he fell backward, his back hitting hard against a tree. Pain jolted up his spine and through his ribs. He dropped Galaxia somewhere along the way, and he blindly twisted his wrist, bidding her to return to him. Nothing quite hurt, but his muscles felt tight and locked up. Meta Knight dropped his head towards the ground, inhaling the sharp smell of pine needles and mold.

“Meta Knight!” Kirby cried.

Kirby scrambled to Meta Knight’s side, Dark moving to stand between them and Dark Nebula. Meta Knight gasped for breath and stumbled to his feet with Kirby’s help. The wolfwrath was
there, and Meta Knight raised his hand, ready to combat the wolf’s fire.

But the wolfwrath didn’t attack. She lowered her ears, and her tail wagged tentatively.

*What?*

Galaxia swept into Meta Knight’s hand. *I think her loyalty lies with you,* Galaxia said. *Dark Nebula did create her for you.*

For him. “I need you to stop him,” Meta Knight said, pointing. “He hurt us.”

The wolfwrath looked between Meta Knight and Dark Nebula and moved nervously on her paws. Slowly, she turned towards Dark Nebula, who’d turned his focus to Dark.

“She’s…on our side,” Kirby said.

The wolfwrath pounced on Dark Nebula, her teeth snapping at his throat. Dark Nebula vanished, but the battle was beginning to wear on him. He only teleported a few feet away.

“Move!” Dark roared, grabbing the back of Meta Knight’s neck and Kirby’s shirt.

The air twisted around them, and when it snapped back into place, they were several feet back. The wolfwrath bounded away from Dark Nebula.

There was a flash of midnight blue, and someone’s clearly new *Lor* bounded over the curb, its front bumper slamming into Dark Nebula. Meta Knight froze, suddenly very, very confused. Delilah opened the driver’s side door and stepped out. Sectonia stepped out from the other side.

Slowly, Dark Nebula stumbled back. With a sharp shout, Kirby swung the Triple-Star. Ice burst from the ground beneath Dark Nebula, crackling and imprisoning his ankles. With a flick of her hand, Sectonia’s crystals grew up the surface of Kirby’s ice, moving very quickly. Within seconds, the wizard was encased in ice and crystal.
“Holy—” Dark began.

Sectonia snapped her fingers, and the crystals and ice burst into hundreds of glimmering, pink shards. “I defy anyone to come back from that,” she said.

Kirby ran and dropped to his knees beside Nightmare’s unmoving body, half-forgotten during the chaos of the fight. “Dad?” he asked, shaking Nightmare’s shoulder.

The wizard didn’t budge. “He’s breathing,” Meta Knight said, slowly joining his brother. “At least, he was when I checked.”

The wolfwrath nudged Meta Knight in the shoulder, and absentmindedly, he raised his hand to pet her.

“If he’s breathing, he’ll likely be fine,” Sectonia said, coming from behind them. “It isn’t uncommon for victims to pass out as a result of possession.”

“Really?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yes. He should wake up on his own, although I can’t say how long that will take. It varies depending on how long the possession was. I also can’t say how much he’ll remember or what the state of his powers will be, but he’ll certainly be alive. Now, back away,” Sectonia said, softening her voice. “I’ve called emergency services already, and the paramedics will need to get through.”

Kirby did as asked and hesitantly offered Sectonia an awkward bow. Meta Knight moved more slowly, and even when he did, he stayed a few feet away from the rest of them. Nothing felt entirely real at the moment. It was like he'd walked into a strange dream.

“Meta Knight,” Delilah said, stepping carefully around the shattered shards of crystal.

He’d never realized that Duchess Delilah wore bright red, lacy velvet to bed. He’d only ever seen her in fluffy bathrobes, and Meta Knight felt awkward looking at her. Suddenly, Meta Knight was very glad he’d been wearing jeans and a borrowed t-shirt when Dark Nebula had decided to conquer Dreamland. Sure, he’d kept Dark’s armor because he’d changed in the Mirror World. But if he hadn’t. He normally slept in only his boxers, and that would’ve been an embarrassing fight.
“Meta Knight.”

“Mm?”

The duchess’s hand lighted on his shoulder. “Are you all right, pet?” Delilah asked.


“Oh, good,” Delilah said. “Doncha ever run after some kinda undead sorcerer again, d’you hear me, young man? I was beside myself with worry! You coulda gotten yourself killed! What were you thinking?”

Meta Knight had only heard Delilah raise her voice once before and never at him, and he stared blankly at her, unsure whether Delilah’s face reflected fury or distress. She’d never really scolded him before, and Meta Knight wasn’t entirely sure what to do. “I—I wasn’t thinking,” he said. “Please, forgive me. I’m so sorry, Your Grace.”

“You better be sorry, you bad boy,” Delilah said, pulling him into a tight hug. “For Nova’s sake, Meta. How d’you think I woulda felt if you’d died?”

Meta Knight lowered his head and kept silent, even as Delilah tucked strands of hair behind his ears and kissed his forehead. For the first time in his life, he didn’t feel uncomfortable with receiving her affection, and when he dared to look up at her, Meta Knight saw there were tears shining in her eyes.

“And don’t think you’re outta hot water either,” Delilah said, pointing at Kirby. “I don’t care if you’re Bikaia. You’re just a kid, and you cain’t be runnin’ into trouble like this! You understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kirby replied awkwardly. “I mean, Your Grace!”

“And you,” Delilah said, turning her attention to Dark. “Jus’ cause you’re Meta from a different dimension don’t mean you oughta be engagin’ in that kinda behavior either.”
“I’m a king,” Dark said.

“Then, bein’ a king, you oughta know the importance of takin’ back-up with you!” Delilah exclaimed. “For Nova’s sake, boy! If Floralia decides they’re gonna invade, are you just gonna try to take ‘em on singlehandedly?”

“My father destroyed the kingdom of Floralia.”

“I don’t care, you gremlin!” Delilah retorted.

“As much as I agree with you,” Sectonia cut in. “Forcing someone to hand you their car and using it to attempt vehicular homicide probably isn’t setting the best example, Delilah.”

Delilah tapped the tip of Meta Knight’s nose. “Well, it ain’t like I took courses in counter-terrorism. You gotta start thinkin’ of those, though,” Delilah said. “Got it, Meta? We don’t just make servants take ‘em for fun. You gotta know how to protect yourself.”

She really did care a lot about him, didn’t she? Meta Knight hesitantly rose on the balls of his feet, almost going on tip-toe, to place a kiss on her cheek. Delilah blinked rapidly, clearly startled. “As you say, Your Grace,” Meta Knight replied. “I’ll be more careful in the future. I promise.”

Delilah’s face softened. Then, she turned away and walked back to the car. “I’ll buy ‘im another car,” Delilah said, standing beside Sectonia. “He hurt my boys. I couldn’ just let that go.”

“We’re ‘her boys,’ are we?” Dark whispered.

“Don’t mock my Lady,” Meta Knight murmured.

Dark arched an eyebrow. “In my world, that woman has tried to assassinate me at least four times. I’d always heard mother-in-laws were dreadful creatures, but…”

“You’re married?” Meta Knight asked. “You married Dedede?”
“Well, he’s not an unattractive man,” Dark replied, pretending to fan himself. “Still, Saint Knight’s dinners are going to be absolutely dreadful affairs with her around.”

“Do you like Dedede, too?” Kirby asked. “In that way?”

Meta Knight felt warmth flood his face. “He’s…fine.”

“Dear Kirby, what Meta Knight means to say is that he’s already being consumed with naughty fantasies—”

“Fantasies of punching you?” Meta Knight asked. “Yes.”

Dark’s face brightened. “Darling, you know being aggressive does so little to dissuade me, and yet you persist on making these little threats. Try another approach.”

“Meta Knight, Kirby,” Sectonia called, beckoning for them.

They walked over, along with Dark and the wolfwrath. “I did a number on the front,” Delilah admitted, tapping a massive dent.

“I’ll take care of the car,” Sectonia replied. “Or Yamikage will. A.M.B.E.R. is surely on their way. Meta Knight, they’ll probably want to confiscate the wolfwrath, so if you’re attached to her, you may want to…smuggle her back to your dorm. I would let you keep her, but I can’t promise Yamikage feels the same way.”

The wolfwrath’s tail drooped, and she shrank to the size of a puppy.

“Does she understand human speech?” Sectonia asked, taken aback.

“Yes,” Meta Knight said.

When she was small, she was really just a giant ball of red fluff. She whined and bounced around Meta Knight’s feet, clearly distraught.
Meta Knight crouched beside her and petted her soft fur. “They’re not going to take you away from me,” Meta Knight murmured.

“If you want, I’ll smuggle her into your dorm,” Dark said. “Then, I’ll head back to the library and see if I can find Shadow. I know he’s had worse injuries, and he’d just shatter. We can only really die if we’re beheaded; otherwise, we just shatter and reassemble. But still, I’m loathed to be away from him. I...I need to see him.”

“When I ran through, Dedede and Bandanna Dee were with ‘im,” Delilah said, “And I’m sure he’s gonna be fine. But if there’s anything we can do to help ‘im, let me know. Please. I’ll personally take care of it.”

“Huh,” Dark said. “I will do that.”

“Yamikage will want the Triple-Star, too, although I can’t imagine how you came by it, Kirby,” Sectonia said. “It was stolen from the A.M.B.E.R. vault years ago.”

The Scarlet Magician was definitely going to be furious.

“Bikaia gave it to me in a dream,” Kirby replied.

“That makes as much sense as anything else,” Sectonia replied.

Sirens blared as the first A.M.B.E.R. agents arrived. Dark scooped up the wolfwrath and vanished. “Well,” Sectonia said, “Here comes the fun part of the night.”

After over an hour of questioning, they were finally released. Sectonia offered to drive Meta Knight, Kirby, and Delilah home in her limo, and they sat mostly in silence. Kirby was in awe because the limo had a mini fridge. How Kirby could be awed by something so ordinary after literally meeting the undead king of Dreamland and the god of the underworld was a mystery to Meta Knight. Delilah kept a hand on Meta Knight's knee. Across from them, Sectonia was drinking
a glass of champagne.

When they arrived at Dedede’s shared dorm, Kirby hesitated. “Am I with you, or…?”

“Of course,” Meta Knight replied. “You’ll stay the night.”

Kirby brightened and left the limo. Delilah followed suit.

“Meta Knight, you’ll be staying for a few minutes,” Sectonia said.

Delilah immediately sat back down, while Kirby waited awkwardly on the sidewalk.

“You’re welcome to go, also, Delilah,” Sectonia said.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere. Meta’s my servant which means I’m allowed to stay any time he’s talkin’ to —”

“That law only applies to interrogations,” Sectonia argued. “I’m not going to question him.”

Delilah’s eyes darted to the side, clearly trying to find a way out. “Fine,” she said, “But Meta Knight, if she so much as asks you what yer middle name is, you’re gonna call me and demand to have a lawyer.”

“I already know his middle name; it’s Mare. And for Nova’s sake, Delilah, you act like I’m going to murder him and throw his body in a ditch,” Sectonia said.

Delilah hesitantly left. “Ten minutes, tops,” she said, as she closed the door.

“Hm. She’s very protective of you,” Sectonia mused, leaning back against her seat.

“Well, I do work for her, and if I do something I shouldn’t, it would reflect poorly on her.”
“Yes,” Sectonia replied. “I’m sure that’s exactly it. She has no emotional investment in your whatsoever.”

Meta Knight had once said that Delilah considered him an investment, and it was uncomfortable hearing Sectonia use the same phrase, even if the princess was being sarcastic. “What do you want from me, Your Royal Highness?” Meta Knight asked.

“Are you in love with Dedede?” Sectonia asked.

Did she want to do this now? Meta Knight had several very un-gentlemanly things that he suddenly wanted to tell Sectonia. He really just wanted to go home and—despite the fact that he’d been in a magically induced sleep for hours—go to bed. And she wanted to talk about this now? And how did she even know? Did the whole kingdom know that Meta Knight maybe—okay, definitely—had fallen head over heels in love with his liege?

“I can’t imagine how you came to such a conclusion,” Meta Knight replied.

Sectonia didn’t look amused by the deflection. “I only wanted to tell you that it would be highly improper for a servant to be romantically involved with his Lord. He can use you to…well, you’re an adult. I don’t need to explain to you what the rules are. But for him to call you his boyfriend? And with your Halcandran blood? Oh, no.”

Meta Knight averted his gaze to the floorboard. He felt a pit form in his stomach; Meta Knight could guess well enough where this was going. “Do you think I too haven’t thought of this?” he asked.

“No, I’m sure you have. But have you thought about what happens when a member of the aristocracy is unable to function?”

Okay, so that wasn’t the direction Meta Knight had thought this would take. “What do you mean? There’s nothing wrong with Dedede.”

Dear Nova, unable to function? Meta Knight suddenly wondered if Sectonia was threatening to maim or kill Dedede. Surely, she wouldn’t go that far, would she? There had been royal scandals before, and no one had been assassinated.
“Well, I realize it is immensely disrespectful of me to…find a silver lining to another’s misfortune, but if I was—say—the daughter of a duke who’d recently fallen into a coma for an indeterminate amount of time, I would declare my right as an interim noble, meaning that I would be granted full access to my father’s lands, properties, money, and titles until he recovered. Of course, you could never do such a thing and remain a servant, so you’d have to abandon that line of work. So tragic.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I sleep more soundly at night when I know I’ve done something—no matter how small—to make the lives of my people happier,” Sectonia replied. “The match isn’t so uneven if you have a title and money of your own.”

“And if you were that duke’s daughter and you’d been approached by a princess…”

“Yes?”

“Would you have asked for that princess’s blessing, and what would she have said?”

“The princess would’ve advised you not to neglect your shaving. Stubble doesn’t suit you. It makes your jaw look too broad for the rest of your face,” Sectonia said.

“Oh.”

“And after that, I suppose the princess would’ve agreed,” Sectonia said. “You do realize you have the opportunity to become one of the wealthiest men in Dreamland, don’t you? One of the most powerful? The most powerful Halcandran man in all of Dreamland?”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I’m playing chess, Meta Knight.”

“Who’s your opponent?”
Sectonia hummed and toyed with the rim of her champagne glass. “My mother,” she said.

“Great. Look; I don’t want any involvement in some game between you and the Queen,” Meta Knight said. “I was beaten to a pulp earlier this week. I was threatened, watched the woman who’s taken care of me for the past few years threatened, and watched my father hurt my friends. And I just learned my father hasn’t actually been my father in over a decade. I just learned that some monster threatened Magolor and Marx and potentially resulted in them betraying me. I have hated them for years, and now, I’ve learned they might have been completely innocent. I want to go home and do absolutely nothing except go to school for the next few months. How can you even be so ready to play games already? We just fought for the control of Dreamland.”

“What better opportunity for a revolution than in the chaotic? When you’re a woman in my position, you learn to take every advantage you can regardless of the situation. Take my advice or leave it,” Sectonia said, her voice cold. “You may leave now. Remember, though. True beauty is control.”

He couldn’t leave quickly enough, and Dedede stood in front of the dorm waiting for him. Meta Knight’s heart pounded so quickly in his chest that he thought it might burst.

Meta Knight took off in a sprint. Dedede met him halfway across the parking lot and swept him into a hug. “You’re all right!” Dedede exclaimed. “Your face! Your hair! You look great!”

Meta Knight nodded. “My…my injuries were healed in the Mirror World. I’m fine.”

Dedede’s hand shook as he tucked a few wayward strands of Meta Knight’s hair back behind his ears. “I’m so sorry about everything that happened,” Dedede murmured.

“So am I.”

Dedede’s face was curious, trying to judge his reaction. “Ya look pretty nice in red an’ black,” Dedede said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck.

“Do you still mean what you said?” Meta Knight asked. “About loving me.”
“If I say ‘yes,’ are you gonna run away?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“It’s funny. I ain’t never seen you run from nothin’ in your life, but I tell you I’m in love with ya and you just…” Dedede trailed off.

“Do you still mean it?” Meta Knight asked.

“Goddess, why would that have changed?” Dedede asked. “If anything, I love you more.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” Meta Knight said. “I hate this whole love business. I don’t feel like I know what I’m doing anymore.”

“Meta, you ain’t gotta marry me tomorrow, y’know.”

No, he didn’t have to, but if he did what Sectonia had suggested and made himself an interim noble, he could have Nightmare’s money. He could clear away all of Dedede’s family debts. He could make Dedede very happy and repay all the kindness he and his mother had shown Meta Knight over the years. He wouldn’t have to be Dedede’s servant anymore. They could just be two noblemen in love with each other. And what else could he do? He could make sure Jecra’s son continued to get medical care and that Blade could pursue her degree. He could make sure Kirby’s tuition continued to get paid. Whatever her motives, Sectonia's suggestion had been a good one.

“I know,” Meta Knight said. “I just…”

Dedede lowered his head, so his breath came in warm puffs on Meta Knight’s cheek. “What’re you thinking, Mety Knight?”

“I thought you might want me as a potential romantic partner,” Meta Knight replied, “And I didn’t think that sounded like a bad idea.”

Dedede flattened his palm against the small of Meta Knight’s back. Reflexively, Meta Knight moved forward, hesitated, and leaned back against Dedede’s hand. “Too forward?” Dedede asked.
“No, I’m just so bad at this.”

“You’re new to it,” Dedede replied, “And that’s okay. It just means we gotta get you a lot a practice in.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Dedede kissed Meta Knight’s jaw. It was nice and soft, nearly butterfly-like. “Let’s go back in to our friends,” Dedede said, linking Meta Knight’s arm with his and leading him back to the dorm.

“All right,” Meta Knight said.

Nightmare would’ve been appalled.

No, not Nightmare. Who knew what Nightmare would’ve thought? But Dark Nebula was dead. Gone. He couldn’t burst into the parking lot in a flash of shadow and fury and make Meta Knight refuse Dedede’s advances. He couldn’t tell Meta Knight he wasn’t allowed to kiss or be in a romantic relationship with anyone. He couldn’t do anything at all. The realization struck Meta Knight all at once. He and Dedede could do whatever they wanted, and Dark Nebula couldn’t do anything about it. It was exhilarating and liberating, and Meta Knight wanted everything, every little romantic gesture that he’d never had.
Delilah, Duchess of the Stars, sat in her office and waited for the video chat to begin. It’d been two weeks since Dark Nebula’s sleeping curse ravaged Dreamland, and she—like any good duke or duchess—had traveled back home to see the reconstruction of her duchy. Things had finally settled enough that all of Dreamland’s rulers could get together. While the aristocracy and parliament were massive, decisions during disasters relied on seven to ten people. Originally, it’d been six, but in the past seventy years, Dreamland had expanded her borders. This, combined with Alera’s fickle temper and habit for stripping titles of elected officials, made the number fluctuate.

Delilah had prepared her budget for reconstructing the Duchy of the Stars, and she knew from experience that Alera would likely give her about half of it. This time, Delilah had tried inflating it, so maybe if the Queen tried to give her a partial amount, it would be the amount Delilah actually needed.

A chat window popped up, and Delilah smiled. Sir Arthur was officially the Duke of Nova—formerly the Kingdom of Seventopia—and the Governor of Traumwald, but he’d been born to a long line of famous knights and preferred the title from his days in Queen’s Guard as opposed to any title the Queen had since given him. Arthur was in his fifties with thick, blond hair and eyes that were nearly violet. Delilah had always found him terribly handsome, but she’d never said so. She was an impoverished duchess and had nothing she could offer him, and her time was better spent improving her Duchy and taking care of her boys, anyway. She had no real need for romance.

“Aah, Delilah!” Arthur greeted.

Arthur sighed and rested his cheek in the palm of his hand. “Seventopia is coming along comparatively well, but I’m hoping the Queen will agree to send some help for clean-up. It’s difficult because our railroad system was rendered inaccessible; we can’t get supplies from one end to the other. We can ship across the Indigo Ocean, of course, but we’re not well-equipped for that volume of shipping.”

Delilah winced. Compared to that, the Duchy of the Stars had fared well. There had been thousands of people injured and millions of deden in damages, but her duchy was still functional. It helped, too, that she shared a border with Floralia. Officially, Queen Alera had to approve of any foreign aid, but before Delilah could even consider requesting aid from Dreamland’s northern neighbor, most of Floralia’s knighthood had shown up on her doorstep ready to help.

Would Alera be furious when she found out? Probably. But Delilah had no intention of telling the much-needed Floralian knights to return home.

“How’s Traumwald?” Delilah asked.

“Big Forest and some of the areas around Candy Mountain remain without power,” Arthur said. “And it’s a poorer region as is. The only silver lining is that the Holy Nightmare Corporation has graciously agreed to offer us their full expanse of medications and technology. It’ll alleviate some injuries, at least.”

So Delilah wasn’t the only one getting unapproved help.

"We're hoping that Haltmann Works will agree to give aid, also," Arthur said, "In an attempt to one-up Nightmare."

Another screen popped up. Count Perry, Lord of Halfmoon, adjusted his camera. Although Delilah had a massive list of things she’d like to say to Bandanna Dee’s dad, she forced a pleasant smile.

It must be really hard being such an abhorrent human being. Delilah bit the inside of her cheek and tried to figure out if there was a way she could make Count Perry's life harder without bringing harm to his constituents.

“Perry,” Arthur said. “How is Halfmoon?”

“We’re managing. Mekkai and Hotbeat took the brunt of the damage, although we did have an armored van drive through the west wing of the Cloud Palace,” Perry said. “How are you, Delilah? I heard that monster almost beheaded you.”

Delilah curled her nails into the palms of her hands. She almost wished Perry had said it spitefully, so she could’ve justified snapping back at that sorry scarfy-faced cretin. But he hadn’t. He’d meant the remark to be genuinely sympathetic. Delilah was still torn between being polite and scoring points. Count Perry was—and always would be—a terrible man who’d abandoned his teenage son, and Delilah hardly cared for taking the high road when faced with that man.


“I hadn’t heard that! How utterly dreadful!” Duke Ebrum, Lord of Aqua Star and the Queen’s cabinet minister had joined them. “Are you all right, Delilah?”

Delilah had dreamed of that moment every night since the curse broke. She’d spent the two nights after in the dorms at DLU, and she’d woken at least a half-dozen times both nights. And each time, she’d quietly tiptoe around the apartment, checking on everyone. She’d realized that was foolish, but at the same time, she’d wanted visual confirmation that everyone was still safe and with her.

Suddenly, Delilah felt as if she was in the Fountain of Dreams again. She remembered all too vividly Dedede and Bandanna Dee screaming for her. And Meta Knight’s wide, grey eyes. Delilah hadn’t known it was Dark until he’d revealed himself. To her, it’d been Meta Knight, and Delilah had seen his indecision. And as she was facing down death, she’d been afraid. She hadn’t wanted to die, but at the same time, she thought of a hundred different things that Nightmare might do if Meta Knight refused. And Nova, how could Delilah even consider asking Meta Knight—that poor, sweet, honorable young man—to let himself be hurt, or even killed, for her sake? How could she let Dreamland fall for her sake?

The duchess looked off to the side of her desk, where the framed photo of Dedede, Meta Knight, and Bandanna Dee rested just out of her camera’s view. “Yes, I was almost beheaded,” Delilah replied, her voice wavering just a bit, “But I’m fine.”
Everyone was fine. Everyone had...improved a bit since then. Dedede and Bandanna Dee were just a few miles away, helping rebuild the region. Meta Knight and Kirby were in the capital, the former working on the laborious process of becoming an interim nobleman and the latter—hopefully—enjoying some rest. And if any threat arose, Meta Knight and Kirby had the wolfwrath to protect them. Sectonia was fine. And Dark was—well—a king from another dimension and had an incredible arsenal of magical powers at his disposal. He hadn't been in touch since the curse broke, but he was probably fine.

For about the fortieth time in the past twelve days, Delilah felt a sharp jolt of fear and dread; she shouldn't have let Meta Knight and Kirby stay in the capital alone. As always, the feeling was followed by the persistent reminder that both Meta Knight and Kirby were grown men and could make their own decisions.

“We can thank Nova that you’re well, then,” Alera said, entering the chat.

Delilah tried not to grimace. Knowing the Queen would inevitably chime in hadn’t made Delilah any more eager to see her. Still, Delilah joined the chorus of greetings and inclined her head slightly to pay proper respect.

Through the combined use of expensive cosmetic treatments and magic, Alera was a stunningly gorgeous woman. Although she was in her late forties, her face remained unlined and her hair a grayless, dark brown. She could’ve been mistaken for being in her mid-twenties. But then, Alera had always been an attractive woman, and there had been a time when Delilah had been terribly envious of that.

“I see that we’ve not all arrived yet,” Alera said, displeasure evident in her tone.

It was still twenty minutes before the meeting was set to begin.

“Is it true that you’ve found the Wielder of Galaxia?” Arthur asked.

Delilah couldn’t help but smirk. She’d seen the news announcement with everyone else, and she and Meta Knight had already had a video conference working through the implications. Hours before, Sectonia, who’d resumed her duties with A.M.B.E.R., had announced that the Wielder of Galaxia had been found and given a full pardon by Queen Alera.
Delilah didn’t believe for a second that Alera actually had. To the duchess, this sounded more like Sectonia acting on her own and assuming Alera would never admit that the royal family didn’t have a unified front.

“We have,” Alera said, her face darkening.

“Wonderful!” Arthur exclaimed. “This is better than we could’ve hoped and at this time, too! Surely, this is proof that the goddess Nova is with us and will support our efforts to rebuild Dreamland.”

Alera looked like she’d have liked to fire a few arrows into the goddess Nova. Or perhaps Sir Arthur.

“And someone capable of wielding the Star Rod,” Perry said. “Can you imagine it? We have someone with all the power of Bikaia in Dreamland.”

“I don’t know why you both think these are both positive things,” Alera said. “Neither of these individuals is a part of the aristocracy, and with the recent displeasure directed towards us, this could spell disaster.”

“You ain’t mentioned to the public that they ain’t royal. I kinda doubt either o’ these men would wanna admit either of those things knowin’ how much attention it’d bring,” Delilah said.

At least, Delilah knew Meta Knight wouldn’t. She didn’t know Kirby as well as his brother, but if Kirby wanted to reveal himself, Delilah would support him every step of the way.

Alera rolled her eyes, probably thinking of several things she’d like to say about Meta Knight and his penchant for attracting attention.

“How’s the princess?” Delilah asked. “She was a part uh the whole mess, too.”

“She’s well,” Alera said stiffly.

If Sectonia was well, that made one of them. Bandanna Dee kept having nightmares about dying
and watching his friends die, Meta Knight had been quieter and more distant than usual, Dedede had become clingy and jumpy, and Kirby kept staring into space. When Delilah thought about how everyone was, a spark of guilt shot through her stomach because she hadn’t—somehow—been able to protect them all from it. And no amount of video conferences with Meta Knight, no amount of questions about Kirby, and no amount of soft words and gentle pets and freshly baked goods to Dedede and Bandanna Dee would be enough to make it all better.

“I’ve heard that Prince Taranza has become very close to her,” Perry said, “If that isn’t too bold of me to say.”

Perry would care. Although he was a third-tier nobleman, he had money, and his recent popularity made his son an eligible suitor for the princess.

“I hadn’t thought you as the type to listen to petty tabloid gossip,” Alera replied. “When she chooses to marry, I’ve no doubt that Sectonia will choose a nice, Dreamlandic man of class and breeding. Some of us have taught our children the importance of staying true to their blood and their destiny.”

Perry’s jaw clenched at the veiled reminder of Bandanna Dee. Alera had been one of the few people who’d known why Bandanna Dee had been disowned. The Queen might’ve even been the one to suggest it, but even if she hadn't, Delilah would never forgive Alera for failing to act. She was the Queen of Dreamland. Even if Bandanna Dee's family hadn't wanted him, Alera could’ve made sure the poor boy at least left with his proper inheritance.

Delilah’s restraint was beginning to wear thin. “Ain’t we done scored enough points?” she asked.

“Did I strike a nerve with you?” Alera asked, narrowing her eyes.

Yes.

Delilah smiled and placed an enormous binder on her desk. “No,” she replied. “I just figure that—while we’re waitin’ on everyone—we might as well start discussin’ some of our regions. This is my budget.”

Kirby had dozed on and off for hours. He’d heard Meta Knight leave for the gym at four in the
morning. He’d fallen asleep and heard Meta Knight return. And asleep again. Now, he was awake again, at the sound of Meta Knight’s voice and the smell of something sugary and doughy. For Kirby, everything seemed to have fallen into a strange, dream-like normalcy. Although DLU had announced that it would open in three days, it’d been closed since Dark Nebula’s curse, leaving Kirby without his normal set schedule of classes. The university had also announced that it was canceling fall break in order to compensate for lost time, and all school-sponsored trips had been moved to spring break. Kirby simply had nothing he needed to do aside from hanging around his dorm and hanging around his friends’ dorm.

But his friends weren’t really around. Dedede and Bandanna Dee had both returned to the Duchy of the Stars to help Delilah repair the damage that had been done. Meta Knight only stayed behind because he had so much to do.

While Kirby might’ve been drowning in boredom, things were much more hectic for Meta Knight, whose days were filled with lawyers and paperwork. Kirby didn’t really understand it. Sure, he understood that Meta Knight was trying to take over their father’s position of Duke of Dreams, a position which would give him considerable power and money. Why should that endeavor involve so much paperwork and arguing, though? It wasn’t as if Nightmare had another son to take over. Kirby had no interest in having all his father’s assets, and even if he had, Kirby firmly believed Meta Knight was better-suited for managing them.

And yet Kirby couldn’t help but feel that he himself ought to be doing more. He was the reincarnation of King Bikaia, the greatest king of Dreamland. Shouldn’t he be doing something? Saving his people? Curing cancer or making the world a better place? Something.

This time, Kirby decided, was going to be different. He was going to march right into the kitchen, and he was going to ask—no, insist—that Meta Knight let him help. Somehow. Surely, Kirby could do something, right? Right.

He was King Bikaia. He was going to demand Meta Knight let him help. Kirby took a deep breath and climbed out of Bandanna Dee’s bed. He padded into the kitchen, where Meta Knight stood holding an absolutely massive bouquet of marigolds and sunflowers. Galaxia’s mark shined from the sunlight streaming through the kitchen window. Meta Knight’s signet ring shined, too, the silver surface catching the rays of light. Kirby was too far away to tell whether it was Dedede’s or Nightmare’s.

Meta Knight had a guest. Kirby started at the sight of a petite woman with the most gorgeous hair Kirby had ever seen. It was long, thick, and a brilliant shade of magenta. She looked over her shoulder, showing Kirby her large, blue eyes and soft, moon-like face. The woman’s skin was very pale and bright; she could’ve been in commercials for acne cleanser. She was well-dressed, too, in a nice-looking suit. At least, Kirby assumed it was nice-looking. He knew nothing about suits.
“Hello, pinky,” the woman said, giving a jaunty wave. “One of your roommates, Meta Knight?”

“His brother,” Kirby replied, puffing his chest out a bit. “I’m Kirby!”

“Oh! I didn’t know he had one,” she said, offering her hand for a shake. “But now that you mention it, I do see the resemblance. It’s something in the face. I’m Susie, Haltmann Works’ beautiful secretary.”

Kirby hesitated. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “If I shake your hand, my—”

“His magic reacts to touch,” Meta Knight cut in.

“Oh! How interesting—”

Meta Knight put the flowers on the counter, partially blocking Kirby’s view of the woman.

“She stopped by to give us flowers and condolences for our father’s condition. Evidently, news that he was injured during the sleeping curse has traveled quickly,” Meta Knight replied.

Kirby had been completely unaware that was the story they were using. “That was super nice!” Kirby exclaimed.

“It’s the right thing to do. President Haltmann is a very old, close friend of Nightmare Nocturne’s,” Susie said cheerily, peering around the flowers. “I’m certain he would’ve personally come to pay his respects if he wasn’t so busy.”

“I’m sure,” Meta Knight replied.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look a bit like your father, despite the Halcandran in you?” Susie asked, glancing at Meta Knight. “You have his eyes.”
“Yes, I know.”

“He has nice eyes. Still, it’s a pity you didn’t get that beautiful Halcandran gold. I mean, you aren’t bad-looking. No one in your family is,” Susie said, “But you’d have looked really gorgeous with the gold.”

“I think gray suits me fine,” Meta Knight replied. "I don't see the point in focusing on what might've been."

“I suppose it’s corporate culture,” she said, smiling at Kirby. “I’m always looking at improvements. Like you, Kirby. You should consider in investing in some white eyeliner—barely noticeable—but it’d really make your eyes pop.”

Wasn’t eyeliner black? Since when did it come in white?

“I know you’re her,” Meta Knight said.

“Of course, you know,” Susie replied.

“So what happened?” Meta Knight asked.

“It’s a very long story,” Susie replied, shaking her head, “And it isn’t something I wish to visit right now.”

“But—”

“I’m not interrogating you over your father, am I?” Susie asked, her face hardening before brightening again. “He’s not being fair, is he, pinky?”

“Well—” Kirby began.

“Come on, Meta Knight,” Susie said, playfully smacking Meta Knight’s chest.
Meta Knight took a step back and glanced around like he was looking for a way to escape.

Susie laughed. “Be chivalrous. Anyway, I must be going. I have a full schedule today. It was good to see you again, Meta Knight, and an absolute delight meeting you, pinky.”

Meta Knight walked her to the door, whether because he had good manners or because of her chivalrous comment was unclear. Once she was gone, Meta Knight returned to the kitchen.

“She seemed nice,” Kirby offered.

“I trust her about as far as I can throw her,” Meta Knight said. “Haltmann is involved in something, and Dark Nebula possessing Father had something to do with a creation of theirs. I don’t understand it.”

“But Dark Nebula did terrible things, too,” Kirby said, “And we weren’t involved in those, right? Just because her dad did or is involved in something bad doesn’t mean she is.”

“It’s different with us.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kirby replied.

Meta Knight shook his head but offered nothing else. Kirby really did feel like Meta Knight wasn’t being entirely reasonable, but Kirby also didn’t want Meta Knight to be angry at him.

“Is it—” Kirby bit his lip and bowed awkwardly, trying his best to get back in Meta Knight’s good graces. “My Lord?”

Meta Knight arched an eyebrow.

“You’re the Duke of Dreams now, right?” Kirby asked. “You mentioned you’d get the title on Friday, and it’s Friday, right?”
“It’s Your Grace if I don’t like you.”

“Do you like me?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight peeked into the oven. “I think I’d be willing to let you call me Meta Knight if that would make you happy.”

And that awkward, indirect declaration of friendship was good enough for Kirby.

“‘You’re cooking?’” Kirby asked.

He’d heard all about Meta Knight’s cooking.

“If by ‘cooking,’ you mean ‘put pre-made pancakes in the oven.’ Then, yes.”

Meta Knight grabbed a pot holder and pulled out the cookie sheet. He wrinkled his nose at the small, round, and clearly burned pancakes.

“And she distracted me,” Meta Knight said, with a sigh. “Oh, well. I wasn’t really hungry anyway.”

Meta Knight hadn’t been very hungry since Delilah, who’d forced Meta Knight to eat regular meals, had left.

“Wolfwrath!” Meta Knight called.

The wolfwrath’s soft fur brushed against Kirby’s ankle; she was in her puppy-sized form and bounded past Kirby. She barked and wagged her tail, wiggling in excitement. “When are you going to name her?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight placed the cookie sheet and the partially burnt pancakes on the ground. “Name her?” he asked.
“Well, you aren’t just going to keep calling her wolfwrath, are you?” Kirby asked. “She’s a pretty girl. She needs a name, Meta Knight!”

A sharp screech split the air as the wolfwrath’s teeth ripped half the baking sheet apart. Kirby gawked and watched as the wolfwrath devoured all the pancakes and the baking sheet.

“I…didn’t mean for her to eat the whole thing,” Meta Knight said. “Well.”

“Uh huh,” Kirby said.

Once she’d finished, the wolfwrath bounced, her paws clinking on the tile floor.

“I suppose she does need a name, though,” Meta Knight said. “I’ll think of names while I’m out today and get back to you.”

“What are you doing today?”

Meta Knight sighed. “I’m going to visit Magolor. And I need to schedule an audience with Queen Alera or Princess Sectonia to approve of my interim noble status, I promised Dark I would repay him by buying some things from the palace gift shop, and I’m really hoping to see Sectonia.”

That did sound like a lot to get done. “Why are you hoping to see the princess?” he asked.

“She’s been reinstated as the head of A.M.B.E.R. and gave her official statement on what happened. It’s mostly what I expected. She claimed that Dark Nebula was released and made a claim for the ownership of Dreamland and was thwarted by herself and a few others. It’s brief and vague. What I didn’t expect was for her to announce that I’ve been given a full pardon for the theft of Galaxia.”

“What?” Kirby asked.

“She didn’t specifically identify me. She just announced that they’ve found the Wielder of Galaxia,
“But isn’t this a good thing?”

“Yes. But I don’t understand how it’s happened. Queen Alera loathes me. There’s no way she’d willingly grant me a pardon. She probably wishes we were still in the pre-Bikaian era, so she could have me flogged in the castle courtyard for the theft. Delilah thinks this is Sectonia’s doing, and I’d really like to know.”

“The Queen’s hatred of you seems really excessive.”

“It isn’t just me,” Meta Knight said. “The Queen holds grudges over even the smallest insult. I’m just the only one you know about.”

“Then, I want to go with you!” Kirby declared. “It’ll be fun.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Meta Knight replied, bending down to stroke the wolfwrath’s thick fur. “It’s probably going to be a very awkward day, Kirby.”

“But I haven’t gotten to spend any real time with you,” Kirby said, “And I want to. I mean, with Dad in a coma, I—you—you’re the only family I have besides Mom. And you’re the only one who really understands everything that happened, too.”

“Well, I…I see your point,” Meta Knight said. “I mean, I guess you can, but I can’t promise it’ll be very fun.”

“That’s okay,” Kirby said. “I think if I get to spend time with you, it’ll be fun no matter what!”

Meta Knight’s face softened. “All right,” he said, “But no promises.”
Kirby stuffed his hands into the pocket of his favorite petal pink coat and followed close behind Meta Knight. They hadn’t gone very far from Meta Knight’s dorm. Had they not been going to the palace directly after, they could’ve easily walked. Although these apartments were near campus, Kirby wasn’t certain if they were officially part of the campus dorms or not. They certainly didn’t look as nice as the dorm Kirby stayed in, and they were nowhere close to his friends’ opulent apartment.

Meta Knight’s sleek, cherry-red Halberd looked out of place beside these vehicles, most of them older models and with chipping paint. The walkway to the apartments was cracked and crooked, and Kirby spied a window partially covered with a black trash bag and wads of duct tape.

Meta Knight loped down a small, bare and mostly concrete hallway and knocked on a bright green door. Then, he rocked back on his heels and waited. “Are these part of the dorms?” Kirby asked.

Meta Knight shook his head. “They’re just apartments across the street. They’re…quite different from our apartments, aren’t they?” Meta Knight asked, sounding uncomfortable.

“Yeah.”

The door opened, and Magolor peered out. “Oh. You. Thanks for letting me know you weren’t dead,” Magolor said, and with considerably more cheer, “Hey, Kirby!”

“Hi,” Kirby said.

“Well, I assumed you’d find out on the news if I was dead. I mean…” Meta Knight trailed off.

Magolor pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “What happened to your face?” he asked.

“My face?”

“The last time you were here, you looked like you’d been hit by a car,” Magolor said, “And now you look…fine.”

“Magic.”
“Oh, now I know *everything*. Also, Duchess Delilah bent the frame of my Starcutter. The *one* nice thing I own. The one that took me twenty-billion different pulls to my credit to get. That was my baby.”

“Why was it even at the library when you were here?” Meta Knight asked.

“Because Marx was borrowing it,” Magolor said, crossing his arms. “Still doesn’t change the fact that your Lady destroyed it.”

“And I believe Princess Sectonia personally agree to replace it,” Meta Knight replied.

Magolor sighed. “Right. That makes the destruction of my property all fine, then.”

“Anyway, I think you have my phone,” Meta Knight said.

Magolor nodded and after a reluctant pause, opened the door to admit them. They stepped right into the kitchen; it was very small but looked warm to Kirby.

“Is this a visit? I have soda and Dorito’s,” Magolor said.

Even though Kirby could get Dorito’s at literally any grocery store, he still brightened at the mention of food.

Magolor waved them in, ushering them onward into the kitchen. “I don’t usually have friends stop by, but—”

“I’d hoped to talk to you,” Meta Knight said.

Magolor’s eyes narrowed. “About?”

“About our father.”
Magolor’s eyes darted between Kirby and Meta Knight. “I really hope you mean you and Kirby are long-lost siblings and not you and me, Meta Knight.”

“Kirby and me,” Meta Knight said. “Thank Nova.”

Magolor looked vaguely offended.

“No offense,” Meta Knight replied, although he didn’t sound like he cared very much if Magolor was offended.

“Uh huh,” Magolor said. “I heard your father was in a coma. He experienced severe head trauma due to an accident that occurred during the sleeping curse.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Meta Knight replied.

“Oh! Anyway, I’m so sorry that happened!” Magolor exclaimed, his eyes darting to the window.

“He is in a coma,” Meta Knight said carefully, “So he isn’t going to burst in and see you talking to us if that’s what you fear.”

Magolor frowned. He nervously rubbed his hands together. “What makes you think I would fear that?” he asked.

“When we were teenagers, I know he spoke to you. Did he threaten you?” Meta Knight asked.

Magolor strode to his fridge and pulled out a two-liter bottle of bright blue coconut-flavored soda. “Want some?” he asked.

“Yes, please!” Kirby replied.

Meta Knight looked uncomfortable and said nothing; Magolor poured three glasses regardless.
Kirby happily took his and raised it in a sort of faux-toast, which Magolor returned. Meta Knight took his glass and toyed with the rim. “What did he do to you?” Meta Knight asked.

“Not one for pleasantries, still,” Magolor said.

Meta Knight rolled his eyes and adopted a clearly forced smile. “Oh, I’m so sorry. It’s great to see you, Magolor. Doing some light reading?” Meta Knight reached over the kitchen counter and picked up a copy of *Forbidden Fantasy*, the “in” romance novel. Kirby was familiar with it, if only because he always awkwardly averted his eyes when he saw the cover, which was—in his opinion—too blatant about being a trashy romance novel.

And because his Dreamlandic History before 1800 professor had a few choice words relating to that text.

“It’s for critical work,” Magolor replied.

“Sure, it is,” Meta Knight replied.

Magolor shook his head. “If you’ve followed this novel, you’ll know it’s soon going to be a multi-million deden picture.”

“Sure,” Meta Knight replied. “It’s being advertised as a darker and edgier adaptation of the Bikaian legend.”

Kirby wrinkled his nose, unsure if he wanted a darker King Bikaia. Maybe it was because Kirby had once been him, but Kirby really liked the idea of Bikaia being the same king from the fairy tales he’d heard as a child. Kind, noble, and brave.

“Yes, and despite the author and producer claiming the film’s authenticity and historical grittiness, the novel itself is anything but historically accurate,” Magolor said. “This Bikaia is lecherous, cruel, cowardly, and immature.”

“So someone failed their Dreamlandic history courses,” Meta Knight said, putting the book back in his place.
“But it’s more than that!” Magolor declared, with a sudden burst of passion. “Don’t you find it strange that Queen Alera hasn’t demanded a boycott? Or insisted on having a hand in the project?”

Meta Knight shrugged. “I’m sure she has other concerns.”

“Yes, but don’t you find it strange that now—when there’s all this unrest—that the Queen is willingly allowing people to mar Bikaia’s name and ruin his reputation?” Magolor asked. “She wants this film to be big. She wants people to believe that Bikaia is more like her, so we don’t realize how far we’ve fallen! She can pretend that the monarchy has always been this way!”

“I hadn’t pegged you as a conspiracy theorist,” Meta Knight said. “Do you really think one movie matters all that much?”

“You tell me. You’re the one licking a nobleman’s boots,” Magolor replied.

“Well, maybe if you—” Meta Knight cut off abruptly and waved his hand as if waving away his anger with the gesture. “Perdóname, Magolor.”

“Bueno,” Magolor replied, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Sólo eres amable cuando quieres algo.”

“Tú también.”

Kirby looked between them, unsure what the exchange meant. He wondered if learning Halcandran might bring him closer to Meta Knight and if it would be something they could bond over.

“Cuéntame qué pasó,” Meta Knight said.

Magolor’s angry expression gave way to pity. His eyes snapped to Meta Knight. Then, back to Kirby.

“¿Tu hermano?” Magolor asked.
Meta Knight narrowed his eyes, clearly calculating something. “It’s…fine if he knows,” Meta Knight said. “I don’t particularly care either way.”

“Hm. So what really happened to your father?” Magolor asked.

“He was possessed,” Kirby cut in.

Meta Knight’s face was unreadable, but this was Kirby’s secret, too. And if Magolor had been hurt by their dad, Magolor deserved to know the truth. It was that simple.

“Possessed?” Magolor asked. “Wow. To think that someone like him could be possessed. I’m so sorry! This must be so hard for you both.”

Kirby swallowed around the lump in his throat. “But now, the—the spirit possessing him is—is dead,” Kirby said, “And our dad is unconscious. And we’re trying to make amends because we think he did some really bad things.”

“Sure,” Magolor replied. “He used to knock Meta Knight around quite a bit.”

“Beyond that,” Meta Knight said. “I caught a glimpse of his memory. I know he did something to you.”

Magolor sighed. “He threatened us. I mean, I realize it sounds cowardly, but Marx and I just wanted you to go. Okay? You really were our friend, and we wanted to tell you. But you know what Nightmare—or whoever—was like and capable of. We were scared. You should’ve been, too. I realize I hurt you, but Marx and I just thought that if…well, you were our friend. We thought if you went with Dedede, he’d at least be able to protect you. I mean, I know he’s an impoverished royal, but we figured he was—you know—still a descendant of Queen Elise.”

“I think drugging me was going a bit far.”

“But we didn’t,” Magolor said. “You really didn’t piece that together?”

“Well…”
“Come on, Meta Knight. You take suppressants all the time. Your father’s company produces them,” Magolor said. “You have to understand how they work.”

Meta Knight looked like Magolor had struck him.

“I don’t understand,” Kirby said tentatively.

“Suppressants aren’t a one-size-fits-all,” Magolor replied. “It actually takes very careful measurements to get them right, especially for long-term usage. And if you want an audience with anyone of a higher rank than a knight, you’re required to pay for the royal physician to personally tailor-fit you to a prescription before you’re allowed an audience. They’re complicated, and if your prescription isn’t right, sometimes, you’ll end up with half your powers subdued and the other not. Or they’ll stop working early.”

“Oh. So every time you go to the palace, Meta Knight, you have to…?” Kirby trailed off.

“I’m Dedede’s servant. The palace has a private store for people like me,” Meta Knight said dully, “And the nobility can waive those requirements if they want to. Sectonia did it for me once. Delilah always does it.”

“For what it’s worth, Marx did stop once he realized,” Magolor said.

“Was he there?” Meta Knight asked.

“Marx?”

“No. Dark Nebula—Nightmare.”

Magolor nodded, looking morose.

“He must’ve been astonished when I pulled Galaxia from my dream,” Meta Knight muttered, a bitter edge to his voice.
“We wanted to tell you,” Magolor said, “But you’ve never…no, I suppose you have witnessed such power. Your father is something else. Something beyond my fire and spells. I’d never felt so helpless in my life, but I just…can you imagine having that much power? The power to shape the world? To make everyone bow before you? And the thought of facing that. We wanted to survive, Meta Knight. Same as you. And you…you…”

“I understand,” Meta Knight replied, “Because I kept going back to him. He told me he hadn’t interfered except that one time with the duchess, and I believed him.”

“Meta Knight, you aren’t to blame for that,” Kirby said. “I mean, he’s—he was our dad.”

“I should’ve seen through him, though. Everyone kept telling me, and I just kept not listening or arguing with the people who tried to help me,” Meta Knight said.

“What child wouldn’t want to see the good in their father?” Magolor asked, toying with his glass. “Look; I think we both messed this up. Maybe we should start over. Try it, anyway. We’ll see if it lasts once your father wakes.”

“Yeah.”

“Friends?” Magolor asked.

Meta Knight shook his head and pulled a checkbook his coat pocket. “I would never let myself be your friend,” he said.

“What?” Kirby asked. “Meta Knight, why—”

“Don’t try and change his mind, Kirby,” Magolor said. “I get it, but maybe you should stop beating yourself up, Meta Knight. It seems like—lately—there’s been plenty of people willing to do that for you.”

“You sound like Dedede,” Meta Knight said, writing out the check.
“Are you hoping to pay your way out of this?” Magolor asked.

Meta Knight tore the check from the book and held it out. “No. But a bit of…financial compensation might help smooth a few rough edges. Fix your window, at least. It’ll be winter soon, and I’ve heard it’s going to be colder than normal.”

Magolor took the check and read the amount. “You clearly have no idea how much it costs to repair a broken window,” he said.

“So you’ll have enough left over to take a trip during spring break,” Meta Knight said, setting his cup on the counter. “I’ll probably see you around.”

Kirby realized that he was supposed to follow Meta Knight’s cue to leave, so he flashed Magolor an apologetic smile. “I’ll text you later,” Kirby said.

“Sure,” Magolor replied.

Kirby followed Meta Knight outside and once more down the cracked pavement. “He was offering to be your friend,” Kirby said, crossing his arms.

“I don’t want to be his friend.”

“Why not? If it was all because of Dark Mind—”

“Kirby, I have hated Magolor and Marx for years because of what they did to me,” Meta Knight said, “And just because Dark Nebula was the cause of it, that doesn’t mean I’m ready to be friends or want to hang out with them. I’m not someone who needs a lot of friends anyway.”

“Meta Knight—”

“If you want to be his friend, it’s fine,” Meta Knight said, getting into the Halberd.

Kirby crossed his arms and took the passenger seat. “Have you eaten anything today?” he asked,
glancing at the clock on the dash. “You need—”

“Who are you, my mother?”

It was almost noon.

“You won’t be friends with Magolor, and you keep cutting me off,” Kirby said. “Clearly, you’re grumpy because you haven’t eaten anything.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“And you went training this morning, too,” Kirby said, “Which means that you’re burning more calories than normal.”

Meta Knight sighed and pulled out of the space. “I didn’t bring you with me, so you could lecture me about my life choices.”

Kirby winced. “I’m just trying to look after you,” he said quietly.

An awkward silence settled between them as Meta Knight drove towards downtown. A knight motioned for them to stop, and Meta Knight halted. A group of protestors, armed with signs, crossed the street before them. Among them, Kirby recognized Whispy Woods. They were shouting and had signs, but Kirby didn’t recognize the language of either. Kirby didn’t think it was Halcandran, but he wasn’t sure what it was.

“Do you know what they’re protesting?” Kirby asked, leaning forward. “Can you understand them, Meta Knight?”

“They’re chanting a Middle Dreamlandic curse,” Meta Knight replied. “They’re displeased with the Queen, but I don’t know…why. Their signs say something about either justice or poison? But Bikaia’s name is in there, too.”

After the protestors continued up the sidewalk, the knight waved them onward.
“What kind of curse was it?” Kirby asked uneasily.

“They apparently want her to get some sort of itchy skin disease,” Meta Knight said, shrugging.

“Really?”

“Mmhmm.”

Huh. “Will that actually work?” Kirby asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried to curse anyone.”

Kirby glanced at the rearview mirror until the protestors faded from view.

“I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said. “The way I reacted earlier was uncalled for. I know you’re just trying to help. I just have a lot on my mind, but even so, I know I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“It’s all right,” Kirby said, absentmindedly rubbing his throat. “We all have a lot to…think about.”

“This might be a poor time to mention it,” Meta Knight said, “But I’ve been thinking about asking you. Maybe next semester, we should share an apartment. If you don’t want to, I understand. It’s fine. Don’t feel obligated. I just thought you might want to, so you aren’t alone. Or we could move into a four-bedroom apartment. Those are a bit expensive, but…we won’t have a problem with money.”

Kirby’s heart fluttered. “I’d love to!” he exclaimed. “Thank you! It’ll be so much fun, Meta Knight!”

Meta Knight nodded, his face seemingly torn between relief and anxiety. “Yeah,” he said. “It’ll be…fun.”
Susie Haltmann’s heels echoed loudly on the tile floor. Was it a bit self-indulgent for her to insist on using a private jet to travel all the way to Dreaming Darkness last-minute? Probably. But she’d just discovered something that absolutely could not wait, and the private jet had made a four-hour trip by car in thirty minutes. While Haltmann Works had offices in the capital, Mekkai, Hotbeat, and the Celestial Valley, they had another base in Dreaming Darkness. This particular base—the Access Ark—was secret to everyone, even Haltmann Works’ shareholders, and the reason for this was that experiments performed in the Access Ark weren’t quite legal.

Like this one. Susie smiled as she entered Dr. Miasmoros’s office and spied the Dark Matter. The Dark Matter shrieked and thrashed inside their containment. It was clear and small, made of a top-of-the-line glass composed of a series of nano-technology coated polycarbonate sheets. Approximately three-hundred times stronger than glass, it was made to contain even the most powerful magical beings. Whether or not the glass was powerful enough to contain a sentient, sacred being remained to be seen, but the glass appeared to contain Dark Matter well enough.

Dr. Miasmoros was the head researcher studying how magical-technology could be weaponized. She was an invaluable asset and of all Haltmann Works’ researchers had worked with Star Dream the longest. Presently, most of her work involved mastering Dark Matter’s potential, but the woman was always Susie’s first pick for her pet projects. It was easy to pick her out in a crowd because her hair was bright, neon green. She was small and pudgy and had a naturally olive complexion that let her pass as either Dreamlandic or Halcandran. She might’ve even been mistaken for Floralian, although Susie had never asked for specifics about the doctor’s racial background.

“Susie,” Dr. Miasmoros greeted. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

Susie waved a dismissive hand. “I found something I thought you would find interesting, so I moved my morning plans to make room.”

“Well,” Dr. Miasmoros said, stepping closer to the particles of Dark Matter and beckoning for Susie to follow her.

Susie’s heels clicked as she crossed the floor. “I hadn’t expected Dark Matter to be so…gooey,” Susie said, gazing at the moving black blobs.

“They are capable of taking other forms,” Dr. Miasmoros said. “However, we’re taking care to stress the Dark Matter if it attempts to use its powers in any way. Something we hadn’t expected is
that—while we’ve reverse-engineered cells of Dark Matter, thanks to Star Dream—this Dark Matter appears to share a collective memory with its original predecessor.”

“Really?”

Dr. Miasmoros nodded. “Star Dream has been exposing them to memories of King Bikaia,” she said. “They’re absolutely terrified of him. And of Galaxia. It’s fascinating to watch, really. All except for this one speck—possibly a defect. It doesn’t seem all that afraid.”

“Interesting. Speaking of Bikaia,” Susie said, flipping her clipboard around. “A.M.B.E.R. recently updated their magical persons database, and they claim to have found someone who can use Copy.”

“Copy?” Dr. Miasmoros asked, taking the clipboard and flipping through the pages. “No one has had that power since Bikaia. I thought that power had been lost to time.”

“Evidently not.”

“Interesting. I wonder if he has Bikaia’s inherent mastery of enchanted objects. When looking at Bikaia, it’s very difficult to discern what he was able to do because of Copy and what he was able to do because he was Bikaia. But here…” Dr. Miasmoros trailed off. “His father is Nightmare Nocturne?”

“Yes.”

“I might like to get some of his genetic material,” Dr. Miasmoros said. “Copy and dimensional powers? Everyone knows he’s powerful. Dream-magic is very rare, too, but to produce results like those. Of course, I realize we’d be foolish to discount Star Dream’s influence, too. As much as Nightmare was directly exposed to Star Dream, it’s entirely possible he was altered on a cellular level.”

Even Dr. Miasmoros didn’t have direct exposure to Star Dream for more than an hour a day. The Mother Computer was simply too powerful for the mortal mind to withstand, unless—of course—that individual had an incredible amount of magical power and mental fortitude, and even then, it wasn’t clear how long would be too long. Because of this, most communication with Star Dream came by having her commands filtered through a series of computers.
“What do you think we could do with him?” Susie asked. “If we could mechanize his Copy ability…”

Dr. Miasmoros’s eyes lit up. “It would be difficult,” she said, “Because of Copy’s adaptability. We’ve no way of knowing how this boy might react to Star Dream.”

“But we don’t know how Meta Knight will react either,” Susie pointed out, “And we’re going through with him.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t want to do it,” Dr. Miasmoros said. “The scientific advancements we might be able to make with Copy at our disposable are incredible. I don’t suppose there’s a chance of him coming willingly.”

“Not with Meta Knight’s paranoia,” Susie replied, clasping her hands together. “So I thought we might proceed with our M-7110 project. But with this one instead. With a few changes, of course. I’d thought Meta Knight would serve better as a security guard, but with Pinky, I think he’d serve us better as an assassin.”

“Whippy will be so disappointed,” Dr. Miasmoros said, with the hint of a smile. “He likes training Halcandrans.”

“Like you care,” Susie said.

“I’ll redo the calculations to suit Kirby, then,” Dr. Miasmoros said, “But I get the first look at him. The last one Whippy sent me was a mess, and he knows the sight of blood bothers me. So messy.”

Blood turned Susie’s stomach, although she’d never told anyone that. “I’d have let you have the first look atMeta Knight, too,” Susie said, “But you’re welcome to it with Pinky. Let’s just keep the change on a need-to-know basis. I suspect we may have a traitor among us.”

Dr. Miasmoros nodded. “Of course,” she said, her eyes bright with excitement as she looked over Kirby Stellarum’s files once more. “Susie, with this, we’re going to make history.”

Susie smiled and nodded, although for her, it wasn’t about making history. It was about waking her father up and about feeling okay again. Sure, a few people might be hurt along the way, but Susie could always make it right later. When she had Star Dream for herself and could make a wish,
she’d be able to undo everything. Or mostly everything. The more time Susie spent working for her father, the more she wondered if he was beyond her reach. Even if she could turn back time and change everything, would it be enough to save her father?

If she was being honest with herself, that was part of the reason she’d really wanted Meta Knight. He was the only part of her childhood, of the happy times she’d had before her accident and before her father forgot her, that Susie knew she actually could have. But now, Meta Knight had lost his father, too, and Susie felt…

She felt guilty, and somehow, offering Kirby Stellarum in his brother’s place did little to assuage her discomfort. Maybe, just maybe, she was doing the wrong thing.

Once they arrived at the palace, Meta Knight didn’t head toward the main entrance. Instead, he headed to the royal gardens. Kirby followed, suddenly second-guessing his choice of clothing. He’d opted for dark wash jeans, his pink coat, and his least worn pair of tennis shoes. It’d been… cute. And seemed reasonable at the time. Meta Knight had said it wasn’t a formal occasion, but even so, Meta Knight was wearing a button-down and dress slacks beneath his coat. And Galaxia. Not that anything Kirby owned could ever compete with Galaxia.

Kirby shook his head. Now wasn’t the time to worry about it, and surely, if he hadn’t been good enough, Meta Knight would’ve told him. “Why the gardens?” Kirby asked.

“For one thing, you couldn’t join me unless Sectonia chose to waive the suppressant requirements. For another, if I did request an audience, I have no way of knowing if that request would reach her today or three weeks from now. Sometimes, you can get an audience immediately; sometimes, it takes months,” Meta Knight said. “If I meet her in the garden, however…”

Presently, the gardens were bright with red and orange chrysanthemums. Kirby smiled at them; they were his mom’s favorite flower, and she bought pots of them every single autumn. A brief pang of homesickness followed. He’d spoken to his mom and told her about everything that had happened, and she’d been…strange.

Worried. Disbelieving. But there had been something else beneath those recognizable emotions, something Kirby hadn’t been able to identify. He told himself that his mom was just shocked. Like any mom would’ve been. Like everyone was. But Kirby still felt a strange twist of dread when he thought of finally, inevitably facing her.
“Do you expect the princess to be here?” Kirby asked.

“It’s not for certain,” Meta Knight replied, “But I do know she likes to come here. And her room happens to overlook these gardens.”

“We’re not going to break in, are we?” Kirby asked, wide-eyed.

“Nova, no,” Meta Knight said. “Do you have any idea how badly that would end? Even assuming I could get past the enchantments around her room, that isn’t just breaking and entering. Entrance into a crown princess’s bedroom without permission constitutes high treason.”

“But for argument’s sake,” Kirby said, “If we did such a thing. Would Dad be powerful enough to get us out of it?”

Meta Knight arched an eyebrow.

“I’m curious,” Kirby admitted. “I don’t really understand. I mean, you have everything of Dad’s now. What does that mean?”

“I could probably get us out of any serious charges,” Meta Knight said, his throat tight. “I was making the point that she might sense me and be curious enough to look.”

_Crack!

Kirby jumped, and his heart raced because he recognized that sound.

He thought of Dark Nebula whipping him in the shoulder. Kirby’s throat was suddenly thick, and it was difficult to breathe. Kirby looked to Meta Knight, the only other person who was there and probably the only person who could possibly understand. “Did Dad—Dark Nebula—ever whip you?” Kirby asked.

“No, but he might’ve if I had…” Meta Knight trailed off.
“If you what?”

Meta Knight shook his head. “Nothing. I was just thinking of a fight I had with him. Considering where we are, it’s probably Prince Fluff. I’ve heard he’s very good with a whip and likes to practice.”

Kirby felt his face flood with warmth when he thought of Prince Fluff and the way his brown eyes seemed to hold all the warm colors of autumn.

“Dear Nova, don’t tell him,” Kirby said, throwing his hands over his mouth.

His face was probably glowing like a setting sun, and Nova’s grace, why did Meta Knight have to look so utterly at ease with everything?

“We could join him if you wanted,” Meta Knight said. “I’m sure if we asked, he’d stop practicing and walk with us.”

“No! We can’t inconvenience him!” Kirby protested.

Meta Knight’s face finally cracked, and he looked mischievous. Kirby’s eyes were wide with horror.

“But weren’t you just telling me to make friends, Kirby?” Meta Knight asked. “I might not feel comfortable being Magolor’s friend, but I’ve never failed Fluff. So—”

What did failure have to do with anything?

“Well, I’ll tell Dedede that you like him, then!” Kirby argued.

“I’m afraid you missed your chance,” Meta Knight replied. “We’ve already moved to the kissing stage of our relationship.”
“What?” Kirby asked. “I haven’t seen you kissing.”

“I haven’t wanted you to see,” Meta Knight said. “Don’t interrogate me about it.”

Kirby gawked. “You’re together,” he squeaked.

“Yes.”

In his excitement, Kirby grasped Meta Knight’s arm. Then, struck by worry that his older sibling might not take kindly to uninvited affection, Kirby darted back. “Oh, Nova, and you didn’t tell me! He’s your boyfriend now? Oh, Goddess! That’s wonderful! I think he’ll be really good for you!”

“I had no idea you were so invested in my love life.”

“You’re my brother! I want you to be happy,” Kirby said, “And Dedede makes you happy. That’s all.”

Meta Knight hummed and offered his arm. Kirby smiled brightly and placed his hand on the inside of Meta Knight’s elbow, and they continued up the garden path.

“But I doubt Prince Fluff would mind if we asked him to join us,” Meta Knight said. “Aside from the Head of Patchland’s Intelligence, Prince Fluff has no one. He must be very lonely.”

Kirby knew all too well what loneliness felt like.

“Maybe. If we happen to run into him! Or we could join him,” Kirby said.

Kirby bit his lip and tried to decide if he might feel up with that. Even though it was a completely irrational feeling, the thought of being close to a whip made Kirby’s skin crawl.

“Didn’t you say that you can use a whip, too?” Kirby asked.
“I am quite good with one, yes.”

“Are you better than Prince Fluff?”

“I couldn’t say,” Meta Knight replied, his face brightening with the prospect of a challenge, “But I’m not really here to compete with Prince Fluff.”

Kirby pursed his lips together. Obviously, Meta Knight’s paperwork was important, but seeing Fluff again and spending time with him sounded so much more fun!

“However, it isn’t the end of the world if I need to come back later this week,” Meta Knight amended. “A little detour wouldn’t be terrible.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

There were a few more cracks, quick and sharp. Kirby dug the pads of his fingers into Meta Knight’s arm, and if Meta Knight noticed, he didn’t acknowledge it. Eventually, they came to a clearing where Fluff stood. Kirby’s face warmed again.

A man stood beside Fluff and seemed to see them first. When the man turned around, the first thing Kirby noticed was that this man had a bright, red bowtie. It went well with the man’s warm hazel eyes and sleek, brown hair. Privately, Kirby thought the man looked a little bit like a movie gangster, but something about his face made it difficult to perceive him as threatening. His cheeks were too plump and his features too soft; overall, he looked like he might be someone’s beloved uncle with a full-throated laugh that would shake his whole body.

Meta Knight bowed, Kirby awkwardly following suit. When Kirby straightened, Fluff’s warm eyes met his. Fluff looked just like the fairy tale prince in a storybook. Kirby’s insides fluttered, and his throat felt dry.

“Your Royal Highness,” Meta Knight said. “Dom Woole.”
“Lord Meta Knight, Lord Kirby,” Dom Woole said. “What a pleasant surprise!”

And Dom Woole said it very sincerely, too. Kirby’s eyes caught a flash of movement—Fluff coiling up a whip.

“What brings you gentlemen to court?” Dom Woole asked.

“We were hoping to happen into the princess,” Meta Knight said.

“Ah, you’re in luck,” Fluff said. “We did glimpse her when we came out here, and Taranza might have followed her a few minutes later. I suppose we could lead you to them.”

“That would be nice,” Meta Knight replied.

“Sure. Follow me, peasants.”

“Well, we can’t all be like you, Mr. Important Prince-Guy,” Kirby blurted out, before throwing his hands over his mouth.

Oh, Nova.

Why had he said that?

This was bad.

Fluff was going to have him executed. Well, maybe not executed, but he’d probably want to. Kirby kind of wished the garden would just swallow him up, but instead of being angry, Fluff held a hand up to his mouth and stifled his laughter. The prince’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “I, Prince Fluff, will forgive you for that most discourteous remark,” he said.

Kirby couldn’t quite catch if Fluff was teasing or not. “Thank you?” Kirby asked.
“How gracious,” Meta Knight said. “Thank you for taking pity on my poor, tactless brother.”

Dear Nova, now *Meta Knight* was laughing at his expense? Kirby gawked at him, and Meta Knight’s smile immediately faded, replaced with something stony and cold.

“Ah, the joys of siblinghood,” Fluff said. “That’s nice for you. I, myself, bear the burden of being an only child.”

“With all due respect, Your Royal Highness,” Dom Woole said, “Your parents only needed one child. You have enough personality for a whole army of children. I believe the king and queen had trouble handling you sometimes.”

“And yet I’m perfectly capable of handling myself,” Fluff replied. “Come along, gentlemen. Let us see if we can find Dreamland’s crown jewel.”

As Fluff led the way, Kirby amused himself by looking at the back of the prince’s head. His blue hair blended right in with the autumn sky, and when the light dappled between the trees, it cast beautiful spots of brightness on Fluff’s luscious locks. He didn’t even look wholly human. He was like something from a Bikaian legend, like a fairy or a nymph. Kirby fidgeted with his hands and felt like he was doing something he shouldn’t be.

When Kirby glanced at Meta Knight, his brother seemed lost in his own thoughts. Kirby had a strange feeling that he’d upset Meta Knight, but he wasn’t sure how. And he couldn’t exactly ask with other people around.

The gardens continued to be lovely, although Kirby supposed that was to be expected with an army of gardeners. Eventually, the trail twisted and went beneath several arches, each one covered in climbing roses. Even though there was plenty of space, Kirby edged closer to Meta Knight and further away from the largest thorns they’d ever seen.

At the end of the arches, the space opened to a fountain and several benches. On one of them, Princess Sectonia sat. She looked stunning, as usual, and wore a purple, chiffon dress that caught the wind. Taranza sat beside her, and almost in unison, they looked behind them. Neither seemed particularly surprised at being found.

Kirby knew to bow and did so, noting that Fluff still refused to.
The princess set aside a folder and placed her thigh over it to keep it safe from the wind. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Sectonia said. “I was just getting Taranza’s opinion on something. I had hoped for some privacy.”

“But it seems there is no rest for the weary, Nia. If only you weren’t so beloved by your subjects,” Taranza said, smiling crookedly.

“I wouldn’t imagine these men consider me to be their beloved.”

“Then, I supposed I’ll have to love you even more in order to compensate,” Taranza teased.

Although the princess rolled her eyes, her face practically glowed with delight.

“I need you to sign something for me,” Meta Knight said, unfolding a paper from his pocket. “If you have the time.”

Sectonia beckoned for him to come closer, and once he did, the princess gently grasped Meta Knight’s signet ring. “Ah, it went over well, did it?” she asked.

“What did?” Fluff asked.

“Oh, I’m surprised he hasn’t been telling everyone,” Sectonia said, as she took the paper. “Is it boyfriend now?”

“Um…” Meta Knight trailed off. “I suppose. You could say that.”

“Taranza, darling, do you have a pen?” Sectonia asked.

Taranza immediately produced one. “Who’s the lucky lady? Or the lucky man?”

“Dedede,” Kirby said. “Er…the Duke—no, the Heir of the Stars!”
“About time,” Taranza said.

“What do you mean?” Kirby asked.

Sectonia signed the paper and handed it back. “Congratulations.”

Taranza laughed. “I was in everyone’s heads. I’ve known Dedede fancied him for a while,” Taranza replied.

Sectonia playfully swatted at him. “Now, don’t embarrass the poor boy too much,” she said.

Meta Knight folded the paper back into his pocket. "About my pardon..."

"I wouldn't question that too much," Sectonia said. "You're dismissed."

Sectonia shook with barely contained mirth. Kirby bowed again and skipped after his brother. It seemed like it’d been a productive day, and in Kirby’s mind, that meant the next day should be spent lazing around. Possibly eating. Or baking!

“Well, that was mercifully brief,” Fluff said, once they were out of earshot. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Meta Knight replied. “The title will be very helpful.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean the title.”

Meta Knight coughed. Evidently, his response had been to choke on his own saliva.

“So how are you going to spend the rest of the day, Your Royal Prince? I mean, Highness,” Kirby said.
“I don’t know,” Fluff replied, glancing askance at Dom Woole. “I appear to have gotten lost with this dream curse business going on. I’m dreadfully sorry about your father, by the way.”

“He wasn’t really even our—” Kirby cut himself off abruptly. That wasn’t the story they were going with. Right.

“He’ll recover,” Meta Knight said. “Right now, Kirby and I are turning our attention to more… superfluous matters.”

Fluff arched an eyebrow. “Do enlighten me.”

“I have recently come into possession of a Dreamland terrier,” Meta Knight said, “And we’re looking at names.”

“Oh,” Fluff said.

Kirby stifled a laugh. A Dreamland terrier weighed about five pounds. Even at her smallest, the wolfwrath weighed about fifteen.

Kirby had fallen asleep after four hours of binge-watching the Bikaia animated series, and he lay curled up on the sofa with the sleeping wolfwrath sprawled out over his legs. Meta Knight remained awake, watching the show, although he was mostly trying to be awake for Dedede and Bandanna Dee. They were going to be home any minute.

When the apartment door creaked open, Meta Knight carefully rose and quietly walked to the entryway. If he didn’t cut Dedede off quickly, he’d probably shout his greeting and wake Kirby.

“Keep your voice down,” Meta Knight said.

Then, Meta Knight froze. Dedede’s hair was a vibrant shade of sapphire-blue.

“Wow.”
Dedede grinned and swept Meta Knight into a tight hug. “Now we match,” Dedede said, his voice mercifully quiet. “How’re y’doing, sugarpuff?”

“This is very romantic and all,” Bandanna Dee said, poking his head inside, “But can you at least move far enough to let me in?”

Dedede grinned and edged further in, awkwardly forcing Meta Knight along with him.

“Hello, Meta Knight,” Bandanna Dee said. “How are you?”

There were bags under Bandanna Dee’s eyes, visible even in the soft, half-light. “I’m well,” Meta Knight said. “How are you?”

“Never better,” Bandanna Dee said. “Two weeks of working in the Duchy of the Stars. I’ve built up some serious muscle!”

“Yeah, ‘cause Mom was tryin’ to work us to death,” Dedede said without any real heat.

Bandanna Dee closed and locked the door behind him. “But guess what?” Bandanna Dee asked. “The visual arts department is going to work to help restore some of the art destroyed during the sleeping curse! And they’re letting students help! I can’t wait to tell Kirby.”

“You may have to wait,” Meta Knight said. “He’s sleeping.”

“Well, I can’t wait long,” Bandanna Dee replied, managing to hug Meta Knight despite Dedede’s apparent insistence on holding him until the end of time. “It’s good to be home.”

“It’s good to have you home,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede swept Meta Knight off his feet and nearly received an elbow to his ribs. “Doncha fight me,” Dedede murmured. “We’re gonna go snuggle.”
Although Meta Knight scowled, his insides twisted and fluttered like leaves caught in a sea-breeze. He let Dedede carry him to his bedroom and set him on his dark blue comforter. Dedede bounded into bed beside him and placed a quick kiss on Meta Knight’s cheek. “I missed you,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight was grateful it was dark, so Dedede couldn’t see him blushing. “I might have missed you a little bit,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede wrapped his arms around Meta Knight’s waist and pulled him close. “Only a little?” Dedede asked. “But caballerito…”

“Just a little,” Meta Knight insisted.

Dedede kissed Meta Knight’s neck, and Meta Knight buried his face in his pillow as if he could bury his embarrassment. No one had ever really treated him this way before. Dedede’s foot brushed against Meta Knight’s ankle. “Maybe a little more than that,” Meta Knight admitted shyly.

“Ain’t you a charmer, Your Grace?” Dedede teased, planting a soft kiss on Meta Knight’s shoulder.

Meta Knight smiled. “Don’t call me that,” he said.

The bed suddenly dipped, the box-spring creaking, as the wolfwrath leaped into bed with them and began licking Dedede’s face with reckless abandon. Dedede wrinkled his nose and reached blindly up to pet the excited puppy.

Meta Knight shifted away and sat upright. “Kirby said I need to name her,” he said, watching as the wolfwrath bounded excitedly around Dedede.

“Yeah?” Dedede asked.

“I’m thinking Scarlett.”

Dedede snorted. “I see you got your dad’s naming skills.”
“What are you talking about?” Meta Knight asked, looking over his shoulder at Dedede, who’d finally managed to calm the wolfwrath some.

“He literally named you Meta Knight Mare.”

“So he likes puns,” Meta Knight said defensively. “Scarlett is a perfectly—”

“I think you oughta call ‘er Sugar Cakes.”

“Dedede, no.”

Dedede grinned. “There ain’t no use in fightin’ me on it. I’ll win you over in the end, pretty-boy.”

The goddess looked like Nova, and with a soft laugh, drew her finger across Dark Matter’s prison, leaving a thin, spidery crack. The Dark Matter shrieked and bounded around, bits of it escaping to freedom. With another smile, the goddess sealed the glass once more and vanished.

Lights flashed, and alarms blared. One blob of Dark Matter slipped free and fled, bouncing over the tiles. Other bits of Dark Matter followed, scattering about and desperate to escape. This particular bit of Dark Matter bounded into an office, barely managing to avoid the feet of several people crowding the hallway.

This bit of Dark Matter emerged into an office, and finding itself alone, the Dark Matter let itself rest for a second. It was free! Really free! It could do anything it wanted now! Like its great inspiration, it could be a great hero and save Dreamland!

While most of Dark Matter fed on dark emotions, this particular one did not. It had found its inspiration, and it was determined to be something different. Something unlike any Dark Matter that had come before it, and there was only one form worth taking for its mission of being a great hero.
The Dark Matter concentrated its power and took a shape. Two eyes popped into existence; they were darker than planned, but the Dark Matter didn’t notice. Its tongue felt strange and large, and the Dark Matter experimentally stuck it out. Too long? Maybe? It made the tongue a bit smaller. When it tried to make its hair black, it emerged as dark blue, but it managed the rest mostly fine. The bones, muscles, and skin were all well-formed, and the face was soft and round. When the Dark Matter was finished, it tentatively traced its hands over the smooth planes of plate armor, very elegantly formed. The Dark Matter turned around and caught sight of its image in the glass of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Although there were some differences in color, the Dark Matter brightened at what it had accomplished! It looked—not exactly like—but mostly like its beloved hero, King Bikaia!

Now, it just needed a name. The Dark Matter opened its mouth and decided that tongues were very strange. “I…” the Dark Matter trailed off.

It didn’t really know much about names, but it vaguely recalled something one of the humans had said. “I am Gooey!” the Dark Matter declared, very pleased with itself. “And I’m going to be the hero of Dreamland!”
New Sorority Comes to DLU

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends! This time, it's plot and fluff! And next time, it's Christmas! In the meanwhile, @Skip_King sacrificed vacation time to bring us adorable fanart of everyone's favorite blue-haired couple!

German:

Gute nacht, Onkel Albtraum-- Good night, Uncle Nightmare.

Spanish:

Tú eres un jerk-- You are a jerk. (...that's not how you say 'jerk' in Spanish)

¿Por qué no te callas?*-- Why don't you just shut-up?

Horchata-- A drink that has varying flavors but is generally milky and made with cinnamon and vanilla. Originally, it comes from north Africa, but it spread to Spain during the Middle Ages and is now popular in Spain, Latin America, South America, and many other places.

*This phrase is also a meme for interested parties.

Bandanna Dee bounced and raised his boxing gloves. A few feet away, Meta Knight moved into a fighting stance. Normally, Bandanna Dee saved his workouts for the evening, but he hadn’t been able to sleep. And Meta Knight had graciously invited him along. Bandanna Dee hadn’t really wanted to go. He’d even considered lying in bed all day, but Meta Knight had coaxed him into going boxing. They’d already been through a few bouts, and Bandanna Dee was dripping sweat.

“You know,” Bandanna Dee said, his tongue toying with his mouth guard. “This isn’t quite fair. Dedede will probably kill me if I bruise you up too badly.”

Meta Knight smiled cheekily, although the effect was somewhat ruined by his fluorescent blue mouth guard. “You’re welcome to surrender,” he said, his words muffled.

“Not a chance, Meta Knight!”

Bandanna Dee took a step forward and aimed an uppercut towards Meta Knight’s jaw, but Meta Knight bobbed away. Meta Knight was very fast, but Bandanna Dee was fast, too. And although Bandanna Dee would never brag about his skills, he boxed far more often than Meta Knight did.
As they exchanged more blows, Bandanna Dee wove around, trying to find an opening in his friend’s defense.

Meta Knight delivered a kick to Bandanna Dee’s shoulder, but for Meta Knight, kicks were always a distraction rather than an assault. Bandanna Dee blocked a punch and seeing an opening, struck Meta Knight squarely in the jaw. They continued trading blows until Bandanna Dee delivered a particularly good punch to Meta Knight’s face.

Meta Knight fell, and Bandanna Dee paused, waiting to see if he’d get back up. When he didn’t, Bandanna Dee sat beside him. Meta Knight pulled off a boxing glove and then removed the mouth guard from over his teeth. “I taste blood,” he said, running his tongue over his teeth.

Bandanna Dee pulled off his gloves and took out his mouth guard, too. They’d been planning on doing the best five out of nine, but now that Bandanna Dee was sitting down, he didn’t really want to get back up. Despite all the adrenaline that had been running through him, rest sounded like a wonderful idea. Going home. Taking a shower. Maybe catching an hour nap before he had to get ready for his classes. “Do you want to call it a draw?” Bandanna Dee asked. “We’re four for four.”

Meta Knight hummed and narrowed his eyes. Bandanna Dee had no doubt that Meta Knight was considering refusing; the man had the strongest competitive streak Bandanna Dee had ever seen.

“I’m tired,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Well, it is more your sport than mine,” Meta Knight conceded.

“Maybe you should’ve done your usual swordsmanship. You could’ve shown the dummies a thing or two.”

“Ha.”

Meta Knight pulled off his boxing glove and began unwrapping the boxing tape from his wrists.

“Dedede thinks it’s really hot when you wrap your wrists,” Bandanna Dee said.
Meta Knight wrinkled his nose. “Really?”

“Uh huh. He said he doesn’t know why. It’s just something about the way you do it.”

“He is so strange,” Meta Knight muttered.

“Yeah, he is. I can’t imagine why anyone would like him,” Bandanna Dee added slyly.

Meta Knight shot him a look of mock-offense.

“I’m going to have a terrible bruise on my stomach,” Bandanna Dee said, slowly undoing his own tape. “That was a nice elbow.”

“It’ll match the bruise on my jaw,” Meta Knight replied.

“And the one on your neck,” Bandanna Dee said.

As they left the boxing ring, Meta Knight furrowed his brow and raised a hand to his throat. “I have a bruise there? You didn’t hit me in the neck.”

“You had it when we left,” Bandanna Dee said. “You didn’t notice?”

Meta Knight shook his head. They walked into the locker room, and after dropping his boxing gear into his backpack, Meta Knight headed to one of the mirrors. The bruise on his neck seemed especially dark beneath the harsh, fluorescent lights. “That’s so strange. I don’t even know how I got it,” Meta Knight said. “I don’t remember bumping into anything, and it’s in such an odd place.”

Bandanna Dee shoved his gear into his backpack and pulled it over his shoulder.

Meta Knight tilted his head and bared his throat, observing the mark from every angle. “Maybe if I put some ice on it, it won’t look so bad?” Meta Knight mused.
And suddenly, Bandanna Dee realized exactly what that bruise really was. He choked and devolved into a fit of coughs.

Meta Knight turned around and arched an eyebrow. “What?”

“Meta Knight,” Bandanna Dee said, muffling a peal of laughter. “When two men love each other very much, sometimes the...kissing is a little much.”

“Kissing?”

Poor, sheltered thing. Meta Knight really didn’t get it, did he? “You...uh, do know what a love-bite is, right?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight’s jaw dropped, and for a moment, he looked so comically stunned that Bandanna Dee nearly burst into laughter again. Slowly, Meta Knight’s face softened. He tilted his head and brushed his fingers over the mark. “I don’t...” he trailed off. “Nova, I hate it.”

“Why?” Bandanna Dee asked.

Meta Knight shrugged. “I just do.”

“But you were fine with the kissing part,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Sure.”

“So why does it bother you? You and Dedede are dating; it’s expected that you might kiss one another,” Bandanna Dee said.

“I know that,” Meta Knight replied, “But I don’t like it being so apparent.”

“Why not?”
Meta Knight shook his head. “I want to be romantic,” he said, his shoulders slumping, “But I’m not. I like being...you know. Affectionate. But I don’t like the feeling that people know.”

“It’s your first serious relationship,” Bandanna Dee said. “It’s expected that you’d be nervous.”

“But that isn’t fair to Dedede.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If Dedede thought it was unfair, you know he’d tell you. He isn’t subtle,” Bandanna Dee replied.

“I just don’t want him to be unhappy because he’s sparing my feelings.”

“Meta Knight, he loves you.”

Meta Knight threw his backpack over his shoulder and left the locker room. Bandanna Dee followed, and together, they walked outside. The air was crisp and pleasant, bearing with it a cool, autumn breeze that pleasantly ruffled Bandanna Dee’s hair.

“Are you embarrassed at having people know you and Dedede are together?”

“Of course not,” Meta Knight replied immediately.

“Then, why worry? I mean, everyone knows how couples act. No one would think it was a big deal.”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay?”

“You,” Meta Knight said. “Are you going to be fine with going to the palace today?”
Bandanna Dee sighed. “I’ll do it for the art,” he said. “I really do want to watch them repair the paintings.”

And as long as he didn’t run into his family, it’d all be fine.

Meta Knight accepted the words with an absentminded nod, and they continued their walk back to the dorms in companionable silence. As Meta Knight reached for the doorknob, Bandanna Dee cleared his throat. “For what it’s worth, I really think you and Dededee make a pretty cute couple,” he said, “And I think being in love really suits you. I mean, I know there’s other stuff. It’s just that you’ve seemed extra happy these past couple of weeks, and I like seeing you happy. It’s nice.”

“Yeah,” Meta Knight said.

Meta Knight opened the door. The wolfwrath immediately greeted them. She bounced up and down, her tail wagging a mile a minute. “Her name is Tiramisu!” Dededee shouted from the kitchen.

“Over my dead body,” Meta Knight hissed.

Bandanna Dee laughed and gave the wolfwrath’s head a soft pat. Meta Knight had already gone into the kitchen, probably to give Dededee an earful for the mark on his neck. Bandanna Dee smiled. His friends really were wonderful, so why...

Why did Bandanna Dee just feel so much like some nameless, terrible thing had happened? Like he just couldn’t feel much of anything anymore? He should be happy, but he just felt uncomfortable. Maybe it was because of everything that had happened with Dark Mind, but if Meta Knight could be passably happy—because Bandanna Dee didn’t believe Meta Knight was nearly as well-adjusted as he acted—surely, Bandanna Dee ought to be better. He just wasn’t.

Kirby sleepily stumbled into view. “Mm. You haven’t left yet, have you, Meta Knight?” he asked.

“Left? Where’s he gonna go?” Dededee asked.

Meta Knight looked askance. “We were going to look at floral arrangements.”
“Floral arrangements?” Bandanna Dee asked.

“I was considering buying Professor Drawcia a bouquet,” Meta Knight said, “As a thank you present. For everything she tried to do for Kirby and me.”

What had she done? Bandanna Dee looked at Dedede, who looked equally baffled.

“You ain’t told us nothin’ ‘bout that,” Dedede said.

“Oh. She tried to help Kirby and me when we were teenagers,” Meta Knight replied, “And Father ruined her career for it. I just felt like she deserved something for that. It’s not a big deal, but it means something to me.”

“What else ain’t ya told us?” Dedede asked.

“Nothing important.”

“Meta—”

“You can interrogate me later,” Meta Knight said.

“But you’re my boyfriend,” Dedede whined. “You’re s’posed to share everythin’ with me!”

“Yes,” Meta Knight replied. “Tell the world, Dedede.”

Without warning, Dedede grabbed Meta Knight’s hips and lifted him a good three feet off the ground. Meta Knight yelped in surprise and put his hands on Dedede’s shoulders to steady himself.

“Course, I’m gonna tell the whole world,” Dedede said. “Gorgeous boy. Took me years to win you over!”
They really were so cute together. Bandanna Dee smiled. Happy. They were happy, and maybe Bandanna Dee just needed a little time to think about everything. And then, he’d be fine, too. Yes. Just a little time.

“Well, there is one thing you need to know,” Meta Knight said.

“What’s that, pumpkin spice?”

“When we go to the palace later today, Dark and Shadow will be joining us.”

“I would like to check this out, sir! Immediately, most magnanimous and noble circulation desk guy!”

Magolor slowly looked up from his computer screen. The library had been very slow that day, so Magolor—like most student employees on slow days—had been given busy work. This consisted of watching the library’s online chat and compiling a list of every single academic journal the university was subscribed to. Evidently, there once had been a list, but it’d somehow disappeared with the previous president of the university. Now, thousands of dollars came from the library budget, and no one was entirely sure what journals they were even paying for.

But now. Now he had come. Dark Matter incarnate.

Marx leaned forward until locks of his lavender hair fell into his dark purple eyes. He looked like he was about to flip face-first over the counter. “Working hard, Maggie?” he asked.

Marx grinned, showing off his fangs.

“What do you want?” Magolor asked.

“What? A friend can’t stop by and see his best buddy at work?” Marx asked. “I’m hurt.”
“A friend would know that work isn’t—”

Marx clambered over the circulation desk and plopped into a rolling chair beside Magolor. “Sorry, Mags,” Marx said. “I went over to your apartment, and you weren’t there.”

Marx said it as if Magolor had no business being anywhere but his own apartment.

“Because I have a job, Marx,” Magolor said.

“I know, and I knew you would be so distressed at being without my presence!” Marx declared, “So I thought I’d come read to you! I found a super interesting novel on the fourth floor.”

Marx proudly held up the novel which featured a very well-muscled shirtless man. The title was blazed proudly across the book in a bright gold font. Magolor couldn’t imagine why. Claimed by the Amorous Werescarfy didn’t seem like a title anyone should be especially proud of.

“The university spent our tuition money getting that,” Magolor said.

“Of course, they did. It’s a masterpiece, Mags,” Marx replied.

Magolor grabbed his long-forgotten and now warm bottle of soda and held it out. “Since you’ve proven you’re going to harass me into an early grave, you should at least be useful.”

When Marx tapped a finger against the bottle, it crackled and cooled. Flecks of ice formed on the base, and satisfied, Magolor took a sip. Soda tasted so much better when it was cold.

“Thank you,” Magolor said.

“Anytime, Mags! Do my Halcandran homework for me later?” Marx asked.

“No,” Magolor replied.

“¿Por qué no te callas?” Magolor asked.

Marx shot him a fierce glare. “Keep rubbing your bilingualism in my face.”

“You are the one who wanted to get a minor in Halcandran Studies,” Magolor pointed out. “You should’ve realized that you’d have to learn some Halcandran.”

“But I don’t care about Halcandran,” Marx replied. “I just like making your life harder!”

“And here I thought you only liked me for my pantry.”

Just then, a woman in her early twenties approached the desk. She was stunning. Tall and slender with long, sapphire blue hair and dark eyes. Her ice blue dress was very professional and had black leather insets that accentuated every curve. The woman’s stiletto heels could probably be used to kill a man, and Magolor thought that he really wouldn’t have minded if this woman wanted to step on him. Magolor shot Marx a reproachful look, promising pain and torment if Marx embarrassed him in front of this very gorgeous woman.

Magolor figured she was probably way out of his league, but he could still do without Marx embarrassing him and making things worse.

She smelled of magic, too. Her scent was a bit like Marx’s—cold and sharp. An ice mage for sure.

“Hello,” Magolor said, adopting his best customer service voice.

“Bonjam.”

“How can I help you?” Magolor asked.

“I need to stamp these signs.”
Magolor gave the fliers a cursory glance. University policy insisted that all signs be stamped by the library before they could be hanged around campus. In Magolor’s opinion, it was an annoying and unnecessary policy, but he might’ve been rethinking it the longer he looked at this very lovely lady.

“Jambastion,” Magolor said, reading off the flier.

“It’s a new sorority coming to DLU,” the woman said, flashing a smile that made Magolor a bit weak in the knees. “My sisters and I are out recruiting.”

“Hey, Magolor here loves sororities,” Marx cut in. “He’s always hanging around them.”

Magolor was going to kill him.

“My new apartment is near the sororities,” Magolor lied. “Marx thinks he’s so funny.”

Magolor slammed his foot into Marx’s ankle. Marx yelped.

“Sorry,” Magolor said.

Sometimes, it took a jerk to show another jerk what-for.

“So who’s your faculty sponsor?” Magolor asked as he began stamping.

There were at least fifty fliers, which meant fifty fliers to stamp, and fifty fliers to talk to this lovely lady.

“Dr. Hyness.”

Magolor shook his head. “Never heard of him.”
“Is he the new psychology professor?” Marx asked. “I heard there’s one coming in the spring.”

“You’re thinking of Dr. Kara Mordtman-Swets,” the woman said. “Psychology is super excited about her. Evidently, she interviewed with the Dean, and he hired her on the spot. She’s *that* good, and she agreed to work a shift in the Testing and Counseling Center. They like that; you know. The turn-over rate of counselors is really high.”

“You’re in psychology?” Magolor asked.

“Mmhmm. Double major in psychology and women’s studies.”

“Mechanical engineering and Halcanran studies. Magolor, by the way. It’s nice to meet you.”

She smiled. “It’s Francisca.”

Magolor had finished nearly half the fliers.

“I like your tattoo,” Francisca said.

“Thanks. I have a few,” Magolor said.

He might’ve adjusted his arm a bit to more clearly show off the thorny roses encircling his wrist.

“And he’ll keep you here *all day* if you get him started,” Marx said, grabbing a stamp and slamming it down on Francisca’s fliers.

Marx very conspicuously didn’t seem to notice Magolor’s glare.

Francisca’s smile was polite and little more. “Well, it’s always nice to meet fellow magic users,” Francisca said. “I’m accustomed to...chilly receptions once people realize what I can do. People aren’t as accepting of magic where I’m from.”
“Well, I won’t pry,” Magolor said. “Friends shouldn’t do that.”

Her fliers finished, Magolor handed them over. “I hope to see you around,” he said.

Francisca held the fliers against her chest and smiled. “I don’t doubt it.”

After she walked away, Magolor watched her movements for a few minutes, mesmerized by the clicking of her heels.

“Way out of your league,” Marx said in a sing-song voice.

Magolor rolled his eyes and shoved his shoulder against Marx’s. “Only because you ruined my chances,” Magolor said. “Jerk.”

“Hey, I’m just looking out for you,” Marx said. “Beautiful women are trouble.”

“And you wonder why you’ve never been able to attract any,” Magolor said.

Marx looked at Magolor like he’d just said something entirely outlandish, but there was something deeper in that look, something Magolor didn’t understand.

“What?” Magolor asked.

“Nothing,” Marx said, leaning back in his rolling chair. “But I was thinking...”

“Dangerous pursuit.”

Marx smirked. “So Mety Knighty left you some money...and I thought we might want to go on that spring break trip. They’re going to Raisin Ruins and White Wafers. That seems like it’d be up your alley.”
Sure. Both Raisin Ruins and White Wafers were sites famous for the excavation of magical artifacts. It would be fun to visit those places.

“It depends on when my internship with Haltmann Works begins,” Magolor said. “You know I can’t turn down their offer for a trip.”

Marx sighed and rolled his eyes. “How boring,” he said.

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t pay any bills,” Magolor pointed out.

Marx leaned right into Magolor’s face and smiled in a deliberately creepy way. Most people would’ve been unnerved by Marx’s fangs a hairsbreadth from their throat, but Magolor wasn’t most people. “Do not want,” Magolor said, pushing the palm of his hand flat against Marx’s face.

Evidently, that small movement was enough to throw Marx off balance and send him crashing to the ground. Marx groaned, and Magolor vainly tried to contain his laughter.

As he and Dededee had walked inside, Dark’s newly grey eyes darted around the palace. Although this Dededee wasn’t his Dededee, Dark still thought the other man looked very attractive, and Dark quite liked the thought of playing his part as Dededee’s doting boyfriend. While negotiations with the princess and the Queen hadn’t progressed, Dark had one advantage—Meta Knight’s guilt. Dark’s poor double had tried returning his borrowed armor, and Dark had launched into an entirely prepared speech about how exhausting it’d been helping Meta Knight. How dangerous. How there was a dent in his armor. And it’d taken work, but Meta Knight had finally conceded.

Dark and Shadow had won their one tour of the palace. Since Queen Alera seemed unlikely to support such a visit, it’d been decided that Dark and Shadow would both adopt identities of their counterparts and that their visit would coincide with the day when the most people would be present and therefore, distracting the palace guards.

According to Meta Knight, the palace was so large that it took visiting royals months to learn to navigate. No one would notice there were two Kirby’s and two Meta Knight’s as long as they weren’t in the same place at the same time. Simple.
So Dark, disguised as Meta Knight, had gone with Dedede, and Shadow, disguised as Kirby, had gone with Meta Knight. Because Dedede wasn’t looking at him, Dark dared to unfasten another button on his borrowed shirt. Much to Dark’s disappointment, no one had been willing to let him wear some of Meta Knight’s more scandalous clothing to the palace; instead, Dark had graciously settled for the single red shirt in Meta Knight’s wardrobe.

Dark kept trying to unbutton the shirt without being caught. Thus far, he’d had no such luck.

“Why did they construct this palace, anyway?” Dark asked.

He couldn’t imagine any monarch choosing to abandon King Bikaia’s castle.

“That was about five-hundred years ago,” Dedede said. “One branch o’ the family challenged the rulin’ family for the throne, and they decided they didn’ wanna live in the same castle as the family they usurped. That’s how my family ended up so far down in the line o’ succession even though we were so close to Bikaia. They turned Bikaia’s castle into DLU. For Nova’s sake, quit unbuttoning your shirt!”

“But don’t you want to gaze upon these magnificent pectorals?” Dark asked.

“I’ve seen more o’ Meta than ‘is pectorals,” Dedede replied.

“So? The more the better,” Dark replied. “My Dedede would love the idea of having two of me. We could play the most delightful tricks on people, too! I don’t suppose you’d let me borrow Meta —what is that?”

Dark gawked and held his arms out as if he was trying to balance himself. A brilliant flash of light burst into the room and enveloped a man who stood before a white statue of a dragon. The source of the magic was a young woman, and Dark waited, mouth agape. The man should’ve been incinerated, but he wasn’t.

“What’s what?”

“The—the light magic,” Dark said.
Dedede burst into laughter. “It’s a flash. From a phone. Cameras. Do you have cameras?”

“You, uh, use light to capture images,” Dedede said, pulling out a small red device. “Here, look.”

Dark gasped. His face was pictured alongside Dedede’s. This made sense. Clearly, this small device was a daguerreotype, and their image had been cast into a silver sheet.

“But you didn’t expose it to mercury vapor,” Dark said. “How does it keep the image?”

“Mercury vapor? That stuff’s like real dangerous.”

“Is it?” Dark asked. “Because it’s a popular cosmetic—”

“You rub mercury all over yourself?” Dedede asked.

Dark rolled his eyes. “Not me,” he said. “Why would I want to make my complexion paler? I can adopt any skin tone I desire. And besides, lead works far better—”

Dedede pinched the bridge of his nose. “Dear Nova, you’re all gonna die. That is, assuming I don’t kill you anyway for indecently exposin’ yerself.”

“You are grossly unfair. You allow Meta Knight to saunter around looking like a lady of the night, and yet I dare to unfasten a single button, and suddenly, I’m a den of sin,” Dark replied, sullenly undoing his work.

“It ain’t what you wear. It’s where we are,” Dedede said. “I can assure ya that Meta’s wearin’ slacks and a button-down shirt right now ‘cause—unlike you—he’s a gentleman of class and elegance.”

Because everyone else they’d passed was dressed similarly, Dark knew Dedede was probably speaking the truth. This did not, of course, mean that Dark was going to cease claiming that he was
being wronged.

They continued down the palace corridors, looping through ballrooms and courtyards. The palace was massive, and everywhere Dark looked, there was something new and exciting. After wandering about the palace, they entered the castle town markets, and Dark—despite his resolve to be mischievous—let his love of trickery dissipate in favor of looking.

There was so much he’d never seen before. Dark drifted from tent to tent, while Dedede followed.

There were dozens of swords made in the likeness of Galaxia and ceramic Star Rods, statues of all the kings and queens of Dreamland, replicas of Bikaia’s crown; these objects couldn’t have existed under Dark Mind’s regime.

“I can buy ya a couple things if you want,” Dedede said. “Meta left ‘is card with me.”

Dark immediately grabbed an entire stack of small, colored portraits of different Dreamlandic sites.

“You, uh, ain’t gotta get postcards,” Dedede said. “If you wanna have big pictures to hang up, we can getcha some. They have galleries here that’ll do that.”

“Really?”

“Meta Knight!” a soft, smooth voice cut through the air.

A young man waved from a few feet away and trotted towards them. Dark decided the man was incredibly stylish; very few people in this world seemed to appreciate cutaway coats, and the man’s choice to dress in scarlet was very inspired. Clearly, this man was a kindred spirit.

“I ain’t got a clue who that is,” Dedede whispered.

Well. Dark didn’t know either, but he was confident he could pass as Meta Knight.

The man stopped before them and grinned. Up close, it became apparent the man was
fashionable and gorgeous. His eyes were a true Halcandran gold that caught the sunlight and shimmered like fire against his warm skin, and his face was nicely formed—very sharp with a small, aristocratic nose that tilted up at the tip. His best feature was his hair, long, silky, and silver. Dark absentmindedly ran his hand through his own hair and nearly changed the color before remembering he was supposed to be Meta Knight.

“Meta Knight! Hey, long time, no see! You’re looking absolutely breathtaking these days!” the man exclaimed.

“Thank you. I know,” Dark replied, flipping his hair.

Meta Knight had excellent hair for flipping.

“I’m glad. I like confidence in a man. You remember me, right? Daroach? We took public speaking together!”

Public speaking.


Daroach whistled between his teeth. “I love your hair. Was it that long the last time I saw you?”

“Prolly,” Dedede cut in. “He’s kept it long for a while.”

“Your doting Lord?” Daroach asked, winking at Dedede. “You have excellent taste in men. He’s very handsome.”

Dark grinned. Although Dedede hadn’t given any outward sign of it, Dark could practically smell his jealousy.

“Are you in the market for any more pretty servants? I see you like boys with long, pretty hair. But what about some variety? Perhaps, a silver fox?” Daroach asked.
Dark was fairly certain that one—technically—had to be at least middle-aged to be called a silver fox, but Dark also had to admit that the descriptor seemed accurate. Daroach might be twenty-four or so, but Dark definitely thought he was a fox.

“I’m available, Lord Dedede,” Daroach added, “For you, at least.”

Dedede’s face reddened. “Mety’s my boyfriend,” he said.

“You make a very handsome couple, then,” Daroach replied. “Well, I’ll be on my way. It was nice seeing you again, Meta Knight, and nice meeting you, my Lord.”

Daroach grasped Dark’s bicep and pulled himself closer to the other man. Dark started. His every instinct said to bite, but he knew Meta Knight wouldn’t bite someone. So he froze. Daroach, undeterred, leaned close to Dark’s ear. “See you around,” he whispered in Halcandran.

“Will you?” Dark asked.

Daroach smiled and patted Dark’s arm. “Anyway, I’m going for coffee! Do you want anything? Horchata, maybe?”

“I think we’re good,” Dedede said, draping an arm over Dark’s shoulders. “Thanks, though.”

Daroach bowed and shrugged. “Suit yourself!”

Then, Daroach sauntered back into the crowd and headed towards the palace.

“Who was that?” a woman’s voice asked.

Dark inwardly groaned.

“Adeleine,” Dedede said, sounding surprised. “Whatcha doin’ out here?”
Ah, Adeleine. That wasn’t so bad. Dark recognized this woman; she’d been there when they’d made plans to rescue Meta Knight from the Mirror World. She stepped into view, and Dark arched an eyebrow. She’d worn a men’s evening wear when Dark had seen her last, but now, she wore a green dress with a red hat perched at a jaunty angle on her black hair.

“I could ask you the same,” Adeleine replied.

“Mety an’ I thought we’d take a walk through the markets,” Dedede said. “You ain’t gonna tell our professor, are you?”

Adeleine shrugged. “You aren’t in grade school. Professor Drawcia can’t do much if you decide to wander about. I actually came from the gallery further down. I’m looking for some art to decorate my apartment. It’s a bit...sparse. But now I’m heading back. They’re repairing one of the canvases in twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, Meta an’ I are gonna catch one of the later showings. They’re doin’ Bikaia’s coronation portrait. That’s my favorite,” Dedede said. “Glass boots an’ all.”

Adeleine laughed. “You know; there is actually an intense scholarly debate over whether those boots actually existed or whether the artist was just being fanciful.”

They absolutely existed, and no amount of evidence would ever convince Dark to believe the contrary. Dark was infinitely jealous that he hadn’t gotten to wear them, and Kirby Stellarum had. After Adeleine left, Dark let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“Tired?” Dedede asked.

“Nope!” Dark declared. “Just weary of people interrupting our romantic walk together.”

Dedede rolled his eyes.

“Now is that any way to act towards your own lover?”
“First of all, no one goes ‘round callin’ people their lover these days,” Dedede said.

“Alas, it appears romance is dead in your realm,” Dark replied.

Dark ran his fingers through the ends of Meta Knight’s hair, slowly turning the tips from midnight blue to silvery-white. “What do you think?” Dark asked.

“It looks nice,” Dedede replied. “I wouldn’ be upset if Mety came home wearin’ it.”

They resumed walking. Impulsively, Dark linked his arm with Dedede’s, and when Dedede didn’t force him away, Dark tilted his head and let his cheek rest on Dedede’s shoulder. “I just think we ought to be acting more like the devoted paramours we’re supposed to be,” Dark said.

“Sorry, pet,” Dedede said, “D’you want me to sweep you into my arms an’ carry ya through market?”

“I’m a little jealous my Dedede doesn’t have that charming accent and diction,” Dark replied. “I want to be called pet.”

“I’m sure you could insist on it.”

“Oh, sure,” Dark replied glumly, “But it’s not the same as someone giving you a term of endearment. The closest my Dedede has ever gotten is calling me a sorry bastard, and that just isn’t very romantic.”

Dedede snorted. “Well, ‘e ain’t wrong,” Dedede said, “But have you told ‘im you wanna have cutesy nicknames?”

“Well, no,” Dark conceded. “I suppose I should try that, but getting my Dedede to...understand my advances is like preventing an adolescent from cutting her stays when she’s first been introduced to tightlacing.”

“I ain’t gotta clue what that means.”
“Oh, stays! Corsets? Do you know what those are?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, when adolescents—mostly girls—begin wearing corsets, there is a convention called tightlacing, wherein the lady’s mother laces her daughter’s corsets very tightly. They’re then worn day and night, and at first, it’s excruciatingly painful. So much so, that mothers frequently converse about how to keep their daughters from cutting their corset laces during the night. Some bind their daughters’ wrists together. Some lock chains around the corset. There’s no end of novel ideas.”

Dedede opened his mouth like he wanted to say something but then closed it.

Dark laughed. “My mother tightlaced me into a corset when I was thirteen,” he said, smiling fondly, “And I kept cutting mine also. The first time, she had me whipped for that, but that made the pain even worse, so I kept cutting them. When her thrashings couldn’t persuade me otherwise, she began having Shadow handcuff me to my bed each night.”

“When you say whipped, you mean like—”

“Like a whip, obviously,” Dark said.

Dedede looked like he might be sick, and Dark wasn’t entirely sure why. Maybe Dedede just had a weak constitution.

“I didn’t know men wore corsets,” Dedede said, although it sounded like his thoughts were elsewhere.

Dark nodded. “Not so much anymore but it was popular for many years,” Dark said. “Personally, I think my mother just hated me and wanted me to suffer; it hurt so badly that I barely slept for the first three months. But I knew some other high-ranking men who wore them. Even my own father did for a time. It’s good for your posture, and my father was very fond of the stern, military man appearance. I was terribly jealous that no one made Shadow wear them; he was just a servant, though. It would’ve been improper. Although even if it hadn’t been, I’m still not sure I would’ve been able to force those upon him.”
Dedede’s face softened. There was something in the look that Dark recognized from his own Dedede. Something kind and patient. “You sound a lot like Meta does when he talks about Nightmare,” Dedede said. “Or when he used to. Dark Nebula. Y’know.”

Dark sighed. “I know my mother wasn’t very good, but she was still my mother,” Dark said. “I loved her as much as I’m capable of loving anyone.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Dark shrugged and forced a smile. Part of the entertainment in talking about his past was in seeing how cheerful he could be and how horrified he could make people be. This...getting pity and sympathy was unsettling.

“The point is that my Dedede is entirely dispassionate when it comes to showering me with the affection I undoubtedly deserve,” Dark said, toying with his wedding band. “I love him very much, but we have some...matters we need to settle.”

“Don’t all couples?”

Dark smiled. “How receptive is Meta Knight to your advances?”

“He’s fine. He’s very sweet,” Dedede said.

“Is that why you left that love-bite on his neck? I saw it before we left,” Dark said. “I’m glad to know you have good teeth.”

“Y’know; I was just kinda starting to tolerate you,” Dedede said. “Now I hate your guts again. Bring that hickey up to Meta, and I’ll shatter you like a mirror.”

Dark grinned victoriously.

“I don’t suppose there’s a dueling circus in this market?” Dark asked.
“Dueling circus?”

“Where you duel people,” Dark replied. “I want to fight someone. I want to see if you Dreamlanders are as good as my opponents in the Mirror World.”

“There ain’t one here,” Dedede replied. “If you’re wanting to fight, you’d wanna go to DLU. They got three different dueling teams and open practice fields.”

“Really?”

“That ain’t an invitation to just come to our school whenever you wanna,” Dedede said.

Dark sighed. “You’re such a bore. What if I challenge someone, though? Surely, you allow that in this world.”

“We do,” Dedede said cautiously, “But doncha be gettin’ no ideas.”

Dark grinned as a series of terrible, terrible thoughts ran through his head. He wanted to challenge dear Meta Knight, of course. But more than anyone else in Dreamland, Dark really, really wanted to cross blades with Crown Princess Sectonia.

Professor Drawcia’s painting class crammed in beside Dr. Curio’s archaeology class with no small amount of pushing and shoving. Kirby had kept close to Bandanna Dee’s side for fear of losing him in the crowd. Two curators carefully brought out the painting—a badly smashed and torn portrait of King Bikaia and Queen Elise. A pane of glass separated them from the bustling crowd, and although there were TVs placed around to show the process, Kirby was grateful that Bandanna Dee had insisted on arriving early to get front row seats. Most people were stuck standing. To Kirby’s right, Adeleine sat, and although they’d never spoken much, Adeleine flashed him a charming smile. “How are you doing after everything?” she asked, her voice quiet but friendly.

“Fine,” Kirby said.
“Great,” Bandanna Dee added.

The circles under Bandanna Dee’s eyes said differently.

“I’m glad,” Adeleine said. “How are Meta Knight and Dedede managing?”


“Oh,” Adeleine said. “If I’d known, I would’ve congratulated them when I saw them earlier.”

And it seemed that Adeleine had been none the wiser that Meta Knight wasn’t actually the man she’d saw. Kirby inwardly sighed in relief.

“So what’s your story anyway?” Bandanna Dee asked. “Art history teaching assistant and an A.M.B.E.R. agent?”

“Well, I’m not a full-fledged agent; I’m an intern field agent. I’m just lucky because Princess Sectonia took me under her wing, but my goal is to join the A.M.B.E.R. art forgery team,” Adeleine said. “Mostly, I do whatever the princess tells me.”

“Really?” Kirby asked. “That’s so cool!”

Adeleine nodded, seemingly taken aback by Kirby’s enthusiasm. “Well, it’s fine. Nothing glamorous, but it’s a foot in the door to what I really want to do. It’s...it’s been rough. I won’t lie. I left my family in Aqua Star to come here.”

“Aqua Star?” Kirby asked, the mention of his home making his stomach twist with longing. “Which part?”

“Tempest Towers,” Adeleine said.
Kirby knew of Tempest Towers; it was the seat of power for the Duchy of Aqua Star and located in the center of the duchy, far from Kirby’s own coastal home. “Oh! I’m from Pupupu Village,” Kirby said. “It’s on the coast of the Orange Ocean.”

“Oh, cool,” Adeleine said. “I’ve never been there, but I’ve been to the Traumwald side of the Orange Ocean. It’s really gorgeous, and when the sun sets over the water, it really does look bright orange.”

“Okay,” Kirby said.

Hadn’t Meta Knight also mentioned growing up near the Orange Ocean? It was strange to think they might’ve shared the same coastline and gazed upon the same waters as children.

“Are you going back home for the holidays?” Bandanna Dee asked.

“No, my family and I had something of a falling out when I left,” Adeleine replied, smiling tightly.

Kirby’s heart swelled with sympathy. “Maybe you could come spend the holidays with me?” Kirby asked. “I’m going home for Solstice. I want to see my mom and introduce everyone to her! You should come, too, Dee. I’ve been meaning to ask you and the guys. I know you’re probably going back to the Duchy of the Stars, but you could come see me for a bit! Because of the—uh—the weather pattern-thingie, it’s warm in Pupupu Village almost year-round! You could enjoy the beach.”

“I’d like that,” Bandanna Dee said. “It sounds fun.”

Kirby beamed at his friend. Having grown up mostly alone, Kirby had never invited anyone to his mom’s house before, and while he probably should’ve asked his mom first, she’d always been the more the merrier type. She’d be thrilled that Kirby was adjusting so well!

Bandanna Dee suddenly raised his hand and waved. “Ribbon!”

A young woman in a red dress waved back and started moving through the crowd towards them. She was cute with short pink hair and a dress embellished with ribbons and lace. Kirby thought she looked like the protagonist of a cutesy magical girl show.
“Let me share your seat,” she said, once she’d reached them.

Without waiting for an answer, Ribbon crammed herself onto Bandanna Dee’s chair; her skirts and petticoat nearly buried them both. She shot a wink at Kirby. “Aren’t you a cutie?” she asked. “I love your hair.”

Kirby immediately decided that Ribbon was a very lovely young lady and had excellent taste.

“I love your dress,” Kirby said.

“Thanks! It’s my favorite coord,” Ribbon replied.

“Ribbon, this is Kirby, Meta Knight’s brother,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Oh! I see the resemblance. You’re lucky to be so cute,” Ribbon said.

Ribbon smiled and held out her hand like a princess expecting it to be kissed.

Kirby smiled awkwardly. “I can’t,” he said. “My magic reacts with touch.”

“Oh!” Ribbon didn’t draw her hand back. “What will it do to me?”

Kirby bit the inside of his cheek. “It’s...um, Copy. Like King Bikaia. It hurts people, though.”

Ribbon’s jaw dropped. She mouthed the words “King Bikaia.”

“Meta Knight said it feels like a pop of static electricity,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Oh, is that all?” Ribbon asked. “I thought you might set me on fire or something! Well, then, I’m
willing to take the risk. Are you, Kirby?”

Kirby felt a strange fluttering in his chest; it was similar to the feeling he always had when he looked at Prince Fluff. When Kirby’s fingertips met Ribbon’s, there was a brief, sharp spark. Ribbon’s smile never faded, and her eyes never dulled. Very gently, Kirby kissed her knuckles.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

Heat rushed to his face and ears, and for a few seconds, he thought he might’ve forgotten how to breathe. He’d never been so intimate with a girl before, and Ribbon was very cute and charming. And when she drew her hand away and laughed, it sounded like the twinkling of bells.

“Likewise,” Ribbon said. “I’m always happy to meet a friend of Bandanna Dee’s.”

“Ribbon has crystal powers,” Bandanna Dee said.

“That’s right,” Ribbon said. “I have wings, too, but I usually keep them put away. Doors just aren’t made for them.”

Kirby tentatively touched the spot between his shoulder blades, just over his backpack, as if he might’ve somehow sprouted wings without noticing.

“We’re ready to begin!” Drawcia exclaimed, her voice amplified by the microphone she held.

The art history professor, along with a short, white-haired man, had been allowed behind the pane of glass along with the two attendants.

“Most of you know me,” Drawcia said. “I am Dr. Drawcia de la Fuente. With me, I have Dr. Geoffrey Curio—”

The white-haired man waved.

“—and the curators of the palace art collections have been gracious enough to allow us to watch
them repair some of the canvases destroyed by vandals during the sleeping curse,” Drawcia said. “What we have here is an early portrait of King Bikaia and Queen Elise. This particular portrait was created to celebrate the couple’s marriage and Elise’s ascension to the Dreamlandic throne. As you can see, if you’re sitting close—or looking at the screens—we have two additional figures in this painting. To the right, we have the goddess Nova and to the left Galaxia blessing their union.”

Kirby had thought seeing the portrait might spark a memory, but that didn’t appear to be the case. It was still strange to imagine himself posing for this portrait with Galaxia’s gentle hands on one shoulder and Elise’s on the other.

“And we must be very careful with repairing a canvas this old,” Drawcia continued. “This is why the curators are wearing gloves and taking the utmost care. We wouldn’t want to cause any damage.”

The curators flipped the canvas over.

“Now, this part is exactly what you’d think,” Drawcia said. “We’re simply going to glue the canvas back together along the places where it’s been cut.”

Dame Garlude approached Drawcia and whispered in her ear.

“What?” Drawcia asked.

Garlude took the microphone and smiled. “Please, enjoy watching the curators work. However, Queen’s Guard and A.M.B.E.R. are currently investigating a possible theft, and we may request to check certain individuals’ possessions.”

“Holy Nova,” Ribbon whispered. “Who would steal from the palace?”

“I don’t know,” Adeleine said, texting quickly on her phone. “No one has said anything to me, so it must’ve just happened.”

“You’re in A.M.B.E.R.?” Ribbon asked, sounding impressed. “Is the testing as rigorous as I’ve heard?”
“Worse,” Adeleine replied. “But I’m being told to stay put.”

“Do you think we’re in any danger?” Kirby asked.

“No,” Bandanna Dee replied. “The palace has certain protocols that are followed in the event of any danger. They’d have far more Queen’s Guard in here than Dame Garlude.”

“That’s true,” Adeleine said, her eyes darting towards Bandanna Dee.

For a few seconds, they held one another’s gazes.

“Or so I’ve heard,” Bandanna Dee said.

Drawcia cleared her throat, trying to silence the suddenly loud crowd. “Let’s all be calm now,” Drawcia said. “As someone in the art history department, I know that theft is very exciting. I’m always very entertained to find that someone has stolen my Expo markers. But let’s continue. I didn’t let you out of class, so you could gossip.”

And slowly, the crowd quieted again. “I hope Meta Knight and...Dedede are fine,” Kirby whispered.

Bandanna Dee’s face paled.

Ribbon laughed. “Well, I’m sure neither Meta Knight nor Dedede are going about the palace stealing things.”

But it wasn’t Meta Knight or Dedede that Kirby was worried about.

“Halt!”
Meta Knight froze. He and Shadow had been just left the crypts where the deceased kings and queens of Dreamland rested. Shadow still had his hand on the wrought iron gates leading inside. “What do we do?” Shadow whispered.

It was Waddle Doo. Meta Knight scowled. “Nothing. He probably just wants to make my life hard,” Meta Knight replied. “I have clearance to be here. We aren’t doing anything wrong.”

Unless, of course, someone had caught onto what they were doing. Meta Knight’s heartbeat thundered in his chest. Even worse, he felt Sectonia’s magic nearby. Maybe she wouldn’t care. Maybe she would feel him and Waddle Doo and ignore it. Surely, Meta Knight was neither that important nor that much of a threat, right?

Waddle Doo groaned. “Of course, it’s you,” he said.

“I’m not allowed to show my brother the crypts?” Meta Knight asked, adopting the same haughty demeanor he’d learned from Nightmare.

Or Dark Nebula. He wasn’t sure.

“As if that would stop you, Your Grace,” Waddle Doo said.

*Your Grace* had never sounded so much like an insult.

“That’s right,” Meta Knight said. “I outrank you now, don’t I? We’ll be on our way.”

There was another flash of magic, and a man in a scarlet coat approached them. “I got your horchata, Meta Knight!” the man declared.

“Who are you?” Waddle Doo asked.

Baffled, Meta Knight took the cup handed to him.
“Daroach!” the man declared. “Meta Knight and I go way back.”

Meta Knight had never seen this man before in his life, but—

He must’ve agreed to bring Dark horchata and didn’t realize he’d brought it to the wrong man. Why was Dark accepting drinks from random strangers?

Waddle Doo crossed his arms, and Sectonia walked towards them as if she’d purposefully timed her arrival to make the situation go as badly as possible.

Once the princess was within ten feet of them, they all bowed. Including Shadow. His courtly etiquette was better than Kirby’s, and Meta Knight hoped Sectonia hadn’t noticed the slip. Technically, it wasn’t illegal to bring Dark and Shadow into the palace, but it would probably be very frowned upon.

“He went to get you coffee?” Waddle Doo prompted.

Sectonia’s violet eyes were far more intimidating than any glare Waddle Doo had ever shot in Meta Knight’s direction.

“Hechata. He’s...right,” Meta Knight said hesitantly.

“I need to search everyone’s bags,” Waddle Doo said, sounding uncomfortable. “Sorry.”

Daroach rolled his eyes. “Honestly, I’d think Queen’s Guard would have something better to do than harassing a bunch of university students.”

“We’re investigating a potential theft, and the Queen will be furious if we don’t investigate everyone.” Sectonia paused. “Sorry, Meta Knight.”

Thank Nova! They didn’t suspect anything. Meta Knight swept his backpack off and carefully unbuckled the swordbelt holding Galaxia.
“Do you need to search me, too?” Meta Knight asked.

Normally, he wouldn’t have offered, but because he was doing something he probably shouldn’t have been doing, the best approach was to be as cooperative and accommodating as possible.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Sectonia said.

Shadow set his backpack beside Meta Knight’s, and after some awkward maneuvers with his remaining cup of coffee, Daroach placed his own on the ground, also. After receiving a curt nod, Waddle Doo set about searching. He began with Meta Knight’s backpack, shifting through papers, a notebook, and a few pens.

Waddle Doo paused. “How...um, how is...you know?”

“As good as the rest of us. I guess. He’s not sleeping much, and when he does, he has nightmares.”

“I should come visit,” Waddle Doo said, handing Meta Knight’s backpack back to him.

Meta Knight bit back a snarky comment. Nice. He needed to be nice. “Call ahead, so we can clean the apartment,” Meta Knight said.

Waddle Doo nodded and searched Shadow’s backpack, which was crammed entirely with souvenirs from the palace market. Nothing unusual.

“You know,” Daroach said when Waddle Doo reached for his backpack, “I’ve always fantasized about a knight from Queen’s Guard—”

“And if you have any sense of self-preservation, you’ll refrain from sharing,” Waddle Doo replied, opening Daroach’s backpack.

Daroach instead turned his attention to Princess Sectonia. “I’ve always had this fantasy—”

Wait.
“Well, I’ve always fantasized about being caught by some attractive nobleman’s son, and instead of calling A.M.B.E.R.—"

Sectonia’s glare was withering, and Meta Knight barely kept his jaw from dropping. *This* was the Scarlet Magician? Maybe Daroach *hadn’t* accidentally gotten Dark and him confused. Maybe he’d just thrown Meta Knight into his plan, and the wise, *rational* thing to do would be straight-up admit everything he knew.

And yet Daroach had helped him. Sort of. However selfish Daroach’s motives were, he *had* taken that collar away from Dark Nebula. He’d seemed legitimately concerned when Meta Knight had been on the verge of some sort of anxious breakdown. Daroach might be stealing back his Triple-Star, too, and Meta Knight wasn’t *entirely* sure Daroach could be faulted for that. Hadn’t Meta Knight, himself, stolen Sacred Galaxia?

Dear Nova, this had *better not* blow up in his face.

“I hadn’t imagined you as being friends with someone completely lacking in all sense of dignity and class, Meta Knight,” Sectonia said.

“Well—"

“We’re classmates!” Daroach chirped. “I met him in public speaking! Kirby remembers me, right? I’m *always* over at Meta Knight’s apartment.”

“Yes!” Shadow agreed. “He’s always there. Never leaves!”

Daroach’s backpack appeared to be overflowing with old candy wrappers and used tissues, something which Waddle Doo appeared to observe with increasing disgust.

“He’s good,” Waddle Doo said, dropping the backpack to the ground. “Sorry for the disturbance.”

“If you want to be checked all day, you’d do best to head on out,” Sectonia said, jerking her head towards the palace gate. “We’ll radio and inform them you’ve been inspected.”
“Thank you, Your Royal Highness,” Meta Knight replied.

Once they were gone, Meta Knight drew Galaxia and nudged Shadow behind him. Daroach was prepared; thin, gold blades glinted between his fingers. “Careful,” Daroach said, “You’d survive, but not without some nasty scars.”

“Is that another of your fantasies?”

Daroach’s lips quirked into a smile. “I’m not particularly interested in maiming men, no,” he said.

“What did you steal?”

“Steal? I only took back what was stolen from me,” Daroach said, “My beloved Triple-Star. Return it to me, and no one has to come to any harm.”

“I don’t have it.”

“It’s in your bag,” Daroach replied.

Warily, Meta Knight crouched behind his backpack, and as Daroach said, the Triple-Star glimmered from inside.

“It seems your father’s poor condition is doing wonderful things for your health,” Daroach said, winking.

Meta Knight drew out the Triple-Star and handed it over. Daroach’s eyes gleamed as he snatched the weapon back and hid it inside his backpack. The glimmer of gold vanished from between his fingers.

“Who did you steal it for?” Meta Knight asked.
“The collar?”

“Mhm.”

Daroach smirked. “I don’t expose my clients’ identities,” he said. “Ta!”

Daroach vanished and reappeared near the gates. Meta Knight knew he could yell and insist that the guards not allow Daroach to leave, but instead, Meta Knight threw an absentminded arm over Shadow’s shoulders. As far as Meta Knight was concerned, this made Daroach and himself even, and Daroach had no involvement with either Haltmann Works, Star Dream, or Dark Nebula. This was probably something Meta Knight could let go. “Well,” Meta Knight said, “At least, you got to see the palace.”

“Yes!” Shadow exclaimed, wrapping his arm around Meta Knight’s. “It was immensely enjoyable!”

It seemed Shadow was every bit as enthusiastic as Kirby was. “Let’s get some ice cream,” Meta Knight said.

“Ice cream? What is that?”

Shadow had never had ice cream before? Meta Knight inwardly recoiled in horror. Yes. This was definitely a situation that needed to be corrected immediately.

_____________________________________

After the more exciting than it needed to be day at the palace, Meta Knight had been looking forward to curling up on the sofa with his astronomy textbook. The university had been closed because of Dark Nebula’s attack, and Meta Knight just felt so...behind. Rusty. It was nice to be in classes again and return to studying.

Then, Dedede who’d went to his suit-fitting for the funeral of the late King Daedalus, had texted and informed Meta Knight that he needed to put on something nice and meet him at the most upscale restaurant in town. Meta Knight had looked morosely at his phone, but he’d done as his liege commanded. He hadn’t even really thought about not doing it. Although Meta Knight now had a title of his own—a title higher than Dedede’s—he’d yet to take the initiative to quit his job as Dedede’s personal assistant, and even if Meta Knight had quit, he still probably would’ve caved.
Dedede had taken the Halberd, so Meta Knight had walked the three blocks. He paused by the door and straightened his tie and dress shirt. After a moment’s consideration, he rolled the cuffs of his shirt. When he left his cuffs rolled up, Galaxia’s mark could be seen wrapping around his right wrist, and Meta Knight liked showing the mark off as much as possible. He tilted his head and wondered if he should’ve done something more formal with his hair. Dedede hadn’t mentioned who else would be attending this dinner.

Meta Knight took a deep breath, forced a passable smile, and walked in. His coat was taken and Meta Knight led to Dedede’s table. From the back, it was clear that Dedede wore a suit—likely the one he’d just left a fitting for. Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek. Dedede shouldn’t have worn that suit before the funeral. It wasn’t proper, and it might get dirty.

“Hey, sugar cakes,” Dedede said, grinning.

“Hello. When is everyone else arriving?” Meta Knight asked, sitting to Dedede’s left.

Or was he supposed to sit to Dedede’s right now? It depended partly on who else was attending the dinner.

“They ain’t no one else,” Dedede replied.

For a long moment, Meta Knight stared blankly at Dedede. There was a tentative spot of warmth on his thigh, and Meta Knight glanced down and realized Dedede had put his hand there. All Meta Knight’s muscles clenched as he met Dedede’s gaze. “Remove your hand, or I’ll remove it for you,” Meta Knight said, dazed.

Dedede immediately moved his hand away. “Is that a hard ‘no’?” Dedede asked, tapping his own neck.

Meta Knight ducked his head and trailed a finger along the rim of his water glass. “I don’t know.”

“You ain’t mad, are you?” Dedede asked.

“No,” Meta Knight admitted, giving Dedede a sheepish look. “But people won’t like it.”
“So what? Mom wouldn’t care.”

“Your mother isn’t who I’m concerned about.”

“For Nova’s sake, are you ashamed o’ me, Meta?” Dedede asked.

“No, but—”

“Then, there ain’t nothin’ to worry ‘bout. Who wouldn’t want to be dating a gorgeous boy like you?” Dedede asked.

“It’s different when people are watching. It’s not...” Meta Knight paused. “Is this a date?”

“Well, yeah,” Dedede said. “I, uh, kinda figured you’d guess that when I said ‘let’s go out and get something to eat together,’ but...yeah.”

Oh, Nova. A date? Meta Knight hadn’t been on a date before, and he hadn’t had time to Google what he was supposed to do on a date. This was going to end in disaster. No, wait. Dedede was just teasing, wasn’t he?

“But you told me to dress nicely.”

“Yeah,” Dedede said, “Because I like you all dressed up. If it wouldn’t have been a faux pas and real uncomfortable for ya to sit here in full armor, I’d have asked for ya to come in that.”

Dedede...thought he looked nice. Dressed up. And in armor. “Oh,” Meta Knight replied very eloquently.

“Hey, y’know that game kids play where you put your hand on someone’s knee, for example, and you try to see how far up they’ll let you go?”
Meta Knight rested his cheek in the palm of his hand and tried desperately to hide that he hoped a meteor burst through the restaurant and incinerated him. He hadn’t realized it was a date, and he had the sinking feeling that literally anyone else would’ve caught on.

And Dedede’s compliments made him feel all warm and fuzzy.

“What even was your childhood?” Meta Knight asked in a vain attempt to regain some self-control.

“Yeah. ‘Cause you had a normal childhood,” Dedede said. “I’m just thinkin’ we can use it to...uh, determine some boundaries.”

“Boundaries.”

“Yeah. I mean, I wanna touch you in public,” Dedede said awkwardly, “And I know it’s somethin’ you ain’t ever done before. And I mean, if you don’t like it, that’s fine. I just thought maybe we try baby steps? Compromise.”

“I suppose that’s fine,” Meta Knight said slowly, “But don’t expect me to reciprocate. Especially not in public.”

Dedede brightened and placed his hand on Meta Knight’s knee. “Fine?” Dedede asked.

Quite pleasant, actually. “I suppose.”

Dedede’s hand inched higher until it reached halfway up Meta Knight’s thigh. “Why don’t you just rip my pants off while you’re at it?” Meta Knight asked, moving Dedede’s hand back down.

“So...an inch above your knee is good?”

Dedede’s eyes were so sincere and concerned that Meta Knight couldn’t help but smile a bit. “An inch above my knee is fine.”

“Then, that’s all I gotta have, pet.”
Meta Knight hesitated before offering Dedede’s hand a quick, fond squeeze. “Maybe two inches,” Meta Knight said.

“Your lower back?”

“Maybe if you warn me first.”

“That’s fair,” Dedede said.

A waitress arrived and poured Meta Knight a glass of cabernet sauvignon. After a quick glance at the forgotten menu, they ordered. Dedede’s hand found its way once more to Meta Knight’s knee.

“You look especially handsome this evening,” Dedede said, “Especially since I didn’t give you much notice.”

“Thank you. You, too.”

“I kinda wish you’d worn a choker instead of the tie, though,” Dedede added. “I know ya like those more.”

And Meta Knight had bought the one Dedede had pointed out when they’d all went shopping together. For special occasions. “Right,” Meta Knight said, fidgeting with his hands. “Next time, I will. Thank you.”

“Yeah. Sure. You...uh, you’re—did I compliment your looks?”

“You did. And I thanked you.”

“Oh, great!”

“Are you this awkward on all your dates?” Meta Knight asked.
“At first, I was with Fae,” Dedede replied. “I guess I’m just kinda nervous ‘bout havin’ you here and now. Like this, caballerito. No more pining from afar. That’s kinda strange.”

“Pining?” Meta Knight asked.

“You weren’t takin’ my hints,” Dedede said. “That’s all.”

“Well, I—”

Customer Service, dressed in an expensive and well-tailored suit, swept into the empty seat beside Meta Knight.

“We’re on a date,” Meta Knight said awkwardly.

“That’s nice,” Customer Service said. “You should’ve answered your phone when I called an hour ago.”

“And you couldn’t leave a message?” Meta Knight asked.

“I see you’ve already made some very expensive financial decisions,” Customer Service continued.

“I thought my father could afford them.”

“Of course, he could,” Customer Service replied. “Paying Blade’s tuition for medical school, paying the medical expenses for Sir Jecra’s child, that’s all fine.”

“So why—”

“Paying off the Duchess’s debts, however...” Customer Service trailed off.
“Wait! You been doin’ what?” Dedede asked.

“I...” Meta Knight trailed off.

“You cain’t do that, Meta,” Dedede said. “That’s too much.”

“No,” Meta Knight replied, shooting a glare at Customer Service, “It’s repaying my debts. You and Duchess Delilah spent so much money on me. It’s only right that I would pay you back.”

“The point of the matter is that you don’t have that authority,” Customer Service said. “You may resume or halt financial transactions that your father already began, but you may not instigate new ones. You may be the Duke of Dreams, but legally, you do not command the same authority. You are, however, entitled to a stipend of a thousand dollars a week.”

“And the perfect time to tell me this was during a dinner date,” Meta Knight said.

Customer Service laughed.

“Meta...” Dedede trailed off.

“Fine,” Meta Knight said. “You’re here, so you can tell me what Haltmann has to do with my father being possessed and how Star Dream and M-7110 tie into this.”

“I can,” Customer Service replied, “But I won’t.”

“Max Haltmann clearly presents some sort of danger—”

“If you were in any real danger, Meta Knight, we’d know,” Customer Service said. “We’ve had spies in Haltmann Works for a very long time. We know every move they make—from the location of their secret facility to the fact that Susie Haltmann brought you flowers. And A.M.B.E.R. has spies in Haltmann Works as well. You’re perfectly safe.”

“I’d still feel better if I knew what was going on. What is Star Dream? What is this admin I keep
hearing about, and why wouldn’t Father give it to Haltmann?”

Customer Service smiled thinly. “When your father wakes, you should ask him. He’d always planned on telling you when you turned twenty-one.”

“Or maybe I ask Max Haltmann myself. Don’t forget that my father abused me for a decade because he was possessed by some monster that had a connection to Haltmann Works. And I—”

“And don’t forget, you brat, that I worked for your father and loved your father. And I’m dealing with the same realization you are,” Customer Service snapped, “And you forget, Meta Knight, that I still run your father’s company and have quite a bit of influence over his assets.”

“That’s not—”

“I am respecting your father’s wishes, but then, that’s something you wouldn’t understand.” Customer Service sneered.

“That ain’t fair!” Dedede exclaimed. “How dare you—”

Customer Service’s eyes snapped to him. “Why don’t you stay out of this, Triple-D? You can huff and puff all you like, but I’m not intimidated by someone who’s named after the size of their mother’s bra.”

Oh, dear Nova.

“Why don’t we take this outside—” Dedede asked.

“Meta Knight, control him, won’t you?”

Meta Knight stood and shaking, placed his hands on the table. “What will happen if I ask Max or Susie Haltmann what’s going on?” Meta Knight asked.
“You’ll give me a headache,” Customer Service said. “You may dislike me, but you and I both know one thing. I loved your father. Whoever he was. You’re Nightmare’s son. At the end of the day, I’ll protect you. Do you know that Max and Susie will give you that same courtesy?”

Meta Knight knew the answer, as loathe as he was to admit it.

“We’re leaving,” Meta Knight said quietly. “Pick up the check.”

Customer Service smirked and mockingly took a sip of Meta Knight’s cabernet.

Dedede stormed away, and Meta Knight hastened to follow. The moment they were outdoors, Dedede spun around and faced Meta Knight.

“What mystery have you been piecing together, and why ain’t you let me in on it?” Dedede snapped, his voice very loud.

“Don’t yell at me.”

Dedede pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Sorry,” he said. “Yer right. I shouldn’t yell at you, especially not out on a sidewalk.”

“I don’t want you to worry needlessly,” Meta Knight said. "That's why I didn't tell you."

Dedede deflated. “Meta...it ain’t no burden to know ‘bout your problems. I love you.”

“I know, but—”

“But nothing,” Dedede said. “Just try keepin’ me in the loop a little more, okay? I’d rather worry ‘bout what was goin’ on with you than worry ‘bout what you might not be tellin’ me. Okay?”

“Okay.”
Dedede nodded, seeming satisfied.

“I’m sorry he ruined our date,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede grasped Meta Knight’s arm and pulled him against him. Meta Knight felt like he’d stepped onto the cover of a really trashy romance novel, and while a rational part of him wanted to be embarrassed, another part of him was filled with fluttery and giddy excitement. And maybe it wouldn’t be the end of the world if Dedede moved his arm a little lower and pulled him a little closer. “I got to spend an evening with you lookin’ all dressed up,” Dedede said. “He didn’t ruin it.”

Meta Knight was too embarrassed to look up at Dedede, but he tentatively let his fingertips rest over Dedede’s broad chest. “Promise?” Meta Knight asked.

“Promise,” Dedede said. “C’mon, caballerito. Let’s find somewhere to have dinner.”

Meta Knight brightened and finally, shyly looked up at Dedede. If there was one way to win Meta Knight’s heart, it was the promise of food.

The hospital was quiet. The Nightmare Wizard lay sleeping, his thoughts drifting to some place beyond mortal reach. Susie Haltmann silently crept to the wizard’s side. She gazed down upon him. The man looked deceptively harmless lying in that bed with wires and monitors attached to him. Moonlight and the electric green and red of the monitor lights cast Nightmare’s already pale skin in an otherworldly glow. And despite it all, Nightmare looked more human lying there than he had in a very long time. “Gute nacht, Onkel Albtraum,” Susie said.

She hadn’t called him *Onkel Albtraum* in more than a decade, but seeing the powerful man so weakened stirred something inside her. Susie thought of Nightmare’s visits and the way he’d pulled objects out of thin air just to delight her, at the way he’d taken her to the rooftop of her father’s mansion and pointed out the constellations to her. She thought of trips to the beach and playing in the waves and tidal pools with Meta Knight. Pouring over old, gilded books in the wizard’s study. Sitting on the large, horizontal refrigerator and watching Nightmare cook. The wizard was always the best man to coax cookies or cakes out of.

For the first time in her life, Susie wasn’t sure what she wanted. It had been Meta Knight. Then,
it’d been Star Dream. Then, Kirby. And now...?

Now, she’d hoped to come gloat at seeing Nightmare Nocturne, the man who’d defied her father and ruined her life, a broken man. Susie had imagined giving him a speech full of venom and threats. She’d had vague ideas of poisoning Nightmare or of pulling some of the monitors apart and making him bleed and suffer, and now, she was here. She waited for the satisfaction to come, but it didn’t.

This had been her father’s best friend, and her father had done this to his best friend. Some part of Susie thought about forgetting all of it and starting anew, but that was giving in. She wanted her father or something like him. She felt like her life since the accident had become a lot like this room. Dark, cold, and quiet. Susie watched the clouds move over the moon. It was impossible to see the stars for the city lights. So different from Traumwald.

Her father used to take her to the edge of the woods, and he would whisper stories about the goddess Nova and her wish-granting powers.

It wasn’t fair that Meta Knight and Kirby got to have their father when she couldn’t have hers.

Heels clicked on the floor. Susie turned her head and smiled demurely. The woman who entered was Halcandran. Her eyes were the tell-tale gold, and her blonde hair was curly and short, framing a soft-featured face. She had a strange, otherworldly look. Probably the result of magic. She wore scrubs, but even their normal simplicity did little to diminish this woman’s unnatural beauty.

“I’m sorry,” Susie said, deciding to play for sympathy. “I know visiting hours are over, but I just had to see my uncle.”

“Unfortunately, he’s been like this since he was first brought here,” the woman said.

“Given what happened...” Susie trailed off.

Susie had heard of it from Haltmann Works’ spies.

“Being exposed to Star Dream really does change you,” the woman said.
Susie stiffened but recovered quickly. She adopted an expression of complete innocence and clasped her hands before her. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“It hurts,” the woman continued, “And even when the pain fades, you realize you’ve changed in ways you can scarcely comprehend. She does something to your powers. I don’t know that being broken is worth the end result. If your father had realized what Star Dream would become, do you think he would’ve stopped before he’d begun to assemble her? Before he’d asked Nightmare Nocturne to provide him with the perfect admin?”

Susie felt a chill run down her spine. There was pepper spray in her purse, but that wouldn’t be enough to combat this woman. Anyone who knew of Star Dream was dangerous.

“I had wondered why Nightmare ceased contacting me,” the woman mused. “Well, he stayed in touch, but it wasn’t the same as it once was. Now, it makes sense. He wouldn’t bow to your father’s wishes, so your father tried to make him. Wasn’t that nice?”

“You’re Asteria, aren’t you?” Susie asked.

“I am.”

“You don’t look like I expected.”

“You’re a child,” Asteria said, completely ignoring the comment. “Leave this game while you can. Cut your losses and never look back.”

“Like you did?” Susie asked, keeping her voice sweet.

“You can’t even imagine how hard it was to leave Nightmare and Meta Knight,” Asteria said, “To stay away for so long. To pretend I’d moved on. Years of pain, loneliness, and longing. All out of fear of what might happen if your father thought he could still use me as leverage. But now...I have every intention of remaining here, and if you—or your father or Star Dream—hurt my husband or my child, I will destroy you and everything you hold dear.”

Susie laughed and turned to the door. “What a dramatic speech,” she said. “A bit disproportionate for the deed, don’t you think?”
Asteria shook her head. “It’s only what Haltmann did to me.”

It was in Susie’s nature to be confrontational and to taunt. Her bluntness was part of what had made her father really like her, both as his daughter and later as his secretary. And fleetingly, Susie considered telling this woman all the terrible things that would be in store for either Meta Knight or Kirby, but she didn’t. Instead, she simply walked away. And as she did, something in Susie’s stomach twisted. It was the feeling that if something happened to her, her own beloved father simply wouldn’t care. If it suited him, her father would destroy her just like he’d destroyed Nightmare Nocturne, his best friend since childhood.
Dreamland's Royalty Prepares for Solstice Ball

Chapter Notes

So...this chapter actually ended up being so unwieldy that I had to break it into two and move a couple of things around. Which means the next couple of updates should be pretty fast. The next chapter is Bikaia, Galacta Knight, and Elise, and then, we get the Solstice Ball!

Also, trigger warning for racism.

The stone floor was cold and rough beneath Dark’s cheek. At first, he’d tried using the voluminous skirts of his gown to put some padding between himself and the ground, but even then, Dark could feel the cold seeping through the layers of fabric and chilling his skin. It had left him with a persistent, dull ache all over his body. It was difficult to breathe, too. Despite occasionally wearing corsets, Dark hadn’t tight-laced them in a very long time. His ribs and stomach throbbed, and he struggled for every breath. And somehow, none of this was as traumatic as having his powers stolen and used against him. He’d experienced worse, of course. Dark kept telling himself that. Maybe if he told himself that enough, it would be true. Footsteps.

Dark sat upright, jostling the heavy chains on his raw wrists. How long had he been here? It couldn’t have been long. Surely, someone was coming for him. Even if Dedede or Delilah or someone else had betrayed him, Shadow would come. Despite their recent disagreement over how to overthrow Dark Mind, Dark was certain that his beloved brother would never leave him to die like this.

Taranza entered. “Are you ready to begin?”

“This won’t bring her back.”

Taranza’s eyes darkened. “I have no illusions of bringing her back,” he said, “But you’re going to die the same way she did. And the kingdom will be better for it.”

The last time Dark had bit him. As punishment, Taranza had made him hold his mouth open and had filed down his fangs, and Taranza hadn’t let him grow those fangs back either. Taranza grabbed the heavy chains wrapped around Dark’s wrists and dragged him across the floor. Dark knew what was happening, but he still fought to stop it. He thrashed and flailed, tripping over the dress’s heavy layers and long hem.
When Taranza grew tired of Dark’s struggles, he forced him to climb to his feet and sit on his knees before a massive, gilded mirror. “Start talking,” Taranza said.

Against his will, Dark raised his eyes to the mirror; Sectonia’s delicate face stared back. He lowered his head and bit the inside of his cheek. He was being asked to do such an absurd, pointless thing. To confess everything he hated about himself to this reflection of Sectonia. And he should be able to fight it. He should—

But disobeying Taranza hurt so, so badly.

A hand shook his shoulder. Still half in his dream, Dark mumbled and rolled back over, burying his nose in his heavy cotton blankets. Shadow’s concerned face loomed over him. “Dark, wake up.”

“I hate myself,” Dark said.

“Don’t say that. Dark, it’s me. It’s Shadow.”

Dark blinked slowly, coming to awareness. “Shadow?”

“Was it Taranza again?”

Dark closed his eyes and shook his head. He forced a crooked grin. “Aw, are you worried about little, old me, Shaddie-kins?”

“I am worried any morning you don’t wake up as yourself,” Shadow replied.

He wasn’t himself? Dark bolted upright, throwing the blankets aside. Black curls fell over his shoulders and curled over his breasts, visible beneath the lace-trimmed nightgown that Sectonia had sometimes worn at nights. Dark remembered her sitting before her mirror and brushing her lovely hair, which caught the warm glow of candlelight and cast it with a beautiful softness. Nova's grace, Sectonia had been such a lovely woman. So perfect.

Dark shook his head as if he could force the image from his mind. “Like you’ve never had any magical missteps during your sleep,” Dark replied. “I seem to recall someone covering my room
with ice as I slept.”

Dark had thought that was hilarious, actually, but Dark Mind had been furious. If Shadow recalled the situation traumatically, though, he gave no evidence of it. Dark’s brother only rolled his eyes. “Shall I lay out your clothes for the morning, or are you going to be Sectonia today?”

It was a fair question. It wasn’t unusual for Dark to spend a day or more as someone else.

“Tempting. But I have an audience with Queen Alera of Dreamland today. She probably wouldn’t take kindly to me being her daughter.”

Shadow’s face lit up. “She finally granted you an audience?”

“She did,” Dark lied.

“You need something better then!” Shadow exclaimed, returning to his brother’s wardrobe. “Do you want a corset?”

Dark smiled at his sibling’s enthusiasm. Because Alera hadn’t actually agreed to an audience of any kind, odds were good the day would end in disaster. But why cruelly dash Shadow’s shining optimism? Surely, there was no harm in entertaining the illusion of successful diplomacy for just a hair longer. “Why not?” Dark asked. “Let’s do everything. Nothing but the best for Queen Alera.”

Even though Dark knew the best wouldn’t be good enough.

Despite how he acted, Dark had been raised as a prince, and despite Dark Mind’s fondness for violent solutions, Dark did know something about diplomacy. And since his father’s death, Dark had tried really hard to act diplomatically. This had been met with differing levels of success, but Dark kept persisting in his efforts to find peaceful, bloodless solutions.

He had dressed at his most handsome and hand-delivered several letters to Queen Alera of Dreamland, always taken by A.M.B.E.R. agents who insisted the Queen would receive them. She had never answered, so Dark had tried gifts. He had sent bolts of luxurious fabrics that—in his realm—would have any aristocrat eager to negotiate. In return, he had received a small calling card informing him that his gift, which cost a fortune and had taken several weavers months to make, would have totaled a couple of hundred dollars at a craft store.
“Is their queen entirely devoid of sense?” Delilah had asked.

As strange as it was to agree with *that* woman, Dark had. And because Sectonia had kept making empty promises about meetings that were never arranged despite Dark putting himself and his kingdom at risk to aid Dreamland, Dark had decided that the best solution was to travel through the Dimension Mirror and *demand* an audience with Queen Alera.

Dark slowly released Sectonia’s form and returned to himself. Shadow came to Dark’s bed with piles of clothing. “She’s going to love you!” Shadow exclaimed.

“We’ll see,” Dark replied.

Shadow helped his brother undress, just like he had since he and Dark were both children. Admittedly, Dark could mostly dress himself—aside from the stays if he was tightlacing—but neither Dark nor Shadow had ever suggested stopping their little, morning routines.

Dark’s gaze drifted to his empty bed. Dedede was never there when Dark woke. Often, Dedede didn’t even sleep with Dark, who didn’t have the courage to ask if his new husband was repulsed by him. Dedede was so…so sparse with his affection, and Dark was still trying to decide how to broach the subject. More than anything, Dark really just wanted a warm bed with someone to curl up against during long winter nights. Someone who would be there to snuggle against in the mornings.

“Are you taking anyone with you?” Shadow asked.

“No,” Dark replied, winking. “I don’t want her to think we’re invading. The Queen’s ego seems so fragile.”

His marital troubles would have to be solved another time.

Marx’s fangs were growing back, and he’d have to file them down soon. It wasn’t that Marx hated
having fangs. Actually, he loved them. They were great for biting and awesome for making people nervous. But the downside to fangs was that they made him talk with the most embarrassing lisp. He kept running his tongue over them as he skipped to the library with his stolen poinsettia. Now, Marx didn’t typically steal things anymore; stealing really got Mags in a tizzy. But this poinsettia had been on a tombstone, which made it a perfectly acceptable target for thievery.

Now, some people might have taken issue with Marx stealing flowers off tombstones, but Marx reasoned that he had more use for the flowers than the dead. And one of those graves had a bright blue poinsettia edged with silver glitter. It was practically screaming to be stolen. Poinsettias came from Halcandra, which was part of why Mags doted over them like they were some Nova’s gift to all mankind. And Marx needed to get back in Mags’s good graces. Might as well take him some flowers.

Mags sat behind circulation. On the other side of the desk, there was a boy with bubblegum pink hair. He seemed to be a very animated creature, wildly waving his hands to emphasize his words. Marx wrinkled his nose, vaguely vexed at the way Mags leaned forward and seemed genuinely interested in what the other student was saying.

“So I just came to get some references,” the boy said. “Now, I’m off to get started!”

“Hey, hey, hey! What’s going on here?” Marx asked, dropping the poinsettia onto the desk.

Mags’s face lit up, proving that grave-robbing flowers was definitely a smooth move. But of course, Marx had already known that.

“Marx, this is Kirby,” Mags said, pulling the poinsettia to his side of the desk.

Marx wrinkled his nose and looked Kirby up and down. Kirby looked so…benign and innocent. He had the face of some cheap romance novel heroine. The sort of drop-dead gorgeous heroine who was too oblivious to realize she was super hot or something. “Hey, Kirbs? Kay?” Marx said. “Nice to meet you!”

“This is a beautiful poinsettia,” Magolor said. “Where ever did you find it from?”

“I didn’t steal it from someone if that’s what you mean,” Marx replied.
The dead didn’t count, after all.

“You, too,” Kirby said. “You’re…um?”

“Marx!” he exclaimed. “I’m sure Meta Knight has told you all about me.”

Probably lots of really awful, mostly true things. But Marx was never one to let facts interfere with the way he acted.

Kirby’s face became excessively sympathetic. Evidently, he didn’t have his brother’s coldness and composure.

“I know our father threatened you,” Kirby said. “I’m sorry.”

“Water under the bridge,” Marx replied. “These days, my only worries are food, classes, and tormenting Mags.”

“If only they were in that order,” Mags muttered under his breath.

“You have to be nice to me,” Marx said. “I brought you flowers, you ungrateful swine.”

“I’m sure you got them through entirely illegal means, too,” Mags said.

“Why would you steal a poinsettia?” Kirby asked. “Those are everywhere this time of year, and they’re not that expensive.”

“But anything is more expensive than free!” Marx argued, throwing an arm around Kirby’s shoulders. “And if there’s one way to a Halcandran man’s heart, it’s the biggest poinsettia you can find. They love poinsettias. Can’t get enough of them. Mix them in their tea—”

“Don’t mix them in Meta Knight's tea! You’ll make him sick!” Mags protested.
Kirby’s eyes widened.

“But if you wanted to buy him a plant, I’m sure he would be very charmed,” Mags added, shooting Marx a death glare. “I’m afraid that I’m still trying to teach Marx the difference between friendly advice and poisoning.”

“Hey, I have eaten poinsettia leaves before, and—”

“That explains so much and yet so little,” Mags replied. “I swear I don’t know why I tolerate you.”

“Because I’m a great cook,” Marx replied.

And that wasn’t a lie. He really was a great cook. Marx’s chicken portabellas was a gift from the gods.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kirby said, “About the poinsettia. I do need to buy Meta Knight something. It’s our first Solstice as real brothers!”

“Can’t relate,” Marx said.

“I’m sure Meta Knight would love anything you got him,” Mags said. “It’s the thought that counts!”

“You sound like a greeting card,” Marx scoffed. “Meta wouldn’t like just anything you got him. He’d just pretend to and never bring it up again. His old man taught him everything he knows about faking positive emotions.”

“Really?” Kirby asked, his eyes widening.

“Besides me, name one person who you’ve ever bought presents for,” Mags said, crossing his arms.

“You don’t have to buy gifts to know how gift-giving works,” Marx argued.
“Dear Nova, he’s going to hate me,” Kirby said.

“He’s not going to hate you,” Mags said. “You’re utterly adorable. How could anyone hate you?”

Kirby blushed bright red. “Thank you!” he chirped. “I’ll try to remember that! I just want this to be the best Solstice ever! I’ve never really had friends to buy presents for, and I can’t wait to go buy them all and wrap them!”

This poor, poor boy. So innocent and cheerful. Someday, someone was probably going to break Kirby Stellarum’s heart, shatter it into pieces, and even Marx, who wasn’t the most upstanding gentleman in Dreamland, thought that would be a very dark day. The gentle, sweet ones were always the ones you had to be careful for.

“Luminosity is the total amount of energy that is emitted per unit of time by a celestial body, which may be a star, galaxy, or other astronomical object. Luminosity is measured in joules per second or in watts,” Meta Knight read. “Luminosity values are frequently presented in terms of the luminosity of the sun.”

Meta Knight’s gaze drifted from his textbook. A few feet away, his father lay sleeping. Although Nightmare Nocturne showed no signs of having heard anything, the doctors had insisted that Nightmare could hear what was being said around him.

Meta Knight sank to his knees and clasped Nightmare’s hands. “Father,” he whispered. “Are you there?”

Nightmare didn’t stir. Meta Knight returned to his seat and stared at his father. After a few seconds, Meta Knight pulled out his phone and began his daily routine of reading through his news alerts. “Queen Alera has finally decided to cancel King Daedalus’s funeral,” Meta Knight said. “I think it’s about time. She’s been facing a good deal of criticism regarding that. She had just moved the date, but people are angry. Dreamland is still recovering, and she wanted to waste all that time and money on having a funeral for a man who’s been dead for years.”

Meta Knight paused, glanced at his father, and sighed.
“The Solstice ball is still happening, though,” Meta Knight said. “I’m not surprised. I’ll go, of course, with Dededede. And possibly Kirby. I had him go to the tailor with me to be fitted. Um… the Queen did her monthly DNA test to prove that she hasn’t been replaced with a shape shifter or consumed any corruptive potions. It looks like she is, indeed, still the Queen we love to hate. Nova bless her bitter, black heart.”

Meta Knight’s phone chimed.

*Meta, save me. ---BD*

*From what?* Meta Knight texted.

*Kirby and Dededede. They’ve started a bet. ---BD*

Oh, Nova, why?

*To see who scores higher on this art history test. Loser has to do whatever the winner wants. ---BD*

Dear Nova, why? Why were his friends this way?

*I feel like I’ve fallen into a teen drama. ---BD*

*Not a good one. ---BD*

*No kidding, Meta Knight replied.*

A small, polite knock. Meta Knight turned towards the door. Susie Haltmann leaned against the door frame, her hands clasped in front of her. “May I join you?” she asked.

“I won’t be here much longer,” Meta Knight replied.
“Finals week?” Susie guessed, nodding to Meta Knight’s textbook.

Meta Knight nodded. “But you may join me,” he said.

As Susie entered the room, her movements were somber. She paused by Nightmare’s bed, and although Meta Knight couldn’t see her face from where he sat, he caught the slump of her shoulders.

“Hallo, Onkel Albtraum,” Susie said, kissing Nightmare’s cheek. “He looks so pale and tried, Meta.”

“I know,” Meta Knight replied.

With a sigh, Susie plopped into the seat beside Meta Knight. “It breaks my heart,” she said. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Meta Knight replied. “I was asleep with everyone else. An accident, I suppose.”

He pretended not to notice the sly side-glance Susie gave him. “I see,” Susie said. “And is that the truth, Meta Knight?”

“Why would I lie about what really happened?”

“I don’t think you trust me,” she replied. “That’s all.”

“I’m not the one second-guessing everything you say,” Meta Knight pointed out.

Susie clasped her hands in her lap and smiled wryly. “What a pair we make,” she said. “Remember when we were little, and we used to be so close? I used to come and stay over in your father’s estate in Traumwald. We used to search the beach for sea glass. Now, we don’t even trust one another to tell the truth.”
“Let’s put the cards on the table, then,” Meta Knight said. “What happened to your father?”

“Of course, you want me to go first.”

“My father is in a coma. Your father appears to have forgotten who both of us are,” Meta Knight replied. “It seems like you have the bigger mystery, and besides, I’ve already told you what I know. Something happened to him during the sleeping curse. That’s all I know.”

Meta Knight turned to look at Susie and found her eyes narrowed. Silently, she studied him for a few seconds. Then, she shifted her gaze to Nightmare.

“Our fathers were working on a project together. She was called Star Dream, the Mother Computer. They made her to grant wishes.”

“It sounds like they were trying to recreate the goddess Nova.”

“They were,” Susie replied. “Terribly sacrilege, I know. It wasn’t easy, but they finally did it. Star Dream was a true marvel, an integration of magic and technology. They were going to reshape Dreamland with her. The only missing piece was their admin.”

“M-7110, right? What is it?” Meta Knight asked.

Susie’s face softened; her expression became pitying. “Why, it was you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“In order to use Star Dream, our fathers needed to create an admin capable of running such a machine. Neither of our fathers could be admin, so they made one. It wasn’t that hard, or so I’ve been told. Find a woman with the right genes to have a child with Nightmare,” Susie said.

“He didn’t…” Meta Knight trailed off.

He didn’t want to believe it; he didn’t think anyone would have wanted to believe it. But part of
him did, and now, Meta Knight wondered if he even wanted his father to wake up. What if he was really just trading one cruel father for one who only thought of him as some sort of glorified eugenics project?

“I hate to be the one to tell you that,” Susie said. “If it’s any consolation, he did change his mind. Your father really did love you, Meta Knight. That’s really kind of incredible considering all Star Dream did to my father; I’m sure it affected Nightmare, too. At the very least, we know it altered his brain chemistry.”

“How so?”

“Anxiety and depression, coupled with memory loss and inescapable nightmares,” Susie replied. “Potentially post-traumatic stress disorder. Sometimes, he couldn’t control his magic. Something similar happened when your mother was exposed to Star Dream, but your parents were strong. They fared better than most.”

“What happened to most?”

“They died,” Susie said. “Epidural hematoma killed most of them, but there were some who simply slipped into comas and never woke.”

Meta Knight’s heart beat so loudly that he heard it in his head. Now, he knew, and he would have given anything to erase the last few minutes. “I was just—”

“You were his son, and he loved you. Once he realized the extent of the damage Star Dream could cause, he wanted out. He couldn’t bear the thought of you enduring everything he had, Meta Knight,” Susie said firmly. “It doesn’t matter if his reasons for having you were wholly selfish. He grew as a person and made up for his mistake. When push came to shove, he did the right thing.”

Was that enough? Meta Knight wasn’t sure. He barely even understood everything he was being told.

“He quit when my father wouldn’t,” Susie continued, her voice wavering, “And sometimes, I helped him with Star Dream. But one day, there was a terrible accident. I was sent into another dimension. This…this Mirror World.”
“How did you get out?” Meta Knight asked.

“Through a mirror. And I returned to a world where my father no longer remembered me,” Susie replied. “There you are, Meta Knight. All of your past and mine.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Of course, you didn’t. I didn’t tell you,” Susie replied. “It’s...unfortunate, isn’t it? It’s like neither of us can ever catch up with our fathers.”

Meta Knight didn’t know if he wanted to catch up with his father anymore, though.

“Now you know,” Susie said, “So what really happened to your father?”

Meta Knight took a deep breath. His gut said that Susie had told him the truth. His conscience told him that he ought to be honest with her, too. But Meta Knight never had been one for showing his hand. He hadn’t even told Dedede everything that he was piecing together, so there was no way Susie was going to be privy to that information.

Meta Knight met her gaze. “I feel as though I’ve cheated you,” he said, his voice never wavering, “But I truly don’t know.”

When Meta Knight entered his apartment, the lights from the living room glowed at the very end of the entryway. He took a deep breath and let himself slump against the wall for a moment, inhaling the pine-scented air freshener and basking in the soft glow. All the weight of everything he’d been told felt as though it had been physically placed upon his shoulders. He took a deep breath as if in doing so, he could somehow erase all the knowledge he’d just learned.

Finally, he pushed off against the wall.
The coffee table was buried beneath a good two-dozen photos of Prince Fluff, and on his knees before those photos was Kirby Stellarum, feverishly sketching a face on an already partially painted canvas. Meta Knight tilted his head and tried to discern what Kirby was in the process of making. Even though Meta Knight didn’t know much about art, he recognized the lady by her posture. Galacta Knight was typically depicted as reclining, usually with her face twisted in pain and anger while Bikaia remained cool and composed, even while driving Galaxia through the knight’s shoulder. But here, Galacta Knight was reclining with a massive book open before her. Per convention, she gazed up at Bikaia but with a smile sketched across her lips. And rather than being the stoic, proper prince, Bikaia stood shyly, almost demurely, before her, a book held behind his back. Like he was asking permission to join her.

*I may have given him a few hints,* Galaxia said, sounding proud. *If you like, I’ll show you a few things later.*

The knight’s features hadn’t been well-defined yet, even though long, red hair fell past strong and broad shoulders. And rather than painting himself as Bikaia, Kirby had chosen to paint Prince Fluff as Bikaia.

“Is this your way of telling me that you think I should start a book club with the disenfranchised prince of Patch Land?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby jumped, looking horrified. “You can’t look!” he exclaimed, practically throwing himself to cover the canvas. “It’s really awful!”

“You, an art student, are saying that to a man who has never held a paintbrush,” Meta Knight replied.

Bandanna Dee emerged from his room, bringing a pack of pencils with him. Meta Knight didn’t understand artist’s equipment at all. H2, HB, B4. It was all the same to him. He understood they were different hardness but had no idea why a middle-range pencil couldn’t just do all the jobs.

Bandanna Dee’s canvas displayed a half-finished Landia, and Meta Knight observed quietly as his friend went to the canvas and began detailing the dragon’s wings. After everything that had happened, Meta Knight wondered if painting a dragon was really the best thing for Bandanna Dee.

“It’s beautiful, Dee,” Meta Knight said.
Bandanna Dee’s smile seemed forced. “Thank you.”

“I can’t wait until finals are over,” Meta Knight said. “It’ll be…fun to visit Traumwald and your home, Kirby.”

Kirby nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! I’m so happy that Mom agreed to let us all come! It’ll be great! You, Bandanna Dee, Ribbon, Adeleine, Fae, and me!”

“And Fluff,” Meta Knight added slyly.

Kirby’s face blossomed like a rose, and seeing that the comment had drawn a small smirk from Bandanna Dee, Meta Knight plucked one of Fluff’s photos off the table and pretended to scrutinize it.

“Have you asked him yet?” Bandanna Dee inquired.

“No,” Kirby replied. “I’m sure Fluff is busy, though. He has the—um—the Solstice Ball.”

“So do we,” Meta Knight said.

“Isn’t Fae going to design Fluff’s outfit?” Bandanna Dee asked.

They all knew she was. The Solstice Ball was a designer’s bread and butter, and Fae had taken several aristocratic commissions for the event.

“I believe she is,” Meta Knight replied, feigning surprise. “Why, I imagine Fluff will have to go to a final fitting, too. If only we knew Fae very well. Then, we could meet him there and ask.”

“Meta Knight, no,” Kirby said.

“Meta Knight, yes,” Bandanna Dee said. “Come on, Kirby! I’ll go with you! It’ll be fun!”
“But what if he refuses?” Kirby asked.

“Why would he? If I was Prince Fluff, I’d bite off my own leg if it meant getting away from Queen Alera,” Bandanna Dee replied.

Satisfied that he had raised his friend’s spirit, if only for a little while, Meta Knight continued through the living room and glanced in Dedede’s room. The man was buried beneath a pile of blankets, the wolfwrath stretched out across his feet. Meta Knight reached out and stroked her head, smoothing back the fur over her eyes. “Hello, princess,” he murmured.

She cracked an eye open and wagged.

“Meta?” Dedede asked groggily.

“Good afternoon,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede stretched and threw an arm over his eyes. “What time is it?” he asked.

“One.”

“I got an hour. Come spend it with me, Mety.”

“What do you want to do?” Meta Knight asked.


“You realize that if anyone else compared me to food, I’d be deeply offended, right?”

Dedede’s smile made Meta Knight’s heartbeat quicken. “Maybe that’s why I abuse the privilege so much,” Dedede said. “I like that you let me do and say things to you that you’d never let anyone else do or say to you.”
Meta Knight lifted the blankets and climbed beneath them. He rolled onto his stomach and let his cheek rest on his arms.

“Where’d you go?” Dedede asked, tracing the curve of Meta Knight’s shoulder. “You ain’t got no classes today.”

“To see Father.”

“How’s he?”

Strange.

Meta Knight swallowed. “Fine.”

Dedede searched his face, seeming to catch the half-lie. Meta Knight bit the inside of his cheek. He had promised to be more honest. Actually, he’d promised himself a lot of things lately. He was going to be more honest. He was going to be a better brother. He was going to learn to forgive people and be nicer. And Meta Knight wondered if he’d even made an earnest attempt at any of them. He sighed.

“I ran into Susie Haltmann.”

Dedede frowned and patted Meta Knight’s hair as if it was some silent reward for being honest. “Flower secretary? Why was she there?”

“We were childhood friends. Kind of. Our fathers were friends. But I don’t trust her.”

“Why doncha?” Dedede asked.

“Dark Nebula came from Haltmann Works. He was given to my father as retaliation for some disagreement that my father had over this admin, M-7110.”
“Admin?”

“For some project they were working on. Susie calls it Star Dream, the Mother Computer.”

Dedede curled up closer to Meta Knight and ran a hand through his hair. “What’s this gotta do with you?”

“I was meant to be that admin. That’s why my father… I was just some sort of glorified science experiment.”

“Oh, my sweet Meta Knight.”

“I have questions ready when my father wakes,” Meta Knight replied. “I just… can’t help but wonder if he ever even loved me, and I know that’s so silly that I care so much.”

“If he didn’t love you, he’s a fool, an’ yer too good for Lord Pointy-Chin.”

“Don’t insult my father,” Meta Knight replied.

“I know, I know, only yer allowed to do that. Still, I cain’t help it sometimes.”

“I know.”

“I love you,” Dedede said.

“You say that a lot.”

Dedede grinned. “Maybe if I keep sayin’ it, I can make my Mety really, truly believe it.”

“I love you, too.”
Dedede snuggled closer to Meta Knight and stroked his hair, watching mesmerized as the blue strands slipped through his fingers.

“And Dedede?”

“Yeah, Mety-Knighty?”

“Why are you making such ridiculous bets with my brother?”

Dedede paused. His jaw dropped. “He –uh—egged me on.”

“Hmm.”

“It ain’t nothin’ excessive just—y’know—”

“The winner does whatever the loser wants?” Meta Knight supplied.

“Hey, you ain’t gotta worry. There ain’t no way Kirbs is gonna win!”

Meta Knight arched an eyebrow. “For your sake, I hope not.”

Dark had waited for hours in the mirror-chamber. Finally, a knight Sir Waddle Doo came and informed him that his audience had been accepted. Dark jumped for joy, which was maybe a bit of an excessive reaction. He practically skipped behind the knight, who had auburn hair and was missing an eye; he greatly resembled Bandanna Dee, but Dark hadn’t asked if there was a familial relationship. He was too occupied with interrogating Waddle Doo about everything they passed.

When they passed a painting that depicted Bikaia kneeling before a beautiful, blonde-haired
woman dressed in purple, Dark halted abruptly.

“Is it usual for Bikaia to be kneeling?” Dark asked.

“Sometimes, it’s done symbolically,” Waddle Doo replied, sighing.

The knight might have been a little vexed that Dark kept slowing their progress.

“After they were married, Bikaia created the Queen’s Guard, a powerful force of knights whose only purpose was to protect his beloved Queen. Here, Bikaia is kneeling because he’s pledging himself to be Elise’s first knight and defender,” Waddle Doo said.


It seemed someone in Dreamland knew how to do romance right.

“There is another painting by the same artist in another hall. It features Bikaia kneeling to the goddess Nova, who has just rescued him from being executed for freeing Elise.”

“When she was being held captive by Bikaia’s grandfather, right?” Dark asked.

“Yes.”

“Strange,” Dark replied. “I had heard that it was Galacta Knight who rescued Bikaia.”

“Interesting,” Waddle Doo replied, although he didn’t sound very interested.

“So where is Bikaia’s famous coronation portrait?” Dark asked. “I have always wanted to gaze upon his famous glass boots.”

Waddle Doo snorted. “It’s locked away and covered up. Queen Alera only unveils the portrait
during the Winter Solstice Ball. It’s a ceremony of sorts.”

Too bad. Dark wondered if he might be able to sneak into Queen Alera’s famous Solstice Ball. He probably could if he disguised himself as Meta Knight.

They halted by a door, which Waddle Doo opened. “Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness,” the knight said, “King Dark of the Mirror World.”

Dark didn’t move. Shouldn’t Waddle Doo take his calling card to the ladies before admitting him? The knight arched an eyebrow. “Are you going?” Waddle Doo asked.

“Yes,” Dark said carefully.

He wasn’t sure what to do with his hat or coat either; typically, a servant would take them as he entered, but Waddle Doo was the only person there. Surely, it would be an insult to have a knight take his clothing, wouldn’t it?

Dark entered the parlor and took a seat across from Sectonia and Alera. As he sat, he swept his hat from his head and placed it on the loveseat beside him. “Good evening, ladies!” Dark greeted as warmly and enthusiastically as he possibly could.

“Well, it was,” Alera said.

“Oh! What happened?” Dark asked.

As a fellow ruler, Dark understood that sometimes, it was just really nice to share difficulties, and he himself wouldn’t mind having another monarch to talk with. There was a good deal about governing that he still needed to learn.

Alera laughed. When Sectonia didn’t, Dark felt a kernel of doubt plant itself in his stomach. The queen had insulted him. He realized it now and couldn’t think of a graceful way to acknowledge it.

“I agree,” Dark replied. “It was a nice day.”
“It can still be a nice day,” Sectonia said. “Welcome, Dark.”

Sectonia held her hand out and reached between them. Dark shook her hand and planted the most cheerful, I-am-not-a-petty-person smile he could. It wasn’t Sectonia’s fault that her mother was a shrew to end all shrews.

“Thank you,” Dark replied. “I am glad to see that some Dreamlanders know how to greet foreign royalty.”

“Oh, please, foreign royalty? You aren’t even human, much less our equal,” Alera said. “You’re just a reflection, and you aren’t even the reflection of anyone notable. No, you’re the reflection of a dirty-blooded upstart.”

Dark furrowed his brow. “Dirty-blooded?” he asked. “Meta Knight is Nightmare’s legitimate child.”

Alera looked at Dark with part-disgust and part-pity. “You don’t even realize you’re inferior,” she said.

“Inferior?”

“Mother, they aren’t inferior,” Sectonia said quietly.

“Did the Halcandran race build this kingdom, Sectonia?”

“No,” Sectonia replied, glancing at Dark.

“No,” Alera repeated. “No, instead, they came here and wanted to take what we had built, what Bikaia had built—”

“Yes,” Dark cut in, “Bikaia, the son of a chambermaid with Halcandran blood.”
Alera waved a dismissive hand. “His father was a prince of Dreamland and had a right to his servants’ bodies. It was another time. Bikaia was still a Dreamlandic king and very merciful. But for too long, Dreamland’s mercy has been taken advantage of. Like you. You truly believe you have the right to march in here and make demands of me?”

“And do you think Bikaia would appreciate your philosophy?”

“Bikaia was noble and honorable, but he was just a man,” Alera said. “He made mistakes. His clemency towards the Halcandrans was one of them.”

Sweet goddess Nova, this woman was Dreamland’s queen.

“Mother, you can’t say things like that,” Sectonia said. “Someday, it’s going to get out.”

Alera rolled her eyes. “I don’t particularly care if it does. I will not be disrespected by gutter-trash like him,” Alera said, jerking her head towards Dark.

And being called gutter-trash was the final straw for Dark.

“I’ll tell you what I believe,” Dark said. “I believe that you’re afraid. You’re worried because your people no longer have faith in you or your regime, so you’re trying to unify them around hating someone else,” Dark replied. “That’s what I think, you bitch.”

“The next time you appear in my kingdom, you’d better be licking my boots clean, and I do mean that literally,” Alera said, “Because if not, I’ve no problem invading your realm and laying it to ruin. I’m sure someone could find a use for your kind. Is it true you don’t die? You just break and re-form? How useful.”

Dark didn’t quite understand what would be particularly useful about his kind, but he recognized a threat. He slowly stood. “I’ll take my leave,” he hissed.

“Good. You never should have come here wanting an alliance,” Alera said. “If anything, you and your kingdom should be paying tribute to Dreamland. You wouldn’t exist without us.”
“And without us, your kingdom would have fallen to Dark Nebula,” Dark said.

“With or without you, I’m confident we would have succeeded,” Alera replied, smiling thinly.

“Mother,” Sectonia said, “Surely, we should consider Dark’s willingness to aid us, though.”

“Why? He was protecting his own interests,” Alera replied. “I just don’t see the advantage of having a long-standing relationship with a kingdom that probably still believes in blood-letting and using cocaine as a cold remedy.”

“If those medical procedures are detrimental to my people, I would imagine you have a moral obligation to share your more advanced medical knowledge with us,” Dark replied.

“And what would you know of morals? Besides, alliances typically assume both parties are bringing something of equal value to the table. An alliance with you would be a blight on Dreamland, a charity case just like Traumwald and Seventopia,” Alera replied. “What do you have? Bolts of fabric?”

Dark had an entire room full of dragon-forged objects and clothing that had been worn by the goddess Nova, and surely, Dreamland would consider those objects valuable. But Dark had worn them and seen his father use them on other people, and while those objects were too valuable to simply discard, Dark didn’t trust this terrible, ill-mannered queen with them.

“It took my weavers months to make that fabric,” Dark said quietly.

Alera rolled her eyes. “And I can snap my fingers and receive the same amount and quality of fabric in an hour,” Alera said, sounding as if she was talking to a small child. “If you’re interested in having a relationship with Dreamland, you’re welcome to become a colony or a province, but I will expect you to pay proper tribute for this privilege.”

“Mother—”

Alera cut off her daughter with the sweep of a hand. “You’re too soft-hearted, Sectonia. I agree this is a sad situation, but we can’t save everyone. I’m not about to burden myself with another charity case.”
Dark stormed from the room. Waddle Doo quickly opened the door, but Dark was fuming so much that he barely noticed the knight.

Dark mentally cursed the Queen of Dreamland in three different languages. How dare she treat him so disgracefully? How dare she insult—not only himself—but Meta Knight? How dare she refer to Bikaia’s tolerance and compassion as a flaw? Had Dark not been a gentleman, he would have done something truly dreadful to her.

“Dark!” Sectonia called after him.

Dark halted, more out of guilt over how his Sectonia had died than out of any true desire to talk to Dreamland’s princess. She halted a few feet away, and the apologies fell out of her mouth like raindrops for a cloud. Dark clenched his jaw and fixed his gaze on the portrait behind Sectonia’s shoulder. Noble Bikaia kneeling and pledging himself to his new, young queen.

Queen Alera didn’t even deserve to have King Bikaia, the Hero of the Lower World, Dark Matter’s Bane, Wielder of Galaxia, adorning the halls of her castle. Especially not when the denizens of the Mirror World, like Dark’s dear brother, were so eager and excited to reclaim their connection and the history of Dreamland’s noblest king. Even with Sectonia there, Dark was tempted to seize the portrait and rip it off the wall. Queen Alera didn’t deserve subjects like Meta Knight or Kirby. She didn’t deserve a daughter like Sectonia. And she definitely didn’t deserve to lay claim to Bikaia’s heritage. Dark had never met such a shrew in his life, and what sort of king would he be if he let her insult go without some acknowledgement?

And then, Dark had a wonderful, terrible idea.
Chapter Notes

It's a Bikaia chapter. A really, really long Bikaia chapter (sorry). Next chapter, everyone gets what they really want: Dark and his new "sidekick" making life hard for the Queen of Dreamland. And Gooey returns!

Also, @Skip_King has created these amazing portraits of Delilah and Sectonia

*Trigger warnings for mentions of ableism, misogyny, and domestic abuse.

Bikaia sat up in bed and watched as his new manservant Ari prepared the morning fire with significantly more ease and practice than Bikaia had ever prepared a fire with. The flames crackled and snapped in the fireplace; their gold and red and warmth reminded Bikaia of his Galacta Knight. Sometimes, when Bikaia's efforts to tend the fire left him with smudges of ash and cinders, Galacta Knight would tease him and wipe the black dust from his cheeks and the tip of his chin. Bikaia had longed for those moments where her warm hands were on his face, and he had leaned into every caress and brush and pet with a frantic sort of hunger.

Necrodeus had been less kind. Bikaia lifted a shaking hand to his shoulder, where the wizard had once pressed a hot poker when he thought Bikaia had lingered too long by the fireside. Because of Galacta Knight's careful attention, the burn, like every other mark Necrodeus left, had dulled to a faint, nearly invisible bruise. Galacta Knight was good with medicine. Bikaia sighed quietly and lowered his forehead to his knees. Even though he had been such a disappointment, Bikaia hoped she remembered him fondly. At least, a little.

Maybe she would forgive him for leaving. Surely, Galacta Knight must have seen how badly Necrodeus had shattered him. Surely, she must have understood why Bikaia absolutely could not let the goddess Nova tutor him after what she'd done. Surely, Galacta Knight must have understood why Bikaia had to go back home.

“Good morning, Your Royal Highness.”

Bikaia raised his head. Ari bowed deeply. “I have prepared your clothes and breakfast, Your Royal Highness. As soon as you have eaten, King Adstellam requests your presence.”

King Adstellam. Bikaia ran his hands through his hair. “Thank you,” he said.
“You—uh—certainly, Your Royal Highness.”

Bikaia winced. He kept forgetting that he wasn’t supposed to thank his servants. Not that it really mattered. Ever since Bikaia had returned—he said from being held captive by a rogue wizard—both the aristocrats and the servants whispered that he’d returned changed. Changed was, of course, everyone’s charitable way of saying that they thought he’d taken leave of his senses.

The months spent with Necrodeus had left him, somehow, less of himself, and the months spent with Galacta Knight had made Bikaia, somehow, something more of himself. Despite Bikaia’s best efforts to hide this, he knew people whispered. His own family called him broken and half-mad when he wasn’t around, but time had passed, and Bikaia faded into the background. He was the forgotten, illegitimate prince once more.

Or he had been.

“Did His Majesty reveal why he desires my presence?” Bikaia asked.

“No, Your Royal Highness.”

Bikaia nodded absentmindedly and swept his blankets aside. Ari immediately grabbed Bikaia’s doublet and boots, clearly with the intention of helping his liege with them.

“I’ll dress myself,” Bikaia said.

Ari paused. “As you wish, Your Royal Highness.”

“I pride myself on being self-sufficient,” Bikaia said. “I don’t require that much attention. As long my room is passably clean, I’ll be content.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

“Please,” Bikaia said, nodding to the door. “Be dismissed.”
Ari bowed. “Thank you, Your Royal Highness.”

Once his servant was gone, Bikaia climbed out of bed. He undressed and dressed himself, made his bed, and neatly ate his breakfast in his parlor. Bikaia absentmindedly picked apart his biscuit. When he’d eaten breakfast with Galacta Knight, she’d always been so lively and full of conversation. Galaxia, too. Now, Bikaia’s breakfasts were quiet and lonely, but he didn’t have a wizard threatening to beat him. That was nice.

It was strange to have so much food. Bikaia had become accustomed to surviving off scraps and crumbs. Still, he made himself eat it all; some of the castle servants had starving families, and what Bikaia didn’t eat would be thrown to the pigs.

After eating, Bikaia left his apartments and went to meet his grandfather. Personal matters between Bikaia and his family were frequently conducted in Adstellam’s favorite parlor, so Bikaia knew where to go without being told. Once Bikaia arrived, the knight at the door announced his presence, and the prince walked in.

King Adstellam was a tall and imposing man with white-blond hair and icy, blue eyes. Despite being nearly one and a half centuries old, the man’s face held few wrinkles or marks. Bikaia knew, of course, that this was primarily because Adstellam used magic to make himself look younger, but there was something uncanny about seeing his aging grandfather look so youthful. Adstellam wore his night shift, proving that he’d just recently left bed. The man sat at a grand, wooden table, currently laden with food.

Noven, Bikaia’s own father, sat beside the king. Unlike Adstellam, Noven wore hunting garb; he had probably risen before sunrise to hunt the stags in the royal forest. The crown prince of Dreamland was as broad and tall as Adstellam was, and both men had the same pale hair and eyes. Bikaia’s own brothers looked similar.

Noven took a sip of wine, followed by a piece of chocolate. Chocolate was stolen from Halcandra. Bikaia knelt and lowered his head. The stones were so cold that his knees ached. Something sharp twisted in his belly. The prince wasn’t sure whether it was from watching his father eat chocolate or if the ache came from the realization that both his grandfather and father were eating and—rather than inviting Bikaia to join them for breakfast—had insisted on him eating alone in his room.

“Rise, boy!” Adstellam exclaimed jovially. “Sit. We’ll have wine poured for you.”

Bikaia took the vacated chair and clasped his hands in his lap.
“Where are your gloves?” Noven asked sharply.

Bikaia flinched. “I’ve forgotten them, Father. I apologize.”

“Forget them again, and I’ll give you a switching to your knuckles,” Noven replied.

Bikaia self-consciously rubbed a thumb over his fingers. “It won’t happen again, Father.”

“For Nova’s sake, how could you be so careless?” Noven asked.

“Now,” Adstellam said, “Don’t be too harsh on Bikaia. We’re about to deliver some terrible news to the poor boy.”

“Terrible news?” Bikaia asked.

Noven snapped his fingers and pointed to the place before Bikaia. A servant hastily placed a goblet of red wine before him.

“We have just received word that your brother Lune was slain in battle,” Noven said.

Bikaia furrowed his brow and toyed with the rim of his goblet. He knew that he ought to feel…something. Distraught. Angry. But there was very little. Bikaia had never known his brother all that well, and it was difficult to feel sympathetic when Bikaia knew Lune had been waging war against the Duke of the Stars, who had the audacity to protect the kingdom’s Halcandran refugees.

Refugees like Galacta Knight.

“I can’t believe it,” Bikaia said.

“It does seem unreal,” Adstellam replied, “And your father and I have been discussing what to do about it. The Duke refuses to return your brother’s body. We had considered sending you to the
Duchy of the Stars to join the fight, but we realized that you have no experience in war and very little experience with a blade.”

The former was true, but the latter wasn’t. Bikaia had been taught swordplay by the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy, but no one in the court knew that.

“However, we might have a use for you yet,” Adstellam said. “I think a good marriage between royal houses will encourage some renewed faith in the monarchy.”

Oh, Nova’s grace. No.

“A good marriage?” Bikaia asked. “I—I don’t see how I could marry, Your Majesty.”

“Bikaia, this is not for you to question,” Noven said. “I have already agreed to have you court Countess Mace.”

Countess Mace was a twenty-seven-year-old girl, seven years older than Bikaia. She had been born with one arm, something that branded her as being an outcast in a way that good-blooded, noble children usually weren’t, and she had been given a knight’s name, inappropriate for a young woman. She was also quite wild, or so Bikaia had heard. He didn’t know her all that well. In short, she had a title and money, but her missing limb, odd name, and masculine mannerisms made her utterly unsuitable for marrying a proper aristocrat. Some even lamented that the noble House of Half Moon would die. Mace’s missing arm was frequently touted as proof that there was something wrong with her breeding, some Nova-given curse, and many Dreamlandic royals believed that her missing arm was a sign that Mace’s offspring would be—likewise—flawed. In short, Countess Mace was an unsellable young woman.

But King Adstellam had his own unsellable child, and Bikaia realized this with cold, sick dread. As an illegitimate child, Bikaia only had what titles and inheritance Adstellam would deign to give him, and because of his alleged killing curse, Bikaia couldn’t even touch a woman.

Even if the curse wasn’t really a curse, Bikaia knew that he would have to live the rest of his life pretending it was. So King Adstellam had determined that Bikaia was going to marry Mace, and if Mace didn’t want to marry Bikaia, Adstellam was sure to find a way to make her. Take two unsellable people, put them in a marriage where they couldn’t even touch one another, and give the inheritance to someone who Adstellam liked when Countess Mace died without children. And if Mace did have children, they would immediately be labeled as illegitimate heirs, like Bikaia himself was.
“The Countess of Half Moon is an excellent match for someone in your position,” Noven added.

Noven said *in your position* as if it was somehow Bikaia’s fault that he was the illegitimate child of a Dreamlandic prince and a common chambermaid.

“She is a bit of a shrew and a bit old. And she’s certainly not an attractive woman,” Adstellam said, “So I do understand your hesitation, Bikaia. Your father never taught you to tame a woman, but I can recommend several books on how to achieve desirable behavior in a wife.”

“A good birching never goes amiss either,” Noven replied. “Just don’t strike her in the face, or people will talk. And she seems like the sort of woman who would earnestly try for a divorce. Keep your punishments within the boundaries of the law and below her waist.”

Bikaia took a gulp of wine, suddenly very grateful for it.

“Does the Countess know about this?” Bikaia asked.

“No,” Adstellam replied. “And I think it would be best if she doesn’t know. I’m hoping that you can charm her, Bikaia. Otherwise, I might have to assert a little pressure to get what I want.”

Bikaia’s stomach churned. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said.

Adstellam smiled and clapped his hands together. “Bravo, my boy! The good Countess will be arriving tomorrow. We shall send you with the entourage to meet her.”

Poor Countess Mace. Bikaia inwardly grimaced. Did she even suspect that she was about to be coerced into marriage with someone that most of the court called broken and half-mad?

Bikaia was doing his best to behave as the perfect, ideal prince. This was in part because he had no idea what to do. He thought every other hour about going into the forests and never returning.
Bikaia might have broken his contract with Galacta Knight, but not a day passed without him thinking, fantasizing, about returning to her home and throwing himself at her mercy. Necrodeus had taught Bikaia to beg, and Bikaia had determined several times that he would grovel at Galacta Knight’s feet for as long as she wanted if she would just take him back.

But he could never go back. Bikaia wasn’t sure if he’d be able to survive her rejection.

Bikaia sat across from Countess Mace, fair-haired and pale. Bikaia thought she was quite a beauty. This was his first time meeting the countess alone. Normally, their interactions were polite greetings and remarks about the weather. But sitting across from her, Bikaia found that her face was soft with a dotting of freckles across her cheeks. She had a beauty mark right at the corner of her eye, indicating a passionate disposition, which led Bikaia’s gaze right to her stunning, blue eyes. She was the one of the tallest women that Bikaia had ever met, second only to Galacta Knight, and while other courtiers disapproved of Mace’s unconventional height, Bikaia found the similarity to Galacta Knight comforting. Not that anyone cared much what Bikaia thought.

The countess definitely did not look like a woman who would bend over a chair and let any man give her a birching. Not that Bikaia had ever considered that. In his mind, the best way to survive a loveless union was to become friends. Or avoid one another. Not that Bikaia knew much about romance. Galacta Knight hadn’t exactly covered that in Bikaia’s education, but Galacta Knight had discussed diplomatic relations and respect towards women.

“Thank you,” Mace murmured, as her lady’s maid handed her a cup of tea.

“Thank you.”

Bikaia paused and dared to glance at the knight’s face. Nothing else. She had sunk into her bath, only her neck and head remaining above the water, filled with oils and frothy bubbles.

“Is something the matter?” Galacta Knight inquired, arching an eyebrow.

Bikaia averted his gaze, worried that she might strike him for looking too much at her. He had only known her for a few days, and this was Bikaia’s first attempt at performing chores without her guidance. “It’s improper to thank one’s servants,” he mumbled.

“Ah. Your first error, little princeling, is in assuming that this is going to be anything like typical indentured servitude. You have placed yourself under my mastery, and I have every intention of
treated you kindly. Poor creature,” Galacta Knight said, softening her voice, “You always look as if you expect me to strike you.”

“Why wouldn’t you? Most aristocrats strike their servants.”

“Do you?”

Bikaia felt warmth rush to his face. “No,” he admitted. “I’m too soft-hearted to strike another person.”

Galacta Knight’s eyes flashed with some nameless and profound emotion. “You speak as if it’s a weakness not to hit another person.”

Bikaia’s father had told him many times that it was.

“To be quite frank with you, Bikaia, I detest the Dreamlandic custom of indentured servitude,” Galacta Knight said.

“Then, why would you—I mean, Mistress—if I—”

“Why would I request that of you?”

A pause and a short, little laugh from the knight.

“Someday,” Galacta Knight said, “I’ll tell you. For now, we’ll just say I’m playing chess.”

“How do you feel about the concept of indentured servitude?” Bikaia asked, turning his attention to Mace. “I feel as though it is unjust to bind the most vulnerable individuals in our kingdom to cruel and terrible masters for seven years, and upon release from their contracts, those individuals often have no choice but to return to servitude.”

Mace paused and took a sip of her tea. “What an odd thing to hear a prince of Dreamland say,” she said.
“I say many odd things. Surely, you’ve heard the gossip.”

“I have,” Mace replied. “I’ve heard that you’re prone to bouts of hysteria, but I don’t believe that for a second.”

“No?”

“No. After all, those same people believe that I am prone to bouts of hysteria,” Mace said, “And I am quite a reasonable woman. It’s just that I think differently than most, so they consider me… damaged. As for your question, I quite agree with you, Bikaia. I feel that indentured servitude operates on the idea that all masters are inherently good, and that is sadly not the case.”

Bikaia felt a pleasant warmth spread through him.

“But then, you already know that,” Mace said quietly. “I’ve heard people speak of the things you said. The travesties you endured at the hands of that sorcerer Necrodeus. How could anyone blame you for being a little frayed around the edges?”

Bikaia stirred his tea and thought of telling Mace the rest. About the beautiful and elegant knight who he’d met in the woods. About how she was so gentle and kind. Bikaia’s breath hitched.

“It feels like more than a little fraying,” Bikaia said.

“And to have returned and found your eldest brother dead. I am dreadfully sorry,” Mace said.

“Are you really?”

“Of course, I am,” Mace replied. “Why would I delight in your misfortune, Bikaia?”

“Apologies. I don’t know why I asked,” Bikaia said, looking at his gloved hands.
“Perhaps, you’re projecting your own emotions onto me,” Mace said. “Are you delighting in your brother’s misfortune? Your family finally remembers that you exist once more.”

“And what is that worth?”

“I don’t know.” Mace paused. “It’s strange.”

“Strange?”

“You disappeared two winters ago and returned—what? In June?” Mace asked, ticking down her fingers. “You’ve been away for two-and-a-half years. I just don’t know if I believe that you were imprisoned by a wicked sorcerer for that whole time.”

Bikaia froze. “No?” he asked, his throat raw.

“You seem different,” Mace replied. “But there’s something strange and better about you. I don’t imagine that anyone would be made better by years of abuse.”

Bikaia met her gaze. “You so seldom spoke to me before I disappeared. I can’t imagine how you can possibly draw all those conclusions.”

The countess laughed. “Come, now, Bikaia. You must realize I have my spies at court. I’ve heard that you’ve become excessively polite.”

“Beatings have a way of making you compliant.”

“You seem suddenly very invested in indentured servants.”

“Shouldn’t a prince care about his people?”

“I have no one to share my suspicions with,” Mace said, her eyes fierce, “But you speak as if you’ve been in the company of someone very educated and very…rebellious. Looking at how thin you are, I can believe you were abused by someone, but there’s something you aren’t telling us.”
There was someone or something else involved.”

“I was held captive by a cruel sorcerer,” Bikaia said carefully, “For a few months.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“I was an indentured servant,” Bikaia admitted. “To…a lady. I learned to spin wool. I wanted to learn what it was like to be something besides a prince.”

That wasn’t entirely a lie. Galacta Knight had taught Bikaia how to weave and how to stitch up wounds and repair clothing.

“You? A prince of Dreamland?”

“My…my mistress was very kind to me,” Bikaia said. “Kinder than I deserved considering everything that happened to her. She had every reason to hate me, but she didn’t. She treated me better than anyone ever has.”

“Then, why did you leave her?”

Bikaia’s stomach twisted. He stared at his tea as if the answers would materialize in his drink. “Because I couldn’t make her understand that I don’t matter,” Bikaia said. “She wanted to do these wondrous things for me, and I just…couldn’t. But I miss her. Sometimes, I think of going back to her.”

“How did this arrangement happen?” Mace asked. “I can’t imagine a man of your station indenturing yourself to anyone.”

“She promised me…” Bikaia trailed off. “Well, it doesn’t matter. It’s in the past now.”

Yes. In the past. That was why Bikaia wanted to burst into tears every time he thought of his broken promise to Galacta Knight.
“After I escaped the sorcerer, she took care of me,” Bikaia continued, his voice strained, “But I couldn’t bear to stay with her. She...she wanted to do all these things for me. She wanted me to learn—”

To learn magic from the goddess Nova. And no amount of arguing, pleading, or sobbing would persuade Galacta Knight that she was enough. Bikaia was nothing, and he was never going to be anything more. And Nova hated him and had hurt him, and Bikaia just wanted her to be very far away from him.

“I’m sorry, Bikaia. I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have been as...direct as I was,” Mace said, placing a tentative hand over Bikaia’s.

Her touch made it all so much worse. Bikaia’s breath made an embarrassing little hitch, and he pulled his hand away. “You remind me a little of her,” he admitted softly.

Something like guilt flashed in Mace’s eyes. “I’m not an unobservant woman,” she said. “I know why you’re paying me such attention.”

“I’m sorry,” Bikaia said. “I know you don’t want me. I will be content if we can just—just marry one another and not hate one another. I promise I won’t hold you back.”

“You wouldn’t be a bad husband,” Mace replied gently.

“But I’m not the one you want.”

“No,” Mace agreed, “But that’s hardly your fault, Bikaia. You could spend your days on my estate, writing treatises against indentured servitude.”

Bikaia shook his head. “Nothing I write or think matters. I’m not going to be the king of Dreamland, and as an illegitimate prince, I’m entitled only to what mercy the king and my father deign to give me.”

Mace’s face softened. “Poor creature,” she said.
Bikaia nodded absentmindedly. Yes, he could imagine himself married to Mace, and the best thing he could do for her would be to stay out of her way and not get underfoot.

Weeks passed, and nothing much seemed to change. Because Adstellam had ordered it, Bikaia continued to court the Countess of Half Moon. She was a nice woman, and Bikaia thought that he might be able to talk himself into loving her. He went to the castle’s meager library and read all the books on courtly romance. They were full of advice, some of it better than others. One book, claiming to be the guide to a successful marriage, contained nothing but different punishments to inflict on one’s wife.

And Bikaia began to wonder why it was so socially acceptable to inflict such grievous injuries upon one’s wife. Why was that even encouraged? All Dreamlanders were the children of the noble goddess Nova the Wish Granter.

Bikaia’s stomach twisted. King Adstellam had imprisoned and tortured Nova, forcing her to comply with his wishes. If the king of Dreamland had such disregard for a goddess, what would prevent him from disregarding other women? Royal women, noble women, common women? This casual attitude towards encouraging violence in marriage needed to change, but Bikaia knew still that he had no power to fix it. He was nothing, and no one cared what he thought.

Except for Galacta Knight. And perhaps, it was Galacta Knight that really drew Bikaia to Mace, the Countess of Half Moon. Bikaia wanted someone who would listen to him and treat him like someone with dreams and aspirations, someone who had very passionate desires and who wasn’t just the foolish, uneducated illegitimate prince of Dreamland. The prince who everyone forgot.

“Have you read many manuals on marriage?” Bikaia asked her one day.

“I hope you’ve no interest in beating me, Your Royal Highness,” Mace replied. "Such attempts would not end well for you."

With a predatory gleam in her eyes, the countess took a sip of her wine.

“I wanted to say that I feel such behavior is cruel,” Bikaia said. “I don’t understand why such practices are so highly recommended in a kingdom that worships a woman. I think it’s indisputable that such a practice is wrong, but I’m wondering how it even came to be.”
“It came into fashion after Queen Katrice’s abduction,” Mace said softly. “Adstellam thought it would be…best if Dreamland’s women were less like Halcandra’s women. Halcandra is famous for their warrior queens and lady knights.”

“It’s that recent?”

Mace nodded. “Mind you, that isn’t to say that there weren’t similar ideas before. There were. It’s just that the king’s war with Halcandra spurred certain changes. I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

“My tutors never told me much history,” Bikaia said. “Why bother? I’m never going to be the king. Once King Adstellam dies, it will be my father. And then, Quasa. Assuming that Father doesn’t remarry and have another son; he’s very young. That’s always a possibility.”

“I was quite fortunate,” Mace replied. “My father has always been a very enlightened man.”

Mace’s father was nearly three-hundred, and he’d only recently abdicated his position as the Count of Half Moon. Mostly, the man stayed in the county; Bikaia had only seen him once or twice. Still, a solemn sense of longing twisted in Bikaia’s belly. Was it bad that he wanted a good father who was enlightened and cared for him?

“I have a present for you,” Mace said.

The countess beckoned to her lady’s servant, who held out a thick, leather book. Bikaia took it, expecting that it might be a marriage manual or perhaps a copy of the County’s history, but when he opened it, the pages were blank.

“A journal,” Mace explained, “So you’ll have something to write all your treatises in.”

Journaling was a lady’s pastime, generally unsuitable for young men. Bikaia wryly wondered if this was Mace’s subtle way of indicating who was going to have the power in their relationship, and if so, that was fine. Bikaia didn’t mind being subservient, and he knew that a marriage to him was a consolation prize, Adstellam’s way of indicating that he cared about the Countess—but not too much.
“Thank you,” Bikaia said. “I promise I’ll write everything down.”

And maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea anyway. Bikaia did have many thoughts swirling around his head. Necrodeus was always there, always close to coming out. And Galacta Knight was, too. Oh, *Galacta Knight*!

Bikaia liked the thought of writing to Galacta Knight, even if she was never going to read his journal. After Countess Mace retired to her own apartments for the night, Bikaia retrieved a quill, seldom used, and sharpened it. He dipped it into the ink and stared for a long time at the blank page before him.

*Dear Mistress,* Bikaia wrote.

He frowned and bit the inside of his cheek. She really wasn’t his mistress anymore, was she? Bikaia crossed out the words and suddenly regretted his decision to start writing. Paper was expensive, and he felt as though his mistake had already marred it beyond redemption.

He sighed and tried again.

*Once, there was a princess, wise beyond her years and unparalleled in her strength. She came from a great nation, a place of incomparable beauty and rich with history. And this young princess had a son, who was the light of her life, and she worshiped her son. Because she was not the eldest royal child, the young princess desired nothing more than to be a happy mother, wife, and scholar.*

*But the king of this kingdom was a selfish and foolish man, and he desired a woman who was wed to another king. Despite the many pleas of his people, the king acted as a man possessed by a dark being, and he stole away the desired woman under nightfall.*

*This other king, grieved to see the theft of his young and luminous queen, launched into a war that brought both kingdoms to the brink of destruction. After years of bloodshed, a truce was called. And in good faith, the noble princess—like many of her peers—sent her beloved son to be educated by a foreign king in a foreign land.*

*But her beloved son was slaughtered with the other royal children, and the noble princess’s sorrow was so great that she felt as though her heart would break. She took up her sword and her lance, and once the battle began anew, she took the field of battle. But years passed and passed, and exhausted from a century of war, she retreated to the woods for a brief respite.*
One day, a crown prince from the kingdom who had slain her son came to her and asked her for a great and terrible favor.

“And why should I do this for you?” the princess asked.

“I will spare your people if you do,” the prince replied. “I know their suffering must hurt you greatly, and despite your best efforts, you cannot save them all.”

“But I have taken you at your word before and gained only misery for company,” the princess said. “This time, I wish for something more. I shall grant your favor if you can return that which I have lost, my beloved son, to me.”

At this, the prince was greatly angered, for he felt that she was mocking him. “You bitter, selfish witch!” he exclaimed. “There is no power in this world that can return your son to you! You know this as well as I!”

Despite the prince’s flushed face and raised voice, the noble princess never faltered. “Then, give me yours.”

Bikaia reread what he’d written, and he decided that he might actually enjoy being a writer. As the weeks passed, summer finally relinquishing to autumn, Bikaia began writing long, elaborate letters to Galacta Knight. He wrote about his courtly life, which had become less lonely with Mace to talk to. And after quite a bit of coaxing and pleading, Bikaia had convinced his manservant to reluctantly eat breakfast with him.

Bikaia practiced swordplay and made frequent trips to the library. Galacta Knight had once told Bikaia that a good education was important, and although Bikaia knew he would never amount to very much, he still had a dull, aching need to please Galacta Knight. He liked learning anyway, and Mace would probably appreciate an educated husband.

Bikaia read about astronomy, medicine, algebra, and rhetoric. Sometimes, he copied down passages that he liked, so he could have them on hand. He read several treatises and tried to copy their style, and although his efforts were often lackluster, Bikaia knew he had good ideas. He envisioned the end to indentured servitude and the creation of monarchy-funded jobs to improve the kingdom’s infrastructure. There would need to be laws in order to enforce good treatment of workers under the new system, so Bikaia wrote those, too. And who could injured people go to for aid? Why not the king himself? So Bikaia drew up plans for days devoted to the people, where any
man, woman, or child could bring their plights directly to the king.

Bikaia didn’t show anyone his journal—not even Mace—although the prince was sure to express his gratitude for the gift. Thus, the bulk of Bikaia’s time was spent writing hundreds of plans and letters that no one would ever read.

A knock on the door jolted Bikaia was his latest project, an idea to more efficiently use the rivers that ran through Dreamland to water crops and bring fresh water to the people in the capital and beyond.

“Come in!” Bikaia shouted.

Ari opened the door and bowed deeply. “King Adstellam has summoned the court together, Your Royal Highness,” he said.

“For what reason?” Bikaia asked.

Ari hesitated. “He…he did not say, Your Royal Highness, but some of the kitchen servants heard that Lady Elise has been brought to court.”

Lady Elise was the eldest daughter of the Duke of the Stars, and she’d been in the Duchy since before Bikaia left in his search for Galacta Knight. She wouldn’t have come to the capital, King’s Rule, on her own. That meant she was coming as a prisoner. A shiver shot through Bikaia’s spine. For an instant, he was somewhere else—somewhere cold and cramped with heavy chains around his wrists.

“Your Royal Highness?”

Bikaia took a steadying breath. “Give me a minute,” he said, his voice tight.

“You may not be allowed a minute, Your Royal Highness,” Ari replied. “I do not believe the king is in the mood to wait.”

Of course, Adstellam wouldn’t want to wait. He would want to be entertained immediately.
Bikaia slowly stood. “In the throne room?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

Dazed, Bikaia swept past Ari and walked towards the room. The guards smartly opened the doors to admit him. Inside, royals and nobles were crowded together. Bikaia worked his way to the front of the crowd and offered a deep bow to his father, who sat in the Queen’s throne beside King Adstellam. Noven bowed his head, acknowledging the gesture.

Two knights escorted Elise in. At first, Bikaia wasn’t entirely sure it was her. He had always seen Lady Elise with long, lustrous locks of sunlight blonde hair, but now, she had only short, matted locks. Elise’s once pale skin was splotchy and red, clearly burned, her chained wrists and collared throat looked raw, and her green velvet dress was stained and ripped. Bikaia wondered if Adstellam’s knights had forced Elise to walk all the way back to the capital.

Adstellam stood and spread his arms wide. “Welcome, Elise!”

Elise tilted her chin up, even as the two knights forced her to her feet.

“What? Nothing?” Adstellam inquired. “But as I recall, you were always so witty, Elise.”

“I don’t see why I oughta waste my wit on such a poor opponent, Your Majesty.”

“I see,” Adstellam replied. “You know, Elise, I consider your father a traitor to the Crown. He’s no longer a legitimate Duke, which means you are no longer a lady. And in case you’ve forgotten the laws of this land, you must be a lady to wear a velvet dress. Strip her.”

The two knights tore and pulled and ripped at Elise’s velvet gown. They stripped her dress off her shoulders, past her waist, and off, so she stood in her chemise, corset, crinolines, and stockings. Red splotched its way across her face; she clenched her hands so tightly together that her knuckles were as white as snow. The poor woman knew what was coming, too. She’d seen the beatings and whippings just as Bikaia had.

“You ain’t nothin’ but a monster!” Elise declared, her voice trembling.
“You know nothing of monsters, little girl,” Adstellam replied. “Your own father slew my grandson, Prince Lune. That is a monster, a man who takes away another’s child.”

But Adstellam had taken Galacta Knight’s son from her. Taken him and beheaded him before sending the poor boy’s head back to his horrified mother. Bikaia’s throat was tight. Had Galacta Knight’s son suffered like Elise was going to? Had Nova? How many people that Bikaia could never know about had been torn apart and hurt by Adstellam?

The room seemed to spin, and Bikaia squeezed his eyes shut.

_Bikaia gasped for breath and blindly raised a hand to his injured throat, hot where the wizard’s fingers had been. Everything hurt, and he couldn’t stop shaking no matter how hard he tried to will himself into stillness. When the wizard reached towards him, Bikaia scrambled back as far as the chains would allow. “Please,” he said. “It won’t happen again. I promise, master. Please, don’t hurt me anymore.”_

Bikaia couldn’t breathe.

Adstellam stood and drew his sword. “Hold her,” he said.

A knight seized Elise’s arm and held it so tightly that the woman winced.

Adstellam left his throne and traced the tip of his blade down Elise’s throat and down to her stomach. “I’m told that your father put my grandson’s body on display. I’ll do the same to you.”

"I'm sure you will," Elise said, her voice shaking.

_Tears blurred Bikaia’s vision as Necrodeus leaned close to him. “If it does, we’ll see how long you can live with a shattered spine,” the wizard said softly._

Why wasn’t there any air? Bikaia’s breath came in quick, hot puffs. No, no, no. Not now.
When the wizard quietly retreated, Bikaia knew something terrible was coming.

“Stop!” Bikaia shouted.

The moment the command left Bikaia’s mouth, he knew he’d made a terrible mistake. Bikaia put his hands over his mouth, as if the gesture could somehow reverse time and put the words back. Adstellam slowly lowered his blade. Elise’s body shuddered. “Bikaia, come here.”

Bikaia obeyed. His eyes fleetingly met Elise’s. Poor, poor woman.

“Explain,” Adstellam said.

Bikaia swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I just don’t think you should beat her, Your Majesty. She hasn’t done anything wrong. I—I was beaten, and I just can’t…stand to see it happen to someone else.”

“You’ve become too soft-hearted, Bikaia,” Adstellam said.

“I know, but I won’t always be. I’ll grow stronger. Just…please, this once. As a wedding gift,” Bikaia said, “I beseech you to show Elise mercy.”

“And what would you propose I do instead?” Adstellam asked.

Bikaia didn’t think anything ought to be done to Elise. Up close, Bikaia could hear the way Elise’s breath came in quick, little pants. She must be terrified, so lonely and so far from home, and at the mercy of this cruel king.

“I think you ought to confine her to her family’s apartments,” Bikaia said, knowing that Adstellam would never choose not to punish Elise in some way. “I agree we cannot risk letting Elise return home, and she might be valuable in negotiations. But I think showing her some mercy would be good for the monarchy, and it would show that you aren’t going to hold children accountable for their parents’ crimes.”

Adstellam patted Bikaia’s shoulder. “I’m not without sympathy, my boy,” the king said, smiling.
“Your father and I have been talking, and I realize that we’ve—perhaps—been laxer with your teaching than we should have been. I think I’ll grant your request and use this as a learning opportunity.”

The king sheathed his sword.

“But, Bikaia, there must be some retribution for your brother’s death,” Adstellam said.

What should he say? Bikaia’s head whirled; he wasn’t quite sure how he’d managed not to earn a beating alongside Elise. “Yes, Your Majesty,” Bikaia said.

Adstellam grasped Elise’s jaw. She tried to pull her head back, but the king held her firmly in place. “Noven and I spent twenty-eight years training Lune to become the king of Dreamland someday,” Adstellam said. “Because you have no way of paying us for all that lost time, you will pay with your time. I sentence you to indentured servitude for twenty-eight years. Maybe in that time, we’ll be able to teach you to speak without that atrocious accent.”

Twenty-eight years. The usual sentence for servitude was seven years.

Adstellam strode away, and the knights shoved Elise back to her knees. Her hand shakily cupped her reddened jaw. Beside her, Bikaia froze, unsure what to do and wondering if he’d made things worse for her.

“And you will spend your nights sleeping in the castle courtyard, so you’ll have a reminder of the nights my grandson spent outside on the battlefield because of your father. I hope the cold reminds ya of yer home, pet,” Adstellam said, mockingly adopting the diction and accent of Elise’s home duchy.

The king’s theatrics drew a smattering of laughter from some of the nobles but nothing from Elise. She didn’t even seem to react to being mocked.

“My home,” she mumbled.

Adstellam waved a dismissive hand, clearly unmoved by Elise’s plight. When Elise climbed to her feet, she stumbled over her crinolines. She wouldn’t survive twenty-eight years of servitude, not when Adstellam hated her so much. The king would work her into an early grave, and Bikaia knew
that—no matter how the royals, nobles, and servants hated Adstellam—no one was willing to defy the king. Bikaia took a deep breath. Elise was clever, and maybe if she had a little help, she’d be able to find a way out.

Bikaia need not have worried about Elise. A week after her announced sentence, Elise, who was under no circumstance allowed to leave the castle grounds, disappeared. Bikaia had been summoned along with the knights and told to find her, so he, fully aware of what consequences failure would bring, joined the hunt for her. After a day’s searching, Elise was found neither in the palace nor in the surrounding town. It was assumed that she would try returning home, so most of Adstellam’s knights headed north. Bikaia went south with a handful of others. They were at the edge of the woods where Galacta Knight lived, and Bikaia thought fleetingly about how easily he could dart away and find Galacta Knight.

A flash of movement caught his eye, and Bikaia urged his horse after it. Soon, Bikaia heard hooves, and when he rounded the thicket, he found the familiar horses. One of them belonged to the Duke of the Stars; the other belonged to the Countess of Half Moon. Bikaia swore softly and dismounted his mare. It was clear what had happened. Elise had found help, someone who was willing to defy King Adstellam. But why were Elise and Mace here? Where were they going?

Maybe Adstellam’s knights had driven them that way without knowing. There was, of course, Galacta Knight in the forests, but did Mace or Elise even know the knight was there? If not, they could wonder around lost for days. Unless Bikaia found them and led them to his mistress.

Bikaia’s breath caught. Galacta Knight wouldn’t want two good women to suffer or to die, and both Mace and Elise would face executions if they were caught. So Bikaia had to find them first. But how? He dismounted his horse and searched the ground, looking for a trail. Galacta Knight had taught him to track and catch the smallest indications of movement. Mace and Elise were aristocratic women; they had never been in the forests before, and they were poor at hiding their tracks. Bikaia found them almost immediately, which meant Adstellam’s knights would, too.

Bikaia followed the women’s trail, trying to cover and obscure it as he went. He bounded over logs and through the leaf litter. Elise and Mace hadn’t been that far ahead of him. He heard the sound of scraping and sliding, leaves being crushed underfoot. “Mace!” Bikaia shouted. “Mace, wait!”

All sounds stopped.
Bikaia broke through a thicket of trees and reached the bank of the river.

Elise stood on the opposite bank, Mace flanking her. Bikaia took a step towards the water, and Elise held up her hand. Her collar was gone, which meant she had the full expanse of her powers. “Don’t make me kill you, Bikaia,” she said.

“You don’t have to,” Bikaia insisted. “I—I know someone who lives in these woods. She can help you.”

Bikaia carefully stepped onto a rock in the river; he could easily cross to the other side by jumping from stone to stone.

“Stop!” Elise ordered.

Bikaia halted. “I promise,” he said. “I can help you. I don’t want you or Mace to be hurt.”

Elise hesitated and furrowed her brow. “Show us, then,” Elise said, lowering her arm.

She had given ground too easily, and Bikaia didn’t know why. He didn’t stop to question it, though. Instead, Bikaia crossed the river as quickly as he could. He took the lead, weaving between trees and brambles and fallen logs. They made swift progress, but Bikaia knew they would be easily followed. They weren’t covering their tracks, and he thought that, perhaps, the trade-off for moving quickly was worth the risk. But what if they were followed? Galacta Knight might be the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy, but Bikaia himself didn’t entirely know how or why Galacta Knight had earned that title. Even though she was a great warrior, that didn’t necessarily mean that she would be capable of fighting the entire Dreamlandic knighthood if they arrived at her doorstep.

“Is this your spinster?” Mace asked.

Bikaia started. “I don’t—yes.”

Although it was steadily growing dark, they kept walking. Bikaia knew the path as well as he knew himself. He slowed his pace to accommodate Elise and Mace, who were unfamiliar with the rabbit holes and dips in the forests. A howl split their air, and they froze.
“It’s the hunting hounds,” Elise said.

“That means Adstellam’s knights will be nearby,” Mace said. “We’ll have to throw off their scent.”

That wouldn’t work. Bikaia’s heart pounded so fiercely that his chest ached. He removed his glove and looked at his fingers, pale and thin. Once, Galacta Knight had explained to him what he could do. “Elise, I need you to trust me,” Bikaia said, holding out his hand.

Wide-eyed, she shrank back. “I ain’t gonna let you kill me,” she said, her eyes like polished jet in the darkness.

“You won’t die. I don’t kill people. I Copy their talents,” Bikaia said slowly. “If they see ice, they’ll assume it’s you. I’m going to lead them away from you. If you follow the riverbend, you’ll come to some ruins. At least, they look like ruins from the outside. Inside, they’re nice. She’ll be there.”

“Who?” Elise asked.

“My mistress,” Bikaia replied. “Please, Elise.”

The howls grew closer. When Elise placed her trembling hand in Bikaia’s, a sharp jolt followed. Bikaia felt a painful burst of cold, so intense it nearly took his breath away. He sucked in air and curled his hand into a fist. Ice crackled around his fingertips.

“You have Halcandran blood,” Mace whispered.

“We gotta go,” Elise said, grabbing Mace’s arm.

The two women fled into the darkness, following the river. Bikaia took a deep breath and ran the other way. Ice crackled and hissed in his wake, coating the autumn leaves with its early, withering grasp. Bikaia had no idea how to control it, and as he fled, hopefully drawing the knights and hounds away from Elise and Mace, Bikaia dimly wondered how he would manage to stop it. He’d never used magic before, and the ice curled in his chest with a strength and ferocity that frightened him.
The leaves rustled; armor clattered. Then, Bikaia knew that he had succeeded. The trees began to thin, and Bikaia emerged into a clearing. There was a flash of movement and hooves. Bikaia yelped and stumbled back. Bikaia’s father, Crown Prince Noven, sat atop his massive black stallion. Bikaia’s head whirled at the unexpected sight of his father. “I—I couldn’t find her,” Bikaia said.

Noven’s eyes narrowed. Ice crackled on the grass and leaves by Bikaia’s feet. In the distance, knights appeared, bringing their horses closer.

“Father—”

Noven’s hand went to the crossbow hanging from his horse’s saddle. “You feel like her,” Noven said. “Don’t lie to me about what you’ve done.”

Wide-eyed, Bikaia took a step back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Noven loaded a bolt into his crossbow. “Drop it,” Noven said softly.

Bikaia’s heart was in his throat, fluttering like a butterfly desperate to be freed. “I don’t know how,” he rasped.

Pain burst through Bikaia’s shoulder. He screamed and reflexively placed a hand against the injury. Bikaia stumbled, his back striking a tree. Elise’s power shattered and vanished like snow before springtime. When Noven dismounted, Bikaia backed away, tripping over his feet.

Bikaia looked to his father, hoping for some sign of mercy. There was none. A small part of Bikaia knew that he shouldn’t have been surprised or hurt by the revelation. He should be accustomed to being betrayed and to having people disappoint him, but he couldn’t help it. Bikaia wondered if he was going to be used as an example. Something to keep the other royals and nobles in line. His pulse raced.

“I have not committed treason,” Bikaia said evenly.

“You quite clearly have,” Noven replied. “You should have stayed away, Bikaia.”
“I only did what you wouldn’t,” Bikaia whispered, as his father drew nearer. “If you just let me go, Galacta Knight can help—”

“And you were a fool,” Noven said. “Do you truly believe that monster cares for you?”

“She isn’t a monster!” Bikaia retorted. “And she does care. She cares more deeply for me than you do!”

“How sweet. You truly believe that Galacta Knight thinks so highly of you. I’m sure she was thoroughly charmed by watching you scrub chamberpots for her. To think that a prince of Dreamland would allow himself to be so degraded,” Noven replied, keeping his voice low. “But I’ll tell you something else. If I’d known that she’d accept you, I’d have brought you kicking and screaming to her.”

Bikaia winced and curled his hand more tightly over his shoulder.

“What did she have you do for her?” Noven asked.

Bikaia had built her fires and helped her preen her wings, and after Necrodeus, he’d curled up at the knight’s side and let her stroke his hair like no one ever had before.

“I did anything she asked of me,” Bikaia said, “And many things she didn’t.”

The knights were too close and too heavily armed for Bikaia to fight. He wilted against the trunk of a tree, his eyes fleetingly rising once more to his father. Bikaia knew what terrible things were coming, and as much as Bikaia was loathe to admit it, he knew that Galacta Knight wasn’t coming to his rescue.

After he’d been dragged back to the castle, Bikaia had been stripped down to his chemise and trousers, and he’d received a beating with his father’s sword. Bikaia might have been executed right there in the throne room if he hadn’t requested a trial by combat. Now, Bikaia lay numbly in the pile of molded straw that dotted the floor of the cage. He was waiting for his trial, a trial that he couldn’t possibly win. Bikaia’s whole body throbbed, and his empty belly ached.
For Bikaia, the days spent in the cage were long and uneventful. The cage was placed in the town square of the nearby Castle Town, so Bikaia occupied his time by watching the townspeople—none of whom were allowed to speak to him without risking the lash. Sometimes, Bikaia tried placing the cold, frost-bitten leaves over the welts and bruises his father had left him, but Bikaia’s attempts never really soothed the pain. He thought often of Necrodeus and often of Galacta Knight. And sometimes, Bikaia thought of Nova. He wondered if she had suffered the same way, and if she had, Bikaia understood why she would hate him so.

Later, though, Bikaia would learn that a lot was happening. He would learn that Ari, his manservant, was actually a spy serving the Duke of the Stars. After Bikaia’s arrest, Ari had taken the prince’s journal and read it, and finding the writings worthwhile—certainly impressive for any relation of King Adstellam’s—had spread them everywhere. The castle servants had always liked Bikaia more than most royals, but now, they saw in Bikaia something more. They saw in him the potential for a sort of Dreamland that hadn’t existed since the wars with Halcandra.

And later, Bikaia would learn that—despite their broken contract—Galacta Knight had kept her promise of saving Dreamland. She was staying in the Duchy of the Stars and aiding his efforts.

King Adstellam had thrown a lavish ball for the Autumnal Equinox, while Dreamlanders starved and struggled and while the country was being torn apart by his wars. And there was poor Prince Bikaia, who shared his meager portions of bread with the stray cats and had only his thin shift, trousers, and a wool cloak to keep him warm against the bitter cold and morning frost. Poor Bikaia with dark bruises on his pale skin. Poor Bikaia, who had saved Elise, an innocent woman being forced to pay for her father’s actions. Poor Bikaia, whose thoughts were mostly consumed with staying warm, had become a sort of champion without even knowing it. The people in Dreamland’s capital who saw him hurried past, and when they returned home, they quietly whispered prayers to the goddess Nova. If ever Nova had appointed a person to lead, they were sure it was Bikaia.

And those who opposed Adstellam fueled the fire, encouraging Dreamlanders to rally behind this young prince who—someday—might be the king Dreamland deserved.

There was an adolescent girl, tall and willowy, with dark hair. She passed Bikaia’s cage every morning, and when the guards were patrolling elsewhere in the town, she slipped him bits of cheese and apples that helped curb the gnawing emptiness in his stomach. Every morning, Bikaia tried to persuade her not to. It wasn’t worth the risk, but she only smiled. And she kept coming.

It was night and especially cold, so the guards had retreated into their watchtower. They wouldn’t be watching Bikaia, who huddled and shivered beneath his cloak.
“Bonjam, Your Royal Highness.”

Bikaia lifted his gaze, reluctantly exposing his face to the cold. Before him, there was a figure, half-hidden in shadows and dressed in white, gold-trimmed robes. A priestess of Nova.

“It’s a cold night, isn’t it?” the figure asked.

“Yes,” Bikaia replied softly.

“I had wanted to speak with you.”

“If the guards catch you, you’ll be punished,” Bikaia replied. “You should go, Sister. I am not worth your efforts.”

“I am no sister of Nova,” the figure replied. “You may call me Father, Your Royal Highness.”

Nova had no priests. This must be some other goddess’s worshipper. Bikaia knew there were other goddesses, but he had never met anyone who didn’t worship the Wish Granter.

“Nevertheless, Father, I fear your efforts will be wasted,” Bikaia replied. “I am a child of Nova.”

“Why would you serve a goddess who has abandoned you and let you suffer in that cruel wizard’s hovel?” the figure asked.

Bikaia stiffened. “How do you know that? Who are you?”

The figure spread his arms wide. “I am the master of a matter most dark, and I have vowed to serve my Dark Lord and usher in a new age, a glorious age. I offer you the chance to join my cause, Your Royal Highness. I could bring about your deliverance if you so desire it. I could help you discover power you never imagined, Your Royal Highness. Together, we could remove this blight from Dreamland.”

Bikaia shivered. “I can’t,” he said. “Thank you, Father, but I—”
“Your goddess has abandoned you!” the man shrieked. “My dark master offers you deliverance and vengeance! Freedom, Your Royal Highness! Why would you cling to a goddess who cares nothing for you?”

The man wrapped his hands around the bars of Bikaia’s cage. Slowly, Bikaia stood as best as he could; the cage was a few inches shorter than he was, so he had to duck his head and bend his knees a bit. “My mistress hasn’t abandoned me,” the prince said.

“She will,” the man replied. “Oh, she will!”

The man reached a hand between the bars, and Bikaia scrambled back and away. “Don’t touch me,” Bikaia said. “You’ll die.”

That was Bikaia’s one saving grace. His father, likely thinking of his own survival, hadn’t told anyone about what Bikaia could really do.

“Don’t lie to me,” the man hissed. “I know what you’re capable of, Your Royal Highness. And if you won’t join my cause, you’ll serve as a sacrifice to my dark master! Do you think these bars can protect you from me?”

“Stay away from the prince!” a sharp, feminine voice demanded.

It was the same girl who came in the mornings and gave Bikaia food. Steel rang in the air as the girl unsheathed her sword and held it at the priest’s throat. Slowly, the priest backed away. The girl moved, placing herself firmly between Bikaia and the man. “Did he hurt you?” the girl asked.

“No,” Bikaia rasped.

“You have no right—” the man began.

“I have every right. Stay away from the prince,” the girl said. “Take your ramblings elsewhere.”
The priest fled. Evidently, his dark lord wasn’t so powerful that he didn’t fear a girl with a sword. Bikaia furrowed his brow and looked at the girl’s blade; it was an arming sword, a knight’s sword. Why would a peasant girl carry such a blade? Or any blade at all?

When the girl turned to him, her face was pinched with worry. “Are you all right?” she asked, her voice infinitely gentle.

“Yes. Thanks to you,” Bikaia replied. “I would offer you something in return if I had anything to give. Would you want a lock of my hair?”

Locks of hair were usually exchanged between close friends or lovers as a mark of trust, so being offered a lock of a prince’s hair was a very respectable gift. If the girl wanted it. No matter what symbolic value might be attributed to his hair, Bikaia knew the gift wouldn’t—ultimately—help the girl.

“You shouldn’t be so eager to give your body away,” the girl said. “It will give people power over you. Some dark sorcerer could do terrible things to you with a lock of your hair, Your Royal Highness.”

“I’m about to die,” Bikaia replied. “I don’t know that it matters.”

“You truly believe you’ll die?” the girl asked.

Bikaia’s smile was watery. He was sore, cold, and hungry. But he didn’t tell the girl. He didn’t want her to think that he was ungrateful for the food she’d given him. She might not have enough food for herself, and yet she continued to give it to him.

“I don’t know that I’ll win,” Bikaia admitted. “Defendants seldom do.”

Perhaps, someone will fight for you.”

No one would. Fighting for him would mean going against Adstellam, and no one in court would ever do that for Bikaia.
“Perhaps,” he conceded, hoping to appease her.

The girl’s eyes shined in the moonlight. Her lips parted slightly, as though she was going to say something more, but no words emerged. There was something strange and solemn about her, as if she held the weight of Bikaia’s impending execution solely on her slender shoulders. Bikaia didn’t understand it, and his fingers itched to touch her cheek and offer some measure of comfort.

“Aren’t the stars beautiful, Your Royal Highness?” the girl murmured.

“Yes,” Bikaia replied. “They surely are.”

The day came. Bikaia’s hands were bound, and he was marched to the arena on the outskirts of the town. It was a large, oval-shaped area. During the warmer months, it was used for tourneys. The stands were filled with the royalty and nobility, while the common people of Dreamland sat on the ground surrounding the sand-covered arena. Bikaia sucked in a deep breath. It felt much warmer in the arena with everyone’s eyes on him. A knight grasped Bikaia’s arm and pulled him along.

King Adstellam sat in a carved throne. He was dressed in deep violet clothing, the silk of his shirt visible beneath his gleaming, silver armor. Bikaia dared to glance at Noven, whose face was cold and impassive.

“You have been accused of treason for aiding the escape of Lady Elise,” Adstellam said, standing. “How do you plead?”

“I haven’t committed treason,” Bikaia rasped.

Adstellam looked as though he was mulling over the reply, but Bikaia knew that was only empty theatrics.

“Well, we’ll let Nova be the judge of that, my boy!” Adstellam exclaimed, booming in laughter. “She’ll choose the victor, eh? Let’s give the boy a sword.”
A knight produced a blade and planted it in the ground a couple of feet before Bikaia. It was an arming sword; Bikaia was better with a rapier.

“Long live the prince!” a woman shouted.

Bikaia looked over his shoulder, unsure why someone would be shouting for him. Did someone in the audience honestly believe that Bikaia would win? No one had won a trial by combat since Adstellam had taken the throne. But the woman’s shout was taken up and chanted. Bikaia felt his face warm with something that was part-embarrassment and part-horror. These people had faith in him. Why did they have faith in him?

King Adstellam’s face reddened, and he stormed from his throne and onto the field. “What have you done?” he hissed.

“I don’t know,” Bikaia replied. “I don’t—”

The woman’s chant was still being shouted, so loudly and so persistently that it sounded like a battle cry.

“I will end you myself, and we’ll see how they chant then!” Adstellam snapped, drawing his blade. “Let’s fight, my boy!”

Bikaia, wide-eyed, climbed to his feet. “My hands are still bound.”

“You have a sword, don’t you?” Adstellam sneered.

Bikaia gulped and put his wrists over the blade. The edge was dull and refused to even saw through the ropes binding Bikaia’s wrists. There was no way Bikaia would be able to slash through Adstellam’s armor with the blade they had given him.

“Don’t worry,” Adstellam said. “I won’t kill you in battle.”

Of course, he wouldn’t. There wasn’t enough pageantry in that. When Bikaia lost, he would go to the whipping post and then probably to the cage again. If Adstellam was feeling merciful, he’d kill
Bikaia by the end of the week; if he wasn’t Bikaia might wait long, painful years before Adstellam finally did the deed.

Bikaia kept sawing at his bound hands, but the rope just wasn’t giving. Without warning, Adstellam’s blade smacked across Bikaia’s shoulders, leaving deep and aching pain in its wake. Bikaia bit back a sharp cry of pain.

“Please, don’t hurt me!”

Not again.

Day after day. But Bikaia kept begging because once or twice or three times a week, his tears and pleas would actually persuade Necrodeus not to hurt him. Today wasn’t one of them, and Bikaia choked back the taste of blood in his mouth.

Bikaia froze and let his forehead rest against the crossguard of the sword. Not now. Any time but now. Not now, not now, not now—

It hurt too much to move, and Necrodeus sat across the room sipping wine and flipping through a book.

He needed to focus. He had to fight.

“My mistress is the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy,” Bikaia said. “She’ll find me.”

“Then, why don’t I give you something to scream about? We’ll see if she comes then.”

“Behold, the noble Prince Bikaia! You’ve disappointed me, my boy! To imagine that you’d meet your death sniveling like a hysterical woman! Get to your feet and fight like a man!” Adstellam laughed.

Why? Bikaia couldn’t even cut his hands free. The chanting had stopped, Dreamland’s people having finally accepted that Bikaia wasn’t going to win.
“If being like you makes you a man, I think we’d all prefer Bikaia remain on his knees!”

Bikaia knew that voice. It was the peasant girl who had visited him in the mornings. Why could he hear her so clearly? Bikaia looked over his shoulder, and to his horror, the girl stood only a few feet behind Adstellam.

“Excuse me?” Adstellam asked, turning around very slowly.

“You haven’t asked Bikaia who his champion is yet,” the girl replied, placing a hand on the hilt of her still-sheathed sword, “And I wish to fight to restore the prince’s honor!”

“No, don’t! I’ll fight!” Bikaia protested.

“Nonsense, my boy! This peasant girl is offering to champion you! How noble!” Adstellam replied, shaking with the force of his laughter.

“Please—”

“In fact, it’s so noble of her that I’ll fight her myself,” Adstellam said. “What an honor for someone of her position.”

“I don’t want her as my champion,” Bikaia insisted. “I’ll fight you myself! I just can’t—”

“I’ll defeat you and win the prince’s freedom, Your Majesty,” the girl said, bowing deeply.

In his desperation to keep a too-brave peasant girl from fighting the king of Dreamland, a man who had slaughtered armies with his blade, Bikaia abandoned his efforts to free his hands and pulled the dull blade free. “I’m ready!” he exclaimed. “Please, don’t—”

“Gag him,” Adstellam said, waving a dismissive hand.
The girl unsheathed her sword and took the worst fighting stance Bikaia had ever seen. His blood ran cold as the realization sank in; the sword had been a bluff when she’d driven off the priest. This girl had no idea how to fight. She was about to be slaughtered. And for what? For him. He wasn’t worth this.

“No, don’t—”

A knight shoved a scrap of fabric in Bikaia’s mouth. The prince felt like he was choking on it, and when he went to remove it, the knight put his right hand over Bikaia’s mouth and his left hand around Bikaia’s arm. Bikaia felt the hard, smooth planes of armor press against his back. He struggled as the girl swung her sword, treating it as if it was a bludgeon rather than a bladed weapon. She was going to be hurt, or worse, 

But it was your life or Adstellam’s.

A shiver traveled down Bikaia’s spine. What could he do? There had to be something. He couldn’t let an innocent person die because of him. Bikaia still trashed, trying to free himself from the knight’s grasp.

“I’m sorry for how you’ve suffered,” the knight murmured, firmly pulling Bikaia back and sending a jolt of pain up his spine. “But it was your life or Adstellam’s. Galacta Knight went through hundreds of scenarios, and this one had the least bloodshed. If we’d interfered earlier, it might have changed things in ways we couldn’t predict.”

Bikaia froze. That was a woman’s voice. Even more shockingly, that was Nova’s voice.

“I’m sorry I misjudged you, Bikaia,” Nova continued. “I shouldn’t have left you with Necrodeus. Even if I fetched Galacta Knight for you, I should have taken you with me. And I don’t expect your forgiveness, but I will spend the rest of my life trying to make amends for that.”

But if Nova was behind him, who was the girl?

The girl, previously clumsy, raised her blade to parry Adstellam’s with such elegance and proficiency that it seemed nearly impossible for any mortal to achieve such a feat, and suddenly, Bikaia knew exactly who that was. Adstellam had been tricked into going into battle with the Greatest Warrior in the Galaxy.

But it was your life or Adstellam’s.
Galacta Knight was about to kill the king of Dreamland. Bikaia’s heart thundered, and Nova lowered her face to his. Her breath came in warm, quick puffs against Bikaia’s cheek. “You know in your heart that he isn’t going to change,” Nova whispered. “You know, Bikaia, that the only way Dreamland will flourish is if he’s gone, and there is someone nobler sitting on her throne.”

Adstellam thrusted, and Galacta Knight parried once more. The king was a great swordsman and an incredible warrior, who had felled thousands of foes, but Galacta Knight’s skills made him look like an amateur. She effortlessly parried every strike, moving nimbly around him. Her grace was so fluid, so elegant, that her every step looked like the smaller part of an elaborate dance. Adstellam’s strikes grew stronger and rougher; his inability to strike seemed to be sinking in. And Galacta Knight never wavered.

Bikaia relaxed in Nova’s arms. While Galacta Knight had taught Bikaia swordplay, the prince had never seen her really fight before. She always held back with him, and Bikaia wondered if she was holding back with Adstellam, too. Then, the dance changed. Galacta Knight parried once more, but when the flat of her blade struck Adstellam’s, the knight whipped her blade beneath the king’s sword. In a movement nearly too fast to follow, Galacta Knight buried her sword through Adstellam’s breastplate and into his chest. As Galacta Knight pulled the blade free, Adstellam stumbled back. The king fell. Wide-eyed, Bikaia watched as the king gasped and twitched before growing silent and still.

Galacta Knight wiped her sword against her dress, cleaning the blood off the blade. For the briefest instant, everything was startlingly quiet. Then, cheers emerged. Bikaia heard his name in them, mingling together with prayers being sent to the goddess Nova, and Bikaia didn’t understand why. He was nobody and would never be anybody. There was no reason for anyone to praise Bikaia.

Nova released Bikaia, gently coaxing the gag from his mouth when he didn’t remove it himself. He felt strange and listless, all his aches and pains melting away as he looked at Galacta Knight, still disguised as a Dreamlandic peasant girl.

“But Bikaia,” Galacta Knight said warmly.

The knight’s voice had changed, becoming light and familiar.

“But Mistress,” Bikaia said shyly.

Bikaia longed to run to her and embrace her, but he hesitated. After spending a week in a cage outdoors, he knew he probably smelled terrible. He looked terrible. And what had he been doing when Galacta Knight arrived? Not standing proudly and defiantly but crying and falling to pieces.
When Bikaia walked to her, he trembled and self-consciously tugged on the dirtied hem of his shift, as if he could magically make it longer. Bikaia wasn’t even really sure why it mattered; the whole kingdom had just seen him in only his shift and trousers. And Galacta Knight had seen him wearing even less. But somehow, knowing that Galacta Knight stood before him made everything else in the world fade away into nothingness.

Galacta Knight carefully edged her sword between Bikaia’s hands and severed the ropes binding them together. Bikaia looked at his hands, his wrists an angry shade of red. When he looked back up, Galacta Knight was herself once more. Bikaia drank in the sight of her burnished horns, her soft eyes, and her thick hair. She wore her armor, the same armor that Bikaia had polished to a mirror-finish day after day. So beautiful and lovely and warm, just like Bikaia had remembered her being. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

“Do you hate me?” Bikaia blurted out.

“Hate you? I just saved your life,” Galacta Knight said.

“I know. I know, but I—I sent Mace and Elise to you without asking. I—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Now, now. You don’t need to apologize. They’re safe with Galaxia, and I’m happy you sent them to me.”

“Really?”

Galacta Knight nodded. “Poor thing, look what they’ve done to you,” Galacta Knight muttered, placing a soft kiss on Bikaia’s forehead. “I am sorry that I couldn’t do more and sooner for you.”

Galacta Knight held out her arms, and Bikaia shook his head.

“If you hug me, I think I’ll cry again,” he said. “I—thank you, mistress. I—I know you didn’t have to do this, especially since I broke my promise, but I’ll come back with you. I’ll be your servant again. I’ll start the seven years over. I—”

Galacta Knight raised a silencing hand. “My sweet princeling,” she murmured. “I thought you were writing a treatise about how much you loathed the practice of indentured servitude.”
Bikaia’s eyes widened. “I didn’t mean because of you,” he said. “I meant because—”

“I know what you meant,” Galacta Knight said, “But perhaps, I’ll take you on as a student. Would you like that?”

Bikaia brightened. “I would love that,” he replied.

Nova hummed and traced a long, slender finger over Bikaia’s shoulders. Something cool and light drifted over him; it was like being submerged in water. The persistent ache of his muscles vanished, and his worn shift disappeared, replaced instead with soft, blue fabrics, a silver breastplate, and riding boots. “Do you like him better this way?” Nova asked.

The goddess’s armor had been replaced by a sky-blue dress made of velvet.

“I do like him this way, yes. The cape was a nice touch,” Galacta Knight said. “What do you think, Bikaia?”

“It’s lovely,” Bikaia replied, enchanted by the sudden softness and comfort. “Thank you.”

Nova’s smile was hesitant. She held out her hands, and the light between them shimmered and twisted. Then, there was a sudden burst of sound, and the light shattered away, leaving behind a silver tiara twisted of leaves and embedded with sapphires. “Now, he’s perfect,” Nova said, placing the circlet on Bikaia’s head.

Bikaia dipped his head in respect. He didn’t know what to say to Nova, and while Bikaia was grateful for her arrival, he still didn’t feel as if they were on friendly terms. Maybe they would never be. Even if Bikaia felt like he might now understand just a little more what she might have endured.

A throat cleared.

Bikaia turned around. His father’s gaze flickered towards him, but Noven, the soon-to-be king of Dreamland, didn’t seem particularly affected by Bikaia being there. Galacta Knight’s hands grasped Bikaia’s shoulders.
“Goddess,” Noven said, bowing.

“Noven,” Nova replied.

“Sir Knight,” Noven added, with a nod to Galacta Knight.

“Your Majesty. I trust that our agreement still holds,” Galacta Knight said.

“It does,” Noven replied. “I shall send out the proclamations immediately. You and your people may live peacefully in Dreamland, as they should have from the start, and I shall end this war with the Duke of the Stars and see his rightful status restored to him. And you are welcome to stay in the castle as my guest if you so desire.”

Galacta Knight hummed and ran a hand through Bikaia’s hair. “I suppose,” Galacta Knight said, “It depends on where my little princeling is going.”

Galacta Knight lounged on her cushions with a large book open before her. Bikaia rocked back on his heels. He held his journal behind his back, his fingers nervously petting the spine. “May I join you, Mistress?” he asked. “I’ve finished my chores.”

The knight raised her head and smiled at him. “Of course.”

Galacta Knight patted the space beside her. Bikaia nestled against her side and peered over her shoulder. He didn’t recognize the language she was reading; it resembled Dreamlandic, but it read strangely. “Is that a dialect I’m unfamiliar with?” Bikaia asked.

“It’s Traumwaldian,” Galacta Knight replied. “I’m reading about a substance called Dark Matter.”

“Like the priest was talking about?” Bikaia asked. “He said he served matter most dark.”
“He said he was a master of it,” Galacta Knight corrected. “And it could be. Or it could be something else entirely. There are countless dark forces in this world, Bikaia. He could mean any number of things.”

“He frightened me,” Bikaia admitted.

“I’m sure he would have frightened anyone in your situation,” Galacta Knight said, soothingly trailing a finger down his back, tracing the line of his spine, “But you don’t need to worry about him, little princeling. Even if he does serve some dark force, you’ve no need to fear it. I’m certain I can defeat any monster that might come my way.”

“I know,” Bikaia replied, rubbing his cheek against her shoulder. “Thank you, Mistress. It just… strikes me as being strange. It isn’t everyday that someone wants to sacrifice me to their dark master.”

“It isn’t something I imagine will happen twice,” Galacta Knight replied.

Bikaia laughed. “No, I imagine not.”

“Now, show me what you’ve written,” Galacta Knight said.
When Dark emerged from the Dimension Mirror, Shadow and Delilah were both waiting. Dark grimaced. Who had told that woman what he was doing? Why couldn’t his Delilah be more like Meta Knight’s Delilah? She seemed to be a very likable, tolerable sort of woman. The sort of woman who would mind her own business. As was, Dark resolved to ignore his Delilah as best as he could. “How did it go?” Shadow asked, his eyes wide and hopeful.

Disastrously. It could not have possibly gone worse. Dark forced a smile. “My darling Shadow, it went just splendidly!” Dark exclaimed, hugging his brother close to him.

“How did it go?”

Dark gave his brother a quick kiss and then pressed their foreheads together. “Of course! But you need not fret about politics, my sweet poppet! I’ll take care of everything!”

Shadow laughed and pushed against his brother’s chest, vainly attempting to free himself. Dark pulled him closer. “Dark! Let go, you pigeon-livered ratbag!”

“Pigeon-livered?” Dark gasped. “I am wounded, my darling honey bee! My precious sweetheart!”

Shadow laughed, and Dark released him, adding an affectionate pat to his brother’s fine hair.

“Now, tell me, brother-dear,” Dark said, grinning. “Have you seen my husband about?”

Shadow shook his head. Dark felt his smile strain across his face. Why was Dedede never around anymore? Admittedly, Dedede would not be nearly as delighted by this absolutely naughty scheme as Dark was, but Dark still wanted to tell him about it.
“Well,” Dark said jovially, “I’m sure he’s enjoying himself. He’s probably out in the forests. He does love his daily rides, and besides, he can’t work all the time. Now, I have the most delightful Solstice surprise that I need to prepare.”

“Really?”

“Yes! For you.”

That wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Run along, my sweetling,” Dark said, “Or you’ll spoil it.”

Shadow kissed Dark’s cheek. “Thank you!” he chirped, before darting off.

Dark chuckled softly and put a hand to his face where Shadow had kissed him. His brother was so happy and energetic. He had been even during Dark Mind’s reign, but Shadow had really blossomed with their father gone. A pity Delilah Novatrix hadn’t also blossomed into something lovelier. She had watched everything in silence, the furrow in her brow becoming more and more pronounced.

“Marital problems?” Delilah asked.

“That’s hardly your business.”

Delilah arched an eyebrow. There was something hard about her that wasn’t present in Meta Knight’s Delilah. Dark knew he would never see this woman in flowing, pastel pink fabric. She wore only dark, practical fabrics. Heavy, dour blue broadcloth and darkly dyed cotton. No frills or lace and rarely a corset.

“If it is my son, it is my business. Have you hurt him?” Delilah asked.

“I would never hurt Dedede,” Dark replied. “I love him. You know that.”
When he had been Taranza’s prisoner, Delilah had been the one to find Dark, still wearing Sectonia’s face, and she had been there when Taranza, trying to prove that Dark really was a monster, had forced him to tell all his deepest secrets. And one of them had been, *I love Dedede.* But knowing didn’t prevent Delilah from giving Dark grief at every turn. How *dare* Dark actually love somebody?

“I suppose,” Delilah replied. “I’m just concerned.”

“When aren’t you?” Dark asked flippantly. “I’m beginning to think tormenting me is your favorite pastime. The *other* Delilah is much more pleasant than you.”

“Did the other Dark kill Sectonia?”

No, he hadn’t. Bile rose in Dark’s throat. He couldn’t help but think of Sectonia’s bright, amethyst eyes and her soft, shy smiles. “His name is Meta Knight, and Delilah treats him like her son. Dotes on him so much that it’s unseemly,” Dark said, neatly side-stepping the actual inquiry.

Delilah huffed. “Don’t press your luck.”

“She has an accent, too,” Dark added.

Delilah’s face crumbled. While she was the Duchess of the Stars, Delilah had never lived in her duchy. She had been born and bred in the capital. Dark Mind didn’t like his court to stray far from him, so Delilah had grown up far from the region that gave her a title. She had never developed the distinctive accent, the accent that came from the noble Queen Elise.

“How was your audience?” Delilah asked. “I don’t believe for a moment that it was as successful as you claim. You may lie to Shadow, but you can’t lie to me.”

“Is it so wrong that I want Shadow to live a carefree life?” Dark asked.

“I couldn’t say,” Delilah replied. “He is a very sweet boy.”

“He is.”
“But what happened?” Delilah asked.

“She…” Dark trailed off. “She said I was ill-bred.”

“Ill-bred?” Delilah asked. “Has the woman no sense? Your breeding is impeccable! You are descended from the king of the Mirror World and a respectable woman.”

“Evidently, the people in Dreamland are prejudiced towards the Halcandran people,” Dark replied. “Alera said that I was beneath her.”

Delilah furrowed her brow. “Why?” she asked. “That doesn’t make the least bit of sense!”

“They’re a strange people. She believes that I’m inferior to her and that the Mirror World is inferior,” Dark said, crossing his arms.

Delilah’s face reddened.

“We cannot stand for this insult,” Dark said.

“What do you intend to do about it?” Delilah asked.

A mischievous smile crept over Dark’s face. “Despite our differences, I think you’ll find this scheme most delightful.”

Queen Alera leaned leisurely against the loveseat as she scanned the files before her. Ever so often, she would reach out with a pale, slender hand and flip a piece of paper. The excitement in Alera’s blue eyes was unnervingly intense, and Susie wondered what the source of that frantic interest was. Did the interest stem from reading about the proposed M-7110 experiments or from knowing who the procedure was meant for? Admittedly, Meta Knight was no longer part of the plan. Susie had determined that all the efforts towards completing the M-7110 project would now be focused on
Kirby Stellarum, but Alera didn’t need to know that. And once everything was set into motion, Alera would have far more to worry about than Meta Knight having his personality in-tact.

“I quite like this procedure,” Alera replied finally. “It looks fascinating. Do you think we might be able to perform this on members of the Queen’s Guard? I’d have never lost Sir Jecra if we’d been able to make him indestructible.”

“Potentially,” Susie said. “We can definitely reproduce the armor for you, Your Majesty, but I’m unsure about the success of this particular procedure if it was fully implemented. It would require a very close and prolonged proximity to Star Dream, and we aren’t even sure Meta Knight will survive it. Much less someone who doesn’t have his magical powers.”

Susie wasn’t sure if Kirby would survive it either.

“So perhaps, the most powerful members of Queen’s Guard,” Alera mused.

“Perhaps, someday,” Susie replied.

More flipping pages. Alera’s lips curved into a smile. “How long do you anticipate Delilah’s reeducation taking?” she asked.

“It depends,” Susie said. “Because Delilah doesn’t have magical powers, Dr. Miasmoros has estimated that the Duchess will take significantly less time than Meta Knight will, but there’s also a greater chance of failure. We could very well kill her, Your Majesty. Even assuming Delilah progresses efficiently through the initial stages of reeducation, Star Dream’s effects are still—to a degree—unpredictable.”

“If you kill her, then, I have to deal with Dedede,” Alera replied, grimacing. “At least, he’s not as much of a threat. Delilah is a smart woman. Dedede is—to put it bluntly—duller than a butter knife. It’s really quite a shame, too. Their line was once so good. Queen Elise is probably rolling in her grave.”

Susie fought down the urge to roll her eyes. Honestly, who cared? Susie knew little about her ancestors, and she was no worse off for it. What good was it knowing that you were related to King Bikaia or Queen Elise? It wasn’t as if either of them was still around and doing anything.
But then, Susie had never cared much for the lore surrounding King Bikaia. While Bikaia was responsible for many things—the abolishment of indenturement, protections for domestic servants, a determination of equality for all the races and genders on Pop Star, and Dreamland’s centuries-long golden age—he had only been a man. Despite what some legends said, Bikaia wasn’t going to return from the dead and liberate Dreamland in her hour of need. So why spend all that time pouring over a half-mythical king?

“Do you think you might be able to reeducate Sectonia, too?” Alera asked.

Susie looked blankly at the Queen. “Reeducate the princess?”

“Yes,” Alera replied. “Not majorly. Not like whatever you’re going to do to the Nocturne boy or Delilah. But just a couple of tweaks in her personality. She isn’t…I fear that she isn’t as loyal to me as she should be. I’ve been too indulgent with her. I had thought, you see, that Sectonia was just going through a rebellious phase, as adolescents often do. Now, I realize that it’s something else entirely.”

“I see,” Susie said. “It is certainly something that we can do, but again, there are risks with a procedure like this.”

“If it succeeds, I’ll have the daughter I’ve always wanted and the one I deserve. If it fails…” Alera trailed off. “Well, my daughter will be a martyr, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing anyway. My goal with this is to inspire my people’s loyalty, and there is little more heart-wrenching than a parent losing a child. It would be...an inconvenience, but I must put Dreamland first. Sectonia will lead this country to ruin if she continues as she does now, and no matter how much it hurts to admit that, I have to be realistic.”

Susie nodded and tried to ignore the sharp pang of guilt that curled in her chest. Kirby Stellarum was Nightmare’s son.

*Onkel Albtraum*’s son. Susie’s breath caught in her throat.

She imagined Nightmare showing the same sort of fear and anger and sorrow that he’d shown when he’d gone to Max Haltmann and informed him that he wanted out. Again. Susie remembered the quiet devastation that had settled over Nightmare’s cold, uncanny face. He hadn’t been as attractive, then. Dark Nebula had changed Nightmare’s appearance to suit his fancy, had turned all Nightmare’s sharp and awkward angles into something that was both beautiful and unnatural.
But the Uncle Nightmare of Susie’s childhood was a bony, awkward creature. He was strange, sharp-toothed smiles and bad jokes.

“Speak to Dr. Miasmoros about it,” Alera said, something part-hesitation and part-fear crossing her pale face. “I would like to know what the odds of success would be for Sectonia as well as a tentative timeline. I'll decide then.”

“Of course,” Susie said.

What sort of monster would want this for her own child?

But didn’t Susie hate Nightmare for not putting Meta Knight through the same thing?

But that was different.

No, it really wasn’t.

Susie swallowed past the lump in her throat. She had never really been that interested in Princess Sectonia, but from what Susie did know about the princess, she seemed to be a decent woman. She was passionate about A.M.B.E.R. and justice. Sectonia seemed to genuinely care about people in that way that royalty never really did.

And Alera wanted Haltmann Works to break Princess Sectonia. And Delilah, Duchess of the Stars. And Meta Knight.

And the list would likely grow longer as Alera remembered more enemies. Already, the Queen had mentioned that Nightmare was on the list, if he ever woke up. Susie almost hoped he wouldn’t. It wouldn’t have bothered her so much if they had merely killed Nightmare, or so Susie told herself. But reeducation was brutal and messy. Those who survived the first phase of reeducation were given to Star Dream, who rebuilt them. Memories were erased, distorted, and replaced. Personalities were reshaped. And this was only reeducation as it was. The new reeducation, the one that Haltmann Works had in store for Kirby Stellarum was far, far worse, and Susie wasn’t sure if she could be part of the team responsible for torturing, breaking, and enslaving Uncle Nightmare.

“There is one more thing,” Alera said.
“Yes?” Susie asked.

“I am interested in Kirby Stellarum. I’m sure you’ve come across information on him.”

“We’ve met, actually,” Susie replied.

“Even better,” Alera replied, leaning back against the loveseat. “He has Copy, the first person to have Copy since Bikaia.”

_Again with Bikaia._

“I intend to speak to him at the Solstice Ball,” Alera replied. “He seems like a very…moldable boy. It would be very beneficial, politically, if I could get him on my side, but I would still like you to run a few diagnostics on his powers. If he turns out to be a more troubling creature than I anticipated, I’ll expect him to be reeducated, also.”

That was already the plan. “Of course,” Susie replied.

“Perfect,” Alera said. “I’ll have Waddle Doo contact you with further details. Until then, I’ll leave this in your capable hands.”

Susie forced a smile and hoped that it was enough to trick the Queen. It seemed to be, for Alera smiled back. But was it really something to brag about? That she could fool the Queen of Dreamland? Susie knew she ought to be flattered; it was difficult to win the trust and approval of a woman like Queen Alera.

But Alera was a monster, and Susie wasn’t sure she wanted to be allies with a woman like her.

Fae pushed her glasses once more up her nose. Kirby, clad in a three-piece petal pink suit, stood before her. While the suit was already sewn, Fae had stuck several shining pins into the fabric, and
Kirby didn’t dare move for fear of jostling the pins and sticking himself. Fae pursed her lips together and placed a swatch of black satin beside the lapel of Kirby’s suit. “How do you feel about black?” Fae asked. “Or perhaps, silver? Black isn’t really a traditional Solstice color, but it does create a nice contrast.”

Pink wasn’t a traditional Solstice color either, something Kirby hadn’t realized when he’d asked Fae for something in pink. It was only once Fae began pulling out blue, snowflake-embezzled fabric for Meta Knight and shiny, red taffeta for Dedede that Kirby realized what he’d done, but Fae didn’t seem to mind.

“I say you just dress ‘im in wrapping paper and call it a day!” Dedede shouted.

Dedede lay sprawled over a red velvet plush sofa in Fae’s studio. When Kirby glanced his way, Dedede smirked.

“You’re just angry because you lost that bet,” Meta Knight replied.

When Meta Knight emerged from one of Fae’s dressing rooms, Kirby’s jaw dropped. He had seen Meta Knight in armor before, but this armor was different. It was very modern and fanciful with elegant, shining snowflakes etched into the metal. Icy blue satin peeked out from beneath the metal plates, standing in beautiful contrast to the deep, cobalt blue cape fell from his shoulders. His boots had thick, high platform heels that added at least three inches to his height, and while Kirby knew he’d have fallen on his face and twisted an ankle in them, Meta Knight didn’t seem to have that problem.

Dedede left the sofa and sauntered over to Meta Knight. “But he’s bein’ mean to me,” Dedede muttered. “He wouldn’ let me have the last slice of strawberry shortcake.”

“Be grateful that I wasn’t in on the bet,” Meta Knight said. “It would be so much worse if you had to do everything I wanted.”

“But you’re my servant! You’d have to—”

“I’m not. I quit last week. Remember, my Lord?”

Dedede splayed his fingers over Meta Knight’s breastplate. “I kinda forgot. But I’d do anythin’ you
wanted anyway if you were dressed like that, Your Grace,” Dedede replied.

Meta Knight hummed and curled his hand over Dedede’s. “How flattering.”

Dedede whistled between his teeth. “Sure we cain't pay you nothing, Fae?” Dedede asked.

“Positive. It’s my Solstice gift to everyone,” Fae replied. “How does it wear, Meta Knight?”

“Marvelously. Although the lack of thigh protection makes me wonder if you’re trying to kill me,” Meta Knight said.

And Kirby, who was not an expert on armor, realized that aside from the metal covering his calf-high boots, Meta Knight wasn’t protected from his hips-down.

“Like you don’t recognize parade armor when you wear it,” Fae scolded. “You’re not supposed to fight in it. You’re supposed to look beautiful in it.”

“Which he does,” Bandanna Dee said, stepping out from another fitting room. “What do you think?”

Although Bandanna Dee was still unsure if he wanted to attend the Solstice Ball, he had happily accepted Fae's offer for free clothes. And she had definitely delivered. Bandanna Dee wore a dark blue brocade cutaway coat, trimmed in silver, over an ice blue silk shirt and black slacks.

“Fantastic!” Kirby chirped.

“Lookin’ good, Dee!” Dedede added.

“Very handsome,” Meta Knight agreed.

Bandanna Dee smiled and spun around on his socked feet, letting the coat flare out behind him. “Thank you,” he said. “It’s almost noon, by the way.”
“Oh, is it?” Meta Knight asked. “Good to know.”

“So it’s lunchtime?” Dedede asked.

“No,” Fae replied. “I have another client coming at twelve.”

“So we gotta clear out,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight laughed and swept back into his dressing room, his cape snapping dramatically behind him. Kirby frowned. “Why did he laugh?” Kirby asked. “What’s so funny?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Fae replied.

“He only laughs like that when he’s up to somethin’ sneaky,” Dedede said.

Then, Kirby Stellarum’s world fell to pieces. “Meta Knight! You didn’t!” he exclaimed.

Meta Knight popped his head out from his dressing room. “Do what?” Meta Knight asked. “Make sure we arrived just before the prince of Patch Land?”

“No,” Kirby replied, putting his hands over his mouth. “Oh, Nova…”

Bandanna Dee patted Kirby’s shoulder. “It’ll be great!”

“All you have to do is ask him to join us over winter break,” Meta Knight replied. “What’s so unnerving about asking someone to go somewhere with you?”

“He might say no!” Kirby exclaimed, covering his mouth with his hands.
“If he does, I’ll kill ‘im,” Dedede said.

“And I’ll help him bury the body,” Meta Knight deadpanned.

“Please, no,” Kirby squeaked.

A bell rang, and Fae smiled. “Come in!” she exclaimed in a sing-song voice.

Kirby felt all the blood drain from his face. He fidgeted and bit his lip. Even Bandanna Dee’s reassuring hand on his shoulder couldn’t calm the butterflies in Kirby’s stomach. Fluff was the prince of Patch Land. Disenfranchised prince. But still the prince of Patch Land.

Prince Fluff entered the room, Dom Woole close behind. Kirby made an undignified little squeak.

“Hello, everyone,” Fluff said. “Should I come back?”

“No,” Fae replied. “You’ll have my undivided attention as soon as I’m finished with Kirby. Everyone else is here trying on the finished products.”

“I see,” Fluff replied. “Nice suit, Kirby.”

Kirby felt his face warm. “Thank you, Your Royal Lordship!”

Fluff raised an eyebrow. “Ah, you’re welcome,” he said.

“Your hair looks brighter!” Kirby burst out. “I mean, I think it does. I like it either way!”

“I freshened up the color,” Fluff replied. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Yeah,” Kirby said.
Fluff’s smile made Kirby’s heart flutter. “I painted you!” Kirby exclaimed.

Oh, Nova’s grace, now Fluff was going to think he was a serial killer!

“For art class,” Bandanna Dee said. “Kirby used photos of you as his references for King Bikaia.”


“It’s a very beautiful piece,” Meta Knight said. “I took pictures with my phone.”

Dedede produced Meta Knight’s phone and flipped to the images. Kirby’s face reddened as Fluff looked them over. “Wow! You’re very talented, Kirby,” the prince said.

Kirby wanted to die.

Fae began removing Kirby’s suit jacket, taking care not to stick him with any pins. Dom Woole had walked over to Meta Knight and muttered something in his ear. Fluff, meanwhile, joined Dedede on the sofa. While Dedede had sprawled over the sofa like a forlorn, romantic heroine, Fluff sat properly, nearly primly, at the edge of the seat. He looked very princely sitting there. Kirby tried not to let his eyes drift too much over Fluff’s delicately boned face.

“So whatcha doin’ for the Winter Solstice?” Dedede asked.

“Attending the Solstice Ball,” Fluff replied. "Obviously."

“But that cain’t be all you’re doin’. Whatcha doin’ for the rest of the season?” Dedede asked.

“The usual. Staying in the palace, trying to avoid the Queen and the press,” Fluff said. “What are you doing?”

Kirby shook his head, but Dedede’s grin only widened. “We’re planning on spendin’ some time
with Kirby’s folks down in Aqua Star, and then, I think we’re gonna go an’ visit Traumwald.”

“Why,” Bandanna Dee said, “You must be so bored being alone in the capital.”

“So you should come to us—I mean, you should come with us—to Pupupu Village. It’s my home!” Kirby exclaimed. “And it’s by the beach, and Meta Knight, Bandanna Dee, Dedede, and a bunch of my friends are going. And I mean, I’m sure you’re busy, but you should come to. It’d be really fun. I promise! And I’m sure it’s not what you’re used to. My mom’s house isn’t as fancy as a palace, but I think you might like a break!”

After Kirby spoke, there was a thick silence. Suddenly, Kirby wondered if he’d been too loud or too sudden.

“Well, I’m certain I’ll be quite busy,” Fluff replied, “With Yin-Yarn’s case still working through the courts. His attorney is negotiating a plea deal with the parliament.”

Kirby had anticipated Fluff’s refusal, but his heart still sank a little at it. “A plea deal?” Kirby asked.

Fluff nodded. “It’s possible that Yin-Yarn won’t be charged for my abduction if he’s willing to testify against Alera.”

Dedede’s smile faltered.

“Surely, you could spare a couple of weeks, Your Royal Majesty,” Dom Woole said. “Considering our conversation last week, I would think you’d be eager to accept this generous offer of hospitality.”

Fluff’s brown eyes widened. “That is too bold of you,” the prince said.

Dom Woole bowed his head. “I do beg your pardon, Your Royal Highness.”

A blush dusted over Fluff’s cheeks.
“Even princes must take time to enjoy themselves every now and then,” Dom Woole replied. “I recall your father giving you that lecture quite often during your childhood.”

“Well, I—”

Dom Woole tilted his head towards Meta Knight. “My liege was always such a serious boy.”

“Was he?” Meta Knight asked.

“I’m still here,” Fluff replied.

“I know,” Dom Woole said.

Fluff wrinkled his nose. “It might be enjoyable,” he conceded, “If you’re truly inviting me. I, Prince Fluff, would be honored to accept such an invitation.”

Kirby’s heartbeat quickened and fluttered with embarrassing intensity. “That would be great,” Kirby said. “Thank you! It’ll be so much fun!”

Fluff’s smile was brilliant. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Then, it’s a done deal!” Dedede declared. “All that’s left to do if figure out who’s takin’ care of Tres Leche while we’re away.”

“We are not calling her Tres Leche,” Meta Knight replied, “And I already have someone to watch her. Magolor graciously agreed to take care of her.”

“Oh. Your Dreamland terrier?” Fluff asked.

Meta Knight smirked. “Yes. My Dreamland terrier.”
While Daroach was a thief, he was a thief with a strong sense of chivalry. So while winter break had just begun, leaving most of the dorms in DLU abandoned and easy pickings for a thief, Daroach refrained from plundering from any apartments save for the most expensive, those belonging to aristocratic children. This particular apartment was clearly not abandoned, but nevertheless, the occupants were absent. Daroach stood in the kitchen, having already nosed around in the cabinets for any potentially hidden valuables. The thief arched an eyebrow as he eyed the photos on the refrigerator. “Hello,” Daroach purred, tipping the rim of his scarlet hat. "What a pleasure to see you all again."

There was a smattering of photos with Dedede and Meta Knight, a couple with Kirby, one of Duchess Delilah, and one of a very handsome man with auburn hair and sun-bright freckles. What a looker!

“Why, where have you been hiding?” Daroach asked. “I haven’t gotten to flirt with you yet.”

“Are you talking to yourself, boss?” Storo asked over the headset.

“Just practicing,” Daroach replied, “For when I finally get to speak to this very handsome gentleman. Meta Knight has been hiding a very dashing friend from me.”

“Nova help us,” Spinni added.

Daroach sighed melodramatically. “Why doesn’t anyone understand me?” he asked.

Daroach pulled open the fridge. His gold eyes landed on the most delicious piece of strawberry shortcake that he’d ever seen. It sat on a plate with a bright pink post-it note.

*Kirby’s! Dedede—Don’t you dare touch!*

Well, Daroach wasn’t Dedede, was he? Daroach swiped the plate and its cake, and having discovered the cool whip, Daroach dumped the cake slice straight into the bowl of fluffy, white
goodness. So for a good ten minutes, Daroach stood in the kitchen, happily eating a slice of strawberry shortcake and a nearly full bowl of cool whip.

Then, a wolf walked into the kitchen. Daroach froze. His jaw dropped, and his mouth went dry. It was a small wolf and bright red but still, undeniably, a wolf. A low growl rumbled from the its throat.

“I didn’t realize they had a dog,” Daroach said, climbing onto the counter.

He’d handled dogs before, and Daroach imagined that wolves weren’t that different. At any rate, they couldn’t climb. This would be a nuisance at most.

“Please, don’t bring another animal home,” Spinni said. “I still have scars from that demon cat you stole!”

“That poor cat was absolutely emaciated,” Daroach countered. “And covered in fleas. I probably saved its life.”

“That’s likely true,” Doc said.

A burst of magic filled the room, and Daroach’s face lit up at the arrival of Meta Knight de Brillante Armadura.

“I’ve been caught,” Daroach said, clapping his hands together in delight.

“By who?” Doc asked.

“Meta Knight.”

Daroach sprawled himself over the counter. After a second’s pause, he realized that the half-eaten bowl of cool whip ruined the image, so he tossed the bowl to the ground. The wolf retreated and ran away, barking, to her master. Daroach threw an arm dramatically over one eye and waited. Once Meta Knight walked into the kitchen, Daroach fixed a *come hither* expression on his face and gazed sultrily up from beneath his eyelashes. *Meta Knight* was wearing a very nice, if dated, suit.

“Did I?” Meta Knight asked.

Daroach grinned and sat upright. Meta Knight reached down once to pet the wolf barking around his feet. Then, he strode closer. Daroach shifted around and put his hands just over Meta Knight’s hips. When a quick glimpse revealed that Meta Knight seemed unaffected, Daroach pulled the other man closer and carefully placed one leg on each side of Meta Knight’s waist. “I might forgive you, though,” Daroach said slyly.

Meta Knight’s lips quirked up.

“Would you like that?” Daroach asked.

“You’re a very lucky boy. I’m in a charitable mood today,” Meta Knight said, his grey eyes bright.

*Interesting.* Was Meta Knight going to flirt back?

“I’ll say,” Daroach replied.

Meta Knight’s hands seized Daroach’s wrists. “But if you move those hands any lower, I’ll have to disembowel you,” Meta Knight said, his voice growing soft and dangerous, “And that would be a tragedy.”

“I’m sad,” Daroach said. “I thought we had something special, Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight chuckled deep in his throat. The light around him shimmered. His long, blue hair shifted to a silvery blond. But most stunning was the man’s face. It was still Meta Knight’s—almost. This new face was marred by scars on one side, thin like a spider’s webbing. Or cracks on a porcelain doll. And those eyes! Daroach had never seen such beautiful eyes. They were red like rubies, surrounded by thick dark lashes.

“Who are you?” Daroach asked.
“I am Dark, King of the Mirror World. Hello, my darling silver fox.”

Daroach’s heartbeat quickened. What a remarkable man! And clearly one with impeccable taste! “Your Majesty, what an honor to be your darling. What brings you to my humble heist?”

Dark’s grip tightened on Daroach’s wrists. “Meta Knight and his friends are my absolute favorite little honeysops,” Dark said. “I’ll not tolerate you stealing from them.”

Dark leaned very close and pressed his teeth against the skin just above Daroach’s thick, velvet choker. The bell charm gave a sharp, little ring. “How cute,” Dark purred, his breath hot against Daroach’s collarbone.

The thief’s pulse quickened. “I see you have great teeth,” Daroach said. “I like a man who takes pride in dental hygiene.”

Dark’s low chuckle rumbled through his chest. Daroach arched his back; he was trying to get enough leverage to strike back.

“Do you really think Kirby will be that upset over a missing piece of cake?” Daroach asked. “This seems like disproportionate retribution, and I’ve had this wonderful fantasy—”

“Oh, do tell,” Dark replied.

Daroach mentally counted to three. Then, he lunged forward and sank his teeth into Dark’s neck. Daroach didn’t normally bite people, and he wasn’t very good at it. There was no blood. Probably not even that much pain. Dark made a strange, pleased sort of sigh and loosened his grip on Daroach’s wrists.

Instantly, Daroach was on his feet. He drew the Triple-Star and kicked Dark in the shoulder. Dark swept back, his eyes narrowed. The wolf barked, but Dark held out a warning hand. “Stay, girl,” he said.

Dark ran a thumb over the side of his neck. Then, the man opened his mouth; his eye-teeth grew into fangs.
Red sparks flashed around the tip of the Triple-Star. “Careful,” Daroach said. “I wouldn’t want to brand you. You’re such a gorgeous man.”

Dark laughed. “I’ve endured much worse than a branding. Whippings, imprisonment, restraints, being blinded, frozen, and burned,” he said. “My father was an exquisitely cruel master. Do your worst, darling.”

Daroach’s golden eyes swept over Dark’s lovely face, settling on the heavily scarred and blinded eye, the scarlet iris covered in a thin layer of misty white. Slowly, Daroach withdrew his Triple-Star, tucking the weapon into the pocket of his coat. Being compassionate was always a gamble in Daroach’s line of work, but in Daroach’s mind, taking that risk was what separated him from common thieves. He knew when to fight, and he knew when a few soft words might be more effective. When Daroach stepped off the table, Dark arched an eyebrow. In two elegant steps, Daroach crossed the space between them and raised a gloved hand to Dark’s face. “Then, I shall endeavor to be exquisitely kind to you,” Daroach said.

Dark’s breath hitched. “Would you?” he asked.

Daroach traced his thumb over the scarring around Dark’s left eye. “Your father did this to you?”

Dark grinned. “Among other things,” he said, “So you see—”

Nova, Dark’s father must’ve been absolutely monstrous. “What a terrible man,” Daroach said. “People shouldn’t ever hurt you. No, people should be writing poetry to this face.”

“Did you know I have a fantasy about you?” Dark asked, trailing a hand down Daroach’s chest.

A smirk worked its way over Daroach’s face. “Oh, do go on, Your Majesty.”

“I discovered a thief in my friends’ apartment, so we fought for a while. And rather than trying to mutilate me, that silver fox agreed to help me do something so delightfully naughty to the wicked Queen of Dreamland.”

Daroach narrowed his eyes. “You’ve fantasized about me assassinating Queen Alera?”
“What?” Spinni shrieked.

“I…uh, think that’s a bit out of our area of expertise, boss,” Storo replied.

“This seems like a good way for us all to die,” Doc added.

“Oh, no! What a complete waste of your many talents! I don’t want you to kill her. I could use a thief for what I have planned,” Dark purred. “You would, of course, be richly compensated. What do you say? I’d be delighted to have a silver fox in my service.”

“Richly compensated?”

“Oh, yes. You name it, you can have it. I have an entire room filled with dragon-forged objects. Gold, silver, jewels. A bit of magic.”

“That does sound lovely. What shall I steal from her, Your Majesty?”

Dark’s face lit up. He curled his hands over Daroach’s. “Darling, I would be so appreciative if you would steal Bikaia’s coronation portrait for me.”

“Bikaia’s coronation portrait?” Daroach asked. “Nova’s grace! Do you realize how much security Queen Alera will have around that? The knights, the alarms, the enchantments, the cameras…oh, Your Majesty! You do understand me! My squad would love to help you with that.”

“Did you just agree to steal Bikaia’s coronation portrait?” Spinni asked. “Boss, come on! There’s no way!”

Daroach’s smile widened. The heist was going to make him and his Squad the stuff of legends, and doing it for this flamboyant, handsome Halcandran man was just the icing on the cake.
Magolor gingerly stepped out of the freshly mopped kitchen, taking care to neither slip nor smudge the floor. The apartment looked good. As good as it was going to look, anyway. Marx was doing his part to clean the apartment up by sprawling all over the sofa and planting his feet in the center of the newly cleaned coffee table. Magolor’s eye twitched.

“Great job, Mags,” Marx said, grinning. “I think we should buy you one of those frilly maid outfits. With the puffy petticoats and everything.”

“Nova forbid I want to live somewhere clean,” Magolor said. “Please, get your feet off the table. Kirby will be here any minute.”

Marx wrinkled his nose. “You’re doing all this for him?”

“That’s what you do when company is coming over.”

Marx scowled and stuck his tongue out. “Why is he coming over, Mags?”

“Because I agreed to watch Kirby’s Dreamland terrier,” Magolor replied, “While he’s away for winter break.”

Marx groaned and threw an arm over his eyes. “Pushover! Why did you agree to do something like that?”

“Because he’s my friend, and contrary to what you may believe, friends should do nice things for one another.”

“The nice thing to do would be to tell Kirbs you’re not watching his dog. That’s seriously going to inconvenience me.”

“You’re not a friend. You’re a gremlin.”

“I am wounded.”
There was a knock at the door.

“Oh, joy!” Marx exclaimed. “Bubblegum-boy has arrived!”

Magolor shot him a dirty look and went over to the door. After he opened it, Kirby’s smiling face greeted him. “Hi!” Kirby exclaimed.

“Hello, Kirby. How are you? Please, come in! Where is your—”

A red blur shot past Magolor. A dog. Sort of. It was furry and vaguely dog-shaped. It barked and opened its mouth, revealing two rows of razor-sharp teeth. Magolor wasn’t sure what that thing was, but he knew that was definitely not a Dreamland terrier. It looked like a dog that could have eaten a Dreamland terrier. The…thing continued to bounce excitedly in front of Magolor, seemingly oblivious to the horror with which Magolor stared at it with.

Meta Knight peeked into the apartment, and when their eyes met, Magolor felt heat flood to his face. Something terrible and deceitful had just occurred, and if Meta Knight hadn’t—probably—been capable of killing a man with his magical powers, Magolor would have stormed across the room and kicked his worst frenemy’s ass into another dimension.

“This is Roja,” Meta Knight said.

Meta Knight looked very pleased with this turn of events. “That isn’t Kirby’s Dreamland terrier,” Magolor said.

“No?” Kirby replied. “It’s Meta Knight’s wolfwrath.”

“A wolfwrath?” Magolor exclaimed. “As in, the magical, fire-breathing wolf? Are you serious?”

“She’s a Dreamland terrier,” Meta Knight insisted.

“Hola, Mety Knighty,” Marx said, propping himself up on his elbows.
Meta Knight’s face darkened. “You can do so much better than this clown, Magolor.”

“Yo, te quiero, mi perra!” Marx exclaimed, pointing at Meta Knight.

Magolor groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. Whatever Marx had been trying to say, *I want you, my bitch* was what had come out. “Never speak my native tongue again,” Meta Knight deadpanned.

“Meta Knight, you told them it was my dog?” Kirby asked. “And a Dreamland terrier?”

“I knew Magolor wouldn’t agree otherwise. She’s a good girl, though,” Meta Knight replied, patting the wolfwrath’s head, “And I’ll pay you for watching her.”

Magolor ran a hand through his hair. “Well, what are friends for?” he finally asked. “I’ll do it. This once.”

“Perfect,” Meta Knight replied. “We’ll be back in two weeks!”

Meta Knight deposited his credit card on the kitchen counter and strode out, looking like he owned the place. “Eres un cretino,” Magolor muttered.

Meta Knight smirked and looked over his shoulder. “Touché.”

“Bye, Magolor! Marx!” Kirby exclaimed, flashing an apologetic smile.

“Anytime, Kirby!” Magolor replied.

“Whatever, Kirbs,” Marx drawled.

Once they left, the wolfwrath darted towards the door and whined, evidently searching for her master. Magolor sighed and shoved Meta Knight’s card into his wallet.
“So we’re stuck keeping his dog?” Marx asked. “That sucks.”

“Sucks?” Magolor asked. “You literally told Meta Knight that you want him.”

Marx abruptly sat upright. “Want him?” he asked. “As in… I told him I want to—”

“It’s not in a sexual way,” Magolor said, rolling his eyes. “It’s like I love you, but maybe less romantic depending on who you ask.”

“Curses!” Marx exclaimed. “I was trying to say burn, bitch!”

“That’s quemar,” Magolor replied, shaking his head. “Honestly—”

“But I got bitch right, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Magolor said. “Congratulations.”

Marx grinned, revealing his fangs. “Suck it, Meta Knight.”

The wolfwrath barked and bounded onto Marx, who shrieked in surprise. Magolor crossed his arms and considered the loud ball of fur. This was definitely going to be an… experience.

Kirby stretched his arms over his head as he climbed out of the Halberd. It had been a six-hour ride from the capital of Reverie all the way to Pupupu Village. While Reverie was expecting snow flurries and icy roads, Pupupu Village was a pleasant eighty degrees. The salt breeze tingled Kirby’s nose and ruffled his hair. He could hear the soft roar of the nearby Orange Ocean, and if he walked just a little beyond the two-story beach house, he would be able to see the beautiful waters, deep blue during the day and bright orange at sunset. Fae’s sleek, purple Crystal pulled in behind the Halberd. It had taken two cars to ferry everyone down, and Fluff had yet to arrive. He was coming separately with Dom Woole.
Kristiana Stellarum, Kirby’s mom, waved from the doorway of the house. It had been purchased centuries before by Kirby’s many-times’ great-grandfather and had been well-maintained over the years. Kristiana had clearly been very busy, wrapping lights and garlands of pine and holly around the eaves. Poinsettias in brightly covered pots lined the walkway heading up to the house.

Kristiana had clearly dressed her best for company. Her blonde hair had been carefully curled into thick ringlets and pulled back. She wore a long, overly formal dress of dark blue velvet. It was too hot for such a garment, but Kirby knew that his mom liked to look good when people were coming over. “Hello, sweetheart! Nova’s grace, what have you done to your hair? It’s pink!” Kristiana exclaimed.

Kirby had anticipated this, and after a few hours agonizing over whether or not to change it, he’d decided not to. “I like it,” Kirby replied, self-consciously patting his pink locks.

“It’s…fine,” Kristiana said, although she didn’t sound like it was fine. “And these are all your friends! How wonderful.”

Kirby smiled. “I’ll introduce you to everyone!” he chirped. “Mom, this is Dedede—”

Kristiana bowed. “Lord Dedede, it’s an honor to have someone from your line visiting my humble home.”

Dedede smiled. “The pleasure’s all mine, ma’am! Thank ya for lettin’ me come an’ stay with y’all!”

“Please, think nothing of it, my Lord.”

“And this is Bandanna Dee,” Kirby said.

Bandanna Dee waved.

“Ribbon.”
Ribbon made a cheerful, little curtsy.

“Fae.”

“Hello!” Fae exclaimed.

“Adeleine.”

Adeleine waved.

“And Meta Knight!” Kirby exclaimed, watching his mom’s face closely to see how she reacted to meeting his newfound sibling.

Meta Knight bowed and offered a charming smile, clearly hoping to make a good impression. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Stellarum,” he said.

“Yes,” Kristiana said, “You, too. I hope you aren’t uncomfortable with us celebrating a very traditionally Dreamlandic Solstice, though. You and Fae.”

A pause. “I’m Dreamlandic, too,” Meta Knight replied.

“Well, it’s technically Traumwaldian, isn’t it?” Kristiana asked. “That’s a bit different. And I’m sure, being Halcandran, you have your own traditions.”

“I spend half the year in Dreamland,” Fae said, her wings fluttering as she spoke, “But I’m very touched by your concern. As I’m sure Meta Knight is, also. That’s so nice of you!”

Kristiana emitted a nervous, little laugh. “Well, I try to be a good hostess,” she replied, beckoning for everyone to follow her.

Kirby and his friends followed her up the walkway and into the house. Fleetingly, Kirby glanced back at Meta Knight and Fae, both of whom had taken up the rear and were whispering to one another.
Inside, the house smelled of cinnamon and baking cookies. Kirby brightened. He was finally home, and everything was just as he’d left it! Despite being a way for a whole semester, Kirby truly felt as if he was home. Diamond-bright acrylic snowflakes sparked from every surface. Silver glitter, likely leftover from decorating, dotted the carpeted stairs and the hardwood floors. “Come on, everyone! Let me show you my room!” Kirby exclaimed.

“Why don’t you show them their rooms?” Kristiana asked, easing past the group and heading upstairs. “I’m sure everyone would like to unpack their luggage and get it all arranged.”

“Oh, right!” Kirby replied.

Everyone headed upstairs. Kristiana stopped and waved to a few rooms. “We have two guestrooms,” she said, “So if we do three people per room, it should work out well.”

“And of course, someone is welcome to stay with me!” Kirby exclaimed.

“I imagine that would be Fluff, wouldn’t it?” Meta Knight asked.

Heat rushed to Kirby’s face.

Meta Knight smirked and headed down the hall, peeking into rooms.

“So you finally get to experience the joy of having siblings,” Bandanna Dee said. “Eh, Kirby? Meta Knight will tease you into an early grave at this rate!”

Bandanna Dee sauntered after Dedede, who had followed Meta Knight.

Ribbon swooped in and linked her arms with Adeleine’s and Fae’s. “I guess that means it’s us girls together, huh?” she asked, laughing.

Adeleine’s smile seemed awkward. “Sure!” she said.
“That sounds nice,” Fae said, pushing her glasses back up her nose.

While Kirby’s friends explored the guestrooms, Kirby stood beside his mom; Kristiana’s face was clearly strained. “Mom?” he asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing, dear,” Kristiana said. “I’m just a bit nervous about having all this company over at once. I want to make a good impression. That’s all.”

Kirby laughed. “I’m sure they’ll all love you, Mom,” he said.

Dedede bounded out of the room, Meta Knight following at his heels. “We’re goin’ down to get all the luggage!” Dedede shouted.

“You are?” Kristiana asked. “But you’re a lord.”

“Well, technically, so’s Meta,” Dedede replied, throwing an arm over the other man’s shoulders. “I figure my title ain’t no reason to be a slacker!”

“And then, can we go to the beach?” Ribbon asked, popping her head outside of a room.

“Ain’t you ready for a nap?” Dedede asked.

“No!” Ribbon replied. “Some of us actually slept on the drive down rather than spending the whole trip bickering about who at the last slice of strawberry shortcake.”

“It wasn’t me!” Dedede insisted.

Kirby crossed his arms.

“I swear it!” Dedede argued.
“Yes,” Meta Knight said. “I’m sure someone just waltzed into our apartment, ate the last slice of strawberry shortcake, and left.”

“I’ve literally been with y’all ever since we left for Fae’s!”

Meta Knight rolled his eyes. “I’m fine with the beach,” he said.

“So am I!” Bandanna Dee declared, popping his head out of the room. “So that’s Ribbon, Meta Knight, and me… anyone else want to cast a vote?”

Dedede shoved Meta Knight forward. “Fine! We’ll go!” Dedede declared.

“Don’t push me!”

Kirby shook his head as the pair bickered on their way downstairs.

“Are they…?” Kristiana trailed off and crossed her fingers.

“Together?” Kirby asked. “Sure! They’re boyfriends.”

“Oh.”

Kirby hesitated. “Is there something wrong with…?”

“No, it’s just unusual,” Kristiana replied. “Dedede will need heirs, after all. It might damage his chances if he’s… well…”

“I’m sure they’ll figure it out if they’re together that long,” Bandanna Dee said.

“Yes, of course!” Kristiana exclaimed. “I didn’t quite mean that the way it came out. They’re both very nice men and very happy together. I’m sure.”
“I say it’s about time,” Ribbon replied. “I take bioarchaeology with Dedede, and I’ve never heard so much pining.”

“Well, I have, ah, cookies in the oven,” Kristiana said. “I’ll see everyone later. Please, make yourselves at home.”

After his mom went downstairs, Kirby couldn’t help the sharp, unsettled feeling in his stomach. It wasn’t really...there was just something odd about how his mom was so concerned about the children of someone she had never met. But had she always been like that, or was this a new development? Kirby pondered the question even as he joined everyone in hauling all the luggage upstairs.

No, his mom had always been like that. Kirby just hadn’t really been bothered by it before. It had never really occurred to him either that his mom would react to Meta Knight with anything other than unabashed excitement. After all, Kirby had a brother! A brother who was funny and intelligent and charming! Why wouldn’t Kirby’s mom love him?

But maybe Kristiana didn’t like him. Or maybe she didn’t like the idea of Meta Knight with Dedede. Either stance made Kirby’s stomach churn.

Half an hour later, as he and his friends walked down the short distance to the beach, Kirby tried to figure out if this was something he should confront his mom over. Or should he apologize? Kirby’s ideals had never come into conflict with his mom’s before. It was confusing.

“Race ya down to the end, Mety Knighty,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight laughed. “You have never been able to beat me in a race.”

“Yeah,” Dedede said, “But now, you got beach chairs wearin’ ya down!”

“And you believe a couple of beach chairs are going to make me that much slower? Besides, you’re carrying a cooler!”

“Well...”
“I’m game for racing!” Kirby exclaimed, shifting around the towels he was holding.

“Yer gonna eat my dust, pipsqueak!” Dedede declared, taking off without ever even announcing it.

“Hey!” Kirby protested, running in hot pursuit.

“I swear it’s like watching over a group of toddlers,” Bandanna Dee said.

It became quickly clear that Dedede wasn’t the fastest runner in the world, especially in loose sand, which he would be unfamiliar with. Kirby hadn’t been home in a few months, but he knew how to shift his weight and move in the sand. He ran as fast as he could with his arms full of towels and quickly overcame Dedede. Kirby spun around and yelled in victory.

Meta Knight cleared his throat, and it was only then that Kirby realized he hadn’t actually won. Dedede huffed and came to a stop. “Y’all ain’t right!” Dedede declared.

“If I recall correctly, you challenged us,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede dropped the cooler onto the sand. “Yeah, well…”

After depositing the chairs in the sand, Meta Knight walked to the edge of the water and dove in. He disappeared beneath the water for a few seconds before emerging.

Kirby laughed and waded in. “You’re really fast,” he said.

“Thank you! But you should put on sunscreen before coming in anymore,” Meta Knight said. “If you get all wet, it won’t stick as well.”

Kirby paused, calf-deep in water. “But we aren’t going to stay that long—”

“Yeah! An’ I give ya half an hour ‘fore your skin bursts into flames, pasty!” Dedede declared.
“He’s right,” Meta Knight said.

“An’ your brother ain’t gettin’ outta sunscreen either!”

Meta Knight’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me? I don’t burn,” he said.

“That don’t mean you cain’t get skin cancer!” Dedede argued, waving a bottle of sunscreen. “An’ you gotta c’mere anyway. I cain’t rub sunscreen on my own back!”

Kirby laughed while Meta Knight sullenly trudged to the beach. Dedede smirked as he lathered his hands with sunscreen and rubbed it in over Meta Knight’s shoulder blades. “Why do I suddenly get the feeling that you’re enjoying this far too much?” Meta Knight asked.

“No, Meta Knight,” Fae said, joining Adeleine beneath the newly-placed beach umbrella, “I’m sure Dedede is deriving absolutely no pleasure from massaging sunscreen into your bare torso.”

Dedede laughed uproariously.

“I hate you all,” Meta Knight mumbled.

Kirby sat beside Adeleine, wearing a sheer purple cover-up over a green one-piece, and waited for a bottle of sunscreen to be handed his way. Bandanna Dee was helping Ribbon work some into her lower back, which was left exposed by her pink, frilly two-piece. Bandanna Dee had opted for loose-fitting swimming trunks and one of those tight-fitting shirts that surfers wore. “Are you getting in the water, Dee?” Kirby asked.

“Totally!” Bandanna Dee replied. “I never get to come to the beach.”

“Done!” Dedede declared.

“Oh, good,” Fae said. “Now, it’s your turn.”
“Are you sure you wouldn’t want to rub him down?” Meta Knight asked.

Fae slyly lowered her sunglasses. Her wings fluttered, trying to aid her balance, as she stood in the loose sand. “Why, Metanaito, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Fae replied.

Before Meta Knight could answer, Fae swiped the bottle of sunscreen and cheerily rubbed it over Dedede’s upper back. "Hey, good-looking,” Dedede said, winking.

"Hello to you," Fae replied.

“What’s with them?” Adeleine whispered.

“Fae is Dedede’s ex-girlfriend,” Kirby replied.

Adeleine nodded, seeming vaguely surprised at the comment. “They get along well,” Adeleine observed.

They did, although until Adeleine mentioned it, Kirby hadn’t really considered that Fae’s behavior might be strange. All Kirby’s friends loved one another, and that was just the way things were.

Dark smiled politely and offered the signet ring, which bore the crest of the House of the Stars, to the Dreamlandic knight. Originally, Dark had planned on taking Meta Knight’s ring, but it had quickly become clear that Meta Knight never removed it. What a sentimental little thing Dark’s Dreamlandic self was! So Dark had settled for stealing Bandanna Dee’s signet ring and Meta Knight’s face. Then, Dark had waltzed right to the palace gates with Daroach in tow.

The thief, who waited beside Dark, had disguised himself as a delivery boy and held a massive, wrapped portrait—the exact same size as King Bikaia’s coronation portrait—between his hands.

“And who is this, Your Grace?” the Dreamlandic knight asked, jerking his head towards Daroach.
“My whipping boy!” Dark declared.

The knight didn’t look amused, but Daroach stifled a chuckle.

Dark toyed with a strand of his newly blue hair and made his absolute best attempt at an apologetic face. “This young man is coming with me. I wish to hang a new portrait up in the Duchess Delilah’s apartments as a Solstice present.”

Hopefully, the knight wouldn’t ask to see the portrait. If he did, there would be a good deal of explaining to do.

The knight nodded and passed the signet ring back. “Have a pleasant evening, Your Grace.”

“Well do!” Dark exclaimed.

He and Daroach walked in without any further difficulties. “Doc says the princess is still away,” Daroach said, keeping his voice low, “But Alera is here.”

The two men entered the apartments belonging to the Duchy of the Stars. Dark’s eyes darted through the unfamiliar rooms. They were very light and airy, every surface covered with pale blue and delicately embroidered flowers. Over the fireplace, there was a massive portrait of a woman with shining, blonde curls and striking eyes. She wore a violet dress, trimmed with silver, and around her neck, the sigil for the House of the Stars hung from a long, silver chain. Dark lingered on the silver circlet that rested in her hair. “Is this Elise?” Dark asked.

“Yes,” Daroach replied. “Pretty, isn’t she?”

Dark shrugged. Elise’s face was softer than Dark really liked; he preferred high cheekbones and cold features. Bikaia’s queen looked too open and approachable. “Passable,” Dark replied.

“Not as pretty as you,” Daroach said.

Dark grinned. “You are so complimentary. I like that about you.”
Daroach winked and fished a map from his pocket. He unfolded it and spread it over the duchess’s coffee table. “We’re here,” the thief said, pointing.

Dark eyed the spot.

“And we need to be here,” Daroach said, indicating to another room. “Up two floors and down a hallway. Bikaia’s portrait is kept under lock and key year-round. Once a year, before Solstice, it is taken for cleaning and promptly covered up in preparation for its annual unveiling. Fortunately, I know it’s already been cleaned and covered for its unveiling.”

“That’s good, then,” Dark replied.

“It is,” Daroach said, “In some respects. Alera is understandably protective of it. There are numerous charms and enchantments around the piece, six guards around it at all times, and cameras everywhere.”

Dark nodded, although he wasn’t entirely sure the significance of what he was being told.

“I think the easiest way for us to accomplish this would be for you to disguise yourself as Princess Sectonia,” Daroach replied, “Someone who could easily access the painting whenever she wanted.”

Dark smiled and closed his eyes, imagining Sectonia’s dark locks and bright eyes. His face shifted, and his bones cracked, lengthening to accommodate Sectonia’s height. Dark bit the inside of his cheek and tried to remember what sort of clothing he had seen Sectonia wear. He imagined Meta Knight’s dark blue trousers but made thinner to accommodate Sectonia’s form. Heeled boots. Dark floundered at the top, so he envisioned the ruffled blouse he had once seen Delilah wear. And Sectonia would, of course, wear a corset. How small was her waist? Dark gave it his best approximation, and when he opened his eyes, Daroach gazed at him with some mingling of awe and approval.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that before,” Daroach said.

“Shapeshifting is a rare skill,” Dark replied. “In both of our worlds, I’ve only met—perhaps—one other person with such a talent.”
That one other person was Bandanna Dee. Potentially. Dark, who had seen Bandanna Dee’s very obvious breasts, had reasoned that Bandanna Dee was likely a powerful shapeshifter, not unlike Dark himself, who was prone to changing his appearance at whim. Either that or Bandanna Dee had decided to abandon a life of corsets and cage crinolines—or whatever these Dreamlanders wore beneath their clothes—and live as a man. Regardless, Dark had no intention of asking; gentlemen weren’t supposed to pry in such delicate matters.

Daroach unbuttoned his black, brocade coat, revealing the red suit and cape beneath. He pulled his hat seemingly from midair.

“I do appreciate your flair for drama, too,” Dark said.

Daroach winked and produced a small, silvery-white device. “I think you’ll appreciate this, too. It goes in your ear,” Daroach said, “And it will allow you to hear everything I say.”

“Oh!” Dark exclaimed, taking the device.

It crackled and popped as he nestled it in his ear.

“Now,” Daroach said, “I will guide you there. It might behoove you to spend part of the journey as Meta Knight. If people see Princess Sectonia walking around, they may want to stop and talk.”

“Right,” Dark said, letting his appearance shift to one more familiar.

“You’ll need to find a mirror to pull me through,” Daroach said. “I doubt there will be any in the chamber with Bikaia’s portrait, but there is an old servant’s passage which runs behind where the portrait is usually kept. I’ve done some intel which indicates it’s locked and under guard, but the princess shouldn’t have any problem. It’s a storage room, so I’m sure there’s probably something there you can use.”

“Got it,” Dark replied, blowing Meta Knight’s blue bangs from his face. “I’ll find the mirror and pull you through along with our replacement.”

“Good man,” Daroach said. “Want a kiss for luck?”
Dark grinned and tilted his head, baring his cheek. Daroach coyly clasped his hands behind his back and planted a quick kiss on Dark’s cheek.

“I’ll do you proud,” Dark replied, darting back.

With a wink, Dark sauntered from the apartments. Then, he remembered that he was supposed to be Meta Knight, and Meta Knight didn’t really swing his hips when he walked the same way that Dark did. But there were some benefits to being Meta Knight. No one stopped him. No one even glanced his way.

“I can see you here,” Daroach said, his voice coming across the headset. “Keep going straight, and when you reach the end of the corridor, take a right.”

For a long time, they continued that way—Daroach giving instructions and Dark following them. After transforming into Sectonia, Dark wandered down the old servant’s passage. Without difficulty, he’d found a mirror, just as Daroach had suspected. “This is going much more smoothly than I thought,” Dark said.

“A pity,” Daroach replied. “I much prefer it when something goes awry.”

“But won’t it be worth it when the good Queen unveils the noble Bikaia’s portrait at Solstice?”

“Oh, most definitely.”

Dark reached through the mirror. Its surface rippled like quicksilver before revealing Daroach’s face. Dark pulled the other man through, pulling them flush against one another, separated only by the large, covered portrait Daroach held in his arms.

“Shall we?” Dark purred.

“Oh, yes,” Daroach said. “Little would give me greater pleasure, Your Majesty.”
As Kirby left the bathroom, he rubbed his eyes and yawned. It was dark and very late, but a light drifted upstairs from the kitchen. Kirby leaned over the railing and peered down. Meta Knight sat on the edge of the counter with a mug in his hands. Kirby headed downstairs and padded into the kitchen, his thick socks muffling the sound of his feet on the tile.

“Did I wake you?” Meta Knight asked.

Kirby sat at the kitchen table and pulled his chair over and closer to his brother. “No,” Kirby replied. “I had to use the bathroom.”

“I have trouble sleeping in strange places,” Meta Knight replied, sitting his mug aside, “So I thought I would drink some tea. Sometimes, chamomile helps.”

“I’ve never been one for tea,” Kirby replied. “I prefer juice and sometimes coffee—if it has lots of cream and sugar in it.”

“I like my coffee like that, too,” Meta Knight said. “Dedede drinks it black. The monster.”

“I make an amazing hot chocolate,” Kirby said shyly. “I could make it for us sometime.”

“That sounds lovely,” Meta Knight said.

Kirby tentatively placed his hand over Meta Knight’s, a gesture followed by the familiar static-like *pop!* Although Meta Knight’s gaze focused on their hands together—milk white and autumn brown—he didn’t pull away. Slowly, Meta Knight rubbed his thumb over Kirby’s knuckles.

“I’m…really happy we found one another,” Kirby said, turning his gaze to the floor. “I know that you’re…um…”

“I’m happy we found one another, too,” Meta Knight replied.

Kirby flushed. “There aren’t enough words to express how much I appreciate you not being afraid
of my powers,” he said.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I know that, but at the same time, I can’t quite make myself believe it. And I felt lyken you hyde thynges from me, maistresse.”

Kirby paused. Something odd had happened, and he wasn’t entirely sure how to describe it. He felt as though he was simultaneously in two different places, two different times.

“Ywis,” Meta Knight said slowly, “But when I do—”

“—hide things from you, it’s out of my love for you, little princeling.”

“I believe that, but I just…” Bikaia trailed off. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Could you have saved my father’s life?”

*Galacta Knight’s breath* gave a soft, little hitch. “Yes.”

“But you didn’t.”

“There is little that I would not do for you, little princeling,” Galacta Knight said, “But I will not forgive your father for abandoning you to your fate. If he had been a good father, he would have been willing to fight for you.”

Bikaia lowered his head and choked back a feeble sob.

“I love you,” Galacta Knight murmured.
“I love you, too,” he said, “If I’m allowed to say so.”

Meta Knight sat there for a few seconds too long, just awkwardly staring. Then, he leaned forward and placed a gentle peck on Kirby’s forehead. Although Meta Knight retreated quickly and headed towards the fridge as if nothing had happened, Kirby put a hand to his own face, while warm and fuzzy feelings stirred in his stomach.

“That’s a bit much, isn’t it?” Kristiana asked.

Kirby spun around. He hadn’t heard his mom enter, but there she stood in the doorway of the kitchen, light framing her from behind.

“A bit much?” Meta Knight echoed.

She walked across the tile floor and only stopped once she stood between Kirby and Meta Knight. “I mean, I’ve never seen any brothers act so physically affectionate before,” Kristiana replied. “That’s all. It’s a little…not quite creepy, but it’s a little strange.”

Meta Knight offered her a blank look in return. “I see,” he said.

Kristiana shrugged. “It’s just an observation, Meta. I think it’s a bit clingy.”

“I didn’t mind it,” Kirby said. “It was nice!”

But even as Kirby said it, he knew the damage was done. Meta Knight had just been told that he’d been too affectionate, and Kirby knew without a shadow of doubt that Meta Knight would immediately seek to correct that perceived problem.

“I mean, have you ever seen any brothers kiss one another?” Kristiana asked.

“We’re more affectionate in—”
“In Traumwald? In Halcandran cultures?” Kristiana asked. “I’m just telling you, so you know. There’s no need to get all defensive.”

“I’m not being defensive.”

Kristiana’s smile was very brittle. “If you say so, sweetie. I’m just trying to help you. I’m sure that Nightmare probably didn’t teach you to have normal, healthy relationships.”

“My father…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“And Kirby doesn’t like people touching him anyway,” Kristiana added.

Meta Knight looked between Kristiana and Kirby, and although Kirby wasn’t a mind reader, it was clear Meta Knight was calculating something. Looking at the odds. Whatever Meta Knight found, it was impossible to tell. “I’ll be more mindful in the future, Mrs. Stellarum. Thank you for your advice,” Meta Knight said.

“Meta Knight, she—” Kirby began.

“I need to wake Dedede,” Meta Knight cut in, “Or he’ll sleep until noon.”

Kirby’s protest died in his throat.

As Meta Knight walked past, he offered Kirby nothing more than a cold, fleeting glance. Kirby watched his brother leave and only reluctantly tore his eyes away from the staircase where Meta Knight had ascended. “Mom, why did you tell him that?” Kirby asked.

“Why? I didn’t mean to upset him, but it is weird,” Kristiana said. “He’s very clingy.”

Kirby had told his mom everything that happened during the sleeping curse and Dark Nebula’s bid for Dreamland over an almost two-hour long phone conversation, so Kristiana knew what had happened to Nightmare Nocturne. And she knew that Dark Nebula had abused Meta Knight. So why couldn’t she just see that Meta Knight was doing his best?
Kristiana slowly sank into a nearby chair. Kirby expected softness or sympathy, but when he looked in his mom’s face, she faltered for only an instant. “I still don’t like it,” she said. “I just—I don’t understand these people you’re friends with, Kirby.”

“What’s wrong with my friends?”

Kristiana shook her head. “I may not have fancy schooling, Kirby, but going to DLU has changed you. And I’m not sure that’s for the best. I mean, Ribbon seems like a nice girl, and Dedede is mostly respectable, even if he appears to have acquired an inappropriate taste for chocolate—”

“Mom.”

“But it’s true!” Kristiana persisted. “And I suppose Bandanna Dee is fine. He’s a nice, normal boy. But that Ripple Star girl is too much. She has wings! And the fallen prince of Patch Land? He’s a charity case, and you shouldn’t encourage him. And an A.M.B.E.R. agent? You know how I feel about those people.”

“But isn’t it enough that I have friends who aren’t afraid of me?” Kirby asked. “Isn’t that worth something, Mom?”

Kristiana hesitated. “I’m glad you have friends,” she said carefully, “But your powers aren’t something to be celebrated or treated carelessly. If you had just some small gift, it would be fine, but this—this is different. Magic, especially as powerful as yours, should only be wielded by the few Nova has chosen. The royalty and the nobility. It isn’t fair that you can just take what other people have earned.”

“But what if I was Bikaia himself?” Kirby asked. “Then, would everything be okay?”

Kirby hadn’t told her that he was Bikaia. He hadn’t told anyone that because he didn’t want people to see him as Bikaia, the greatest king Dreamland had ever had. He just wanted to be Kirby. Or maybe Kirby with Bikaia’s strength and courage. But not solely Bikaia. That didn’t feel right somehow.

“Bikaia was different. He came from a Nova-blessed line,” Kristiana said.
But did she truly believe that, or was it Dark Nebula’s curse making her believe that? Kirby felt his blood run cold. How much of his mom was really his mom, and how much was magically influenced?

“But is that all that matters about him?” Kirby asked. “His bloodline? Not all the wonderful things he did?”

“Of course, those matter,” Kristiana said. “I’m just saying that he—well, a big reason that he was able to do those things was because Nova blessed him. She chose him. It’s not the same for you, Kirby. And look—I know you think I’m being unfair, but if people learn what you can do, they’ll be afraid. People are afraid of things they can’t understand and things they can’t control.”

“But why is the Queen allowed to use magic, and it’s all fine, but when I—”

“Because her magic comes directly from Nova herself,” Kristiana said. “Yours comes from—from Traumwald. From Nightmare. It’s a matter of the source. Good things don’t come from Traumwald. It’s the home of Dark Matter for a reason.”

“If my dad was so abhorrent, why did you get with him?” Kirby asked.

Kristiana sighed. “It was a mistake,” she said, “And after I realized what he was, I wanted to avoid him. But I couldn’t support myself. I took Nightmare’s help because it was the best thing for you. For both of us.”

By help, she meant money.

With a sudden, sharp twist in his chest, Kirby realized that he could have known his dad, his real dad, if his mom had just been willing to talk to Nightmare.

“Meta Knight is my brother, Mom,” Kirby said, “The only one I have. He’s going to be in my life.”

Kristiana sighed and ran her hand through her hair. “I know,” she said.

Kirby bit the inside of his cheek. “And I know that—that Dark Nebula didn’t treat you well,” Kirby
said, “But Mom, Meta Knight’s a victim, too.”

Kirby thought of Bikaia, what little Galaxia had shown of him. Bikaia’s family hadn’t liked his powers either. That moment when he’d first met Galacta Knight had been the first moment that Bikaia had ever touched anyone’s bare skin. And Galacta Knight had been so kind. So patient.

Kirby pursed his lips together. Just in case, he had to figure out if Dark Nebula’s curse still lingered on Pupupu Village, and if so, Kirby had to find a way to remove it. Because Kirby knew nothing about curses, he knew this would require a lot of research and take a good deal of time, but he was going to break this curse no matter how long it took! But first, he had to make this up to Meta Knight.

Dark and Daroach stood beside one another outside the Mirror World treasury. Before them, the portrait of Bikaia remained carefully wrapped and preserved. With uncharacteristic solemnity, Dark slowly unwrapped the picture. He took in the gold, gilded frame and Bikaia’s soft face and gentle, blue-grey eyes.

Realizing that the theft of Bikaia’s coronation portrait would get immediate attention, Dark and Daroach had taken care to replace Bikaia’s portrait with another one. And when Alera unveiled the portrait during her Solstice ball, it would not be Bikaia’s face who greeted her prestigious guests. Instead, it would be a portrait of Dark, wearing his most opulent and regal clothing, sitting in his throne while a crowd of men and women fawned at his feet. And Dark had, naturally, made sure that one of those devoted women heavily resembled dear Alera.

It was only once they were in the Mirror World that Dark began to consider that he might have done something incredibly sacrilege and reckless. But had Bikaia been alive and even half as good of a man as he was said to have been, Dark was certain that Bikaia would have far more problems with Alera’s policies and ill manners than with the theft of a painting. Dark let out the breath he hadn’t even known he was holding. “He’s beautiful,” Dark murmured.

“Really?” Daroach asked. “Because I really think Elise was a ten, and Bikaia is…maybe a six? Seven?”

“Is Bikaia’s portrait making you insecure?” Dark inquired, arching an eyebrow. “Because if that’s the case, you’re obviously a ten, my darling silver fox.”
Daroach sighed and wrapped his arm around Dark’s. “Your Majesty, I just want so much to see what reward you have prepared for me,” Daroach said, planting a hand on Dark’s chest.

Dark laughed. “You’ll like it,” he replied smugly.

Dark waved to two of his knights and pointed at the portrait. “Please, make sure Bikaia is put in a safe place. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to him, and then, I’d be very appreciative if you would shatter the Dimension Mirror for me. We don’t want the dear Queen of Dreamland coming here.”

The knights nodded their assent and took Bikaia’s portrait with them.

Once his men were gone, Dark spun around and threw open the treasury doors with as much drama as he could muster. Daroach audibly gasped.

Dark smirked and puffed out his chest a bit. His treasury was impressive, a massive room filled to the brim with rare and valuable artifacts. Some of the items in the treasury—like the silver Galaxia that Meta Knight had once wielded in the Dream World—were mere curiosities. Dark didn’t know their exact value, but he kept them because he liked them. He had a rather embarrassing fixation with shiny things.

But most of the others had more tangible value. There were the usual coins and jewels expected of the royal vault, but beyond this, there was more. This was where all Dark Mind’s artifacts relating to the goddess Nova had been placed. If they were too valuable to be destroyed, they ended up in the vault. Dark’s attention flickered to Daroach, whose eyes were as wide as dinner plates. “Oh, Your Majesty, you’re spoiling me!” Daroach exclaimed.

Dark’s lips quirked into a smile. “You are welcome to choose a few baubles from here, provided they aren’t significant to my people. I do like to reward my servants well.”

Dark followed Daroach as he scampered about the room, running his hands over the jewels and coins. At one point, Daroach paused and pointed to a massive bolt of violet velvet. “Why is there fabric in your treasury?” he asked.

Dark crossed his arms. “Velvet is a very rare and expensive fabric in my realm,” Dark said. “It took my weavers several months to make that bolt of fabric, and as a show of friendship, I had offered Queen Alera bolts of velvet. She informed me that she could purchase them at a craft store.”
“Oh, Dark,” Daroach murmured.

Dark forced a watery smile. “I had—don’t think me overly sentimental, Daroach—but I had wanted to give one of my Dreamlandic acquaintances a choker. Made of velvet. He likes those. But I’m wondering if my gift is now sub-par.”

“Nonsense!” Daroach declared. “Any man with the least bit of aesthetic taste would appreciate such a thoughtful present, Your Majesty, and if your acquaintance does not, I’ll happily purloin a few of his valuables for you.”

Dark laughed. “I don’t doubt it,” he said.

Daroach’s grin abruptly faded, and he pointed behind Dark, somewhere over his shoulder. “What is that?” Daroach asked.

Dark turned to see what Daroach had found so distressing. It was a painting of a woman with disheveled blonde hair. She wore an elegantly embroidered light blue dress, although the dress was ripped and torn, proving it had seen better days. Bruises dotted her skin, and her blue eyes looked watery. As always, Dark’s eyes were drawn to the heavy collar around her neck and to the cuffs around her slender wrists. “Why, Daroach,” Dark said softly, “That’s your goddess.”

“Nova?”

Dark nodded solemnly.

Daroach walked forward, moving as if he was in a trance. Once the thief reached the portrait, he spied the dresses and the restraints, all carefully placed in shelves and organized. For a long time, Dark watched in silence as Daroach ran his gloved hands over the bejeweled cuffs and collars.

“What is this?” Daroach asked.

Dark’s eyes flickered from Daroach’s furrowed brow to the shining item held between his hands. “It’s a muzzle,” Dark said quietly.
“It’s not for an animal, is it?”

“No.”

Daroach carefully placed the item back. “But what is all of this, Dark?”

“For some time, my father held the goddess Nova captive. She was eventually freed, but…” Dark trailed off. “But my father had a particular fixation with torture. He liked to maim beautiful, young women, and he used to keep many portraits of his victims around in his chambers. I destroyed them after he died. Except for this one. Because it’s Nova. I think the only woman he never hurt was my own mother, and well, that was until Father made me kill her.”

Daroach waved a hand towards the cuffs. “Did he use these on you?”

“Often enough,” Dark replied. “They’re dragon-forged, so they suppress magical powers.”

For a second, Daroach seemed lost for words.

"Are you repulsed by me now?” Dark asked.

“By you? No. I just wondered...is this all you know?” Daroach asked. “Cruelty and neglect?”

“Not entirely,” Dark replied. “I had my darling Shadow. I had Dedede. They're the two most important people in my life.”

Daroach nodded, although his flirtatious energy seemed to have abandoned him. “How would you feel about me being the…third most important man in your life?” Daroach asked.

Dark blinked a few times. The offer seemed sincere and heartfelt, and Dark was a little baffled by that. “I think I’d like that very much,” he eventually replied.
Daroch held out his hand. Dark swept into an elegant bow and kissed Daroch’s knuckles. “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful partnership,” Dark purred.
When Dark woke and rolled over in bed, Dedede was there. The king of the Mirror World smiled and rolled onto his stomach, showing off the impressive muscles in his upper back. Dedede’s eyes lazily flickered from the book in his hands toward Dark, making his heart skip a beat. “You’re not usually around in the morning anymore,” Dark said. “What’s brought on this change?”

"I'm not allowed to spend time with my beloved husband?"

"Of course, you are."

“You’ve been in especially good spirits lately,” Dedede said.

Dark brightened. Dedede had noticed him! “I made a friend the other day,” Dark said. “The most magnificent, dashing tomcat I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet. Besides you.”

Dark smiled and nestled against Dedede’s side. Although Dedede initially stiffened, he slowly relaxed. Dark dared to move closer, placing his cheek against his husband's chest. Dedede curled an arm around Dark and rubbed a fond hand over his back.

“A friend?” Dedede asked. “I thought I was your friend.”
“Surely, I’m allowed to have more than one, aren’t I?” Dark asked, gazing at Dedede from beneath his eyelashes.

“More than one,” Dedede murmured, tracing his thumb over the scar stretching over Dark’s eye.

Dedede’s face was strangely hard to read.

“I thought you’d be pleased,” Dark said.

“I am,” Dedede replied. “I’m sorry. I’ve been neglecting you lately, haven’t I? I’ve just been trying to sort out some things in my head. This is an experience completely different from anything I’ve had.”

“I know, darling,” Dark said. “I understand.”

Dedede smiled hesitantly. “I just wonder if you’ll still love me, Dark. What if I wasn’t who you thought I was? Or who I thought I was?”

“We all do change a bit,” Dark replied, sitting upright. “I, for example, have become infinitely more charming over the years. And handsomer.”

Dark winked and tilted his head, his blond hair growing paler and longer until it resembled Daroach’s silver-white.

“So you have,” Dedede said slyly. “Perhaps, I’m overthinking it. I am happy you have a friend—even if he’s convinced you to steal a portrait of the good King Bikaia.”

“I fear I’m more of a bad influence on my silver fox than he is on me,” Dark replied. “Are you angry?”

“I’ve known you long enough to expect this sort of thing.”

Dark grinned. “So,” he said, “May I take that to mean that you don’t mind if I attend the Solstice
Ball disguised as a beautiful lady, so I can see Alera’s face when Bikaia’s portrait is instead revealed to be my glorious visage?”

“You…” Dedede trailed off.

“I’ve already planned it out! I’ve enlisted Daroach to help me find a dress—something very scandalous. I might even show my shoulders!” Dark exclaimed. “It sounds like such a delightful way to pass the evening.”

Dedede shook his head, an amused smile playing on his face. “I’ve no doubt that you’ll do this regardless of any protests I might raise.”

“Well, you aren’t wrong…” Dark trailed off.

Dedede shook his head. “Enjoy yourself, sweetling.”

“Thank you, darling,” Dark replied, giving Dedede a quick kiss on the cheek.

The king scrambled from his bed, nearly becoming ensnared in his own bedding. “Just you wait! It’s going to be truly wondrous!” Dark declared. “I’m going to show Alera that she can’t just expect us to fulfill all her demands.”

Meta Knight shuffled down the hallway in his pajamas. While he’d told Kirby that his plan was to wake Dedede, Meta Knight hadn’t done that. Instead, he’d returned to the guestroom and, seeing Dedede was fast asleep, had curled up against him. Dedede wrapped his arms around Meta Knight’s waist and pulled him close. “Dedede,” Meta Knight said.

“Mm?”

“Did you ever see Delilah kiss Dahlia?”

“Her cousin Dahlia?”
“Yes.”

“No,” Dedede said slowly, “But I’ve only seen Dahlia…I dunno. Once every few years. Why d’you ask?”

“I wanted to know if it’s normal for siblings to kiss one another. On the forehead or something. Cousins seemed…close enough.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Dedede said, his voice somewhere between amused and frustrated. “Did you kiss yer brother?”

Meta Knight scowled. “It was a spur of the moment kind of thing. There was some sort of memory of Biakia and Galacta Knight, and she kissed him. On the forehead. I thought that was an appropriate way of showing affection, but I don’t want to be…too affectionate.”

Dedede snorted. “Course it’s fine. I kiss Mom all the time.”

“But Delilah isn’t your brother.”

“You’re talking about brothers?” Bandanna Dee asked, rolling over.

“Dee, tell ‘im there ain’t nothin’ wrong with kissin’ your brother.”

“No,” Bandanna Dee replied.

“Kristiana just…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“What did she say to you?” Dedede asked.

“Nothing.”
“Yeah, sure. I swear we oughta just book a hotel,” Dedede said, “And forget her—”

“Be nice. She’s Kirby’s mother,” Meta Knight replied, “And Nova knows all the terrible things Dark Nebula did to her. It’s expected that she would be wary of me being around her son.”

“That don’t excuse her treatment of you an’ Fae. Her bein’ abused don’t give her the right to abuse you. And that ain’t her only problem,” Dedede said. “I’d like to tell ‘er where she can shove her poinsettias.”

“Please, be nice,” Meta Knight said. “I want her to like me.”

“When?”

“Because she’s important to Kirby. I’m not excusing her behavior. The things she's said and done aren't acceptable, even considering what Dark Nebula might have done to her,” Meta Knight said, “But we're only going to be here for three days. I don't want to start something that's going to make this unpleasant for everyone, especially something that might hurt Kirby, who's just lost the only father he ever knew. It’s not a battle worth fighting, particularly when Kristiana's behavior might be influenced, however little, by a curse engineered specifically to make her wary of magic users. If an event arises where I have to deal with her frequently, I'll address the matter then.”

“I get it, Meta Knight,” Bandanna Dee said quietly, “But it’s not for Kristiana to decide how you act with her son. That’s no one’s business except yours and Kirby’s. If you want kissing to be a part of your relationship, it should be.”

“But did you and your brother…?” Meta Knight asked.

“No. But there’s not some sort of sibling hive mind,” Bandanna Dee said. “For Nova’s sake, it’s fine to kiss your brother.”

“Thank you,” Meta Knight replied.

“Sure.”
Dedede reached over to the nightstand and handed Meta Knight his phone. “What am I supposed to do with this?” Meta Knight asked.

“Yer gonna put your phone to good use an’ take a picture of yer gorgeous boyfriend,” Dedede said.

“You’re impossible. I’m trying to talk through a serious issue, and you—”

“It ain’t nothin’ serious. You ain’t nearly as awkward with yer relationships as ya think ya are,” Dedede purred, pressing his lips against Meta Knight’s neck.

Meta Knight pulled up his camera and snapped the photo. “If you leave a love bite, I’ll be very vexed,” Meta Knight said.

Dedede’s chuckle rumbled in his throat. “They’re called hickeys, Meta,” he said. “What are ya? Some kinda post-Bikaian maiden swooning on her fainting couch?”

“It’s tacky,” Meta Knight replied.

“It’s scarf season,” Bandanna Dee said mischievously.

Meta Knight sighed and swatted at Dedede’s chest.

“Hey! Why am I gettin’ smacked? I didn’t suggest it!” Dedede protested.

“Because I felt like it,” Meta Knight replied.

Dedede gave Meta Knight a final, quick kiss on the lips and then clambered out of bed. Meta Knight rolled onto his stomach and watched with a sort of restful absentmindedness as Dedede dressed.

“Enjoyin’ the view?” Dedede drawled, looking over his shoulder.
Meta Knight’s breath caught in his throat. His eyes darted across Dedede’s broad shoulders. “Yes,” Meta Knight replied, warmth flooding his face. “I was actually thinking of inviting Fae to join us. She and I could make some popcorn and enjoy the show.”

Fully dressed, but with his shirt unbuttoned, Dedede swept by and ruffled Meta Knight’s hair. “Yer a terrible person, y’know that?”

“You’re the one dating me,” Meta Knight replied. “I suppose you have bad taste.”

Dedede grabbed a handful of the blankets and pulled them down. Bandanna Dee squeaked. Meta Knight grimaced as the cold air hit the bare skin where his cotton tank top had ridden up. Sure, it wasn’t exactly freezing in Pupupu Village, but he didn’t like being deprived of his fleece and cotton. Dedede put his hand on the small of Meta Knight’s back and slowly trailed upwards, tracing the line of Meta Knight’s spine and the muscles of his upper back. A few pinprick scars dotted his skin, remains of Dark Mind’s torture. Although the marks were tiny, easy to miss if you weren’t specifically looking for them, Meta Knight self-consciously shifted when Dedede’s fingers traced over the vertebrae of his spine.

“Ya match my aesthetic,” Dedede replied.

“Your aesthetic?”

“Quick-witted. Chivalrous. Courageous. Is that enough strokin’ of your ego to make you happy? The muscles don’t hurt either, cookie dough,” Dedede said, winking.

“It’s praise well-deserved,” Meta Knight replied.

“The two of you are so sweet, I’m going to get diabetes,” Bandanna Dee said.

Meta Knight rolled onto his back and playfully shoved Bandanna Dee, and that moment of distraction was all that Dedede needed. The bed dipped, the box springs creaked, and Dedede picked Meta Knight up and hauled him over his shoulder. Meta Knight yelled in surprise and twisted around. He leaned forward and hand nearly squirmed free when Dedede bent over and slammed him back onto the bed. Bandanna Dee rushed in and seized Meta Knight’s wrists.
“You are not fair!” Meta Knight exclaimed.

Dedede smacked Meta Knight in the face with a pillow before lumbering over him and straddling his waist. “Now, we’ve got ‘im!” Dedede cackled, wringing his hands together.

“Oh, no,” Meta Knight deadpanned, twisting his wrists but not trying in earnest to free himself. “What ever shall I do?”

“All according to our nefarious plan!” Bandanna Dee exclaimed.

“What nefarious plan?” Meta Knight asked.

“We need a virgin sacrifice,” Dedede said.

“To bring back our dark lord!” Bandanna Dee chimed in.

Meta Knight called his magic to him and slipped into another dimension. He took three steps and appeared behind Dedede.

“Ha!” Meta Knight exclaimed.

Dedede bounded out of the bed, and as Meta Knight fled, Dedede wrapped his arms around his waist and lifted him off the floor. Meta Knight squeaked and kicked in the air. When Bandanna Dee joined the fray, Meta Knight took greater care; he didn’t want to inadvertently kick Bandanna Dee in the face.

“I don’t want to be your virgin sacrifice!” Meta Knight exclaimed. “You—”

The door opened. Ribbon and Fae stared blankly at the sight before them, and for a moment, no one said a word.

“We’re tryin’ to sacrifice Meta to our dark master,” Dedede eventually explained. “As y’do.”
“Again?” Ribbon asked. “We talked about this, Dedede!”

Fae approached Meta Knight and hooked a finger through the signet ring hanging from his neck. Her violet eyes narrowed as she trailed her thumb over the rabbit insignia. “Well, I suppose that’s one way to get rid of my competition,” she said, letting the ring fall back against Meta Knight’s chest. “I promise I’ll sprinkle marigold petals and plant a poinsettia over your final resting place.”

“But I like Meta Knight,” Ribbon mused, putting her hands on her hips. “I suppose if I want him, I’ll have to fight all of you, won’t I?”

“Afraid so, pet,” Dedede said. “If I were you, I’d jus’ give up.”

“And then, you’ll miss our girls’ day!” Fae pointed out.

“Help me, Ribbon. You’re my only hope,” Meta Knight deadpanned.

Ribbon rocked back on her heels and held her hands out, as if she was literally weighing the options. “Girls’ day or saving Meta Knight from being sacrificed to the dark forces. Hmm. Tough choice,” Ribbon said.

“Tough choice?” Meta Knight asked. “Are you serious?”

Fae smirked. “Ribbon. Two words. Souvenir shops.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Ribbon said. “Sorry, Meta Knight! You just can’t compete with little souvenir shops!”

With a wink and a smile, Ribbon skipped out of the room. Fae patted Meta Knight’s cheek, gave Dedede a quick kiss on his, and after squeezing Bandanna Dee’s shoulder, left.

“Shall I prepare the altar, Your Grace?” Bandanna Dee asked, wringing his hands together.

“Aw, there goes my exciting weekend!” Bandanna Dee exclaimed. “I was promised a sacrifice!”

“But haven’t you seen the movies?” Meta Knight asked. “The virgin being sacrificed is always a pretty, blonde Dreamlandic woman. You can’t sacrifice me.”

“We’re an equal opportunity evil cult,” Bandanna Dee replied. “We sacrifice all people regardless of their gender, race, or sexual orientation.”

Dedede lowered Meta Knight, so his feet touched the ground. But he didn’t release him. Instead, Dedede leaned down, brushed aside Meta Knight’s hair, and kissed the nape of his neck. “C’mon. Let’s go wander ‘round town and have fun. Jus’ the three of us. While the girls are out an’ Pipsqueak’s tryin’ to sweep the other pipsqueak off his feet. How’ll that do for yer plans, Dee?”

Bandanna Dee smiled, a gesture that—Meta Knight noted—looked sincerer than the tired, halfhearted grins that Bandanna Dee had been mustering up for them since Dark Nebula. “That sounds fun,” Bandanna Dee said.

"I still haven’t bought Kirby anything for Solstice,” Meta Knight said, sinking onto the bed, “And I just know he bought me something.”

“You’re his brother,” Bandanna Dee said. “Of course, he did.”

“So what do I get him?”

“Somethin’ pink an’ sparkly, obviously,” Dedede said. “Kirbs ain’t exactly the hardest man to shop for.”

Maybe not. But Meta Knight was probably the worst gift-giver in all of Dreamland.
Kirby Stellarum widened his eyes and stared at his reflection. He was thinking about what Susie had said about him trying white eyeliner. Would it really make his eyes look better? His mom wouldn’t like it, but she couldn’t really control what he did when he was at DLU. Only at home. Kirby wrinkled his brow and then leaned back. He tried emulating the way Meta Knight looked. That sort of effortless confidence. But the expression looked all wrong on Kirby.

*Knock, knock, knock*!

Kirby jumped and looked over his shoulder. “Come in!” he exclaimed.

The door opened, and Meta Knight peeked inside. “Good morning again,” he said.

Speak of Dark Matter! Kirby smiled. He had spent the past couple of hours worrying that his mom’s comment might have made Meta Knight avoid him. “Good morning,” Kirby replied.

Quick! Think of something to talk about.

Kirby self-consciously ran his hands through his hair, trying to tame some of its wayward fluff. “I, um, came back and went to bed after we talked,” Kirby said sheepishly.

“I did, too,” Meta Knight replied. “Dedede just looked so peaceful in the bed. I just couldn’t bear to wake him.”

“Oh.” Kirby paused. “Did you want to talk or something? You’re here, and you closed the door.”

“I think a better question is, what do you want from me?” Meta Knight said.

“Want from you?”

“As your sibling. Your brother. I feel like we need to have serious conversation about boundaries and acceptable behavior.”

Kirby plopped onto the bed beside Meta Knight. “Okay,” Kirby said, clasping his hands in his lap.
“What do—um—you want?”

“To be a tolerable brother.”

“Only tolerable?”

“I have no illusions about how awkward I really am,” Meta Knight replied. “I like to keep my goals reasonable.”

“I want you to touch me,” Kirby said. “I went my whole life without anyone but my mom being able to touch me, and she’s never been huge on physical affection. Then, I met you. You’re my brother, and I love you. And I guess you kind of like me. And that’s fine. I don’t expect you to love me, but could you…maybe try being just a little more affectionate?”

“Affection is too broad for me to make effective changes. Besides, when I try being affectionate, I do it wrong.”

“Are you really so bothered by what my mom said?”

Meta Knight paused. “She’s right, though. I don’t know any siblings who act the way we do. Maybe I’m doing it wrong. Maybe I need to do more research.”

“But we’re not talking about any siblings. We’re talking about us, and how we want to behave towards one another,” Kirby replied, looking at his lap. “And that’s how I want us to behave. You asked. But if you don’t want to do it, that’s fine. I…I wanted a sibling my entire life. I need other people to love me, okay? And I get the feeling that you…you need that, too. But you take a while to warm.”

“You think so?”

“I think you actively try to be cold towards people, so they don’t disappoint you,” Kirby said. “That’s why you never tell people everything you know. That’s why you won’t forgive Magolor or Marx and why you think the worst of Susie when she hasn’t done anything to you.”
“But—”

“And when you and I went to the palace together, most of the time I looked at you, you just…you looked so stony. Like you were afraid of me knowing what you might be thinking. And you don’t look that way around Dedede.”

“Well, I love Dedede, so—” Meta Knight cut off abruptly.

“I know you do,” Kirby replied, his shoulders slumping, “And I don’t blame you for the way you are. Dark Nebula treated you so badly. I can’t even imagine how…how terrible of a betrayal it must be having the childhood you did. I’m sorry. I thought that you liking me would be enough, but now, I realize that isn’t what I want. I want you to trust me.”

“I do,” Meta Knight said.

Kirby shook his head. “You didn’t tell me Susie was there when you went to see Dad.”

“How do you even know?”

“Does it matter?”

“That’s incidental,” Meta Knight replied.

“You wouldn’t tell me Dark Nebula was beating you,” Kirby said.

“We thought he was our father.”

“And?” Kirby asked. “And you don’t think I would have wanted to know that the man I thought was my dad, the only dad I know, beat you and hacked your hair off with a kitchen knife? You could have come to my apartment! You could have called me!”

“That’s not fair. I was trying to figure everything out.”
“Maybe,” Kirby replied. “But I just wonder what all else you haven’t told me about. I feel like you might like me, but you don’t trust me. I feel like you’re waiting for me to fail you like the rest of your family has. And you have this idea that we have to look like loving siblings rather than be loving siblings.”

“Maybe I am,” Meta Knight conceded.

Kirby hesitated. “You aren’t really all to blame, though,” he said. “I guess I just…you’re…”

“I’m what?”

“You’re the only family I have now,” Kirby said, “Besides Mom. I never even knew my real father. Our real father. My whole life, it was just Dark Nebula. And now that I’ve seen some of the affection Bikaia and Galacta Knight had for one another, I think I want that, too. Bikaia’s love for his friends is why we’re all here again. Can you imagine loving everyone that much? And waiting for so long, so many years, just to see everyone again.”

“I’m sorry,” Meta Knight said. “I’ve been such a failure.”

“You haven’t been a failure,” Kirby replied. “Promise not to return your Solstice present. That’ll be a good start.”

“You don’t think I’ll like it?”

Kirby slowly rose and dug through his backpack. He found the present, painstakingly wrapped in bright pink paper with a giant red bow. The wrapping paper had a mirror finish, and Kirby’s fingers left visible prints on it.

“You don’t have to give it to me now,” Meta Knight said. “I haven’t bought yours yet.”

“I know,” Kirby said, “But I want to.”
Kirby held out the box, and after a moment’s hesitation, Meta Knight took it, turning it over in his hands. With an awkward smile, Meta Knight shook the box. It made no noise. Slowly, Meta Knight unwrapped the gift. It was a pair of silver necklaces, a moon and a star linked together.

“They break apart,” Kirby said, rocking back on his heels. “They’re best brother necklaces. Well, not really. They’re more general purpose necklaces. Best friends, whatever. But I—”

Meta Knight snapped the star and moon apart. “So we each get one?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Meta Knight took the crescent moon for himself and latched the necklace around his neck. Then, he stood and clasped the star necklace around Kirby’s neck.

“I like them a lot,” Meta Knight said. “Thank you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

There was a knock at the door. “Come in!” Kirby said, his attention still on his brother.

When the door opened, Dom Woole strode in, bringing several pieces of luggage with him. “Lord Meta Knight, Lord Kirby,” he greeted. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Fluff!” Kirby exclaimed, a bright flush rushing to his face.

“His Royal Highness is downstairs,” Dom Woole said.

Kirby glanced at Meta Knight, who chuckled. “Shouldn’t you go greet him? Be a good host.”
Kirby’s face lit up, and he darted down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Once he reached the first floor, he found the crowd inside the foyer. Ribbon caught his eye and smiled. “What a dream boat,” Ribbon whispered, resting her cheek in her hand. “It’s so hard to find a man who appreciates nicely sculpted eyebrows.”

Kirby halted, unsure whether she was teasing him or if she, too, felt warm fuzzies any time she was in Fluff’s presence.

“Hey, there’s the pipsqueak!” Dedede exclaimed. “He sure came down here awful fast!”

Fae and Adeleine edged aside. Fluff stood by Kirby’s mom, who was all smiles. Kirby swallowed; he knew now that she didn’t like Fluff.

“Oh, Nova, that was all wrong, wasn’t it? He should have said hello or good morning. Anything except hi!”

Fluff laughed. “Kirby, it’s good to see you. I am deeply honored to accept your and Mrs. Stellarum’s hospitality.”

“He brought a lovely hostess gift,” Kristiana said, waving a hand towards a bottle of wine and a massive bouquet of flowers.

“Now, all we need’s Meta, an’ we can start divvying up the groups,” Dedede said, rubbing his hands together.

“The groups?” Fluff asked.

“Yes. For going into Cappy Town,” Fae replied. “I believe Ribbon, Adeleine, and I are going to have a girls’ day. And Mrs. Stellarum, you are, of course, invited to join us.”

Kristiana looked taken aback. “Oh. That’s very…nice of you girls, but I’ve actually already planned some errands for today. I really need to visit Biblio’s Library, and I’m sure you girls don’t
want to spend your day in some dusty, old bookstore.”

“Oh,” Fae said. “No worries!”

“An’ Mety, Dee, an’ I are gonna go Solstice shopping!” Dedede exclaimed. “Kirbs cain’t come with us ‘cause we’re buyin’ his Solstice gifts.”

Kirby’s jaw dropped.

“Ah, so I suppose I’ll need to entertain myself, then,” Fluff said.

“Yeah,” Dedede said, grinning.

Kirby was really regretting not giving Dedede the last piece of the strawberry shortcake.

Eyes wide, Kirby silently pleaded for Dedede to have mercy. Prince Fluff was so handsome and endearing that Kirby just knew he would look like a fool if left alone with the young prince for any length of time. But Dedede’s grin only widened, indicating a complete lack of mercy. Goddess, Meta Knight was in love with a monster.

“That’s right. You an’ Pipsqueak are jus’ gonna have to find something to do.”

Pupupu Village and Cappy Town were both coastal towns, about a mile apart from one another. Cappy Town was the tourist town with everything to see and do. Pupupu Village, on the other hand, was very tightly knit and offered little beyond the absolute necessities. When he was young, Kirby had mentioned that he liked going to Cappy Town, although Kristiana hadn’t let him go very often. It wasn’t safe; she’d always said. There was crime in Cappy Town that there just wasn’t in Pupupu Village, where everyone knew everyone and always had. But as Meta Knight looked around Cappy Town, he couldn’t see anything particularly dangerous about the place.

Dedede slipped an arm around Meta Knight’s waist and pulled him close. Meta Knight arched an
eyebrow and shot Dedede a look of mock-offense. Dedede only grinned. “C’mon, Mety Knighty, you ain’t gonna tell me I cain’t have both my boys close to me, are ya?”

“Both?” Bandanna Dee asked, squeaking as Dedede pulled him close, too.

“Yeah, both,” Dedede said.

“Somehow, I don’t think Meta Knight would be inclined to share,” Bandanna Dee replied.

“I wouldn’t be,” Meta Knight replied, attempting to sound sultry.

Dedede boomed in laughter. “Guess y’all are jus’ gonna have to fight to the death for my love.”

“I think Meta Knight and I should run away together and leave you behind,” Bandanna Dee. “I mean, just this morning, you were going to sacrifice him to your dark master.”

“So were you!” Dedede protested.

“I clearly lack the strength needed to subdue and sacrifice Meta Knight,” Bandanna Dee said, “Whereas you could probably break him in half.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dedede said, “Mr. I’ve-Been-Boxing-Since-I-Was-Twelve. Sure. You ain’t a threat at all.”

Bandanna Dee jokingly kissed his own bicep.

“Let’s be real,” Dedede said, “Assumin’ we’re all unarmed, if someone attacked us, you’d do the best outta all of us. ‘Cept for Meta’s magical powers.”

Dedede’s stomach growled suddenly, the sound disproportionately loud.
“Wow,” Bandanna Dee said.

“I suppose we’re going to find somewhere to eat, then,” Meta Knight said.

“Well, good thing there’s a restaurant right ahead!” Dedede exclaimed, pointing. “There we go! Kawasaki’s. Sounds good.”

Meta Knight shook his head. “I hope they have good desserts.”

They walked into the restaurant. It was a very warm-looking place with nearly every table occupied. A waitress greeted them and led them quickly to a booth. Kawasaki’s boasted foods from Dreamlandic, Halcandran, and Traumwaldian cultures, which was a rarity in most places. After everyone ordered, they were quickly brought drinks—sodas for Meta Knight and Dedede and hot mint tea for Bandanna Dee. “The service is pretty good,” Dedede said.

“It is,” Meta Knight replied. “I appreciate their attempts at incorporating Halcandran foods, too.”

“I know. I’m surprised you didn’t get the horchata,” Bandanna Dee said.

Meta Knight laughed. “Just because they’re incorporating Halcandran culture doesn’t mean they’re doing it right. I’m raising my eyebrows at their Traumwaldian beer, too. For five deden? I doubt it.”

“I didn’t know you drank beer,” Dedede said.

“The drinking age for beer is fourteen in Traumwald,” Meta Knight replied. “When Fath—Dark Nebula—when Dark Nebula was around, he used to take me to this brewery in Dark Palace. I used to drink it quite a bit. It was coming to the capital that turned me into a wine drinker.”

“We oughta go sometime,” Dedede said. “I’d love to see the places you grew up.”

“Would you?” Meta Knight asked.
Dedede smiled. “Of course, I would.”

Meta Knight ducked his head, vaguely embarrassed by how warm Dedede sounded. Instead, Meta Knight grabbed his phone and pulled up what he’d been looking at earlier—custom-made fleece coats in a variety of colors. “Kirby would like this,” Meta Knight said, showing Dedede.

“He would! You oughta get ‘im that,” Dedede said. “They’ll even tailor it to ‘im.”

Bandanna Dee looked at the phone and gave it an approving nod. “He’ll love it.”

Meta Knight nodded. He could get Kirby’s measurements from Fae and buy it later. The waitress arrived with their food. She placed a key lime pie before Meta Knight, a *tres leche* in front of Bandanna Dee, and chicken portabella before Dedede.

The key lime pie looked good, and it was buried beneath a mound of whipped cream, the way Meta Knight liked it. He put his fork down, but it didn’t budge. The crust was too thick and refused to give. Meta Knight blinked a few times, taken aback. This was a first. He liked thick crust, but he’d never encountered any like *this* before.

Dedede laughed nervously. “Is chicken supposed to be pink inside?” he asked. “Ain’t that, like, a sign it’s undercooked?”

Meta Knight looked over at Dedede’s dish and grimaced. “That looks like a good way to get salmonella to me,” Meta Knight said, “But then again, I’m not the best cook either.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt if they cooked it a little longer,” Bandanna Dee said. “You can always ask the waitress when she comes back. It does look a little rare.”

“True,” Dedede said, stabbing a mushroom.

Meta Knight returned to his battle with the pie crust. Unable to break it with his fork, he lifted up the whole slice and considered it.

“Something wrong with it?” Bandanna Dee asked.
Meta Knight took a tentative bite. That crust must have been made out of iron because it still refused to break.

“I think I might chip a tooth if I bite down any harder,” Meta Knight said. “I could kill a man with this!”

Dedede rolled his eyes. “It cain’t be that bad!”

Dedede wiped the edge of his steak knife clean on a napkin and brought it down on Meta Knight’s pie. The crust didn’t budge even when faced with a knife. Dedede furrowed his brow and tried sawing at it, but even a sharpened blade was no match for that unholy abomination.


“I don’t suppose anyone knows if tres leche is supposed to have a rock-hard layer of caramel?” Bandanna Dee asked, stabbing the alleged tres leche with a fork.

“That’s the most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen.” Meta Knight paused. “I should buy one for Magolor. He likes tres leche.”

“Meta, no. You already pushed yer fire-breathin’ wolf on him,” Dedede said. “Normally, I’d be on board with tormentin’ ‘im, but yer tryin’ to be annoying—not break the man!”

Bandanna Dee left his fork sticking upright in a layer of tres leche. Meta Knight winced. It was if all his Halcandran ancestors were crying out in pain from beyond the grave.

“I am so grateful I didn’t try their horchata,” Meta Knight said.

“But I don’ get it!” Dedede whispered. “If the food sucks, why’s it packed? I don’ really like Pipsqueak’s mom, but at least, she ain’t gonna try to poison us with ‘er cooking!”

The waitress walked by, a cheery smile on her face. “How is it?” she asked.
“It’s awful,” Dedede said bluntly. “I’m pretty sure I could do better blindfolded.”

The waitress raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t from around here, are you? Did you try adding salt?”

“Salt?” Dedede asked. “There ain’t enough salt in all o’ Dreamland that’d save this!”

Meta Knight put a calming hand on Dedede’s arm. “We’ll take the check,” Meta Knight said. “Do you know of another restaurant in town?”

The waitress shook her head. “Kawasaki’s is all we have, Sir.”

Dedede groaned. “You mean, you ain’t got no—”

Meta Knight’s phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket, frowning when he saw the name. Customer Service. Why would he be calling?

“Hello?” Meta Knight answered.

“Hello. Jecra has informed me that you’ve not yet made it to Traumwald,” Customer Service said. Seriously? “Did you call just to micromanage my vacation plans?” Meta Knight asked.

“No. I called to inform you that your father is awake. He wishes to speak to you.”

Meta Knight froze. “Awake?” he asked distantly.

“Yes. I thought you and Kirby might want to come see him.”

Go see father. Who was awake.
“Oh.”

“Would you like me to make travel plans for you?”

“No,” Meta Knight replied. “I’ll figure it out on my own.”


The line clicked. Meta Knight slowly lowered the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Dedede asked.

“Father is awake,” Meta Knight replied.

He would have to tell Kirby, so they could go back together. Meta Knight thought of Susie, and a sharp pang of guilt followed. He ought to call her. She would want to know.

*But he didn’t trust her.*

But she did care about Nightmare, didn’t she? And Goddess, hadn’t Meta Knight and Kirby had *so many* discussions about how he needed to be more open with people?

“What’re you gonna do?” Dedede asked.

Do it for Kirby. Call Susie and tell her that her Onkel Albtraum was awake.

Meta Knight sighed and scrolled through his contacts, his finger hovering over Susie’s number. She’d included it with the flowers she sent, and although Meta Knight hadn’t trusted her—and still didn’t—he’d put it in his phone. “I’m going to go home,” he said, “But first, there’s someone I need to call. I’ll meet you outside.”
Meta Knight swept from his seat and headed outside. His pulse quickened as the phone rang. He stood outside the restaurant and rocked back on his heels. Awake. Father was really awake.

“Hello?” Susie asked.

What was Nightmare going to be like?

“Susie, hello.”

What if he really hadn’t changed at all?

“Oh! Meta Knight!” Susie exclaimed. “What’s going on?”

What if Nightmare woke and was, somehow, still Dark Nebula?

“Father is awake. I thought you might want to know.”

There was a soft hitch of breath from the other end of the line. “Is he really?” Susie asked.

“Customer Service just called. Kirby and I are down south. Near the border with Traumwald. I’m going to let him know, and I imagine we’ll both come up.”

“I’m in Traumwald, too,” Susie said. “Dark Forest. How did you plan on getting back to Reverie?”

“I’ll probably drive up.”

“Ach, that’ll take hours! You should just let me pick you and Kirby up. It’ll be much more efficient!” Susie exclaimed. “We can go there by helicopter! Send me an address, and I’ll head right over. For old time’s sake!”
Meta Knight hesitated. It *would* be quicker going by helicopter. “That would be great,” he said.

“Super great! Text me your address, and I’ll be there ASAP!” she replied cheerily.

“Thank you.”

“Sure,” Susie said, “And thank you for calling. I really appreciate it, Meta Knight.”

Meta Knight forced a smile even though there was no one to see it. “It’ll be good to see Father again,” he said quietly.

But would it be? Or had he just traded one abusive father for another? Maybe it would have been better if Father hadn’t woken up at all.

Kirby led Fluff up Main Street, Dom Woole trailing them. This was where everything in Cappy Town was, along a three-mile stretch that ended at the ocean. Kirby remembered the street being a place of wonder and excitement, but now, with Fluff, it seemed somehow lackluster. Somehow, it just didn't seem good enough for the disenfranchised prince. “So there’s a lot of really cool stuff up this way,” Kirby said.

Maybe if he kept saying that, he could make it true.

“It has a very provincial charm,” Fluff said.

Provincial charm? Was that a good thing? Kirby had only heard *provincial charm* applied to places like Traumwald.

“It does,” Kirby said.
“Ah, is that a fortune teller?” Fluff asked.

The prince nodded towards a large, silk tent nestled against several other, less dramatic storefronts. “Oh,” Kirby said, “Yeah, that’s Mabel.”

“Is she a real fortune teller?”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard she’s incredibly powerful and her predictions very accurate,” Kirby replied. “But my mom never let me talk to her.”

“We should visit her,” Fluff said. “It might be entertaining—even if she’s a fraud.”

“Oh,” Kirby said. “Okay!”

Fluff was so handsome and charming that Kirby probably would have walked off a cliff if Fluff had asked him to. Kirby skipped ahead and pulled the tent flap open, adding an awkward, little bow along with it. Fluff smiled. “Thank you, peasant.”

Kirby’s heart gave an anxious, little flutter. When Dom Woole smiled and motioned for Kirby to enter, the nervous flutter intensified. Kirby entered and blinked rapidly, trying to adjust his eyes to the dim lighting. Mabel’s tent was covered in luxurious cushions of silk and satin, arranged in a circle with a table placed in their center. A woman, wearing a headdress and veil, sat cross-legged before the table. “Welcome,” she said, waving for them to be seated.

Kirby sat beside Fluff, while Dom Woole remained by the tent’s entrance, watching.

Mabel was a round woman with large, brown eyes and a good deal of eyeliner and mascara. She had a warm smile, emphasized by shimmery, pink lipstick. “Welcome,” she said, “To my tent.”

“Thank you,” Fluff said.

Mabel reached beneath her cushions and fished out a small, velvet bag. She poured it out, letting a myriad of bright, polished crystals fall onto the table. “I see you have come to me seeking wisdom,” she said.
“Yes,” Fluff replied.

Mabel hummed. “Yes,” she said, “I had sensed it.”

Fluff furrowed his brows together. “I see,” he said.

“I’m really excited about hearing what you have to say about my future!” Kirby exclaimed.

“I’m sure there’s a lot to say,” Mabel replied.

Kirby smiled and leaned forward eagerly.

Mabel breathed in deeply and placed her hands over her crystals. She closed her eyes and hummed. “I can see you aren’t from around here,” she said.

“Anyone could see that,” Fluff replied. “If you want to impress me, you’ll need to do better than that.”

Mabel’s eyes snapped open. “I see you’re a non-believer,” she said.

“I’m aware that many fortune tellers are frauds,” Fluff replied, “And that genuine foresight is a rare gift.”

Mabel laughed. “What a clever boy you are,” she said. “Now, I need us all to hold hands.”

Fluff rolled his eyes and held out his hand. Mabel didn’t hesitate in taking his hand. Kirby swallowed. If Mabel did have genuine powers, he might Copy them. Kirby took a deep breath and placed his hands in theirs—one in Mabel’s and one in Fluff’s. There was a sharp jolt between Kirby’s hand and Fluff’s. Kirby bit his lip, hoping the prince wouldn’t notice.

“I’m getting a name,” Mabel said. “I want you both to close your eyes and focus on a name.”
Kirby closed his eyes.

“Now, breathe in…and out. In and out. Clear your mind.”

Kirby tried. He imagined blankness and nothingness, just a colorless sea of quiet.

“And now,” Mabel said, “Tell me the name that came to mind. On three. One. Two. Three.”

“Meta Knight,” Kirby blurted out.

His brother, of course. He was the one person whom Kirby was most invested in trying to learn about and get along with. That answer made sense.

“Elise.”

Elise? Kirby felt a strange, sudden chill overcome him. It seemed to drift over his skin and sink down into his bones.

*Elise, in a dress of midnight blue velvet and silver trim, sat at his side. “It ain’t too bold of me to say that you’ve displeased me, is it, Your Royal Highness?” she asked softly.*

*It was too bold of her, but Bikaia hardly thought of that. It mattered only that he had upset her—not that she had dared to say he had. “How have I upset you, Lady Elise?” he asked.*

*He wasn’t certain if he was allowed to call her simply ‘Elise’ after everything his family had done to her. Her hair still hadn’t grown back from being cut off so short, and although they had faded substantially, Bikaia could still see the remnants of bruises on her wrists. He’d been chosen to travel to the Duchy of the Stars and negotiate the end of their feud with the royal family of Dreamland. Bikaia half-expected imprisonment to be awaiting him once he entered the Duchy. Just because Noven, the new king of Dreamland, was offering peace didn’t mean the Duke had to accept it. Bikaia swallowed around the lump in his throat when he thought of imprisonment. He didn’t want to be put in a cage again—even if Galacta Knight would surely be quick to free him.*
Elise’s eyes remained on Bikaia’s face as she touched his hand, gently pulling at one of his leather gloves. He hesitated. “I can’t control your powers,” Bikaia said. “I’ve tried once before and failed.”

“But you ain’t never tried with me,” Elise replied. “D’you truly believe I’d allow ya to come to some harm, Your Royal Highness?”

Bikaia swallowed. “I…I tried to help you and instead persuaded my grandfather to make you an indentured servant,” he said, “And his knights hurt you. My family waged war against your father and resulted in the deaths of so many people. Perhaps, I am deserving of some maltreatment. Were I in your position, I might be tempted to cause me some harm.”

“Do you truly believe that you carry any blame for all that’s passed?” Elise asked. “I would bid you be kinder to yerself, Your Royal Highness.”

“Thank you, Lady Elise.”

“Trust me,” Elise said, slipping the glove off his hand.

Bikaia trembled as she placed her hand in his, a small jolt passing between them. Frost crackled and formed where their hands met.

“You ain’t gotta fear my father, Your Royal Highness,” Elise murmured. “I know he’s gonna love you.”

Fluff abruptly dropped Kirby’s hand. “What was that?” Fluff asked. “Why did I see that?”

Kirby slowly looked towards the prince, who ran his hand through his hair, mussing the pale blue locks.

“Y—you saw something?” Mabel asked. “I—I mean, of course, you did.”

Fluff shivered and rubbed his arms. “That wasn’t my future,” he said. “That was Queen Elise and King Bikaia. That doesn’t make any sense. I’m not even Dreamlandic.”
Mabel tilted her head back and smiled. “You tell me,” she said. “Bikaia and Elise must have some relationship to you and your life.”

Kirby’s heartbeat quickened. Bikaia and Elise. Fluff had seen it, too. Kirby’s breath hitched as he looked at Fluff, his face still unnerved, anxious even. Was Fluff really Elise? As Kirby looked upon the Prince of Patch Land, was he also gazing upon the face of Bikaia’s once-great love?

“Fluff,” Kirby said.

Fluff’s face sharpened. His brown eyes fixed on Kirby’s face. “Bikaia…” Fluff trailed off.

Kirby slowly nodded. “Yes,” he whispered.

Kirby’s ringtone blared through the tent. Color flooded his face as he scrambled for the phone in his coat pocket. Meta Knight. “Sorry,” Kirby said, “I have to take this.”

Fluff shook his head, seemingly snapping out of some daze. “Of course,” he said.

Kirby left the tent and took a deep breath. This revelation felt, somehow, more shattering than any of the others. He’d found…he’d found Elise, Bikaia’s beloved wife and true love. The woman who had stood beside Bikaia through the wars early in his reign and later through Dreamland’s golden age. She was here, and she was Fluff!

“Fluff is Elise!” Kirby blurted out.

There was a stark silence from the other end of the line. “That’s…interesting,” Meta Knight finally said. “I didn’t quite expect that.”

“Neither did I,” Kirby said, “But I—I think I might…be okay with that. I…”

“We’ll have ample time to talk about it on our way to Reverie.”
Kirby frowned. “Reverie?”

Meta Knight sighed. “Father is awake. I thought you and I would go see him. If you don’t want to, I understand, but I assumed you would.”

His dad. His real dad was awake. Awake and waiting. “I’ll meet you back at the house,” Kirby said.

Fluff left the tent, looking shaky. Kirby gulped. Had Fluff drawn the same conclusion that he had? Did he realize the significance of what they’d seen? Kirby was too afraid to ask.

Susie Haltmann led the way, her heels clicking sharply on the hospital’s tile floor. Her long, magenta hair had been pulled back into a half-hearted, quick bun. It had been her day off; she’d explained. So she wasn’t looking as immaculate as usual. Kirby still thought she was cute, though, with her white, fleece coat and her petal-pink dress. Meta Knight followed in her wake, pulling out his earrings as he went and shoving them in his coat pocket. Kirby fidgeted his fluffy, pink mittens. Somehow, it felt as if they arrived at Nightmare’s room both too quickly and too late.

Kirby wasn’t sure what he’d expect when he entered—maybe some dramatic change—but no. Nightmare Nocturne looked the same as he always had, at least to Kirby’s memory. The wizard’s glasses were absent; his eyes were the same pale grey as Meta Knight’s, something Kirby hadn’t caught before. The lights were dim and cast warm shadows over Nightmare’s face. “Children,” Nightmare said.

“Onkel Albtraum!” Susie cried, rushing into Nightmare’s arms.

Nightmare started for a split-second before wrapping his arms around her. Susie buried her face in his shoulder and trembled as Nightmare rubbed circles on her back. “Susanna,” he murmured. “Hello, dearest.”

“I missed you,” Susie said, her voice muffled.

“I missed you, too.”
Kirby clasped his hands together and approached Nightmare’s bed. The wizard smiled, showing his too-sharp teeth. “Kirby,” he breathed. “Kirby Stellarum.”

Kirby bent over, shuffling in close to Susie and his dad. “Hi,” he said.

Nightmare hesitated but slowly reached out and squeezed Kirby’s hand. Even through the thick layer of pink wool yarn, Kirby felt the coolness radiating from his dad’s skin.

“Hello,” Nightmare said. “My boy, you look just like Meta Knight! I suppose you’re going to be my kleine Maus.”

Kirby didn’t know what that meant, but he smiled like he did.

Susie stood and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “It’s good to see you again,” she said, her voice quivering.

“Likewise,” Nightmare said.

A thick silence settled in the room. Nightmare cleared his throat. “Meta.”

Meta Knight hadn’t moved away from the door. “Vater,” he said.

A pause. “Es tut mir leid, kleine Fledermaus.” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight said nothing, but his breath made an awkward, little hitch. His hand fluttered a half-inch closer to Galaxia’s hilt.

“Komm her,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight shook his head and remained where he was. Kirby furrowed his brow and watched his brother. For a long moment, no one moved or spoke. It felt as if time had suspended around them,
as if they were all in a snowglobe and waiting to be shook up. Then, slowly and deliberately, Meta Knight crossed the room, sinking to his knees at his dad’s side, and when Nightmare beckoned for him, something inside Meta Knight seemed to break. He practically flung himself into his dad’s arms, his fingers twisting in the thin hospital gown. Meta Knight leaned his forehead against Nightmare’s shoulder and clung to his dad, as tiny, breathy sobs tore from his throat.

Kirby had never really seen this overwhelmed, emotional side of Meta Knight before. There was something solemn and vulnerable about it, and Kirby watched, transfixed by this unfamiliar sadness. Nightmare slowly threaded his slender fingers through Meta Knight’s hair.

“You’re all grown now,” Nightmare said, “And I missed it.”

Meta Knight lifted his head from his father’s shoulder. “Did you…did you ever love us, Father?” Meta Knight asked, his voice shaking.

Nightmare’s face fell. “You know,” he said.

“Yes.”

“About Dark Nebula,” Kirby said. “We both know.”

“I’m talking about Star Dream,” Meta Knight said.

“Star Dream?” Kirby asked. “What is that?”

Nightmare’s grey eyes flickered to Susie. “It’s an old mistake,” Nightmare said. “I never wanted any of this to happen, and I know that I can’t just apologize and fix it. For what it’s worth, Meta Knight, I did love you. All of you. And I will never forgive myself for ruining the family we all could have had. But you don’t believe me, do you, Meta?”

“No,” Meta Knight replied.

Nightmare nodded. “I don’t suppose there’s any way I could prove it to you, is there?”
Meta Knight unsheathed Galaxia and held her in his hands with a sort of respectful reverence. “There is one way,” Meta Knight said, “But I shudder to think what she’d do to you. Even if you’re sorry, you aren’t a good man, Father.”

Nightmare’s fingers twitched forward, and for a second, Kirby thought his dad really might touch the sacred sword. But Nightmare’s hand closed nearly a foot away from Galaxia’s blade.

“I can’t,” Nightmare said.

Meta Knight held Galaxia close to his chest, one of her prongs brushing his jaw. Kirby thought the ruby in her crossguard might be pulsing softly, perhaps in time to Meta Knight’s own heart. “Clearly,” Meta Knight replied.

“Meta—”

“Ich kann nicht...iche habe niemals—” Meta Knight’s voice wavered, and without warning, he swept from the room.

“Where are you going?” Susie shouted after him.

There was no answer.

Kirby froze and looked between his dad and brother, torn between staying with the father he had never known and following the brother he had grown to love.

“He’s right to be angry with me,” Nightmare said. “I’ve really done some unforgivable things, and I’ll have to do many more before this is all finished.”

“Is it too late to save my father?” Susie asked.

Nightmare remained quiet for a long moment. “I’m not sure,” he finally admitted. “Star Dream was never meant to be used by your father.”
“I don’t—I don’t understand any of this,” Kirby said.

Nightmare shook his head. “Neither does Meta Knight. Once I’m discharged, I’ll have to get you both together and discuss it all, and then…” Nightmare trailed off.

“And then?” Susie prompted.

Nightmare’s face was pitying. “And then, I’ll have to ruin your father, Susanna.”

Dark, clad in a long off-the-shoulder gown made of red satin, emerged from the dressing room. He swept around, twirling the skirt. The neckline was scandalously low; Dark could see the top of his newly soft breasts. And bare shoulders! He had made himself into the most beautiful creature he could possibly devise—high cheekbones, elegant facial features, wide eyes, and thick, curly brown hair. Why, Dark’s mother would have launched into a fury if she’d been able to see him, then. Dark spun and smirked at his companion.

Daroach grinned lazily. He was dressed in a blood-red shirt with black trousers and an elegant, wool coat that reached his calves. Dark much preferred Daroach’s Scarlet Magician regalia, but this attire was passable. And Daroach had unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt, displaying a tempting clavicle. My, Dreamland was such a magnificent realm with such a wonderful sense of aesthetics! “You’re missing something,” Daroach said.

“Oh?” Dark asked, turning back to the mirror.

Daroach pulled a long, glittering strand of diamonds seemingly from midair. “For you,” Daroach said, fastening the choker around Dark’s throat.

“Beautiful,” Dark said, raising a hand to the necklace. “Oh, you have such wonderful taste, darling!”

“You, too,” Daroach said, tracing his hands down the curves of Dark’s soft, round shoulders. “You
“But the body is fine?” Dark asked. “I don’t need to accentuate the bosom a little more? Taper in
the waist?”

“Nonsense,” Daroach replied. “You can’t improve perfection, Your Majesty.”

Dark threw a dramatic hand over his eyes and fell backwards. He had anticipated on Daroach
catching him, but the thief went even further. He caught Dark and swept him off his feet. “Oh,”
Dark purred, wrapping his arms around Daroach’s neck. “Aren’t you a charmer?”

“I’m afraid you were so beautiful I simply couldn’t resist you.”

Dark grinned and pecked Daroach on the cheek. “For all your help, darling. Remind me to reward
you extravagantly later.”

Daroach’s easy smile faltered. The thief gently placed Dark upon a chair, which he immediately
settled imperiously into.

“Dark, I need you to be serious for a moment,” Daroach said.

need to slaughter someone for you?”

Daroach dropped to one knee and reached into his coat. The thief drew out a black jewelry box.
Dark would have laughed or teased, but Daroach’s face was too serious for that. Tentatively, Dark
took the box and opened it. His breath caught in his throat. Dark dropped the box, letting the too
familiar silver and sapphires fall to the floor.

“I’m sorry I upset you,” Daroach said, dusting off the collar.

“Where did you get this?” Dark asked.
When Daroach offered the collar again, Dark snatched it away and held it close to his chest. “It’s your father’s, isn’t it?” Daroach asked.

Dark nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said.

“I was asked to steal this for a client,” Daroach said. “This collar belonged to Nightmare Nocturne, and I stole it. That’s when I first met Meta Knight. But knowing this item’s past, I don’t know if I can—in good conscience—give this to her. If I want to dabble in dark magic or dark artifacts, that’s my business, but I would never want some innocent person hurt because of me.”

“Will your client be angry with you?” Dark asked.

“I’m sure,” Daroach said. “She’s a powerful woman with a lot of connections.”

Dark smiled and placed a soft kiss on Daroach’s cheek. “I can put my alchemists at making an exact replica of this,” Dark said. “It won’t bear the same powers, but I’m certain we can mimic its magical signature.”

“Can you?” Daroach asked.

“Most definitely,” Dark said. “Illusions are our specialty in the Mirror World. I’ll make sure your client is happy, darling. It’s the least you deserve for being such a gentleman.”

“Only for you, Your Majesty.”

Dark smiled and stroked Daroach’s long, silver hair. “Will you be joining me at the Solstice Ball?” Dark asked, his voice as smooth as silk.

Daroach grasped Dark’s right hand and kissed his knuckles. “Why, I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Daroach said. “It’ll be a night to remember.”

Dark’s eyes lit up, their new golden color becoming bright and luminous. “Most definitely.”
Meta Knight kept to Dedede’s side, occasionally shooting glances towards his boyfriend. This was their first function together as boyfriends. With a warm burst of affection, Meta Knight leaned over and rubbed his cheek against Dedede’s shoulder. Dedede chuckled and wrapped his arm around Meta Knight’s shoulders. Kirby trailed them, feeling awkward and stiff in his tuxedo. The clothes were beautiful and well-made; Kirby just wasn’t used to dressing for formal occasions. “C’mon, Pipsqueak! You can have the other side,” Dedede said, beckoning with his free hand.

Kirby laughed. “I think I’ll stay over here beside Meta.”

“Rude! Clearly, y’ain’t got no taste!”

“No taste?” Meta Knight asked.

Dedede swore. “Misplayed that, didn’t I, schnookums?”

“Oh, yes,” Meta Knight replied.

“Oh! Meta Knight!” a charming, crystalline voice drifted through the air.

Meta Knight looked towards the voice and found a Halcandran woman. She was stunningly beautiful with thick, dark hair that fell over her slender shoulders. Her scarlet gown was off-the-shoulder and displayed a modest amount of cleavage.

“Who is that?” Dedede asked, halting in his tracks and forcing Meta Knight to stop with him.

“I have no idea,” Meta Knight said.

“She’s hot. Don’t s’pose you’d change yer mind about sharin’ your boyfriend, my sweetest, dearest, bestest Mety Knighty?” Dedede asked, grinning.

Meta Knight arched an eyebrow beneath his mask. He dropped Dedede’s arm. “So that’s how it is,”
Meta Knight said. “Perhaps, *I* will go greet her, then, while *you* make all those boring introductions, *Your Grace*.”

Dedede didn’t have the grace to look ashamed. Instead, he leaned forward and placed a quick kiss on Meta Knight’s cheek. “Doncha stay away for too long,” Dedede said.

Meta Knight rolled his eyes and crossed the walkway. The woman’s red lips curled into a sly smile at his approach. “Why, aren’t *you* handsome?” she asked.

He still had no idea who this was. “Thank you,” Meta Knight replied, “My Lady.”

There was no way of knowing if that title was high enough for her.

“You don’t recognize me?” the woman asked, her eyes widening. “Why, imagine not recognizing your own date!”

“My date?” Meta Knight asked. “You—you must have me mistaken for someone else.”

“Oh, no. You *are* going to be my date and get me admittance into the Solstice Ball. If you refuse, I’ll just be forced to create some *unsupervised* mischief,” the woman purred. “Wouldn’t you be distraught if someone caught you engaging in *most* ungentlemanly behavior?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t it be dreadful if I borrowed your face and did something shameful with it? Vandalize the throne room, maybe? Steal Bikaia’s coronation portrait?”

“Dark?”

“Now, you understand,” Dark replied, smiling, “So why don’t you be a gentle*man* and escort your *lady-friend* inside?”

“Not a chance.”
Dark stepped so close that his chest pressed against Meta Knight’s armor. “Careful,” Dark said, his eyes lighting up in excitement. “You’re a stubborn man, but I’m very good at wearing people down. I’ll ruin you, darling. But be my dearest friend for the night, and you need not worry. That’s not so terrible of a request.”

“Cute,” Meta Knight said, “But all I really have to do is tell the Queen’s knights that you’re here and masquerading as someone else.”

“Do it, and I’ll drop all your clothes in the castle moat.”

Meta Knight barely kept his jaw from dropping. He would have tolerated Dark dropping a lot of his things in a moat, but his clothes were not one of them. Most of them were custom-made and tailored for him. Those couldn’t be replaced, and because most of Meta Knight’s clothes came from Dedede or Delilah, many of them had sentimental value, too. “The castle doesn’t have a moat,” Meta Knight replied dryly.

Dark’s smile was sharp. “Mine does,” he said in a sing-song voice. “You might succeed in having me thrown out, Meta Knight, but I sincerely doubt even Alera’s dear Queen’s Guard is capable of subduing me.”

“I might be, though,” Meta Knight replied.

Dark clapped his hands together and laughed. “Oh, please, do. Please, pull out your sword and threaten an unarmed party guest,” Dark said. “Attack the beautiful lady in her Solstice gown.”

Meta Knight grasped Dark’s arm and called his dimensional powers to him. Dark’s eyes narrowed, calculating. The world rippled around them, shifting and wrinkling. Meta Knight pushed through, and they arrived in Delilah’s apartments. Meta Knight unsheathed Galaxia and pressed her tip against Dark’s chest. Dark’s face settled into a pout. “Get out,” Meta Knight said.

“And here I thought you’d make this easy for me,” Dark said.

“Not a chance.”
Dark’s appearance shifted, the gown fading and making way for black armor. He drew a sword and moved into a fighting stance. “I’ve already beaten you once,” Dark said.

“I had fractured ribs, and we are not going to fight in—”

Dark raised his blade and swept Galaxia aside. He lunged forward, his sword aimed for Meta Knight’s neck. Meta Knight moved into a fighting stance and parried the blow with lightning-quick speed. Dark disappeared and reappeared several feet away. He paused and unsheathed his wings, extending them to their full, impressive length. His wings struck a table, sending it and its contents toppling onto the floor. Glass shattered, and wood thudded on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Dark asked. “Does the duchess have you on such a tight leash that you’re unwilling to fight?”

“I don’t need to fight. You need to leave!”

Dark laughed. “Make me!”

Dark vanished again. Meta Knight clenched his jaw. He reached out with his dimensional powers, feeling for the changes in the air. There! He turned around and caught Dark’s blade the second he reappeared. Meta Knight flicked his wrist, trying to disarm Dark with one of Galaxia’s prongs. Dark’s blade went flying, but his wing struck out. The force knocked Meta Knight’s back, the claw-tip of Dark’s wing slicing through Meta Knight’s cheek. Dark retrieved his blade and swung hard, forcing Meta Knight down to one knee.

Meta Knight vanished suddenly. Dark stumbled at the sudden loss of resistance, and Meta Knight reappeared just as Dark regained his balance. Dark’s parry was too slow to prevent Galaxia’s glancing blow along his arm.

Dark spread his wings and with two powerful strokes, flew backwards. A loveseat tipped over. The Mirror Worlder smirked. “To second blood?” Dark asked.

“Get out!”

Dark swooped forward. Meta Knight, who had no experience using his wings in battle, darted aside, knocking over a table. Dark brought his sword down on Meta Knight’s shoulder, but Fae’s
well-designed armor turned the blade. Meta Knight swiped at Dark’s chest, but before Galaxia could land a blow, Dark leveled a sharp kick to Meta Knight’s face. Meta Knight stumbled back, dazed. With a fierce swipe of his wing, Dark knocked Meta Knight to the ground. Dark was on him in an instant and brought his blade down. Meta Knight caught it with his hand, his armor taking the damage of the blade’s edge. Dark punched Meta Knight with his free hand, the blow sending a dull thud through his skull.

“Surrender?” Dark asked.

“Not on your life!”

Meta Knight struck Dark in the jaw with the flat of Galaxia, and taking advantage of the moment, Meta Knight managed to flip Dark over and force him beneath him. “And now what?” Dark asked gleefully. “I’m at your mercy, darling Meta Knight. What are you going to do to me?”

“You can leave at any time!” Meta Knight snapped.

Dark lifted his head and before Meta Knight could stop him, sank his teeth into Meta Knight’s neck. Pain blossomed above Meta Knight’s shirt collar. He grasped a handful of Dark’s hair and tried to force his teeth away and back.

“What are y’all doing?” Delilah’s voice cut through the air as sharp as a knife.

Meta Knight froze.

Dark laughed and pulled his teeth free. “Sorry, darling, but I’m not staying and taking a beating with you!” he exclaimed. “You’d better run!”

Dark vanished. Meta Knight awkwardly scrambled to his feet. When fighting Dark, he hadn’t realized just how much damage they’d caused to the room. The rug beneath him was spackled with blood and mud, a framed photo and a vase had broken on the floor, furniture was overturned, and—during some point in the fight—Queen Elise’s famous portrait had been knocked free of her place on the wall.

Delilah pinched the bridge of her nose and drew a shuddering breath. Meta Knight winced.
The Duchess of the Stars walked past it all and into the kitchen. “Pick it up,” she said quietly.

Of course, he would. He’d made part of the mess. That wasn’t nearly as bad as knowing he’d disappointed her. Meta Knight sheathed Galaxia and left the duchess’s chambers in search of a broom. He felt like this mercy was really undeserved.

The first few minutes of the Solstice Ball were lovely. Kirby took Meta Knight's place of following Dedede around, as he greeted everyone. There were men in elegant tuxedos and ladies in stunning gowns. Kirby was introduced to them all, but although everyone was friendly, he floundered with remembering their names. There was a vast selection of finger foods, brought by friendly waiters, and Kirby had resolved to try them all. "Kirby Stellarum?"

Kirby nearly choked in his haste to eat a cheese-covered cracker. Sir Waddle Doo stood before him.

"Whatcha want?" Dedede asked, crossing his arms.

Waddle Doo smiled tightly. "Her Majesty requests Kirby's presence."

Dedede's jaw dropped.

"Immediately," the knight continued.

"Mine?" Kirby asked.

"I'm coming, too," Dedede said.

"No, you aren't," Waddle Doo said, beckoning for Kirby.
"Why can't I? What's she gonna do?"

"Her Majesty isn't going to murder him, Your Grace," Waddle Doo said. "There's no need to be so concerned."

The knight took Kirby's arm and led him towards the ballroom entrance. Dedede scowled and followed them. "If she does anything to make you uncomfortable, you walk right back out, pipsqueak," Dedede hissed.

"I will," Kirby said, although he knew he wouldn't.

He shivered as Waddle Doo led him to the parlor. Kirby's knees felt weak as he gazed upon the Queen of Dreamland, clad in her Solstice red, and sitting on a loveseat that probably cost more than he would ever make in his life. She was beautiful, possibly the most beautiful person Kirby had ever beheld. After Waddle Doo closed the door behind him, Kirby remained frozen for a few seconds. The Queen tilted her head towards him and laughed. "Are you afraid?" she asked. "You've nothing to fear from me. It's a pleasure to meet you, Kirby."

Kirby dropped to his knees and bowed his head. His stomach lurched and turned flip-flops. This was the Queen of Dreamland; he was going to pass out, face-first, on the carpet.

"Please, sit by me," Alera said.

Kirby stood and sat on the loveseat as far away from her as he could. She passed him a glass of red wine and clinked hers against it. Kirby's fingers curled around his glass as if his life depended on it. "Y-you asked to see me, Your Royal Highness? Your Majesty!" Kirby stammered.

She smiled indulgently and moved closer to him. "I did," she said. "I've heard that you have a very rare gift."

The Queen wore opera gloves; Kirby's breath hitched as he wondered if she was purposefully trying to protect herself from him. "I guess," Kirby replied, "But I don't really know how to use Copy. It isn't really all that useful."

Alera took a slow sip of her wine. "That could be remedied with proper training," she replied, "Which I could personally provide you."
“Oh.”

“Poor thing, I’ve made you nervous, haven’t I? Relax. Try the wine. It’s a very good vintage.”

Kirby anxiously eyed the glass, trying to emulate the refined elegance that Meta Knight always seemed to have when he drank wine. Kirby swirled the glass a bit and took a careful sip. The wine was disgusting. Too sour and tangy, and it burned somewhere in his nose. How did Meta Knight manage to drink this?

“It’s great,” Kirby lied.


Sweet Nova, what did she give her dishonored quests? “I don’t know that I’m really an honored guest,” Kirby said.

Alera laughed. “Of course, you are! You helped defeat Dark Nebula and saved Dreamland. Surely, that warrants you some honor to your name, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Kirby replied. “But I mean, I didn’t do it all alone. My friends and I did it all together.”

“Yes,” Alera said slowly, “But I think you ought to give yourself a little more credit, Kirby. After all, you have Copy, don’t you? What incredible potential!”

Kirby smiled hesitantly. “I do,” he replied, “But I can’t really use it yet. I’m still learning how it works.”

“Why, that’s all the more reason to accept my offer,” Alera replied. “You know, Kirby, I very rarely take on students. But I would make an exception for you.”

But why? Kirby bit his lip. This was a great offer and one that people didn’t often get; even Kirby,
who knew far less about royal politics than his friends, knew that. But this woman had been so cruel to his friends. Meta Knight, who had better control of his magic and was the Wielder of Galaxia, hadn’t gotten this offer. Alera hadn’t helped Dedede or Delilah or Bandanna Dee. She might have stolen Patch Land from Fluff and ruined Drawcia’s career. This was the last person Kirby Stellarum ever wanted to teach him anything. And yet this was the most powerful woman in Dreamland, so he needed to be polite to her.

“I appreciate that,” Kirby said, “But really—I mean, I really don’t have any interest in learning how to use my powers.”

Alera’s smile faded, replaced instead with something like bewilderment. Then, understanding. “I see,” she said. “You come from a place where a gift like yours is not celebrated as it should be.”

“That isn’t it,” Kirby replied. “I would just rather focus on art and spend time with my friends. I don’t need to use my powers. I don’t want to be a hero.”

“Kirby, I would consider someone like you for Queen’s Guard,” Alera said. “The magnitude of your gift is…incredible. I’m sure you realize that the last person to have Copy was King Bikaia.”

“I’m no King Bikaia,” Kirby said, “And I’m sure I never will be.”

“I disagree,” Alera replied.

“Well, I’m just not interested. I’m sorry,” Kirby said. “I appreciate it a lot, but right now, all I really want to do in my life is be an art student.

Alera took a sip of her wine and narrowed her eyes. “I’ve never had anyone refuse this offer before.”

“I’m sorry. I want to accept, but I’m just not ready for that sort of commitment,” Kirby said. “I don’t need to learn to use my magic.”

“Is your refusal related to something Meta Knight has said about me?” Alera asked.
Kirby looked at his wine, as if it might tell him what to say.

“I see,” Alera replied. “That’s a pity.”

“He’s my brother. I love him,” Kirby said. “I always will.”

Alera shook her head. “Poor boy. You’re so ill-prepared for the world. Your family are only deserving of your loyalty if they can be advantageous. If not, they should be cast aside, like anything else,” Alera said.

“I can’t do that,” Kirby said. “I will never do that, and…I won’t even consider your offer until you put Meta Knight on Queen’s Guard.”

Alera grimaced. “Queen’s Guard? He doesn’t have the skills to be on Queen’s Guard.”

“Why not?” Kirby asked. “He—he has dimensional powers. Those are rare, aren’t they? He’s the Wielder of Galaxia, and he helped defeat Dark Nebula, too. We even have the same father! He’s far more skilled than I am and smarter than I am.”

Kirby reflexively took a sip of wine, even though it tasted badly. Alera glared at him, and Kirby fought to hold her gaze unflinchingly. There was only one reason Alera hadn’t had this same conversation with Meta Knight, and they both knew it.

“If you can’t accept Meta Knight, you’d never be able to accept me,” Kirby said quietly, “And that’s not even getting into Bandanna Dee and Dedede.”

Alera’s smile was very dangerous. “We’ll see, Kirby. Perhaps, you’ll come to see reason.”

He wouldn’t. Not if seeing reason meant abandoning his friends.

“You’re dismissed. Sir Waddle Doo, please, escort Kirby Stellarum back to the ballroom. Once you have, please, inform Susie that I’m requesting her presence.”
“Certainly,” Waddle Doo said.

Kirby stood. He wasn’t sure whether he ought to take the wine or not, but his hand seemed to have curled like a vice around it. He didn’t look at Waddle Doo as the knight escorted him out.

“She’s a little intense, isn’t she?” Waddle Doo asked, once they were far from the Queen’s parlor.

Kirby reflexively took a sip of the wine before remembering how terrible it tasted. “She scares me,” he said quietly.

“She scares us all,” Waddle Doo replied. “For what it’s worth, she’s wrong about family. You should be loyal to your family…even if it isn’t necessarily advantageous. I’m learning that now.”

“Bandanna Dee would like to hear you say that.”

Waddle Doo hesitated. “I know,” he said. “I—I wanted to tell him that in person, but he isn’t here tonight.”

“You should come see him,” Kirby said.

Waddle Doo nodded. “Maybe after Solstice. Before school is back in session. I’ll…I’ll make things right, then.”

“Bandanna Dee would like that.”

Waddle Doo stopped by the ballroom entrance. “I know,” he said.

Kirby bit his lip. "You're a knight, so you're honorable, right? You have to keep your word."

Something, perhaps pain, passed over Waddle Doo's features, but he nodded all the same.
"Then, give me your word," Kirby said. "Promise me you'll talk to Bandanna Dee."

Waddle Doo hesitated for just an instant. He audibly gulped. "I promise," he finally said, "Until then, just... take care of him for me, Kirby. And be careful. There is a lot of chess being played in the palace."

Kirby furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

Waddle Doo didn’t answer. He only smiled and squeezed Kirby’s shoulder. “Enjoy yourself,” he said finally, before turning heel and walking back down the corridor.

Kirby bit the inside of his cheek, unsure what to make of it all. Slowly, he entered the ballroom, but neither Dedede nor Meta Knight were anywhere to be found. Kirby lingered against the wall, trying to find his friends, but to no avail.

Further down, another man leaned against the wall. He was an adorable man with dark blue hair and dark eyes. His armor was silver and blue; the design was strange and overdone, like something from a cartoon. It was large and bulky, quite different from the sleek, streamlined designs that most people wore. Beyond that, Kirby couldn’t say anything intelligent about it. He was sure Meta Knight would’ve had a lot to say, though.

The man tilted his head towards Kirby and smiled. “Hi! I’m Gooey!”

Kirby smiled back. “Kirby,” he said. “I like your hair.”

Gooey’s face lit up. “It’s just like my hero’s!”

His hero’s? Kirby wondered what famous person had dyed their hair blue. Maybe he was a big fan of Prince Fluff. Warmth rushed to Kirby’s face. He hadn’t seen Fluff since Cappy Town, since they’d both realized he was really Elise.

Elise with her wide, love-me blue eyes. And the way Bikaia’s heart had raced when he looked at her and spoke to her and how nervous he’d been that he might have upset her...
Kirby shook his head, as if he could shake away his thoughts of Elise. “Who is your hero?” he asked.

“King Bikaia!” Gooey chirped. “I had to come and see his portrait unveiled tonight!”

Bikaia didn’t have blue hair, but Kirby decided not to mention it.

“Right, his coronation portrait,” Kirby said, paling at the thought of those horrid glass boots.

“Exactly!” Gooey exclaimed. “That’s the whole reason I came!”

Kirby nodded. “That’s as good of a reason as any,” he said.

Gooey nodded enthusiastically. Then, he paused and wrinkled his nose. “Say, Kirby? Does your tongue fit into your mouth? Just normally?”

That was…an odd thing to say. “I think so,” Kirby said.

Gooey laughed. “I just think tongues are strange,” he said.

Kirby thought Gooey was a little strange. But still cute and charming. And if Kirby couldn’t find his other friends, spending time with Gooey seemed like a good way to pass the night. He was a good way to take one’s thoughts off Queen Alera.

Meta Knight stood and glanced at Delilah, who had settled onto a sofa after having thrown away a heap of broken glass. She tilted her head back and gazed up at Elise’s portrait, mercifully undamaged and returned to her place over the mantle. Meta Knight looked at the rug beneath his feet, now unstained and pristine once more.

*Of all the people you know, she’s the most likely to accept your apology,* Galaxia murmured.
Of course, she was. Delilah would forgive him whether he deserved it or not.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” he said quietly, as he turned to face her. “I’ve been very careless and very ungrateful, considering everything you’ve done for me.”

Delilah sighed. “It’s fine, pet. At least, you ain’t snortin’ cocaine off Countess Mace’s wedding portrait or nothin’.”

“Has…has that happened before?”

“Once.”

Meta Knight hesitated. After a few seconds, he sat beside Delilah and clasped his hands with hers. “There’s something else,” he said, “And it might take me a few tries to word it properly.”

Delilah’s face softened. She leaned forward, accompanied by the rustling of scarlet taffeta and the scratching of lace. “Okay, sweetheart. Take all the time y’need.”

“We might be here all night.”

“That’s fine.”

“I—I’m sorry that Alera made you take care of me.”

Delilah leaned back, something strange and wary crossing her face. “Excuse me?”

“When I was a baby,” Meta Knight said. “I’ve known for a little while. I just couldn’t find a way to mention it.”

“Who told you that?” Delilah asked.
“Sectonia,” Meta Knight replied, “And I wanted to thank you but also apologize. Alera had no—”

Delilah pulled her hands free. At first, Meta Knight thought he’d worded it wrongly and upset her, but instead she pulled him into a tight hug. He hesitated only an instant before he relaxed in her embrace.

“It was you!” she exclaimed. “I knew it. That’s why Bikaia and Elise were there.”

“Bikaia and Elise?”

“It’s—it’s a long story, Meta, but what Sectonia told you cain’t be the whole truth. I didn’t—I didn’t understand it for the longest time, but knowin’ who you are…”

“Will you tell me?” Meta Knight asked gently.

Delilah shivered and nodded, although she looked close to tears. “Part o’ what I’m gonna tell you is a secret, though. You cain’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.”

Delilah clasped her hands in her lap and smiled as if she was enjoying some private joke. Then, she began.

Delilah left the sounds of King Daedalus’s Solstice Ball behind her, letting the laughter and music melt away like snow before the first breath of spring. The duchess walked silently down the empty corridors. She thought of Dedede, spending Solstice all alone. He was a small child, too small to realize he’d been left alone, but Delilah still felt a pang of guilt. But orders were orders. Alera didn’t like children underfoot, so she’d insisted that royal children be raised far from the capital and far from her. The one exception was, of course, the princess, but Alera was notably hands-off when it came to her daughter. Delilah wished, not for the first time, that Daedalus was just a little more assertive when it came to his young bride.
But perhaps, he felt he didn’t have that right. Daedalus was unable to have children; Sectonia wasn’t his child. Maybe he felt he had no say in Alera’s treatment of children, including the future Queen of Dreamland.

As Delilah turned a corner, she nearly ran into a young woman. “Oh! I’m terribly sorry,” the woman said.

There was something odd about how she spoke, but Delilah couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. And she didn’t recognize the woman. She had long blonde hair and wore a Bikaian era dress made of dark green velvet. The woman was probably a tour guide of some sort. During Solstice, there were always all sorts of reenactments and tours going on.

“It ain’t no problem,” Delilah said, shrugging.

The woman’s face brightened. “Ah! You’re a woman from my region!”

Delilah smiled. “Yer from the Duchy of the Stars?”

The woman tittered in laughter. “I know I don’t sound like it,” she replied. “I fear I’ve lost my accent over the years. It’s my husband’s fault. I spend too much time with him, and he has that old-fashioned capital accent. And Dreamlandic has changed so much over the centuries!”

Delilah nodded. Her cousin Dahlia had spent a lot of time away from the Duchy of the Stars, and her accent was barely noticeable.

“Speaking of, I can’t seem to find him,” the woman said. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen him? He’s a very handsome man. Soft brown hair, a fair face, blue eyes that just make you melt. Or perhaps, that’s just me. He’s a very lovely creature.”

Delilah decided that this woman, whoever she was, clearly didn’t realize she was speaking to a duchess. That was fine. Sometimes, it was nice to talk to people who weren’t constantly watching themselves around her.

“Maybe I can help ya find ‘im,” Delilah said. “I’m pretty familiar with the palace.”
“Would you?” the woman asked, linking her arm with Delilah’s. “That would be just wonderful! I fear he'll find some mischief if I’m not at his side.”

Delilah blinked a few times, taken aback by the young woman’s enthusiasm. Everything grew sort of fuzzy, then. Dimly, Delilah thought it was strange that she was so passively following this unfamiliar young woman, but these doubts were quickly assuaged. They were in the palace during the largest celebration all year; security was dramatically heightened. Delilah had nothing to fear.

And even when the woman took a passage that Delilah had never even seen before, she still couldn’t muster up enough strength to be afraid. Finally, they stepped into a room. White walls, concrete floors. Delilah furrowed her brow. How had she gotten here? She struggled to grasp the foggy pieces of her memory. They had arrived in A.M.B.E.R.’s headquarters, the most secure place in the whole palace. Delilah darted for the door behind her, but it wouldn’t budge. Her blood ran cold as reality began to sink in all at once. Did she have her phone? Yes. She could call for help!

“I, your beloved wife, have returned,” the woman announced. “How discourteous of you to leave me behind! Have you forgotten the last time you went somewhere without me? Why, Dark Matter Swordsman nearly slaughtered you!”

Slowly, Delilah turned around. When her panic abated a little, she realized she wasn’t alone with the woman. There was a man in intricately etched silver armor and a blue cape there, too, standing before a cradle. Why was there a cradle? This wasn’t a place for children.

The man looked up and turned around, moving very fluidly despite his armor and heeled boots. His eyes were a cold blue, their frigidity at odds with the warmth and softness of his face. “Please, forgive me, my sweet Elise! You know I would never stray far from your side.”

“I have held your heart for a long time,” Elise mused. “Perhaps, I’ll forgive you, my sweet pet. I did meet this lovely lady, after all.”

“Oh, yes,” her husband said.

Elise’s face glowed with pride. “She’s one of mine, Bikaia.”

“Why, if she’s one of yours, she’s also one of mine, isn’t she?” Bikaia asked.
“She’s mine,” Elise said, laughing. “Claim your own descendants, Bikaia. Keep your greedy hands off mine.”

Bikaia? Elise? Delilah stared wide-eyed at them. This couldn’t really be happening.

Elise strode lightly across the holding cell and placed her hand on Bikaia’s chest. He smiled and hummed, looking as if Elise’s lightest touch was a pleasure greater than words. Delilah decided that she was dreaming. But dream or no, it was still Bikaia, the greatest king Dreamland had ever known, and Elise, Delilah’s own noble ancestor. Delilah knelt and bowed her head. And was that low enough? She had never in her life imagined that she might ever meet someone like Bikaia. Delilah shifted her weight, moving so that her forehead touched the cold tiles. A sharp shiver ran through her. Somehow, even that still didn’t feel like enough.

“You need not do all that,” Bikaia said cheerily. “Please, come see the baby. He needs your devotion far more than I do. I’m a dead man.”

Slowly, Delilah rose to her feet and stepped towards the crib.

The baby was round and pudgy with thin wisps of blond hair and autumn-brown skin. Delilah smiled and gently ran a thumb over his tiny fingers. The baby’s eyes were open and dark in color, muddy and unsettled; they might emerge as gray or blue or brown.

“The poor thing is colicky,” Bikaia said. “I can scarcely believe the child was left alone like this. To cry and wail alone in some forgotten room.”

Elise’s face softened in sympathy; she squeezed Bikaia’s hand. “You’ll find her again,” Elise said, “And when you do, you can make sure she’s never lonely again.”

Bikaia’s breath made a little hitch. “You’re going to leave me soon, Elise.”

“No, not for long. I promise you that.”

Delilah swallowed around the lump in her throat and tentatively stroked the wisps of blond hair on the tiny head.
“You’ll take care of him, won’t you? I couldn’t bear it if my mistress was left alone again,” Bikaia said. “To be broken and hurt in the dark and the cold. I failed her once. My heart would break if I failed her again.”

Mistress? Bikaia had never had a mistress. As far as historical records showed, he had loved only his Queen and had, indeed, been praised for his exceptional devotion. Bikaia was faithful to his wife during an era when royal men often weren’t.

The doors behind Delilah opened. She started and then spun around. Delilah froze when she saw who stood at the room’s entrance: King Daedalus and Queen Alera. “What are you doing here?” Alera asked, her voice harsh.

The baby began wailing at the sound of Alera’s raised voice. The Queen rolled her eyes and scowled as if it was the baby’s fault that he had been startled. Bikaia and Elise were gone, leaving Delilah to fend for herself. “I…I was following Elise,” Delilah said.

“Elise?” Daedalus asked. “Queen Elise?”

“Yeah, Queen Elise, Your Majesty.”

Delilah lifted the baby from his crib and held him against her breast, gently bouncing him. He kept crying, but Delilah would rather the child cry against her breast than in that crib. Bikaia was right. It wasn’t fair that this little one had been left alone, crammed and forgotten in the corner of some empty cell, like any common criminal taken into A.M.B.E.R. custody. This little one needed love and attention.

The Queen stormed forward. “That baby is in A.M.B.E.R. custody,” Alera said, “Give him to me.”

Delilah glanced towards Daedalus, silently pleading him to intervene. Maybe she was being a bit irrational. It wasn’t as if Alera was going to hurt a baby. Still, Delilah’s hands shook as she handed the boy over, and Delilah’s hurt twisted when Alera held the child all wrong.

“You gotta support his head, Alera,” Delilah said. “His neck muscles ain’t developed well enough to support its weight yet.”

Alera scowled and didn’t adjust the way she was holding the child, who kept wailing at her. “It’s
Your Majesty,” Alera said.

“You gotta support his head, Your Majesty.”

“It’s not really going to hurt him,” Alera replied.

Delilah wondered if Alera was pressing the issue just to bother her. Dreamland’s new queen was so petty that Delilah didn’t doubt it.

“Maybe you should let Delilah hold him, though,” Daedalus said. “She does have more experience taking care of children.”

Alera scowled. “Take him, then,” the Queen said. “She has more experience with dirty blood, too.”

Delilah took the baby and held him once more against her chest.

“Alera, you sound like your parents. This idea that the royal bloodline is becoming too diluted is just absurd,” Daedalus said. “Why, Dedede is still from the line of King Bikaia and Queen Elise! How better of a line could he have? And Bikaia himself wasn’t a pure-blooded Dreamlander. If the greatest king Dreamland knew can be the son of a chambermaid, why, I think it’s perfectly acceptable for the future Duke of the Stars to be the son of a Floralian man.”

“Bikaia didn’t have half the kingdom doubting the strength of the monarchy,” Alera said stiffly. “He saved Dreamland from war, slaughter, and Dark Matter. The Dreamlandic people feared his power.”

“I don’t think it’s detrimental that our citizens are critical of us,” Daedalus replied. “Mace, if you recall, was a huge advocate for citizens’ rights to criticize the monarchy. She and Elise wrote the law preventing the royalty and nobility from punishing citizens who criticized them.”

It was just a tiny disagreement, one Daedalus and Alera had countless times, but Delilah saw the opportunity in it. “He’s crying,” Delilah said. “He’s colicky and needs someone to give him attention. You cain’t just leave him alone. That ain’t right.”
Indecision flickered in Daedalus’s eyes. He knew nothing about babies or what supervision they needed. Royal children were raised by nannies, away from their busy parents. Except for Delilah, who had raised Dedede by herself and continued to raise him, save for the rare times when she was forced to attend capital functions.

“Can I take ‘im?” Delilah asked. “I know how to raise children.”

Daedalus rubbed his chin. “That’s really up to Alera,” he said.

Delilah knew that already. She’d hoped he would help, though. “Surely, it would be less of a headache for y’all,” Delilah said, “If I jus’ took ‘im and took care of ‘im. And it’d make Elise happy.”

“You keep saying Elise. Do you expect us to believe that Queen Elise rose from the grave and insisted you care for this brat?” Alera asked, crossing her arms. “He’s nothing.”

“Not alone. Bikaia was ‘ere, too. And he is something. This is someone’s baby! Someone’s whole world!”

And Bikaia’s name had power. Hopefully, that would persuade them if Elise wouldn’t. If it wouldn’t, Delilah didn’t know what she would do. Leaving this baby alone wasn’t an option.

“Bikaia,” Alera said flatly. “I think you’ve had a little too much to drink, Delilah.”

“Why would I be ‘ere in this room if someone didn’ show me here?” Delilah asked. “I’m sure ya got some guards outside the room. Ask them if they saw me. An’ when they say they didn’t, then, what? You know I ain’t got magic. There ain’t no—”

“Look at the floor,” Daedalus said.

Delilah frowned and turned around. The concrete had frosted over, the glass covered in crystal-like floral patterns. It hadn’t been before; it wasn’t even cold enough to freeze inside the cell.

“Queen Elise had ice magic,” Daedalus said, sounding awed.
“So do many people presently living in Dreamland,” Alera replied dismissively.

“Magic shouldn’t even work inside these cells. I doubt any sorcerer off the street could accomplish such a feat. And why would Delilah—firstly, know—but secondly, why would she care to try and steal away a child she knows nothing about?” Daedalus asked. “Unless you’re implying, Alera, that A.M.B.E.R. is so poor at keeping their information classified that word of this child spread this quickly in one night?”

Alera’s face reddened.

“Clearly, there is some magic afoot here,” Daedalus said, “But it is my personal opinion that we should give Delilah the child.”

“Fine!” Alera snapped. “Keep the baby if you want him! Nova knows you’ll never be able to have another one.”

“Alera!” Daedalus exclaimed.

Alera stormed away. Once she was gone, Daedalus sighed and smiled apologetically. “I had just learned he was in a holding cell. I persuaded her to get him and take him to one of Sectonia’s nurses. Alera didn’t like the idea, of course, but…I suppose this works out. If you’re fine with taking him. I trust you.”

Nova knows you’ll never be able to have another one.

Delilah swallowed past the lump in her throat.

“But that didn’t change anything. It didn’t change that she couldn’t have more babies. It didn’t change that Daedalus was infertile, too, but he was fine because no one ever found out about his. No, Delilah alone had taken the fall for being unable to have children.”
“It’s fine,” Delilah said. “I have my heir, and you have yours.”

Nova knows you’ll never be able to have another one. No more babies. None except for Dedede and this little one, and she would only get him for so long. This baby was in A.M.B.E.R. custody, and eventually, he’d be given back to his parents or put into foster care. She wouldn’t get to keep him. He was a borrowed baby, likely taken from his own doting mother.

No more babies. All because her body wasn’t working right. And why couldn’t it? If she’d been able to have babies, none of this would’ve happened. She could’ve married Daedalus. They could have made an arrangement like Daedalus and Alera had, and no one would have ever known. Now, Delilah was lonely and subservient to Alera, and there would never be any more babies. Really, Delilah just wanted to break down crying, but she had too much pride to do it with Daedalus watching. She forced back her tears.

Daedalus looked pained. “Of the many mistakes I’ve made, I regret most of all this one,” Daedalus said. “I should have said something.”

Why couldn’t he stop talking? He was making it worse.

“You couldn’ have an infertile wife. We both know the nobles wouldn’ stand for you overlookin’ all their eligible children for me. They’d have dug an’ dug until they took yer throne,” Delilah said. “Y’know Alera was already tryin’ to take it from you.”

No more babies. No more heirs. No royal or noble man would ever want her because she couldn’t have his children. She’d saved Elise’s line, but that was it.

Daedalus slumped against the wall. “Maybe if…no. You’re right. She would have. I had hoped making her my Queen would placate her, but it’s done the opposite. I was such a fool.”

“You were only tryin’ to do what’s best for everyone,” Delilah said.

Nova knows you’ll never be able to have another one.

The best for everyone. The best for Dreamland. That was why everyone knew about Delilah’s infertility, and no one knew about Daedalus’s. No one but Delilah and presumably Alera.
Daedalus smiled feebly and nodded towards the baby. “You’ll have to keep a close eye on that little one. Every time I had my head turned, he kept going for my rapier.”

Delilah’s lips curved into a small smile. Why couldn’t he just stop talking? “Sounds like you,” she said.

Daedalus laughed. His eyes sparkled. “How strange,” he said. “I was going to say it sounded like you.”

Nova help this poor baby if it was anything like her. Delilah really couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“And that’s how I found you,” Delilah said, gently brushing Meta Knight’s hair from his face. “I took you to my chambers an’ took care of you like you were my own kid. You were a terror, crying and screaming all the time, ’cause you had the colic. I lost so much sleep over you. It was kinda funny ’cause Dedede was the sweetest, quietest baby.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t be,” Delilah said. “I—I was happy to do it. To take care of you. I even started tryin’ to learn some Halcandran to talk to you. I thought maybe yer mom or dad spoke it. I didn’t know how long I was gonna have you and didn’t want you losing that. I wasn’ very good, but I tried. And when they took you back, I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. I let ‘em take all the stuff I’d got ya, but I don’t know if they kept any.”

“I—I never…” Meta Knight trailed off.

“Don’t be upset,” Delilah said. “There’s a lot uh things I regret in life, but takin’ care of you never was one of them. Okay? All I ever wanted was to be a mom an’ have a lot of kids. I liked gettin’ to take care of you for a year, ‘specially since Alera didn’ want me to keep Dedede around.”

Meta Knight curled his hands over hers.
“At the risk of sounding terribly saccharine,” Meta Knight said, “I—I don’t know if I have a mother somewhere in the world. Maybe she’s alive. Maybe she’s dead. Maybe she just doesn’t want me. But I was wondering if I could—maybe—call you something besides Your Grace.”

“I’ve only asked ya that for years,” Delilah said.

“I know. Just maybe…I could address you as my mother until I find her. Maybe I could call you Mama. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Delilah said, kissing Meta Knight’s cheek just beneath his mask. “I’d let you call me that all day long.”

Meta Knight shyly stood and offered his arm. “May I escort you to the ball, Mama?”

Delilah stood and linked her arm with his. “You can do that anytime you wanna,” she said.

“Oh, if it isn’t Kirby Stellarum!”

Kirby paused his conversation with Gooey, as Meta Knight’s friend—the gorgeous woman in the red dress—approached. She held out her arms and winked. “If you touch me—” Kirby began.

“You’ll copy my powers? And? Dance with me!” she exclaimed, taking Kirby’s wrist and sending a sharp jolt through it.

Gooey drew back from them, looking as if he’d been burned. Kirby frowned, unsure what had upset Gooey so. He didn’t have much time to think about it, as Meta Knight’s friend pulled him onto the dance floor.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Kirby said, shooting Gooey an apologetic smile.
“That’s all right,” the woman purred, winking conspiratorially. “I’m certain our darling will interrupt us before long.”

Kirby frowned and uneasily tried copying her movements. Something strange had happened. The world seemed sharper, brighter, and lighter. He blinked rapidly, trying to adjust his vision. When Kirby chanced a glance up, his eyes caught sight of the brilliant, crystal chandelier. Images seemed to flash between the elegant slivers of glass. The woman laughed. “Did you discover something?” she asked.

“I—”

“Shadow calls that power mirror,” the woman said.

Kirby’s jaw dropped. This wasn’t a woman at all. “Dark!” he exclaimed.

“Caught,” Dark replied.

“What are you doing here?” Kirby asked.

“Causing a bit of mischief,” Dark replied. “Nothing much.”

Kirby stumbled, wincing as he stepped on the hem of Dark’s dress. “Sorry.”

“Poor creature,” Dark said. “You need not fret about that.”

They spun slowly around the dance floor, clearly off-beat to the fast-paced music, but Dark, who was clearly a gifted dancer, didn’t seem to mind.

“May I cut in?” Meta Knight asked, seemingly appearing from nowhere.

There was a cut over Meta Knight’s cheek and a red mark peeking above the collar of his blue, silk shirt that hadn’t been there before.
“Oh. Darling,” Dark said. “How many lashes did that earn you? Or is the good duchess more likely to use a cane?”

Meta Knight rolled his eyes. “None,” he said.

“None? Is she going to punish you later?”

“She made me clean up the mess we made,” Meta Knight replied.

Dark raised a hand and caressed Meta Knight’s cheek, right over the cut. “Sorry, darling. I panicked.”

“Uh huh.”

Dark held his hand out. A sleek, black box dropped into his palm. “I can fix this. I bought this for you!” Dark exclaimed. “Happy Solstice, happy birthday!”

“Thank you?” Meta Knight replied, sounding concerned.

Meta Knight took the box and carefully opened it. Inside, there was a choker of made of dark blue velvet. A small moon-shaped charm made of a sleek, opalescent stone dangled from the fabric. “Oh! It’s really pretty,” Kirby said.

“It is. Thank you,” Meta Knight said.

Dark swiped the choker from the box and moved behind Meta Knight, clasping it around his neck. “You’re welcome!” Dark replied. “I saw it on a corpse and immediately thought of you. Don’t worry. I cleaned out the bloodstains!”

“Oh. Wonderful,” Meta Knight said. "You could have helped me clean Delilah's rug."
“Do you like it?” Dark asked, slipping two fingers beneath the choker and Meta Knight’s throat. “I made sure to get the length right.”

“It’s lovely,” Meta Knight said. “It almost makes up for the fact that you thought I was going to be beaten and left me.”

Dark shrugged his slender shoulders. “What can I say? I’m a survivor.”

Dedede swooped in and wrapped his arms around Meta Knight’s waist from behind. “Hey, good looking,” Dedede said.

Dark smirked. “Thank you.”

“It’s Dark,” Meta Knight said dryly.

“Oh,” Dedede said. “Nice bod. You’re lucky Alera didn’t make this one of those parties where she wants everyone on suppressants.”

“I can think of worse fates than being stuck in this beautiful body,” Dark replied, trailing his hands over his hips.

Kirby felt Gooey hovering behind him and waved for him to join his other friends. “Everyone,” Kirby said, “This is my new friend Gooey!”

“That’s me!” Gooey exclaimed.

“So Pipsqueak found another Pipsqueak, huh?” Dedede asked, extending a hand. “All we gotta do now is tear Fluff away from the food, an’ we’ll have the whole Pipsqueak set.”

Kirby looked towards the food. His heart raced when he found the familiar blue head, seemingly engaged in a deep conversation with Duchess Delilah.

“Nice to meet ya! I’m Dedede, Heir of the Stars.”
Gooey brightened and enthusiastically shook Dedede’s hand with both of his. “You’re the descendant of King Bikaia and Queen Elise!” Gooey exclaimed. “What an honor!”

“Well, it is pretty great,” Dedede said, puffing out his chest.

Meta Knight shook his head. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Never,” Dedede said, draping an arm over Meta Knight’s chest.

“Good evening!” Sectonia exclaimed.

Everyone looked towards the balcony where Sectonia, microphone in hand, stood with Queen Alera. The queen’s eyes seemed to look straight at Kirby, staring down deep into his soul. A cloth-covered object was wheeled out beneath the balcony, just at the edge of the ballroom. Both Garlude and Waddle Doo stood beside it.

“Oh!” Gooey exclaimed, clapping his hands together in excitement. “Bikaia!”

Dark chuckled, the sound low. “Oh, Bikaia, indeed,” he said.

“Every year during the Winter Ball, it is our tradition to unveil King Bikaia’s coronation portrait,” Sectonia said. “Bikaia took the crown when Dreamland was being ravaged and torn apart by war, and through his courage and perseverance, he brought Dreamland into her golden age. Without his efforts, Dreamland would not have a fraction of the prosperity she has today. Bikaia showed us that we can flourish even out of the darkest, and so tonight, on the longest night of the year, I ask you all to join our noble Queen and myself in welcoming the coming new year.”

The room erupted in applause as the scarlet silk fell away, but the portrait revealed wasn’t of Bikaia. It was of Dark, clad in heavy, ermine-trimmed robes. His shirt was unbuttoned and showed off abdominal muscles that looked too perfect to possibly be real. At Dark’s feet, a crowd of people fawned over him. One of them was the spitting image of Queen Alera. Kirby’s jaw dropped.

Gooey shrieked.
“What did you do?” Meta Knight asked, turning to Dark, who smiled.

At first, neither Sectonia nor Alera seemed to realize anything was wrong, but they figured it out quickly. Sectonia leaned over the balcony and gazed down at what should have been the most famous portrait of her most esteemed ancestor.

Laughter echoed through the room, breaking through the shouts of surprise. Crystals clinked together. “Hello, Dreamland!”

Kirby’s head jerked up. The Scarlet Magician stood proudly atop the crystal chandelier.

“Oh, my hero,” Dark sighed. “I might faint from the excitement of it all!”

The Scarlet Magician tipped his hat. “Do you like my little trick?” he asked. “I thought it appropriate considering your recent maltreatment of the noble King Dark of the Mirror World.”

There were a few scattered whispers. When Kirby looked at the Queen, her face was red.

“Good luck finding Bikaia,” the Scarlet Magician said. “Tah!”

Without warning, the lights went out, leaving the room in darkness. Light flared beside Kirby. Galaxia’s blade was alight with flames and lightning. But before anyone could do much else, the lights returned. The Scarlet Magician was gone.

“Find him!” Alera roared, her voice booming over the microphone.

“Dark, she’s going to kill you,” Meta Knight said, his voice straining.

“Let her try,” Dark replied. “If you’d heard the vile, racist things she said, you’d have done something, too.”
"No, I wouldn't have," Meta Knight argued.

"But surely, you've thought about it," Dark said. "The only reason you haven't is because she's the Queen. I don't hear you saying she doesn't deserve it."

Meta Knight shook his head. "And you won't hear me say it. But be careful, Dark. You don't know her like I do," he said.

"I know."

“Bikaia?” Gooey asked.

“It’s all right!” Kirby said. “If you like Bikaia, I can give you a tour of my university! It used to be his castle!”

Gooey brightened. “His castle? Yes!”

Before Kirby could explain about his magic, Gooey clasped Kirby’s hand and bounced eagerly up and down. Sparks jolted up Kirby’s hand, taking some unknown power. Gooey either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “I can’t wait! Can we be friends now? The power of friendship is the most powerful force on the planet!” Gooey exclaimed.

“Of course, it is!” Kirby agreed.

Gooey pulled Kirby into a hug so enthusiastic that Kirby couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well,” Dedede said, “Any chance I can get a copy of that portrait with some…uh, modifications?”

“Why?” Dark asked.

Dedede smirked and shot Meta Knight a sly look. “Y’know. Partly to commemorate the occasion. And partly because I was just thinkin’ I’d like to have a giant picture of my boy—”
“Dedede, no,” Meta Knight said flatly.

Dark grinned. “Dedede, yes.”

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