A chance encounter leads to the formation of Japan's newest super-team. But between government conspiracies, an evil sorceress, aliens and a time-traveling assassin, do they even stand a chance?

A crossover between the DCU and more Anime and Video Games than I can count. But especially Gurren Lagann, Final Fantasy XIII, Xenoblade Chronicles, Madoka Magica, Code Geass, Fate/Stay Night, Kingdom Hearts, and Fullmetal Alchemist.
Issue #1: A Fight At The Museum!

Chapter Notes

**This story is dedicated...**

To those who wrote badfics that they later regretted. Only by seeing your mistakes did I realize I had to look outside of myself.

To those who wrote good fanfics. Only by trying could I ever learn to succeed.

To Linkara, who taught me to love (and hate) comic books.

To Grant Morrison, who taught me that idealism, comic book weirdness and serious storytelling don't need to be mutually exclusive.

Author’s Note: Dialogue that is meant to be characters speaking english is written <like this>. Everywhere else, the characters are assumed to be speaking Japanese.

[FRONTCOVER: A dynamic groupshot, where the main characters are fighting suits of animated armor. The title reads “A Fight at the Museum!”, and a caption informs the reader that this issue is “NOT A DREAM! NOT AN IMAGINARY STORY!” Featured most prominently are Simon the Digger, Lightning Farron, and Shulk. Simon is clutching a drill, and ducking under a samurai armor’s katana, Lightning is parrying the same blade, and Shulk is slicing a suit of european armor in half. Meanwhile, you can see Shinji Ikari in a dress suit backing away from another suit of armor brandishing an axe, about to strike him while a girl with orange hair tries (and fails) to pull the Axe away]

“Congratulations, child.” said the man “In just a few short weeks, you’ve robbed me of my fleet, robbed me of my dignity, and robbed me of my daughter’s heart. It’s only fair that you should rob me of life.”

The boy remained silent.
“Come now, what’s wrong?” said the man. “I’m the one who took everything from you. Your home, your dreams, your family… you should have every right to wish me dead.”

Yet the boy remained silent still.

“What is it that you want, then? A fair trial? Justice? Any judge with a sane mind would give me the death penalty for what I’ve done, assuming your government doesn’t keep me alive to try to steal my secrets. But I could always escape. No, I would always escape, because every time you would refuse to put an end to it. And I would become your shadow, haunting at every turn. For years and years your existence will be such, denying you the chance to put down your sword for fear of losing your loved ones. And then one day you’ll slip, and you’ll be at my mercy. And then I will ask you a simple question. Why? Why didn’t you kill me? Why—"

*SNAP*

Simon the Digger jolted awake to find himself staring into the flower-shaped pupils of Nia Teppelin, his girlfriend and former princess of the Spiral Kingdom.

“Si-mon! Don’t tell me you’ve fallen asleep again!”

“Oh. Sorry, dear.” Simon said. “I kinda had trouble sleeping last night.”

“Well that is what happens when you stay up all night playing video games.”

“Guilty as charged.” Simon chuckled softly.

Nia gave Simon a wistful look. “Conscious or not, I’m glad you came anyway.” She twirled around, giggling. “I’ve been wanting to see this exhibit ever since I was a little girl! I can’t believe it actually came all the way to Tokyo!”

“Yeah, its... really great.” Simon held back a sigh. At the end of the day he wasn’t all that interested the Garrett Memorial History Museum, even if there was an exhibit on King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. He figured that King Arthur (assuming he ever existed in the first place) was probably a pretty cool guy, but seeing all those weapons and pictures on display like that was just kind of boring. If given the option, Simon would much rather be doing something exciting, like attending a monster truck rally, fighting a supervillain, skydiving, or fighting a sentient monster truck supervillain while skydiving (“Man, wasn’t that a weird day?” Simon thought to himself as he pondered that particular memory). Plus, Simon always worried that a supervillain would try to steal something and that he would end up getting blamed for the collateral damage.

The fact that the only way he could get in was through a formal party for the exhibit’s opening didn’t help things. Simon never knew exactly what to wear to formal events; as far as he was concerned, a blue jacket over a loose, white shirt was all the clothes a guy needed. So he panicked and pulled out the first thing that caught his eye; a golden tuxedo that he swore Kittan gave to him as a joke. Nia thought it looked fine, of course, but then again she’d probably say the same thing if Simon was wearing a gorilla suit. She’s funny like that.

“Are you okay?” said Nia. “You seem a bit… what’s the word? ‘high-strung’?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.” Simon lied. “It’s just a bit stressed, that’s all.” That much, at least, was true. Trying to juggle being a superhero and running a repair shop is no easy feat, especially when you don’t have superpowers or a secret identity to fall back on.

“I know you work hard, Simon. But life isn’t all about patching oil leaks and punching
supervillains. You need to take it easy every once in awhile.” She gently took Simon’s hand. “You know as well as I do that Kittan and the others can handle the shop just fine…”

“Yeah…”

“...and if a disaster breaks out somewhere, you can leave it to Super Young Team.”

Simon’s eye twitched momentarily. “Y-yeah,” he said. “They’ll do just fine.” He considered turning his cell phone back on, but ultimately decided against it.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar voice called out. “Nia? Ohmygosh, Is that you?!”

Simon and Nia turned to find a dark-haired young woman with purple eyes in a frilly red dress waving at them.

“Lyra?” said Nia.

“I knew it! It is you!” the other woman said. “I mean who can forget hair like yours? It’s even more beautiful than I remember it! Ohmygosh, it’s been like, what? Three years?”

Nia’s face glowed with a flash of recognition. “LYRA!” she shouted, seizing her into a full-body hug. “I thought I would never see you again!” Tears of joy streamed down the Nia’s eyes.

“Ha ha, not so tight, Nia.” said Lyra. “Everyone’s staring at us. It’s probably making your boyfriend jealous.”

“Oh, sorry.” Nia backed off, and brushed off her dress.

“So... is this someone I should know?” said Simon.

Nia smiled. “Si-mon, this is Lyra, remember? From the book club?”

“Oh, right.” vague memories of the two swam to the surface.

“So I’m guessing you're finally done with your tour of Europe?” said Nia.

“But of course!” Lyra smirked. “I had a magical time there, I can’t wait to tell you all about it!”

“Well, I don’t want to get in the way of this reunion.” said Simon, “How about I go get us drinks while you two catch up with each other?”

“Fruit punch for me, if they have it!” said Nia.

“I prefer a champagne, if you please.” said Lyra. “And don’t worry, I’m not going to steal away your girlfriend or anything.”

Simon smiled. “Alright, you two lovebirds have fun. I’ll be right back.” As he walked away, he thought he could hear Nia say something along the lines of “Why would he be afraid of you kidnapping me?” Followed by a hearty laugh from Lyra.

Simon looked around the room for a bit, until he finally found a young man in a white suit with messy red hair carrying a tray of champagne glasses.

“Nice tux.” Said the waiter.

“Ha ha, very funny.” Simon replied.
“No, I mean it. It actually looks really nice with your blue hair.” He pointed at Simon’s unkempt mop with, as far as Simon could tell, absolute sincerity.

“Uh... right.” Simon took a glass, and began to hand the young man a tip, only for him to refuse.

“No thanks, I don’t actually work here.” The young man said. “I’m just filling in for the guy who does.”

“Oh.” Simon considered forcing the issue. But as uncouth as he was, Simon was vaguely aware that probing the psyche of random waiters is not something you typically do at these sort of events. So he did his best to ignore his instincts and left to try to find the punch, assuming there was any to begin with.

As he continued to search through the crowd of rich people in formal wear, he noticed that security was a good deal tighter than he expected. Rather than your standard rent-a-cop, the guards stationed around the perimeter of the exhibit hall were much more professional-looking, standing to attention with firearms concealed in such a manner that civilians wouldn’t notice them but would be obvious to anyone with any kind of combat experience. Their sunglass-hidden eyes were hawkishly eying the guests as they passed. He approached one of them, a short young lady with fire-engine red hair.

Simon examined the stylized, trident-shaped emblem on the guard’s uniform. “Yep, just as I thought.” he said to himself. “Black Knights. Someone must be pulling out all the stops today.” the guard pulled down her shades to glare at him, prompting Simon to take his leave. “But that doesn’t make sense, those guys are supposed to fight supers. What are they doing here?” Simon looked down at the floor as he lost himself in thought. “Are they expecting a villain to show up?” he asked himself. “But if so, why did they go ahead with the party? Or maybe they’re not expecting anyone in particular. Maybe they’re just here to protect someone impor-”

Simon soon got an answer to his question when he crashed right into a well-dressed gentleman, sending his glass crashing to the floor.

“Oh, sorry about that, mister-” He began to say, when suddenly a pink-haired woman in a black suit shoved a very large pistol right into his face.

“We have a possible 10-31 in progress.” she said into her comlink. “Prime Minister is safe for the moment. Squad alpha, pattern delta. Squad beta, charlie, standby for further instructions. Over.”

“Wait, did you say the prime-?” Simon began to say.

Ka-click! The woman flipped the safety off her gun.

“Ah-ha... I’ll shut up now.” the young man gulped.

“Please calm down, Inspector Farron, Simon here is a national hero. Even if he did want to kill me, I’m sure he’d do something more clever than fall flat on his face.” Simon looked up to see the Prime Minister extending a hand towards him. He was wearing a big smile, the kind only a politician can keep for any length of time.

“Uh. Thank you, mister Ikari.” Simon said, blushing with embarrassment as he picked himself up off the floor.

“Please, call me Gendo.” said the Prime Minister. “I believe this is the first time we’ve met?”

“Yeah... I guess it is.” Simon glanced nervously at the woman’s gun, which was still pointed at his
face. “Say, I don’t mean to be rude, but can you ask your bodyguard to-”

“Certainly. Please put the gun down, Inspector.”

The bodyguard sighed as she holstered her weapon. “False alarm. Code green.” she said into her commlink.

“You’ll have to excuse her. She’s a bit jumpy, but I assure you she’s only worried about the safety of my son and I.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Simon scrambled to figure out how to continue the conversation. “So uh... your son... his name is...”

“Shinji.”

“Yeah, Shinji. How’s... he doing?”

“He’s still not talking to people, if that’s what you're asking,” Gendo’s smile fell. “It appears he still hasn’t learned to cope with his mother’s death.”

His face turned towards the far wall, where a teenage boy was moping in front of a display of medieval tapestries depicting ancient battles, trying his best not to be noticed by anyone.

“Poor kid...” Simon thought to himself. “It’s not his fault that his mother couldn’t control her powers. And to survive an explosion that leveled a city block....”

“He looks lonely.” Simon’s mouth said before his brain caught up with him. “Doesn’t he ever hang out with kids his own age?”

“After a decade of moping, you’d think so, wouldn’t you? But the sad truth is that he just doesn’t seem to want to.” Gendo shook his head. “I’m not sure if he’s being isolated by others who harbor anti-meta resentment, or if he’s purposely isolating himself because he’s afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of himself, obviously. And what he might become if he ever lost control.”

Simon racked his brain in an effort to come up with something positive to say. “…but... but that’s ridiculous, right?” he said. “Even if he did inherit the meta... thingy, aren’t the odds of ending up with the same power, like, one in a-”

“He’s metagene positive. We tested him as right after the incident.” Gendo paused to let this sink in. “And given how ingrained the incident was in his psyche, if he does develop powers they’re likely to be related, if not identical to his mothers’.”

The prime minister’s bodyguard pulled him to the side. “Sir,” she said. “I believe there’s a policy against giving away state secrets to vigilantes...”

“Our private life was not a state secret, last time I checked.” Gendo said.

“Yes, but the press.”

“...will figure it out eventually. The superhero community, however, deserves a head start given how their reputation was tarnished during the last incident.” Gendo nodded. “Relax, Inspector. You worry about my head, I’ll worry about my career.”
The Inspector sighed. “If you say so, sir.”

“But enough about me.” the Prime Minister said. “How are you doing, Simon? I’ve heard talk that you’d be proposing to your girlfriend soon. Did I hear right?”

Simon froze. “Aaack! Nia!” he said. He then looked at the president’s champagne glass. “I’m sorry sir, but I’m in kind of a hurry right now. Say, you haven’t drank out of that, have you?”

“Why no, I-”

Simon snatched the Prime Minister’s glass right out of his hand. “Sorry sir, gotta run! I promise to vote for you next year!” he shouted as he went off to find Nia.

“...what a curious young man.” Gendo said as Simon left.

Inspector Farron could only plant her palm in her face and sigh.

Meanwhile, Simon arrived at where he left Nia only to find that Lyra was nowhere in sight. Instead he found her talking to a pair of teenager men; one blonde and short, the other raven-haired and thin. The first one was wearing a suit and carrying what looked like a large, oddly-shaped guitar case on his back, while the second was wearing a school uniform, which Simon recognized as belonging to Ashford Academy, a private school not far from here.

“<...it’s a shame they couldn’t find Excalibur.>” The blonde said in what sounded like English tinged with a thick British accent. “<Still, the sheath it was carried in is still quite a rare find.>”

“<Assuming it’s the original, of course.>” Said the other teen in what Simon believed was an American accent.

“<Well, some simple tests should clear that up. If we can find anything magical about it, we might be able to prove that it’s the real deal.>”

“<And if it’s ordinary?>”

“<That wouldn’t rule out the possibility of it being genuine. After all, it was the sword that was supposed to be magic, not the sheath. After all we can always compare it to->”

“Um, <execute-> no, wait, I mean <excuse me a second>.>” Simon interrupted in what little high-school English he could remember. “I got the drink, Nia. Where’d Lyra go?”

“Oh, Simon!” She said. “Lyra had to go to the ladies room. Did you remember to get the punch?”

Simon looked down at the singular glass he was carrying. “Aw crap, I knew I forgot something...”

“Oh that’s okay. I wasn’t that thirsty anyway.” Nia assured him. “Anyway, I’d like you to meet some new friends Lyra introduced me to!” he gestured to the blonde. “This is Shulk Lowsley, a real-life wizard!”

Shulk laughed. “Oh no, you’ve got it all wrong; I’m not a Magus, I just work with the Mages Association. Can’t actually do any magic, to be honest.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that!” Nia said. “I just assumed-”

“It was an honest mistake.” Shulk said. “Believe me, you’re not the first to think that. In fact some people have even asked if I graduated from Hogwarts.”
“Is that a real place?!” Nia said enthusiastically.

“Um... no. No it isn’t.” Shulk gave the woman a perplexed look.

“Awwww...” Nia sighed. “Now where was I? Oh yes, and this other young gentleman is Lelouch Lamperouge. He’s going to be one of Lyra’s students in the upcoming semester.”

“Lyra has a teaching job?” Simon asked.

“Of course, silly! She got a job at Ashford! Didn’t I tell you?” Nia said. “Oh wait, no I didn’t. Hmm.” she frowned, looking somewhat disappointed.

Lelouch smirked. “We were just talking about how excited we were to see this exhibit. The vice president of the student council has been looking forward to it for weeks.”

“I’m guessing he’s big into chivalry?”

“You... could say that.” said Lelouch, glancing off to the side. Simon followed his gaze until he found a group of students in Ashford Academy uniforms. One of them, a diminutive, purple-haired boy, appeared to be giving a pep talk of some sort to an orange-haired girl wearing a wide-brimmed sunhat (“Indoors? That’s unusual” Simon noted). While a very full-figured student watched with amusement. “Excuse me a moment.” Lelouch said before walking off to deal with the teenage crisis was brewing.

“I think I need to get going too, I’m afraid.” Shulk said. “I need to have a chat with the curator concerning the tests. So long.” And with that, he too departed.

Simon scratched the back of his head with free hand. “Man, I feel like such a killjoy...”

“Aww, don’t feel bad, Simon; it’s not your fault.” Nia said, taking the glass from his hands. “You know I’m always happy when you’re around!” she took a sip from her glass, and scrunched up her face as soon as the bitter juices came into contact with her tongue “*cough* *cough* I mean, I guess I don’t really like champagne, but I’ve always wanted to try it!”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

“See? You’re feeling better already!” Nia’s eyes glimmered as the string quartet began a new piece. “Oh! Canon in D! I love this one!” She curtsied and extended her hand. “Simon, would you have this dance with me?”

“Um... I’d be delighted to!” he said as Nia escorted him towards the dance floor.

Simon’s anxious heart began to pound as the room filled with the sound of Pachelbel. Time seemed to stand still as the two lovebirds began their dance (with Nia in the lead, since she was the only one who knew how). They looked into each other’s eyes, and for one moment, they forgot their troubles. They forgot about the Spiral Kingdom, Lordgenome, and Kamina. They forgot about champagne, supervillains, and the Super Young Team.

For one brief, magical moment, the pair forgot all else in the world but each other.

...And then suddenly a huge pillar of flame burst out of the ground at the spot they were about to waltz into.

The hall was thrown into an uproar. Some patrons fled the room screaming their heads off, others began to take photos with their cell phones, and others still stood in place, too paralyzed in fear to
do anything.

“<Oh dear.>” said Shulk. He then pulled the case off his back, and began fumbling with the locks while making a hasty apology to the museum curator. “<Sorry about this Miss Robin, but it seems that something’s just come up...>” With the last lock removed, the young man pried the case open to reveal a very large, oddly-shaped metallic red sword decorated in bright blue stripes, with a large circular hole near the hilt. While it appeared to be very unbalanced, it was deceptively light, so Shulk had no trouble holding onto it with one hand as he slid his finger along the circular stripe near the hole causing a glowing user interface to appear in the center.

“<That’s a strange device you have there.>” said Nico Robin, the museum curator. “<Is it some kind of special magus weapon?>”

“<Well... yes and no.>” Said Shulk. “<The Monado is a mystic code from ages past, and it is designed to be used as a weapon, but I’m actually trying to use it as a scanner...>” The blade chimed as Shulk finally found what he was looking for. “<Brilliant!>” he said as he held the blade up so that he was looking at the flame through the blade’s opening. “<Just as I thought, a prana signature!>”

“A what?>” said the curator.

“<It’s a... magic thing.>” said Shulk. “<And it’s a strong one too, though nothing apocalyptic. My guess is that we’re either dealing with a powerful magus, or a moderately powerful spiritual being of->”

But Shulk’s explanation was cut short as he was wracked by a sharp headache. He clutched his forehead and closed his eyes, dreading what was about to come next. “<Oh no... not now...>”

When he opened them he found himself on a street corner, watching a fight between Nia’s husband and an armored figure in a horned helmet. The room was littered with corpses, including several of the Black Knights and a handful of costumed vigilantes that he didn’t recognize. He couldn’t identify them, however, as he soon found himself in a dreamlike trance, unable to do anything but watch the ensuing battle.

Armed with only his drill-necklace, Simon was trying to hold his ground against the knight, but the Knight effortlessly blocked every single one of his blows, before shoving a brilliant black blade though Simon’s stomach. He thought he heard a woman screaming in the background...

…the vision faded and Shulk was back at the Museum, with nary a moment passing in between.

“A spiritual being of what?” the curator asked.

“Uh... well...” Shulk grappled with what he could possibly say to politely end the conversation before deciding to just dart toward the pillar of flame, calling back “Sorry about this, I’ll explain later!” as he left.

The Inspector, meanwhile, was busy making emergency calls to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police. “I’ve already contacted the rest of the Metahuman Crimes Division, and the Black Knights have begun to evacuate the citizens,” Inspector Farron said to the Prime Minister. “We should leave. Now.”

“What about Shinji?” said Gendo.

“If he hasn’t left already, he’s probably cowering in a bathroom somewhere.” The Inspector took a moment to assess her situation. “Don’t worry, I’ll get him out of here. You get to safety.”
“No.” Gendo said, shaking his head. “Stay here and take care of that... thing, I’ll try to find the boy.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, sir, but that’s an incredibly-”

“Don’t worry about me,” he pulled a small pistol out of his jacket. “I can handle myself. Just make sure that thing gets nowhere near Shinji.”

“...If you insist.”

As for Simon and Nia, they just stared at the flames dumbfounded.

“Is it time for you to go to work?” Nia asked.

“Looks like it.” Simon pulled a small earpiece out of his pocket and handed it to Nia. “Try to get everyone to safety, then get Kittan to send the Lagann over.” He thought about this for a moment. “But just the Lagann this time. I don’t think there’s enough room for the Gurren as well.”

“Right!” Nia nodded appreciatively before giving Simon a peck on the cheek as she left to do just that. “Just try not to get hurt!”

Simon was soon joined by Shulk and the Inspector, the latter of which didn’t seem too enthusiastic about the others’ presence.

“Let me handle this,” she said. “I’m a trained professional who can take down a meta with her bare hands. You’re a vigilante who built a robot in his garage and a kid with a plastic sword.”

“Well tough. I’m not leaving and you can’t make me!” said Simon.

“I can probably have you arrested.” the Inspector said.

“I’ll take that chance.”

“You’d better not!” said Shulk. “If you don’t get of here with the others you’re all going to die!”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” asked the Inspector.

“If so, it’s not a very good one.” said Simon.

“No no, It’s not that!” Shulk said in a hurried tone, “I get these... visions, you see. And in one of them I saw you killed by an armored warrior in a horned helmet, just a few moments ago!”

“And you expect us to buy that?” said the Inspector.

“In a world full of talking gorillas and aliens who fly around in their long johns?” said Simon. “Sure; I’ll take that risk. If the guy with horns shows up, I’ll duck out and head for cover! Simple!”

“Simple minded, maybe...” said the Inspector.

Simon chuckled. “Well if the helmet guy does show up, I can at least count on you to stop him, right Farron?”

“Just call me ‘Lightning’.” the Inspector said “Rolls off the tongue better.”
“...that’s not your real name, is it?” asked Simon.

“That’s not important.” Lightning replied. “What is important is that we figure out what we’re up against.”

Suddenly, the Monado started beeping wildly. “Heads up, there’s a subspace rift forming in the center. Looks like someone’s trying to teleport in...”

“Can you stop him?” asked Lightning.

“I don’t think so.” Shulk experimented with a few of the settings on the Monado. “Even if I jammed the caster’s signal, that’s no guarantee that he won’t try again...”

“Make that ‘she won’t try again’. Look!” Simon shouted as the flaming pillar began to unravel, revealing a masked sorceress clad in shapely golden armor and a bear-skin cape hovering in the air with nothing but the withered, white-grey threads of her long, braided hair betraying her true age.

“Something tells me you’re not Merlin.” said Simon.

“Correct.” said the sorceress in a raspy, bone-dry tone. “I am Morgaine Le Fey. I don’t suppose any of you have heard of me?”

“I dunno. Should I have?” said Simon.

“She’s one of King Arthur’s mortal enemies!” said Shulk. “And possibly his half-sister, the mythology is a bit fuzzy on that point...”

“I see my reputation precedes me.” said Morgaine. She eyed eyeing the weapons that Shulk and Lightning were carrying, and said “I see you planned on using force. How very...” she paused to come up with the right words. “...human.” She shook her head with disapproval. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to just hand over Avalon if I promised not to hurt anyone?”

“Which Avalon are we talking about here?”, replied Shulk, “Last time I checked we didn’t have any mystical islands here in this museum.”

“No, no, not that one. I meant the sheath that Excalibur once rested in.” she pointed to a large display case in the back. “You three are rather uninformed for sellswords...”

“We’re not mercenaries...” said Lightning.

“Yeah.” said Simon. “Light over here is an officer of the law, and the rest of us are what you’d call “concerned citizens”.”

“Fascinating,” said Morgaine. “To think that humans in this day in age are so eager to throw their lives away.” She raised her hand, and a circle of flame surrounded the group. “My offer still stands. Your safety for Avalon. The choice is yours.”

“Not a chance, lady!” said Simon. “You’d probably just use it to blow up the moon or turn everyone into frogs or something!”

“So be it.” Morgain flew higher still into the air, and began to recite an incantation as a green fireball began to form between her hands.

“Gehénnam, adolebit omn-”

Without warning, Lightning leapt dozens of feet into the air, past wall of flames that surrounded
her, and towards Morgaine. Mid-flight, she flipped a switch on her gun, and with a quick flick of the wrist the pistol unfolded into an ornate sword with a curved edge, which she swung at the sorceress as she passed by. Though Morgaine was able to dodge it made her lose focus, causing her spells to fizzle out, releasing the others from their fiery prisons and sending her crashing to the ground.

Once they landed, Lightning then switched back to her weapon’s gun form, and fired off a few rounds at the sorceress, followed by conjuring up a couple of glowing, white spheres, which flew towards Morgaine at blinding speed. The bullets bounced off a shield that Morgaine hastily threw up, but the energy spheres exploded as they collided with the barrier, sending Morgaine back even further.

“Okay that was awesome.” Simon said.

“Im...possible.” Morgaine coughed. “A L’cie?! I thought the Fal’cie were extinct!”

“A Fal’ what?” said Simon.

“Long story, not important.” replied Lightning. “For now, just pretend that it means ‘wizard’ because it would make just as much sense. And keep your mind on the battle.”

“Oh.” he turned to Shulk. “Say, this wasn’t the horned guy you were talking about, is it?”

“Well, I don’t think so, but—”

“Right, then!” Simon grabbed a chair and smashed a display stand full of antique weapons, grabbed a morningstar, and started rushing towards Morgaine with the weapon held high. “Now it’s my turn!”

But just when he was a few feet away, he ran face-first into an invisible barrier that Morgaine set up. “Foolish mortal, did you really think that I would go down that easily? The L’cie did surprise me, I must admit, but I will be taken by surprise no long—”

Ignoring Morgaine’s rant, Simon tore off off drill-shaped necklace, and shoved it into the barrier, gritting his teeth as he did so. A continuous shockwave of green energy began to form around Simon, and much to Morgaine’s shock she felt her barrier about to give way. She flew back up into the air just as Simon was about to fully pierce it, leading to Simon accidently punching a large hole in the wall, revealing a stall in the men’s restroom on the other side.

This was extremely frightening to the brown-haired kid hiding the restroom stall, who let out a short scream of terror.

“Oh fu—” said Simon, realizing what he had done. “Uh, sorry! That was an accident! It won’t happen again!” he tried hiding the Morningstar behind his back.

The kid, not reassured in the slightest, backed into the stall door.

“Okay, gotta think quick. How would bro handle this?” Simon took a deep breath. “What’s your name, kid?”

“...S-Shinji.” said the boy. “S-Shinji Ikari.”

“Well Shinji what I mean to say is that I’m a superhero. You want to help me take down a supervillain?”
“Uh...” Shinji seemed to be confused.

“Of course you do. And the best thing you can do right now is go home and try not to get taken hostage. You do have a home to go back to, right?”

“Yeah... it’s just that-”

“I know it’s looks dangerous out there, but don’t worry; we promise to protect you no matter what. You just need to be brave enough to try.” He knelt down to Shinji and point and his heart. “Don’t believe in yourself...” Then Simon pointed at his own Heart. “...believe in the me that believes in you!”

“Uh...” Shinji slowly raised his own arm, and pointed at something behind Simon.

Dreading what he was about to see, Simon turned his head to find Morgaine Le Fey readying another fireball.

“Uh oh.”

“Gehénnam, adolebit Omnia!”

Getting in front of Shinji, Simon crossed his arms in hopes that he could shield the boy from the intense heat that was about to hit, only to find that it never came. He slowly lowered his arms to find himself facing a barrier of glowing concentric octagons. Glancing behind him, Simon found Shinji, cowering on the floor with a single arm weakly stretched out towards the shield.

“Did you do that?” Simon asked.

“I-I don’t know.” Shinji whimpered.

The gears in Simon’s brain began to turn. “Do you think you could do it again?” A second fireball crashed against the shield.

Shinji looked down at his hands. They were twitching ever so slightly. “...Maybe?”

“Allright...” Simon glowed with confidence as he picked Shinji up from the floor. “Now listen close, I think I know how we can win this...”

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“Nia? NIA!” Lyra pushed her way through the crowd towards the blue haired woman chatting on her cell phone.

“...That’s right, we need it as soon as possible... no the Gurren won’t fit... yes, I’ll clear some space... okay, good by!” Nia closed her phone and turned to Lyra. “Sorry about that, just needed to take a call. Thank goodness you made it out!”

“But what’s going on in there?!”

“Oh, nothing to worry about, just an evil sorceress of some sort. It happens!” Nia said with a beaming smile on her face.

“...that’s not exactly something to be happy about.”

“I know. But Simon’s in there, so everything’s going to be just fine!”
Lyra didn’t exactly share Nia’s confidence. “Yeah... does your boyfriend have any superpowers?”
“No.”
“Does he have any magic?”
“No.”
“Does he have any weapons? A mystic sword? A shotgun? A powersuit, perhaps?”
“Well he has a robot, but we’re still waiting for it...” Nia’s face suddenly lit up. “Oh, that reminds me! We need to make room for the landing!” The young woman awkwardly tried to climb up a telephone pole, and began shouting. “Everyone! Get out of the way! We need to make room for a giant robot! It’s going to land right here and I don’t want to see any of you hurt!”

Unfortunately, Nia’s pleas were unsuccessful. In fact if anything they more people were showing up to watch the crazy lady scream about god know what.

Lyra began hanging her head in embarrassment. “I think we need a plan B...”

Meanwhile, a middle-aged american with messy blonde hair that never seemed to stay down was on his way back to his hotel, when he stopped to watch the spectacle with equal parts confusion and curiosity.

“I guess you get the crazy types here, too.” he thought. “And here I thought Metropolis was the only place fulla weirdos...”

Just then, he noticed a pair of voices conversing in perfect English passing by. They were making their way through the crowd, towards the museum that everyone else seemed to be so worried about, and since the man could barely understand anything else that was being said he found himself becoming an accidental eavesdropper.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I don’t think I’m ready...”

“Don’t worry so much. There’s just one guy and apparently there’s at least three other supers backing you up. Just make sure you get into the front lines and get a few good blows in, and the story of the scrappy young upstart will practically write itself. Besides, if you break we’ll just get Nia to fix you up.”

The man tried to get a glimpse of the speakers, but he didn’t catch anything more than a sunhat and a few locks of long, orange hair.

“But the costume, it’s so...”

“The costume is fine, everyone else is wearing stuff like that nowadays. I mean Wonder Woman’s a paragon of virtue, and do you see how she dresses? Besides, everyone else in Super Young Team has a costume inspired by famous hero.”

“But you based mine on ‘Power Girl’? Really?”

“Well, admittedly you don’t quite have the rack to pull off the boob window...”

“Hey...!”
“...but other than that you’ve got a good figure and you’re pretty strong so you do fit the mold. And the only way you’ll get their attention is if you become a sensation, so why not show off those legs of yours?>”

At this point the conversation was too far away to hear, and he didn’t particularly feel like following them.

“<Kids these days...>” he sighed.

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“Mortis Arma reptilia!”

A quivering mass of thorns and brambles clashed against Shinji’s shield as Lightning leapt behind it, carrying Shulk into the hallway with Simon.

“Alright, you’re doing good so far, kid!” Simon said. “Keep that up for a few more minutes and we’ll be golden!”

“I mustn’t run away, I mustn’t run away, I mustn’t run away.” Shinji’s knees quivered as he tried to focus on using his newly-acquired powers.

“This was a bad idea.” Said Lightning.

“It’s not like we had too many options, none of us are much in the way of defence.” He turned to Simon. “What do we do next?”

“Okay, here’s the plan.” Simon pulled out a crumpled up map of the museum. “Light and Shinji stay here and guard this entrance and keep her distracted, while you and I circle around. Then we wheel over the catapult on the east wall, and use it to I launch you into the air so you can hit her with that big sword thingy of yours.”

“Just one problem.” said Shulk. “The Monado doesn’t work on humans, and while it’s durable, it’s a lot lighter than it looks. You’d be better off swinging a wiffle bat for all the good it’ll do.”

“Okay then... in that case you fire the catapult and I’ll just clobber her in the face.”

“Are you joking?” said Lightning. “We’re fighting a centuries old witch and the best plan you can come up with is ‘punch her in the face’?”

“Do you have a better plan?” said Simon.

“Yes. Hold our position and wait for backup.”

“That could take ages!” Simon protested. “She could have enacted her plan! Or worse, Super Young Team could show up!”

Lightning’s eye twitched ever so slightly. “You may have a point there.” she said. “Still, let’s try something a bit less reckless.” she pointed at a diagram of the second floor. “There’s a balcony here that overlooks the main hall. If you two circle around and keep her distracted, I might just be able to get a good shot in...”

“Um, you said something about a distraction?” Shulk point past Shinji’s barrier, towards the the opposite doorway. The young, red-haired waiter from before rushed into the room carrying a metal pipe, and smashed a display case containing a medieval crossbow, swiping a handful of bolts that
were also on display as he did so. Morgaine watched with mild amusement as he loaded, drew, and fired the bow, missing by a mile.

“So, yet another mortal has come to play hero?” With a wave of her hand, the young man flew through the air, and crashed through an archery display, dropping his crossbow as he landed. A soft snap could be heard as his tendons ruptured.

“Give up, child. I tire of this already.”

The boy, however, would not heed Morgaine’s words. “Never!” he said. Weakly, he grabbed a bow, and mumbled “Trace... on!” Seconds later, a large broadsword materialized in his hand, and he began to fumble with a nearby longbow, apparently trying to launch the sword as if it were an arrow, with little success.

Morgaine stared at the boy with disbelief, and then aimed one of her arms at him.“If you truly wish to die a hero's death, then I will gladly comply...”

“Okay, new plan.” said Lightning. “I’ll save the boy, you two head for the balcony.”

“And then what?” said Shulk.

“Improvise.” she tapped Shinji on his shoulder to get his attention, and then sped off once the shield was down, leaving the three young men on their own.

“...well? You heard the lady!” Simon said. “Let’s get to that balcony!”

People, I beg you!” Nia shouted. “The only way my boyfriend can beat the evil sorceress is if you all make room for the giant robot! ...Yes, I am a space alien. ...No, I’m not crazy, why do you ask?”

Having spent the last few minutes trying desperately not to be seen, Lyra was finally fed up. She stormed her way in front of Nia. “Stand back. Let me handle this...” She reached into her purse and pulled out a tiny perfume bottle labeled “Symphonie de Menthe Poivrée”. “You might want to hold your breath for this...”

After giving Nia a moment to react, Lyra point the bottle upwards gave the bulb a light squeeze, spraying a fine purple mist into the air. Soon, everyone’s nostrils filled with an intoxicating aroma that could be politely described as a pungent medley of peppermint and horseradish. Soon, the crowd began to emit a calamitous cacophony of coughing, and quickly began to part in an effort to escape the stench.

Even Nia, who was more than willing to go with whatever crazy plan her friend came up with, was having a hard time maintaining her composure.

“*cough* *cough*... what was that?” she asked.

“Just some *cough* perfume I bought while *cough* I was in France.” Lyra replied. “I asked a perfume maker for *cough* the strongest *cough* thing he had. *cough* be careful what you wish for, am I right?”

“Yeah, you’re always doing things like that.” Nia made a stifled laugh as she waited for a passing breeze to reduce the odor to a more tolerable level. “Okay...” she said once she was able to breath again. “...Now to rescue Simon!”
Meanwhile, in a less reputable part of the city, there stands a very unusual building. Supposedly it used to be an aircraft hangar built by a wealthy enthusiast prior to World War II that nobody had bothered to tear down, though the place had been patched up and reworked so many times that only the hollow interior and overly large doorways gave any hint as to it’s original purpose. Too small compared to the surrounding buildings, too large for any practical use, and too old to demolish outright, the hangar remained a local curiosity; trading hands many, many times over the decades. Up until recently, it had been a local landlord seeking to make a quick buck bought up the place and converted it into “Chieftain Motors”, an auto-repair center of ill repute.

But a few years ago the place traded hands again, this time passing into the possession of Simon Doriru, a former street urchin who had worked at Chieftain Motors before achieving national recognition when he thwarted an alien invasion using a robot that he and his late brother salvaged from a junkyard. The place was re-named “Kamina Motors” in honor of said brother, a fact the huge, red, skull-shaped sign hung over the building was all too proud to announce.

Inside, another young man was working on a much smaller mech than he was used to. He wore a thick tuft of blond hair on his head, shaped as if a spike was jutting forward, while everything below the forehead was cut short almost like male-pattern baldness were happening in reverse. His bushy brown eyebrows were furrowed as he tightened the screws on a diminutive, humanoid robot skeleton. It was apparently a kind of toy robot that fought other toy robots or something using interchangeable weapons. Kittan wasn’t sure and he didn’t really care; working on a childrens’ toy was embarrassing, and he wanted to get done with it as soon as possible.

Not helping things was the robot’s owner; a ten-year-old tomboy with a raspy voice who bossed around a couple kids her own age, one of them fat and dopey looking, the other skinny and kinda jitterish. They of course had their own robots, because their parents were also okay with them owning three-foot-tall killer robots (Kittan did note that the robots weapons were weak enough that they only posed a danger to other toy robots, but he was too worn out to give a fuck at this point).

“Hey! What’s takin’ ya so long?” the tomboy tapped her foot impatiently. “I ain’t payin by the hour, so hurry up and fix Peppercat already! I don’t have all day!”

“Yeah, well, maybe if ya just keep yer trap shut I’d be done by now!” Kittan gritted his teeth. He had tried to be patient with the kid, but after an hour of nagging looking over his shoulder Kittan was at wits end. “Stupid Simon and his stupid ‘we fix anything’ policy... kid’s more annoying than my sisters...”

Suddenly, Kittan’s pocket began vibrating, and the sickeningly sweet theme song of that pony show that his sisters watch began to play. Kittan then realized just why everyone was so ready to accept choosing his ringtone as collateral in last night’s poker game, as the tomboy began to snicker.

Flush with embarrassment, Kittan deftly pulled out his phone and slammed his finger on the “answer” button in one swift motion. “Hello?”

“Kittan? It’s Nia.” said the voice on the other end. “You’re not busy are you?”

“Eeehhh... of course not!” Kitan gave the impatient tomboy waiting nearby a smug look. “I’m just, ya know, doin’ stuff. Whazzup?”

“Simon’s in a bit of a jam right now; I need you guys to send the Lagann over so that he can stop Morgane Le Fey, an immortal sorceress straight out of medieval legend from achieving her vague
but no doubt malevolent goals.”

“Sure! Anything for you, sweet cheeks! Hold on a sec.” He reached for a megaphone lying on a nearby workbench. “Alright; hold up, gang!” Kittan said through the megaphone, his booming voice echoing throughout the room. “The boss needs Lagann to fight some kinda kooky magic thing! Prep the cannon, on the double!”

“YOU GOT IT, BOSS!” shouted a pair of burly, square-jawed men wearing sunglasses. Their names were Jougan and Balinbow, though Kittan could never remember which was which. They leapt off the Mech they were working on and dashed towards a pair of hand-cranks sticking out of the back wall. With all the Machismo they could muster, the twins began twisting the cranks, and a large, red-and-blue cannon began to rise up from the ground, while the roof of the building began to split apart, revealing the bright, blue sky overhead.

“Hey, what’s the big idea? Get back to workin on my bot!” said the tomboy.

“Hey, relax, this will just take a sec.” Kittan said. “And if you promise to stop complainin’, I might just let ya ride with me.”

“Ride? Ride what?” said the girl.

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“Uhh, boss?” said the skinny kid, “I don’t think this is such a good idea. It’s dark and cramped and I wanna go home. Can I please get out?”

“No way! This is gonna be awesome!” said the Tomboy. “sides; these guys are professionals. They’ve probably done it a zillion times already.”

“Ya got that right, kid.” Kittan said as he finished strapping the parachute to the Lagann’s frame. “Now let me show you how real badasses make a delivery.” He turned towards the shaft of light at the other end of the cannon. “Hey Leeron! You all set there?”

Just outside of the canon, an effeminate, blue-haired man crunched some numbers on his laptop. “Adjusting for additional weight, aaaand…” the computer made a soothing chime. “Looks like you’re ready to go, sweetie!”

“Right!” Kittan shoved a pair of noise-cancelling headphones over his ears. “Headphones, ON!”

“On!” the kids said (some more reluctantly than others) as they followed Kittan’s example.

“Music, ON!” Kittan shouted.

“ON!” Balinbow and Jougan (or was it Jougan and Balinbow?) shouted as they turned on a pair of heavily-worn radios, whereupon the speakers started blasting the sound of Freddie Mercury singing the chorus of “Don’t Stop Me Now”.

“Canon, FIRE!” Kittan pointed dramatically down the length of the cannon, while the tomboy’s cohorts ducked for cover.”

“FIIIIIIIRRRRRRRE!” A scrawny man standing directly behind the canon slammed his fist into the large, red button that was sitting right in front of him with an almost childlike glee.

Back in the canon, the world exploded as the Lagann and it’s passengers were shot into the air, high above the Tokyo skyline. The entire city was stretched before them, from the Tokyo Tower to
all the way across the Tokyo Bay.

The tomboy looked upon the scene with awe, recording the whole thing on her smartphone so that she could brag about it later. “Man, won’t Tenryou be jealous.” she said. “Am I right?”

The cohorts were less enthusiastic, with the fat one sweating nervously as he tried to keep his cool, while the skinny one took one look at the city below and ducked back into the cockpit.

“Sweet view, am I right?” said Kitan, who was slightly embarrassed to realize the lengths he was going just to impress a bunch of kids, and how much more successful his love life would be if he put half that effort into impressing a potential lady-friend. “Now here comes the fun part.” He grabbed the ripcord on the parachute as the forces of gravity began to catch up with the Lagann. “I gotta pull this here thing at the exact right time; too early and we miss our target, too late and we end up in full body casts!” He took a deep breath as he watched for his stopwatch to reach the exact right moment. “One... two... THREE-”

Through her binoculars, Lyra stared at the mecha careening through the sky in disbelief. "You've gotta be kidding me... and you say you guys shoot your robot out of a canon?"

"Yep!" said Nia.

"...that seems impractical. And dangerous."

"Oh don't worry, it's perfectly safe!"

Lyra continued to watch as the Lagann's parachute got caught on a fast-food restaurant sign, nearly causing the contents of the mecha to spill over onto the street. "I can see that."

One emergency trip to the hardware store later, the girls managed to get the Kitan and the kids who were inexplicably traveling with him down from the Lagann via a ladder.

"That. Was. AWESOME!" said the Tomboy of the group. "You're a heck of a lot cooler than that floozy mechanic that Tenryo hangs out with!"

"Thanks, kid!" said Kitan, quietly ignoring how he had no idea who that was.

"I gotta show this to Peppercat! Oh man, I'm totally coming back to you guys! Hey, do 'ya can do some mechanic stuff and let Peppercat transform into a hoverboard?"

"Uh... maybe?" Kitan grinned nervously. "Maybe I could talk to Leeron about that... it would be kinda expensive though."

"How much!?"

"I dunno, maybe like, thirty thousand yen or-"

"DEAL!" The tomboy then grabbed her cohorts (who were still stunned by the whole ordeal) and started dragging them away. "Come on! That money's not gonna earn itself! Now start looking for plastic bottles, that might be worth a bit of scratch..."

"...are those kids are going to be alright?" said Nia.

"Oh yeah, they'll be just fine!" said Kitan, not completely sure of himself. "Besides, they left that little toy of theirs back at the shop. If they don't come back to pick it up, I'll just call the police or
"Well... I suppose you're right." said Nia. "...Just promise me they won't get hurt."

"What, do you want me to follow 'em?" Kittan scratched his head.

"...maybe?" said Nia.

Lyra shot Nia an incredulous look. "Oh yes, a grown man following around a bunch of prepubescent children. That won't be mistaken for anything..." Lyra shook her head. "Don't you have a boyfriend to save?"

"Oh, right!" Nia reached into her purse and took out a small, golden drill-shape necklace, and started climbing up to the Lagann's cockpit.

"Hey, waitasecond." Kitan said. "Isn't that Simon’s necklace doohicky?"

“It’s her father’s.” said Lyra.

Kitann looked at her, dumbfounded.

“You know, Lordgenome? The Spiral King? Guy who nearly leveled Tokyo about a decade ago? Honestly, I wasn’t even there; how the hell do I know more about this than you?”

“Uhhhh...” Kittan glanced down at his watch. “Oh look at the time I really gotta get back to the garage!” he pointed at Lyra and gave what he imagined was a smarmy wink. He said “Call me sometime, we’ll do lunch.” before dashing off to catch the subway.

Lyra rolled her eyes. “Moron.” she whispered to nobody in particular.

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Sparks flew as steel met steel in the exhibit hall. Morgaine Le Fey had proved to be more nimble than Lightning had expected, and now the pair were locked in an epic sword duel as the red-haired young man just watched helplessly from the other side of the room, too weak to even pick himself up off the ground.

“Funny. I never really imagined you as a swordsman.” Lightning said to her opponent as she parried a series of ferocious attacks. “I always thought you were more into treachery and dirty tricks.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.” Morgaine continued her relentless assault, slowly backing Lightning towards a display featuring several suits of armor in a thick glass case. “The centuries it took me to master the art of the blade were nothing to me.” She then relented long enough for Lightning to leap backwards onto armor display in an attempt to gain higher ground.

"Just as expected..." the sorceress thought to herself. She then stretched her hand towards the display, and said “Arma, venit ad vitam!”

Immediately, the arms of the suit right below Lightning shot up through the glass and grabbed her by the ankles. Before Lightning could react, she found herself being flung across the room, and crashing into a priceless tapestry depicting a humbled Sir Gawain offering his head to the Green Knight. She heard something a crack as her skull collided with the concrete wall behind the tapestry, which subsequently fell from its mount and buried her in a pile of priceless, centuries-old yarn. A quick check of her possessions confirmed that despite her massive headache only thing that
was actually broken was her communication device. “Damn it. I’m getting too careless; a blow like that should have killed me...”

As she struggled to get back onto her knees, Lightning’s mind ran through all of the possible moves her opponent could make next. She concluded that whatever Morgain did next, it probably wasn’t a good idea to stay in one place for very long. So Lightning cut a hole in the tapestry in order to free herself, just in time to see the heavy iron mace that was about to crash through her skull. With her free hand, Lightning grabbed the hit of the mace, halting it mid-swing.

Taking a good look at her attacker, Lightning wasn’t surprised to find that the figure that was now struggling to free it’s weapon from Lightning’s grip was the same suit of animated armor that had originally caught her off guard. She was even less surprised to discover that the suit had been joined by at least a dozen of it’s ilk, all brandishing swords, axes bows, and polearms of various make.

Lightning looked up and glared at Morgaine, who was now floating above the assembled legion. “Cute.” Lightning said. “So you’re going to try to win by numbers, now?”

“Well I never promised a fair fight.” Lightning thought she could see her golden mask crack a smile. “It’s always enjoyable to toy with a mortals, and truthfully this is the most fun I’ve had in ages...”

Lightning didn’t even bother coming up with a snappy one-liner. Instead, the pink-haired officer threw herself at her opponents, sword in one hand and a spell readied in the other.

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“Remind me not to get on her bad side...” From the balcony, Simon watched as Lightning turned into a hurricane of steel and magic. Her sword cut through the antique armors like they were butter, while the ones who somehow managed to avoid the blade were enveloped in a series of bright white explosions before disappearing entirely. Soon, all that was left in the ruins of the museum were Lightning, Morgaine, and the young man in the corner who still lacked common sense to leave.

“...what was the plan again?” said Shinji.

“I’ll tell you in a moment...” Shulk look at the battle below, then at Shinji, then at Simon. “Now would be a very good time for a vision...” he silently bemoaned. A then took a deep breath, and exclaimed “We’re going to make a bridge, and then Simon is going to punch her in the face.”

Simon cracked his knuckles. “I like this plan.”


“I was just getting to that.” Shulk replied smoothly. “You’re going to create a barrier that Simon can walk across. Then, right when Lightning is about to strike Morgaine, Simon is going to leap off the end and strike her with that drill of his. If we time things just right, the bulk her shield’s energy will be diverted to stopping Lightning’s attack, letting Simon pierce through the other side.”

“B-but I’ve never done this before! How do you know I can hold it for that long! What if he misses! What if he-”

“Shinji, relax.” Simon put his hand on Shinji’s shoulder. “We both know you can do it. It’s like I said; we both believe in you. Now you’ve got to believe in us.”
Shinji felt his eyes drawn to Simon’s. He looked at them, and felt a sense of absolute trust flowing through him. “All right... I’ll try.”

“That’s what I like to hear!” Simon slapped Shinji on the back. “I just know you’ll make a superhero someday!”

Shinji felt breathless. “A... super-”

“Actually, Shinji brings up a good point.” Shulk toyed with the Monado as he interrupted the two. “Landing the blow will require split-second timing, but fortunately I have just the thing for that!” A glowing symbol appeared on his weapon’s interface, as it began to radiate a brilliant blue aura. “One of the Monado’s more useful functions is that it has a connection to the Speed Force. And more importantly, a connection that can be shared with others.”

“Speed force?” Simon crossed his arms “What’s that?”

“The Speed Force is a semi-mystical extradimensional energy source which is capable of accelerating matter to superluminal speeds without-” Shulk then remembered that he was talking to a teenage boy and a man who expected a shorter answer. “What I mean to say is that It’s a magic... thing... that makes you go really fast.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” said Simon. “Anything I need to know before you juice me up? Like, don’t cross the streams or something?”

“Just keep in mind that the Monado can only tap into the Speed Force for ten seconds at a time. Though at the speeds you’re going, it’ll feel more like ten minutes.” Shulk glanced down at the battle. Lightning had finished off the suits of armor, and was now back in close quarters combat with Morgaine, though as Shulk expected Lightning was having a bit of trouble with Morgaine’s shield. “Now’s our chance! Shinji, ready the platform!”

“Right!” Shinji trembled as he focused on the space in front of him.

“Simon, you ready for this?”

Simon removed his necklace. “Ready as I’ll ever be!”

“On three:” Shulk held the Monado up high. “One! Two! Thrrrrreeeeeeeeeee...”

Shulk’s final syllable slowed to a crawl as the Speed Force rushed though Simon’s body. He glanced at his watched and found that it too had slowed down; the second hand appeared to be stuck at five seconds to the minute. Examining his surroundings, Simon saw that things looked more or less the same except that everything was frozen in place, and the world had a deep, bluish tint. He was startled by a thunderous noise coming from behind him, and discovered that a bridge of transparent light was forming behind him, past the balcony and over the warriors locked in a majestic dance below.

He looked at Shinji, still frozen in place. “Huh.” he said, not expecting to be heard by anyone. “Looks like you pulled it off...” Simon casually began crossing the bridge of light, until he was finally standing right over where Morgane and Lightning were fighting. He glanced down at his digital watch, was surprised to find that the digits on his watch had also frozen in time. Simon began to wonder if he wasn’t somehow violating the laws of physics, but then he remembered that this was happening because of a wizard’s magic sword left it at that.

Just then, Simon’s train of thought was interrupted by a crack of thunder, as Lightning’s sword collided with Morgaine’s barrier for the upteenth time. A small tear opened on the other side of the
shield, which continued to grow as the shield’s energies contracted to a single point. Simon almost wished he could watch the spectacle a few more times, but he knew there were more important things to worry about, as the shield’s tear soon began to retract. Clutching his drill tightly, Simon let loose a fearsome battle cry as he leapt off the edge of the bridge.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Simon watched as Morgaine began to walk towards the berserking mecha pilot and began to recite a quick emergency incantation, but for Simon it looked like she was still going in slow motion. And just before the barrier could fully close, Simon’s fist managed to slip through the barrier and strike Morgaine’s armor-clad face with the full power of his spiral energy-infused punch that dented her mask and sent her flying across the room, where she crashed into a catapult display with enough force to reduce it into a pile of splinters.

“...you know, I could have handled that myself.” said Lightning.

Simon was about to say something snarky to the contrary, but thought better of it. “Yeah, but this was better.”

“You just destroyed millions in priceless artifacts. How is that ‘better’?”

“Well I...” a bead of sweat dripped down Simon’s face as he struggled to come up an answer. “...just thought the sooner she’s taken out, the less likely civilians get caught in the crossfire.”

“True.” Lightning grudgingly agreed, “But do you really think a five hundred year old sorceress is going to go down with one lucky punch?”

“...maybe?” said Simon.

“Well unfortunately, you’d be quite wrong about that.” the pair turned to find Morgaine standing among the ruins of the catapult, brushing the splinters off her robes. “Just as I was wrong about going easy on you.” She touched the dent in her armor’s face-mask left behind by Simon’s devastating punch. “Despite your lack of discipline, you are clearly formidable advisories, and therefore deserve to be treated as such.”

“Uh... thanks?” said Simon.

The air hung still as Morgaine clasped her hands together. Lightning felt her stomach churn as a sickly green aura began to surrounded Morgaine. “Voco, Modredum!” she said. “Disperdes inimicos meos!” With those words, her aura abruptly changed from green to red, and a vortex of crimson Lightning began to form in front of her, drowning the room in a cacophonous din.

It was so loud, in fact, that the noise reached all the way to the balcony, where Shulk and Shinji were still watching.

“What's she saying?!” shinji screamed over the thunder.

“I don’t know! Something about Mordred... calling... I think it’s a summoning spell! She’s trying to summon Mordred!”

“Who’s Mordred?!”

“The guy who killed King Arthur. Not the sort of person you should mess around with.”
“WHAT?!” Simon shouted from back on the ground floor.

“I SAID HE’S NOT THE KIND OF GUY YOU MESS AROUND WITH!”

“WHO?!”

“MORDRED!”

“What?!”

“I SAID MORDRED!”

“WHAT?!”

“HE SAID MORDRED!” said Lightning.

“WHO’S MORDRED?!” said Simon.

“The guy who killed King Arthur!” said Lightning.

“THE KING ARTHUR?!”

“YEAH!”

“REALLY?!”

“YEAH!”

“THAT DOESN’T SOUND LIKE THE KIND OF GUY YOU MESS AROUND WITH!”

“I LITERALLY JUST SAID THAT!” said Shulk.

“What?” said Simon.

But before this circuitous argument could go any further, the vortex dissipated, taking the noise with it. In it’s place stood a stout figure in glistening silver armor over a blood-red brigandine. On his head, the warrior wore a decorated silver helmet with steel horns, a faceplate that bore no features but a pair of curved slits carved in the front in place of eyes. Finally, in his hand the warrior carried an enormous broadsword with a blue hilt and gold trimmings, which he brandished without the slightest sign of discomfort.

The room went silent.

Slowly, the figure turned to face Morgaine. He then knelt in front of her before speaking. <“Mother, what service dost thou require?”>

Morgaine motioned towards Simon and Lightning, “<Two insolent fools have attempted to take my life, while two of their allies are waiting above. Destroy them for me, Mordred, so that I may accomplish my task.>”

“<Thy will shall be done, mother.>” Mordred bowed his head “<I swear upon my honor, that these fools shall trouble thee no long->”

Mordred felt his armor shake as he heard a loud “clang” of metal behind him, followed by a loud *FWOOSH* accompanied by what appeared to be green flames engulfing his helmet. He turned his neck to find Simon standing right behind him, baffled as to how Mordred could take a spiral-
energy punch without even flinching. Slowly, the warrior got up, and turned to face Simon.

“Have you no honor, knave?” Mordred said in surprisingly good Japanese. “Have things truly fallen so far in this day in age that thy people have been reduced to cheap shots and sneak attacks as your primary modus operandi?”

Simon quickly regained his composure. “Hey, all I know at this point is that you’re working for a bad guy, and you want to kill us.” Simon threw another spiral-energy punch at Mordred, only to nearly break his knuckles on Mordred’s immobile faceplace. “Honor has nothing to do with this!”

Simon tried to throw another punch, but Mordred caught the blow with his free hand before Simon could even blink.

“In that case, I shall take great pleasure in exterminating such a tactless cur...” Mordred’s grip soon tightened, causing Simon to grimace in pain at the sound of his fingerbones snapping. He then let go of Simon, but not before slapping him in the face with the force of a truck, sending the young man spiraling to the floor in agony.

“Consider it a blessing that your death shall be quick.” Mordred’s boot smashed into Simon’s chest, shattering his ribs in at least a dozen places, followed by a swift kick to the head. Mordred then clasped his blade in both hands, and raised it above the broken in the manner of an executioner. “It would be against my code to give you anything less...”

Lightning, meanwhile, was furiously trying to load her weapon with an anti-magic bullet. “Think; you’ve been in worse situations before...” she looked down at her gun. “If that thing is a traditional summon or a low-powered construct, an anti-magic bullet might help. But if it doesn’t, he’ll go after me next and we’ll both be out of commission.” she looked back up as Simon. “Either way, we’re in over our heads. No choice but to regroup. Now if I could just get to Simon...”

Just as Lightning considered making a mad dash to save Simon, personal safety be damned, a voice echoed throughout the hall.

“NOT SO FAST, EVILDOERS!”

The entire room turned their attention to a teenage girl on the second floor, standing directly across from Shulk and Shinji. She had green eyes and long, tangerine-colored hair that went all the way down to her hips, and wore a transparent pink visor as well as a pair of “robot ears”; translucent pink antenne that seemed to serve no purpose but to move in response to her emotional state. But as unexpected as her appearance was, more perplexing still was her outfit, which looked like it was assembled from the contents of an upscale cosplay bargain bin. On her torso was a “Power Girl” outfit, complete with her infamous “Boob window”, but minus the sleeves and gloves. Instead, she wore golden pauldrons and metal gauntlets, the rightmost of which had an attachment that looked like a gold lion with a green gem inserted into the slot. The lower part of her body wasn’t much better; while there were similarly-shaped leg-plates, there was also an inexplicable miniskirt for some reason. Overall, it was a very embarrassing costume, and the worst part was that the girl wearing it seemed to know this, as she flinched once everyone started watching her.

“Uh.. Don’t worry citizens!” the girl said. “I, “The Amazingly Powerful Girlborg” will make sure that none of you come to harm!”

The room continued to stare at her in silence.

If anyone other than Lightning had super-hearing, they might have heard the girl whisper “Um, okay. I did the speech just like you said. Now what?”
And if perhaps they were concentrating very, very hard, they might have heard a voice in the girl’s earpiece reply. “<How did they react?>”

“<I... don’t know. They’re just... staring at me for some reason.>”

“<They must have been awed by your masterful delivery.>”

“<Milly, I’m serious! And there’s another supervillain! I thought you said there’d only be one!>”

“<Don’t worry, he’s probably just the main villain’s elite mook; nothing to worry about. Actions speak louder than words, so just jump down in an impressive manner and start fighting already!>”

“<If you say so...>” having apparently concluded her conversation, Girlborg struck another heroic pose, and pointed her finger at Mordred. “I suggest you leave right now, or else I’ll be forced to... um, hurt you!”

Mordred was not amused by the newcomer’s boast. “Since thou speakest the king’s tongue, I shall make this as clear as I can. I mean thee no offense, milady, for whilst thou might be a fine combatant, to challenge me to single combat is to throw thine life away. Doest thou truly seek death’s embrace, or art thou addled in the mind?>”

“<Uhhhh...>” The Amazingly Powerful Girlborg stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. “<I’m not exactly sure how to answer that.>” The then clenched her first. “<But if there’s one thing I do know, it’s that I’m not going to let your hurt anyone else!>”

“<A noble sentiment, to be sure...>” Mordred withdrew his sword. “<Since thy motives are pure, in the interests of fairness I shall let thee have the first blow.>”

“<...really?>”

“<By all means. Have a go at it.>”

“<Uh... okay then.>” Girlborg nervously hopped down to the first floor, and carefully made her way towards Mordred.

She made it about half-way when a blur rushed past her field of view.

Lightning to stoped not ten feet from Mordred as he pointed his sword at Simon’s throat, causing her to drop a small, pill-shaped device she was carrying, which rolled up to Mordred’s feet.

“Don’t tempt me, wench.” quipped Mordred. “One more step, and I can foresee much trouble breathing in this man’s future.” He picked up the trinket that Lightning dropped, and threw it behind him. “The battle is between me and the girl; though you may feel free to challenge me afterwards...”

Girlborg looked to Lightning for advice, but after a brief pause she simply responded by nodding gently. “...right.” Girlborg said to herself. “No pressure.” Gritting her teeth, she wound up an amateurish uppercut, and after a moments anticipation, launched herself directly at Mordred...

...And much to everyone’s surprise (most of all Girlborg’s), she found that the slightest touch sent the armor-clad figure hurtling through the roof and into the sky, where he soon became a blip off in the distance.

Girlborg looked at her hands in shock. “Did... I do that?”
“Not quite.” Lightning handed Girlborg a silver pill-shaped capsule. “It’s a gravity bomb; nullifies gravity within a meter’s radius. I detonated one right before you hit him; elementary physics did the rest.”

“I see...” he tried to hand it back to Lightning. “Do you want this one-“

“Keep it. You need the edge more than I do, anyway.” Lightning turned her attention away from Girlborg, and went to check on Simon. “He’s got a pulse. Lay him out so he’s flat on his back.”

As she did as Lightning said, Girlborg looked up at Morgaine, who was casually making her way towards Avalon’s display case. “Shouldn't we do something about-“

“I know what I’m doing!” Lightning said. “Alright, looks fine for now...” Lightning held out her arm. She held her hands out over Simon, and they began to glow with a bright light. Girlborg watched in amazement as Simon’s blood retreated into his body and his wounds began to seal themselves up. She even swore that she heard something that sounded like knucklebones shattering, but in reverse.

“Mrmmmm... I’m gonna kill you... Bizzaro... Lincon.” Simon mumbled as got up from the floor, yawning as if he had just had a bad night’s sleep rather than being an inch away from death. He looked at Lightning, then at his fist, then at Girlborg, then back at Lightning again.

“...oh man, thanks, Light. I really screwed up, didn’t I?”

“Well you’re not exactly an expert at this. But we can talk about that later.” Lightning pulled Simon back up to his feet. “Right now we still need to take care of Morgaine.” She pointed at the sorceress, who was at this moment rounding the weapons gallery, passing the injured waiter as she approached Avalon.

“Oh.” Simon stretched his arms. “Where are the others? Who’s the newcomer?”

“If he was smart, Shulk would have left with the minister's son by now. So I’d say it’s a fifty/fifty chance that they’re heading down here as we speak.” She looked at Girlborg. “As for her, this is...”

“I think I heard that much.” said Simon. “Amazingly Powerful Girlborg, right?” he extended his hand towards the newcomer.

“Uh.. ha ha, yeah. That’s right!” Girborg blushed at the sound her own name as she accepted Simon’s handshake. “Sorry if the name’s a bit of a mouthful. All the good ones were already taken.”

“Hey, do you think if I had a choice I would call myself ‘Simon the Digger’?” Simon grinned. “But I like it. It’s nice and distinct, not to mention descriptive.” He then let go of Girlborg’s hand and pumped his fist at her. “So, whadda say we go kick some evil wizard butt?”

“Sorceress.” corrected Lightning.

“Close enough! Let’s do this!”

“Shouldn’t we at least come up with some kind of plan?” said Lightning.

“The best kind of plan is the one you make up as you go along!” said Simon.

“Because that worked so well against Mordred.”
“Yeah, well you were doing just fine against Morgaine.”

“That’s because I’m at least fifty times as strong, fast and durable as an ordinary human, not to mention I’m trained in handling this kind of thing.”

“Well so am I... sort of. Maybe not that first, part, but I can hold my own in a-”

“I’m a technopath, if that helps...” said Girlborg. Sadly, her input fell on deaf ears.

“Look, you’re a Mecha pilot, and a damn good one from what I hear. But you don’t have the skills to-”

“You don’t know anything about me! You’re just a cop with superpowers, but my brother and I grew up in the streets-”

“Uh, guys?”

“Just because you say you’re a hero doesn’t mean you are-”

“Yeah, well, If you were always such a stickler to the rules you never would have become a L’cie in the first place!”

“Guys, she’s almost-”

“Yeah, and look where that got us; Japan’s most wanted and a month of hiding from the Justice League.”

“You you still saved the world!”

“Look, if you’re not going to, then I’m-”

“And nearly died in the process, I might add.”

“You were just in the wrong place at the right time; that’s what superheroing is all about and hey wait where did Girlborg go?”

Instinctively, the pair of bickering heroes looked to the side, where they found Girlborg standing in front of Avalon’s display case, trying her best to look brave in front of the approaching villain.

“D-Don’t come any closer!” she said. “I’m not letting you have this! Never!”

Morgaine continued her unflinching walk towards the reluctant heroine.

“I’m warning you! Don’t come any closer or I’ll... I’ll... shoot laser beams at you!”

("Laser beams?" her earpiece quipped. "Is that really the best threat you could come up with?")

Finally, once she was within Inches of Girlborg’s face, Morgaine put her hand on Girlborg’s shoulder and asked “Tell me, child. Do you have a lover?”

A face instantly popped into Girlborg’s head. “...y-yes?”

“Then I’m sure he’ll be disappointed to learn of the virus that now converts your flesh to steel and clockwork even as we speak.”

There was a flash of green light, and a sharp pain shot through Girlborg’s arm. She watched in
horror as her flesh began to tear, revealing not a simple array of bones and muscle, but a menagerie of springs, sprockets, gears and cogs.

(“<Shirley? SHIRLEY! What’s going->” was the last thing Girlborg heard from the earpiece before it shorted out.)

“I’ll leave you be, for now.” Morgain pushed aside the broken clockwork girl. “I cannot think of a single fate worse than the one that you are already doomed to suffer.” She looked back at Simon. “…Though perhaps it’ll prevent those interlopers from interfering. After all, they don’t want to risk infection, now, do they?”

“Damn it…” Lightning gritted her teeth.


“Orthopoxvirus Machina, better known as the Machine Plague.” Shulk dashed into the room, notably without Shinji behind him. “It’s got a one hundred percent infectivity rate, and no cure. First it converts your body to metal, then it destroys your soul. In the end, it leaves nothing left but an empty shell…” he held up the Mondao. “I scanned the girl while she was doing that speech of hers, and as far as I can tell she’s in the final stages of infection.”

“Thought so.” Lightning frowned. “The station would probably have her on file if she was a cyborg, and she’s too human-like to be a robot and still be this inexperienced. Where’s Shinji?”

“Safe with the Minister, and he’s already called for a quarantine though I’m more worried about other potential carriers…”

“Right.” Lightning glanced at Morgaine, who was at this very moment delicately carving a hole in Avalon’s display cause using a magical beam projected from her fingertips. She then looked at a small, oblong-shaped flower vase that was nearby. “Either of you boys play football?”

Simon followed Lightning’s gaze, and then returned a knowing look. “Well, I’ve always thought I’d make a good linebacker…”

“Hold up,” Shulk began, “Are we talking American Football? Because I don’t think I’ve ever played-” but before he could finish, Light and Simon bolted off like a pair of cheetahs just as Morgaine had pulled Avalon out of it’s case.

Running as fast as her name implied, Lightning, carrying the empty flower vase, was the first to make it to the target, weapon drawn and ready to strike. But though Morgaine braced for an attack, instead of stabbing her in the face the Inspector tossed aside her weapon snatched the sheath out of Morgaine’s hands in the middle of an elegant backflip. And when Morgaine turned to retaliate, she found herself taking the full blow of Simon’s spiral-energy powered tackle. Though the sorceress was quickly throw Simon off her back using telekinesis, Simon’s attack provided Lightning with enough of a distraction to stuff the artifact in the vase and toss it in Shulk’s direction.

“Heads-up, halfback!” she said as the vase hurtled through the air.

Shulk dropped the Monado in surprise, nearly fumbling the vase as he realized what he had done. Without taking the time to remove the Sheath, he grabbed the sword and started to run for the exit, ducking hallways in hopes that he might be able to lose the sorceress that would soon be chasing after him.

As he exited the building and arrived safely on the open street, he thanked his lucky stars that he made it out in one piece. But then he heard a sound. Faint at first, but it quickly grew loud enough
that he was able to make out some kind of “whooshing” noise. Just as he was wondering what it could be, he was suddenly struck with a vision an airborne projectile hurtling towards him at an unfathomable velocity. He immediately leapt to the ground, vase and sword in hand, crossing his arms in hopes that he wouldn’t scrape his face against the pavement. In doing so, he cleared the way for Mordred, who at that moment had just returned from his trip to the stratosphere in an incredibly violent manner, stabbing his sword into the ground as he smashed into the pavement. The mere shockwaves sent Shulk tumbling head over heels, yet his grip on his possessions remained as firm as ever.

“<‘Twas most aggravating. I shall take care to lower my guard no longer.>” Mordred sighed as he drew his sword from the ground and pointed it at Shulk. “<Now, forgive my presumptuousness, but unless I am mistaken thou hast the demeanor and physique of a scholar, not a fighter. And whilst your weapon is no doubt potent, I highly doubt thou can match steel with one such as myself. So once more I ask thee; lay down thy arms and hand over thy spoils, and we can both walk out of this conflict satisfied.>”

Shulk scratched his head. “<Just one question.>” he said. “<If you’re a really Mordred, why are you speaking in faux-elizabethan? By all accounts you should be speaking Middle English, or perhaps even Old English. You sound less like a serious threat, and more like a Shakespeare impersonator at a renaissance fair.>”

“<What’s wrong with Shakespeare? I like Shakespeare.>”

“<Well yes, so do I. But coming from you it sounds a bit... um... goofy.>”

“<Very well then.>” Mordred said in a more subdued manner. “<Would you prefer it if I talked like this?>”

“<Yes, that’s much better.>”

“<WELL TOUGH!>” Mordred shouted, his armor cackling with dark energy. “<I SHALL CONTINUE TO TALKETH IN WHATEVER WAY I WILST, AND THOU SHALT CONSIDER THE MATTER CLOSED!>”

“<Gaah! Okay, you’ve made your point!>” shulk said. His mind began to race as he considered his options. “<I don’t dare enrage him any further.>” he thought. “<even if it turns out the Monado does work on this guy, he’s just too strong... too fast...>” He looked down at Avalon, still stuck in the vase Shulk carried under his arm. “<Perhaps I could appeal to his chivalry. He’ll probably spare me if I surrender, and perhaps that might be enough to prevent my vision....>” Shulk shook his head. “<But who knows what Morgaine will do with Avalon! Is an uncertain future really worth it if it prevents certain death?>” Having come up empty-handed for a solution, Shulk decided to stall for time. “<I don’t suppose you’d be willing to explain your plan?>”

“<Dost thou taketh me for a simple-minded knave? Appealing to hubris may work on Luthor or Sivana, but not I.>”

“<Weellll... It’s just that your mother doesn’t have a very good reputation. In fact in all likelihood she’s only using you to achieve her own ends.>”

“<As it should be! For it is a knight’s duty to obey their sovereign, no matter what the consequences.>”

“<That’s ridiculous! You betrayed the Knights of the Round Table! How do you consider yourself a proper knight after murdering your king?>”
Mordred didn’t even flinch at this question. “‘Twas for the greater good, I assure thee.” He readied his blade, and assumed a combat stance. “Now, fight or flee: the choice is yours, scholar.”

Shulk removed Avalon from the vase, and wedged in a more convenient location between his belt. He then gripped the Monado in both hands, and a shaft of brilliant, blue energy extended from the blade. “How’s this for an answer?”

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From the television in his father’s limo, Shinji watched as the battle between the heroes and Morgaine Le Fey spilled out onto the streets. He tried to ignore the newscaster’s commentary as he watched Lightning and Simon double-team the sorceress; taking advantage of both their numbers and the newly-discovered limitations of Morgaine’s shield to punish her with a series of carefully coordinated attacks.

Shinji breathed a sigh of relief. “Looks like they’ll be just fine without me…”

Suddenly, the newscaster’s voice picked up, and the camera shifted to the other side of the museum, where Shulk, despite wielding a laser sword taller than his own body, appeared to be taking the beating of a lifetime from Mordred. Shinji watched squeamishly as Mordred delivered his beatdown with a rapid series of kicks and elbow jabs, only using his sword to parry Shulk’s own feeble counterattacks. The only reason Shulk was still alive, Shinji realized, was that he seemed to disappear every time Mordred went for a killing blow.

Shinji looked as his father. He seemed too engrossed talking to someone apparently called “Checkmate” over the phone to be much help. He then turned to the driver. “STOP THE CAR!” he shouted, causing the limo to screech to a stop, and startling Gendo enough that he nearly dropped his phone.

“Heavens, Shinji, don’t scream like that.” He apologized to the person on the other end of the line, and put his phone on hold. “What’s the matter?”

“Those people back there need me!” Shinji pointed to the screen. “I mean, I know I just got these powers and I don’t really know how they work... but...” a nervous tear fell from his eye. “They saved my life and I just ran away! I mean there’s a girl back there who-”

“...is a class-5 biohazard.” Gendo interrupted. “I know who you’re talking about; I’ve been watching the incident very closely, and I’m afraid she’s a lost cause. And chances are the others are infected by now too.”

“But what if they’re not?” Shinji pleaded. “We have to do something!”

“The Black Knights are en route with their armored division, and the police are going to quarantine the area. I’ve sent word to Big Science Action, Super Young Team and the Justice League... but by the time they arrive it’ll already be over…”

Frantically, Shinji unbuckled his seatbelt, leapt onto the handle, shoved car door open, and started running back towards the museum. “Look I’m... sorry! I just gotta do this, okay!”

“Shinji? Come back here! SHINJI!” Gendo began to exit the vehicle, but stopped just outside of the car door, seeing that Shinji had hidden himself away in middle of the ongoing traffic jam.

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“Well, maybe we did fail to stop the evil sorceress that even now is telekinetically dangling us upside-down by our ankles, but I think the important thing is that we tried.”

“Please shut up.” said Lightning.

“Yes, please, I grow tired of your wisecracks.” said Morgaine. “And to think a pair of half-wits like yourselves forced me to be so... pragmatic.” she shook her head. “Truly, I must be getting old.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to stay positive!” said Simon. “Besides, she’s already been trying to kill us. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“She could send our souls to Hell.”

“...she can do that?”

“Yep.”

“Like, the actual, literal, capital H ‘Hell’. Not a hell planet or a hell dimension or some kind of virtual hell. The real one.”

“Yep.”

Simon looked slightly worried, but the feeling quickly subsided. “Well... if she does that, then I’ll kill Satan and break outta Hell myself!”

“The sad thing about this world is that’s probably a legitimate plan.” Morgain spread her hands and a magical circle appeared underneath the heroes. “Which is why I am instead going to bind your souls into a pair of eating utensils for my son Mordred, so that three meals a day you will be so very close to my supernaturally succulent foodstuffs, forever reminding you of the simple pleasures of your lost humanity, yet you will forever be unable to taste such things ever again.”

“That’s pretty damn cruel.” said Simon.

“What can I say, I’m in a foul mood this week. No thanks to you two, of course...” She then placed a fork and a knife in the center of the circle, and began to chant her vile incantation.

Suddenly, Morgaine heard a shrill voice from off to the side. “Simon! I’m coming! Don’t worry!”

“Now what...” Morgaine followed the source of the voice until she spotted a woman with strange-looking eyes and far too much hair running at her driving a robot shaped like a human face. It was probably the eighth most peculiar thing she had seen in her life, and certainly the strangest thing she had beheld today.

“Nia!” shouted Simon. “You came through!”

“I told you I would!” Nia replied. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you down! Just give me a second!”

If Morgaine was familiar with the cultural connotations of such an act, she probably would have rolled her eyes. “Another member of the fools parade, I see.” She pointed her finger at Nia twirled it around. “Wingardium leviosa.”

Nia screamed as she found herself lifted off her feet and out of the Lagann, and soon she too found herself with the others, hanging upside-down above the magic circle.

“Yeah, some rescue.” said Lightning.
“Sorry...” Nia tried her hardest not to tear up. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Don’t worry, that attack caught us off guard, too,” said Simon. “And you did get the Lagann here; with any luck, our rescuer will be able to use it to turn the tables.”

“Rescuer? What rescuer?” Morgaine said. “The boy had turned tail and fled, and even now, my son is finishing off the blonde one.” she woke up to the Lagann to get a better look at it, wondering how the bizarre-looking contraption would be any sort of threat, what with it’s stubby arms raised in the air like that. “All that’s left is the girl, but she’s in no condition to fight.” she turned to face her victims once more. “Even if she was still conscious, how would she be able to operate such an automaton with only one arm? And if you ignore that, there is no way that I would allow myself to be beaten by that-”

The Lagann then brought it’s mighty fists down own Morgaine’s head, knocking the sorceress out with a single, swift blow.

“Huh.” Nia stared at the mech in disbelief. “Did I do that? I don’t think I did. Did I press the wrong button and activate the killer AI function?”

“Doubt it. I think we just got saved by someone Morgaine wasn't counting on...” Lightning pointed at the entrance to the museum.

Sure enough, Girlborg slowly limped out from behind the doorframe. “See...?” She murmured. “Technopathy... told you... it would work...” then she collapsed, falling face-first onto the pavement.

“We’ve got to help her!” said Nia.

“How?” said Lightning. “Last time I checked, we can’t really do much but wait around for the magic to fade-”

And then they all fell to the ground.

“-away.” Lightning got up, and shook her head. “This day just keeps getting better and better, does it?”

Nia started to run for the collapsed girl, but Lightning grabbed her by the shoulder. “Wait! That girl’s contaminated with the Machine Plague! Don’t get any closer.”

“Relax.” said Simon. “Nia’s a physician and I’m a mechanic. If anyone’s going to be able to save that girl, it’s us.” He removed Lightning’s hand from Nia’s shoulder, and together they approached the girl.

“Hm... no bleeding.” Nia examined the girl from a distance as she put on a pair of rubber gloves that she kept in her purse. “That’s a good sign... but that also means she’s already in the advanced stages.” Nia then flipped the girl onto her back, and put her ear on the girl’s chest. “She’s still breathing though, so she’s apparently still alive...”

“Uhgh...” Girlborg moaned “I’m okay, I’m okay...”

“No you’re not.” said Lightning. “You’re infected with a dangerous disease, and you’re missing an arm.”

“Not a big deal... I’ve got a friend who can fix it...” she said.
“A friend?” said Lightning. “You mean someone’s been messing around with your insides?”

“...y-yes?”

“Great...” Lightning facepalmed. “Now we’ve got a potential outbreak on our hands...”

Nia tore off a piece of her dress, and wrapped it around the stump of Girlborg’s arm like a	tourniquete. “I don’t know if this’ll help... but it might keep you from losing any more parts.”

“Thanks...” the girl said.

“Now come on!” Simon said. “Let’s all pile into the Lagann! Now that the gang’s all here, I’ve got a plan to beat Mordred!”

“Let me guess.” said Lightning. “We’re going to punch him in the face.”

“Exactly!” said Simon.

“And why do you think it’s going to work this time?”

And so Simon told her.

-----------------------------------------------

Shulk let out a short scream as his face hit the pavement, chipping a tooth and no doubt making his black eye even worse than it was already.

“<I shall give you this much, scholar.>” Mordred said. “<Of all the fools I’ve killed, thou, perhaps, are the most dedicated. Tell me, why dost thou perseverest in the face of an impossible test?>”

“<There are... lives... on the line...>” Shulk said. “<Just... promise me... you won’t kill the others...>”

“<Well of course I won’t kill without due cause.>” Mordred replied. “<But given how violent their natures are, I may be forced to do so.>”

“<I see...>” Shulk coughed up some blood. “<I guess... I didn’t... change... anything...>” He clutched the monado with his dear life.

“<Rest easy, scholar.>” said Mordred. “<For soon thou shalt be with God...>” He raised his blade high into the air, ready to deliver the final blow...

But just as the blade was about to strike, instead bounced off an barrier that appeared out of nowhere.

“<What trickery is this?>” Mordred looked around. “<Do the forces of fate haunt me still...>” He then spotted Shinji, peeking out from behind a nearby newsstand. “<...or is there yet a knave who knows not his place?>” He stomped towards the boy, grabbed him by his collar, and hoisted him high into the air. He then glared at Shinji, while the boy himself did his best not to wet his pants.

“Child, thy heroism is admirable, but misguided.” Mordred said “<One more stunt like that and I shall be forced to-” Suddenly, he heard a heavy clanking noise come from behind him. “-kill you?”

Mordred glanced behind himself, and saw a stout, red, face made out of metal, with stubby arms and legs sprouting out of the sides, grab Shulk and toss him into it’s head, where the broken young man slipped through some kind of membrane. Mordred didn’t have much time to contemplate all
this before the Laggan sprang forward and snatched Shinji right out of his grasp, and tossed him to
into the membrane.

“<...I know not what kind of weapon this is... nor do I care! Show thyself, so that you may die with
dignity!>”

Meanwhile, inside the Lagann, it soon became apparent that the cockpit was not in fact made for
six people.

“I don’t like this plan so far...” said Girlborg.

“Trust me, it gets better!” said Nia.

“It’s not like it can get much worse...” said Lightning

“Simon? Lightning? What is this?” said Shulk.

“This, my good friend, is the Lagann, the most powerful mech in the universe! It was our secret
weapon against Spiral Kingdom, and now it’s our secret weapon against Mordred!” Simon pointed
to the furious knight on the display screen.

“But that’s crazy!” Shinji yelped. “We saw what that guy did to you; he’s freakin invincible!”

“Beat the invincible! Do the impossible! That’s what my bro used to say!” he pumped his fist in
the air. “This thing runs on nothing guts and fighting spirit, like a big, robot-shaped Green Lantern
ring! So I say we combine our willpower, and show this literal bastard what we’re made of!”

Shulk struggled to look at the Monado’s screen. “That might actually work! It says here that our
combined willpower output is bordering on 1.4 Megascotts. If your robot works like you say...”

Lightning sighed. “I should be saying ‘this will never work’, but honestly I’m sick of being proven
wrong. Let’s do this.”

“Right!” Simon pressed a button, and the cockpit flipped open, revealing everyone to Mordred.

“So thou thinkst thou can gang up on me?” he reeled back in laughter. “HA! How many times must
I prove myself to thou before I hear thy surrender?”

“We’ve got news for you, pal!” Simon said. “For you, the dark ages are just getting started!”

“...really? That’s the best you could come up with?” said Lightning.

“Hey, it’s not like I spent all night practicing one liners in case I run into a knight (Okay yes I do).”

“I see a natural 1 in your future, pal!” said Shulk.

Lightning just stared at him. “…that’s even worse.”

“We’ll hit you so hard, even your mother will feel it?” said Girlborg.

“That’s probably the best we’re going to get...” said Lightning.

Simon flipped down his goggles. “WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK WE ARE!?”

He then flipped the cockpit back down and told everyone to grab onto the controls and think about
punching Mordred.
Outside of the Lagann, the mech’s arms suddenly turned into drills, which grew a heck of a lot longer over the course of a couple seconds, before fusing and then expanding into a drill that was at least ten times the size of the Lagann itself.

“<Thou could send a dozen such attacks at me and I wouldn’t even flinch!>” said Mordred
“<Bringeth it on!>”

And indeed they did. The lagann’s legs then turned into rockets, which propelled the mech at its intended target: Mordred’s helmet. He tried to block the attack with his sword, but it came too fast to him to react. Instead, he was treated to the agonizing sound of steel scraping against steel, with the drill slowly boring into the helmet.

“JUST A... BIT... LONGER...” Simon said through his bared teeth.

Suddenly the Monado began to emit a series of piercing beeps.

“CAN YOU TURN THAT DAMN THING OFF!??” shouted Lightning “IT’S HARD FOR ME TO CONCENTRATE.”

“I CAN’T, IT’S AN AUTOMATED ALERT!” Shulk glanced down at the Monado. “IT SAYS THERE’S A TRANS-SPACIAL GATEWAY FORMING RIGHT BEHIND US! IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE’S TELEPORTING IN, AND FA-”

Just then, the cabin shook as what was presumably the thing the Monado had detected crashed into the Lagann, throwing the whole thing off balance, jostling the Lagann’s shell open and sending everyone inside flying out of the mech and onto the pavement. For Mordred, the effect was more akin to a nail being stuck by a hammer: before returning to normal size, the Lagann’s drill shattered a large chunk of his helmet, and sent the knight toppling over. The Lagann, meanwhile, tumbled to a stop somewhat behind Mordred, and the unknown projectile itself crashed into the ground, leaving a small impact crater situated somewhere between Mordred and the heroes.

“Well... didn’t see that coming.” Simon rubbed his aching forehead.

“Technically we did.” said Shulk as he helped Girloborg off the ground. “We just didn’t have enough time to prepare.”

“What was that, anyway?” said Girloborg.

“Reinforcements would be my guess.” said Lightning. “I mean what else would it be: some random girl we’ve never met before who just falls out of the sky for no reason?”

Just then, a young girl, perhaps no older than 10 crawled out of the impact crater. She had medium-length black hair and pale skin, and was wearing a plain black baseball cap, as well as a t-shirt with a stylized depiction of an armored figure, with an English caption below the image implying the figure was named “Wild Tiger”. Despite her clothes being torn in several places, she seemed to be in remarkably good shape for someone who just survived an impact like that. She stood up, looked up into the air, raised her fists into the sky and shouted “<HELOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO STERNBILD!>” before fainting.

“...Next time, just say ‘a sack full of free money.’” said Simon.

“Noted.” said Lightning. She looked over at Mordred, who was now raging with fury, covering the missing part of his facemask with a free hand, and screaming a string of Shakespearean insults at anyone who would listen.
“<Thou cullionly plume-plucked whey-face! Thou lumpish earth-vexing ratsbane! I shall wring thee limb from limb until thy bones crumble to dust!>”

Lightning ignored Mordred’s ramblings for the time being.

“So what are going to do now?” said Shinji. “Without your robot, we can’t even leave a dent in the guy...”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking...” Simon bit his upper lip in frustration.

“Um, actually, I think I might have an idea...” Shulk said, his voice cracking a bit. “But you’re going to have to promise not to interrupt and let me do the talking.”

“Well, you probably do have the most tact out of all of us...” Lightning said. “Go ahead. Let’s see what this plan of your is...”

Grasping Avalon in his left hand, Shulk slowly approached Mordred, taking care to step around the still-unconscious girl lying between them.

When he was about ten feet away, Mordred took notice of Shulk’s presence and said <“SCHOLAR, TIS LUNACY FOR YOU TO COME AND FACE ME ALONE! IT IS TOO LATE FOR REPARATIONS, NOW OUR FEUD MUST BE SETTLED IN COMBAT, WITH OUR ARMOR DRENCHED IN->”

“<Here.>” Shulk dropped Avalon to the ground, and stepped back. “<It’s yours.>”


“<Avalon. It’s yours. It’s no longer worth fighting over.>” he took a deep breath. “<Especially since it’s a fake.>”

“<WHAT?!>” Mordred bellowed.

“<We believe that the previous curator of the exhibit, Sir Crocodile, sold it to an unknown party for a hefty sum over ten years ago. We believe that someone is a member of the Clock Tower, one of the three main branches of the Mages Association. I’m here on behalf of Atlas, another one of the branches, to identify if the Avalon in the collection is the real thing or not for the investigation.>”

“<So... thou art a bringer of justice?>”

“<No, I’m just one step in the process. Once I’ve identified that foul play has been committed, Atlas will bring the matter to the attention of Interpol, Interpol will track down the ones responsible (with some nudges in the right direction by Atlas), whatever family is responsible will use their political clout to get the heat off themselves, but they’ll look incredibly foolish in the process.>”

“<And the man responsible for this corruption? Will he face judgement?>”

Shulk shrugged. “<...perhaps he’ll lose some status within his house, but from a legal standpoint he’ll probably get away with it.>”

“<That’s preposterous!>” Mordred exclaimed, crushing the fake Avalon between his fist. “<If thy story is true, then I swear on my honor that I will track this man down and slay him myself!>”
“...not really sure that’s a good idea, but you’re welcome to try.” Shulk coughed. “Now... do you think we could have a—”

“A truce? Yes, now that we have nothing to fight over, that would be a splendid idea. All I must do is convince mother, and then I will be off.” Mordred then began to walk away. “Fare thee well, scholar! May we meet again, on more amicable-” Mordred suddenly stopped as his ears picked up a faint rumbling in the distance. “Hark! I hear the sound of many wheels scraping against asphalt, unrelenting. What in God’s name could the source of this racket be?”

Moments later, dozens upon dozens of Knightmare Frames poured in from every direction, their chests gleaming with the silver emblem of the Black Knights. The twenty-foot-tall mecha came to a halt in a circle around Mordred, their land-spinners screeching in response to the sudden change in velocity, and aimed their enormous rifles directly at Mordred.

“Oh silly me.” Mordred shook his head. “The answer ‘twas robots... on roller skates.”

From behind a nearby building, one last Frame emerged. It was very different from the others; it could fly for one thing. But rather than the stout, economical shape of the Sutherland models, this Knightmare frame was slim and sleek, almost anorexic if not for its bulky shoulder, chest and knee-plates. It’s color scheme was different, too. Rather than the purple-and-black pattern that the other Knightmare Frames wore, this one was almost entirely black, with gold plating on the shoulders, knees and helmet, as well as a red, glowing, backpack-looking device that no doubt the source of the Knightmare Frame’s flight.

“Criminal!” boomed a voice from the flying Mecha. “I am Zero, and we are the Black Knights: a global force for justice!” The voice paused to let that sink in. “You have five seconds to surrender!”

Mordred’s fist clenched in anger. “Thou call thyselfs knights!? you have five seconds to surrender!”

“Thou art nothing but charlatans masquerading as—”

“All units, fire!” Zero shouted, and at that moment, every one of the Knightmare frames under his command opened fire on Mordred. For a full minute, nothing but the sounds of the Black Knights’ rifles could be heard, and nothing could be seen but the flash of muzzle fire and the endless spray of bullets.

But when the smoke cleared, Mordred was still standing, uninjured as ever.

“Oh come on, that never works!” shouted Simon.

“Relax, I’ve seem them do this before.” said Lightning, “Watch this...”

“HA!” he said. “It doesn’t matter how many times thee throwest thyselfs against me; for my power is beyond that of any mortal—”

And then, suddenly, a hexagonal prism appeared in a flash of crimson light, cutting him off mid-sentence and freezing him in place.

Girlborg, almost fatigued to the point of collapsing, thought for a moment that she was hallucinating voices, only to realize that she was somehow picking up the Knights’ radio signals.

“Good work, but you cut it a little close this time.” she heard Zero say.

“Waddya talking about?! we were only off by six seconds!” she heard another voice say.
“It takes exactly one minute, eleven seconds for the Absolute Defense Field to ready it’s capture program. After our legally-mandated five-second warning, that means you need to occupy the target’s attention with sustained gunfire for one minute, five seconds. And six seconds would have been more than enough time for Black Adam or Bizzaro to tear us all to pieces.” said Zero. “We were lucky that this villain was fond of monologuing...”

“Oh, like you’re one to talk!” the other man said.

She tried to tune out the conversation. It reminded her too much Lelouch’s own lectures. Lelouch’s encyclopedic knowledge on the numbers of absolutely everything was one of his more endearing traits, and she didn’t want to associate him with that mercenary, Zero. After all, who else but Loulou would know that the average villain speech was thirty seconds long, or that hostage-takers have an effective reflex of about 1.5 seconds, or that you could delay most villains indefinitely with a long enough speech...

...and that’s when Girlborg realized that, now that the Knightmare frames had taken care of Mordred, they were now turning their attention to the group themselves.

“Vigilantes!” Zero said. “It is possible that you may be infected with a deadly virus. Surrender now, or we’ll be forced to take drastic measures!” he then repeated his message in English, just in case.

“<Hey, wait a second!>” Girlborg said, “<I thought we were on the same side!>”

“<They are.>” Shulk said. “<Don’t worry, they’re not going to hurt us. They’re just being cautious because you’re infected with the Machine Plague...>”


“<You mean you don’t know?>” said Lightning.

“No!” said Girlborg. “<I just... after those robots attacked, when I went to get breakfast the next day I got a refrigerator magnet stuck to my arm, and->”

“<Wait... what robots?>” said Shulk.

“<You know... that ones that attacked Okinawa a couple months ago... I was on vacation then...>”


Girlborg leaned back a little, creeped out by Shulk’s reaction. “<Uh.... I dunno... giant lobsters or something?>”

Shulk reached into his pocket, and pulled out a fancy cell-phone. A couple minutes later, he held it up to Girlborg’s face, where it displayed a picture of a dark-blue, bipedal contraption with a hunched back, no noticeable head or neck, and glowing red eyes, generously decorated with gold patterns. “<Tell me, did they look anything like this?>”

Girlborg took the phone, and squinted at the image as her vision began to blur. It did look familiar, somehow. “<...I think so. I wasn’t really paying attention, but...>”

Shulk immediately snatched the phone away, and frantically started dialling. “<Dickson? It’s Shulk. Listen, I’ve got big news... uh-huh... yes I know that’s important but it can wait. It’s about the Mechon... no, don’t worry, I haven’t gone there yet. It’s about the attack on Okinawa... that’s just it: I think I’ve found a survivor... well yes she is, but she’s also fully sentient. Do you know
what this could mean? I mean it is a bit too early to get my hopes up, but Fiora could still be- …ah, right, I’ll keep quiet. Just... try to get here as soon as you can.>”

The last thing Girlborg heard before she fell unconscious was another one of the Knights’ radio transmissions. “This is squad alpha; mission accomplished. Target one is secured and the quarantine was successful...”

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“Roger that, Alpha.” Kallen said. “Beta leader, here. Squad is fanning out, searching for stragglers. I’m moving to capture secondary target.” From the cockpit of the Guren Mk. II (not to be confused with “The Gurren”, a similarly named mech that people kept confusing the Mk. II with for some reason), perhaps the most powerful unit in the Black Knights’ arsenal, she had perhaps the best view of the battle below. The Float System her mech wore was still just a prototype, so it was only reserved for the best pilots. And Kallen was the best. By several orders of magnitude, in fact.

True, the Mk. II’s bright red armor and enormous metal claw made it stand out from the rank and file, but this only caused enemies to make the mistake of going after her first. It was a mistake they usually didn’t live to make a second time; the Guren Mk. II’s arm could emit nearly any form of radiation: from microwaves to zeta beams to green-k. The arm alone was a formidable weapon against nearly anything under the sun.

So it came as a bit of a surprise when Zero refused to let her proceed. “Negative, Beta.” he said. “Target is too dangerous to approach solo. Wait for backup.”

“With all due respect, sir, target has already proven to be capable of long-distance teleportation. We might not get a second chance.”

“...very well. But at the first sign of trouble, abort mission. I repeat, at the first sign of trouble, abort mission.”

Kallen turned off her radio. “Right...” she sighed, “...no pressure.” After all she was just going to capture an immortal witch with mysterious powers by using a weapon that would probably be at least seven types of illegal if anyone bothered to actually look at the schematics. Still, as long as she kept a few feet of metal between herself and Morgaine, Kallen figured she’d probably be safe. Probably.

The MK II touched near where the vigilantes had beaten the Sorceress; about thirty feet from the museum, right in the middle of the road. Plenty of space to maneuver on foot, and she could easily take to the air if she had to. She turned on her monitor and saw that, indeed, Morgaine Le Fay was lying right where they had left her.

“Well, it looks that way at least...” Kallen mused. “Still, I’d better make sure. Just gotta turn on this scanner, and...”

...the monitor turned to static.

“Huh. That’s funny...” Kallen flipped the switch again, to no avail. “Is the damn thing busted again?”

Suddenly, a hand burst out of the monitor, and grabbed Kallen by the throat. The hand could have been best described as “armored”, if only because there wasn’t a word for “covered entirely in tiny padlocks arranged in a way that resembled crude scale armor”.
“<Sorry about this, ‘luv.’>” said a thickly-accented English voice. “<Can’t let you go ‘bout capturing this one. She’d kill you if you tried, and we can’t have that happening, now can we? Especially when I need you so much, miss...>” the voice paused. “<Kozuki? Or Stadtfeld? Oh well, it doesn’t especially matter because they’re both wrong. Or both right. Depends on your point of view.>”

“<What... do you... want...?>” Kallen gasped.

“<What? I don’t want anything! ...no, wait, that’s a lie: I want a lot of things. But for you, right here, right now, I don’t want anything. In fact, I want to give you a gift. A most wonderful gift, in fact...>”

The hand gripped tighter on Kallen’s throat.

“<I want you to see the world as it truly is...>”

------------END OF CHAPTER------------

BETHANY SNOW: Welcome to Chanel 52 News. Our top story for tonight, the case of the disappearing children. All around the world, teenage girls are vanishing at an alarming rate with no apparent pattern. We now bring you live to reporter A. Bug, and his interview with detective Harvey Bullock of the Gotham P.D. on the disappearance of Deborah Blank, 14 years old.

HARVEY BULLOCK: Ah, well, it’s kind of a strange case ya see. Yer everyday middle-class schoolgirl. No ransom note, no mob ties, no nothin. Only thing strange about her was that some girl that used to bully her died of a heart attack a few months ago, but if she had supah-powers we woulda heard about it already. That and she was really into the animes, but it ain’t like that’s a lead or anythin.

AMBUSH BUG: So are you saying that this is the work of a mind-reading, telepathic nerdy pedophile?

HARVEY BULLOCK: Well we ain’t gonna rule it out just yet, but-

AMBUSH BUG: You heard it first, folks! Lock your doors and burn your DVD players! We’ve got a madman on the loose!

HARVEY BULLOCK: Now wait just a second I didn’t say-

BETHANY SNOW: Fascinating. In other news, d-list hero Sora Hibiki has returned to earth after being absent for over a year and a half.

CALENDER MAN: For those not aware of Sora, he’s a young man who wields an impractically-shaped weapon called a Keyblade, which is said to be our only line of defence against monsters called The Heartless, who are probably the cutest eldritch abominations this side of Hello Cthulhu. Assisting him were fellow d-listers G’nort the Green Lantern and Klarion the Witch Boy, though recent developments say that perhaps Sora doesn’t deserve an the credit attributed to him. We now take you to our darkened studio, where our anonymous informant will hopefully shed some light on the matter.

TOTALLY NOT KLARION THE WITCH BOY: Yeah, Klarion was doing all the work. Sora and G’nort was just eating potato chips and stuff. Did I mention Klarion was awesome? Because he totally is.

CALENDER MAN: Fascinating. Back to you, Bethany.
BETHANY SNOW: Now we turn to our foreign correspondent, Dr. W for an update on the Clock Tower situation.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Thanks, Bethany. I’m here at the ruins of the clock tower known as “Big Ben”, thought technically that’s just the name of the bell. But that’s not important! What is important is that someone blew it up, and we don’t know how or why, but we do know when! Because, erm. It’s a clock. Obviously. Of course, that’s not much if you don’t know where the perp is in the first place, but no worries! I’m sure they’ll find him eventually.

BETHANY SNOW: Thank you, Doctor. Coming up: an interview with Most Excellent Superbat as part of our ongoing special on the Super Young Team. Also: Unicorns; fact or fiction? Here, on Channel 52.

-------------AUTHORS NOTES-------------

Okay I admit it Simon’s last name came from putting the word “Drill” into google translate.

Yes I am very obviously Simon X Nia. But if you despise mushy stuff, rest assured that romance is only a part of this fic; not the whole thing. Trust me, there’s going to be plenty of action and lasers and robots and magic and angst and dinosaurs and punching and kicking and more angst and guns and conspiracies to keep you occupied.

I am pretty sure that Tokyo does not have a national history museum. OH WELL I GUESS IT DOES NOW.

Also I don’t actually know if Lightning’s rank of “Inspector” is appropriate for a police detective since I don’t really know much about the japanese police force. So there’s two possibilities here: Either I will do the research and covertly replace all references to “Inspector” with the appropriate rank, or I will not do the research and just assume that in this universe her rank is actually correct..

I based Morgaine Le Fey’s physical appearance mostly on her appearance in issue 12 of Demon Knights, while her association with Mordred is something borrowed from the DCAU... though obviously I put a major twist on it, since in the DCAU he’s a bratty kid while here Mordred is at least a teenager, if not an adult who appears to be horribly, horribly overpowered.

Speaking of which, this is not explicitly set in any actual version of the DCU. Rather, it’s a version of the DCU that has anime characters in it, and has always had anime characters in it. The explanation is that these stories come from an alternate universe where DC at some point bought the rights to translate publish Manga in the U.S. during the Silver Age. In order to promote these manga series, they started introducing characters from those series into DC’s comics’ universe, usually as guest stars explicitly from alternate realities, though it was rare for DC characters to appear the original work (though Osamu Tezuka’s “Astro Boy” was a notable exception, as Will Magnus, The Metal Men, and Dr. T.O. Morrow ended up becoming recurring characters). When Crisis on Infinite Earths happened, they still decided to keep Manga and Anime characters in the new DCU, though it was made abundantly clear that these were separate from the “canon” versions of the characters.

A few notable facts about this version of the DCU:

- Vash the Stampede is currently The Red Hood. Most people in-universe think Vash died during the events of Armageddon 2001, where Millions Knives (who at the time was in the Justice League pretending to be a “reformed” Vash the Stampede) was revealed to be Monarch instead of Captain Atom or Hawk.
• Fate/Stay Night was never an H-Game. Instead, Kinoko Nasu became a writer at DC, and worked with Gen Urobuchi to incorporate his ideas into “Fate Origin/Fall”, a miniseries with plot very similar to Fate/Zero. He also became a co-writer for JSJ.

• Andrew Hussie did not go into webcomics, and instead made a bunch of weird (but popular!) batman stories before being handed the reigns to work with Grant Morrison on an Animal Man miniseries about Grant and Hussie’s author avatars making up new, ridiculously overpowered villains to kill each other’s characters so said authors could seize control of the miniseries, and then trying to wrap it into a coherent plot after they call a truce in the final issue.

What does any of this have to do with the plot? Probably nothing!

Also, in real life Japan has an extremely low crime rate. But we’re going to ignore this fact because it would be a pretty boring superhero story if nothing interesting happened.

Also also; is GINO (Gendo-In-Name-Only) actually a good guy in this universe, or does he have some kind of hidden agenda? WOOOOOOOO ITS A MYSTERY.

Also also also, before anyone points this out to me I already know that you don’t vote for the prime minister, at least in Japan. But Simon doesn’t know that.
Issue #2: Quarantine!

[FRONT COVER: The cover shows a picture of the main characters from the last issue in facility of some sort, trapped behind glass windows. In the center is Girloborg, who is being examined by a bunch of guys in hazmat suits. In the room to the left of Girloborg, Simon and Nia are banging on the glass, while Lightning just looks bored in the room to the right of Girloborg. In the room to the right of Girloborg, Shinji is lying on a couch, talking to a psychologist in a hazmat suit. Below Girloborg, Shulk has a thumbtack bulletin board that is full of indistinct pictures, drawings and papers, like some kind of conspiracy theorist. The only legible thing is the words “Mechon => Virus => Aglets???” written across several papers in red marker. A caption informs the reader that once again this story is “NOT A DREAM! NOT AN IMAGINARY STORY!” A caption underneath this statement says “Our heroes are now under…” followed by the words “QUARANTINE” in big, imposing letters.]

If there was one thing that Yokoda Memorial Hospital prided itself on, it was its emergency response speed. Even while understaffed and overcrowded with those injured in the wake of Super Young Team’s battle with the Ten Ben Matanga they always found a way to squeeze in an injured hero or two, even for such unexpected circumstances as possible infection with a deadly virus.

“Of course we’ve only taken preliminary steps at this point.” Masamichi Sonoda, head of the Tokyo Police Cataclysm Division, adjusted his glasses as best he could from within his hazmat suit. “We still need to set up additional quarantine points, send out alerts, inform the media, et cetera, et cetera. Thankfully, the carrier’s been more than cooperative; she practically gave us her whole life story.”

“Skip to the important bits.” said Lightning, examining the contents of a manilla folder. “I’ll read the rest of it later.” The work was a welcome change of pace, as there was nothing to look at in the stark, white hospital room but a single television, two beds, and a blue curtain that neatly divided the room, and a 12th-floor view of the Tokyo skyline that she had already gotten bored with.

“Right.” Sonoda glanced at his clipboard. “Her name is Shirley Fenette; she’s an American student attending Ashford Academy. Just as you said, she apparently contracted the virus during the attack on Okinawa. Supposedly, another student pulled her to safety after she was nearly swallowed by a, and I quote, ‘big lobster robot’ that we identified as ‘Unknown Automaton 132’.”

“The kid from the Mages Association called it a ‘Mechon’.” Lightning added. “Those guys play pretty close to their chests. But throw the name around, ruffle a few feathers, and someone might spill the beans just to save face.”

“I’ll keep that in mind...” the captain jotted down a reminder on his notepad. “Anyway, the girl suffered minor injuries while fleeing Okinawa, but she did not seek treatment, as she said she ‘didn’t want her father to worry’. In addition, she and her fellow travelers had left via private yacht, so they were able to bypass the checkpoint we set up after the fact.”

“So of course when she started to turn to metal, she decided to play hero...” Lightning looked at the photograph of the orange-haired teen. “It’s always the rich kids the ones who lack common sense?”

“It gets worse.” he handed Lightning a map of the city. The red area indicates the roaming distance of an average Ashford Academy student. The blue area is the area the carrier covered on her
‘patrols’. Between these two, that’s about twenty-five percent of the city that could be infected, and given the lengthy incubation period…”

“Looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you then. What about the other girl? Any info on her?”

“Yes, but nothing all that useful.” he handed her a ream of papers. “Her name is Hope. This is a transcript of everything she’s said within the past three hours. At this point we know is her shoe size, her favorite color, her favorite videogame, her favorite Pokémon, her favorite TV shows, her favorite episodes of her favorite tv shows, her favorite parts of her favorite episodes of her favorite tv show, her favorite movies, her favorite books, her favorite internet celebrities, her favorite flavor of ice cream. We might also have her name, depending on whether “Hope” is a first name or an alias…”

“The name’s more common than you’d think. I knew a boy named that, believe it or not.”

Lightning set the transcript aside. “And let me guess, she’s running away from home.”

“Yes. Said she was going to Sternbild to become the sidekick of someone named ‘Wild Tiger’…”

“D-lister. Part of an american reality TV-Show. Call the network and see if they got any strange calls or fan mail recently. I’d also suggest checking for Metagene activity. Kids don’t usually fall out the sky and walk away unharmed…”

“Already done. Her genes are normal, though given how she immediately regenerated during a blood test it’s clear that she has powers of some sort. Plus, there was this.” Sonoda pointed a photograph of the girl’s forehead, unobscured by either hair or her hat, revealing a bright red tattoo of a dragon looping around to eat it’s own tail. Inside the loop were three red triangle arranged into a larger triangle, leaving small gaps above which three smaller triangle were arranged around. Inside the triangle themselves was a design that looked like snake a wrapped around a crucifix, with a pair of little wings above the cross and a crown above the pair of wings.

“It’s an Oroboros.” said Lightning. “That could mean anything from alchemy to ancient egypt. Come back when you’ve got something more substantial.” Lightning then turned to look back at her papers. “Don’t worry about me. For now, hang tight and try not to attract too much attention. My guess is the kid’s parents are a real nasty piece of work. Weird experiments and stuff. Soon as this disease thing is over and done with, I’ll get on the case.”

The room hung silently.

Sonoda reached to put away his glasses, only to realize that there was no way he could do so without taking off the suit. “...Farron, we need to talk.”

“I’m not going to die anytime soon, captain. You know as well as I do that I’m immune to-”

“It’s not that. It’s more like... your attitude.” Sonoda looked up at the ceiling as he tried to collect his thoughts. “What I’m getting at is that you have a reputation as a loose cannon.”

Lightning didn’t even look up. “It’s exaggerated. I don’t make arrests off duty, I always get a search warrant, I don’t beat perps as a form of interrogation…”

“True, at least on paper your track record is impeccable…” He coughed. “The problem is... not everyone else sees it that way. I’ve been getting complaints about your attitude towards your officers. One Chief Hirukawa, for instance, seems convinced that you’ve been purposely trying to ruin his career...”
“By thwarting a Yakuza operation happening right under his nose?”

“He did ask you to leave it to his department...”

“Well, you’d think he’d be more grateful...”

“And then there’s your whole “Fal’cie” incident.”

“That wasn’t our fault. We were just at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Innocent or not, ‘Japan’s Most Wanted’ isn’t something you can just sweep under the rug. Not to mention the fact that you’re still are technically a L’cie... and... well...” He handed Lightning a yellow piece of paper. “You’re demoted to paperwork until further notice.”

“...You’ve got to be joking!” said Lightning. “This city would be nothing more than a smoking crater if it weren’t for-”

The chief suddenly raised his voice, “DO YOU THINK I DON’T KNOW THAT?!” he then caught himself. “Sorry. Nerves. You know how it is.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “The fact of the matter is, between the whole Fal’cie debacle, the crises, and Ikari’s cataclysm, people are still distrusting of metahumans. The public barely tolerates Big Science Action despite all the good they do, and outside the 18-to-24-year-old demographic Super Young Team is seen as almost a joke.” he flipped to the next page. “And then there’s complaints from more ‘traditional’ officers about your gender, complaints from ‘traditional’ mothers about being a poor role model, threats from the Mages Association...”

“You’re not honestly telling me you listen to that pack of inbreds...”

“I do when their political cronies threaten to slash my budget.” Sonoda turned to another page. “I’m working out a corruption case against them, but until then I can’t risk you acting out in public. There’s more than enough forensic work to occupy your time...” He then handed Lightning the rest of the clipboard. “Hopefully this’ll all blow over, but it’ll take a while.”

Lightning thought about trying to argue her case some more, but she knew Sonoda well enough that he was probably telling the truth. He couldn’t blame the man for putting his career over hers. After all, Sonoda was married and had a kid to take care of while Lightning was single and not in any hurry to settle down. It’s not that she found the idea of starting an intimate relationship repulsive or anything (hell, she could spend hours rattling off the names of her high school exes), but more that she had yet to work out the logistics. That, and being able to bend steel with one’s bare hands was usually a turn-off.

“Got it, sir.” she said.

“Good. Once you’re clear, report to me and I’ll give you your next assignment. Until then, think of this as paid vacation time.” And with that, Captain Sonoda took his leave.

Once she was sure no one was watching, Lightning slumped back onto her bed, and sighed. “Back to square one again, I see...”

“Is something wrong?”

Lightning jolted from her bed, sending papers flying everywhere. She had almost forgotten about her roommate.

“It’s... Farron, right?” A hand pulled back the curtain to the left of Lightning to reveal Nia, her
slightly uncanny face as bright and cheerful as ever. “Lightning Farron?”

Lightning immediately closed the curtain, and rolled to her side. The last thing she needed right now was a ray of sunshine beaming at her with those strange, flower-shaped pupils to remind her how much her day sucked.

Nia, of course, taking no notice of this, opened the curtain again. “I’m sorry, but I just wanted to thank you for helping my husband last night. You were very good at that whole “crime fighting” thing. Maybe you and Simon should team up more often!”

“I’m not doing that anymore.” Lightning mumbled.

“What?”

“I said I’m not doing that anymore.” she repeated, this time in a louder voice.

“I know. I head the whole thing, and I’m sorry to hear that...” Nia said. “…it’s just too bad that the police don’t like Fal’cie...”

Despite her continued slump, Lightning’s finely-tuned instincts couldn’t detect a trace of dishonesty in Nia’s voice.

“...but your boss is right! With any luck this will all blow over, and you’ll be back on the streets in no time!”

“...do you even know what a L’cie is?”

“It’s a kind of space alien, right?”

Lightning rolled her eyes. “No. L’cie are living weapons created by the Fal’Cie, which are... well, do you remember a couple years back when they found those giant crystals deep underneath Tokyo?”

“The ones that tried to destroy the world? I think so, but Simon and I were on Rann that month, so I kinda missed most of the details...”

Lightning facepalmed. “Of course you were. Well those things were Fal’cie, and they create L’cie to complete a task called a “focus” under the threat of a fate worse than death. I was turned into a L’cie with a bunch of others when I tried to rescue my sister, and we were tasked with destroying the world. But we obviously ignored that and spent a month running from just about everyone. Including the Justice League. Then we killed this big Fal’cie and somehow we saved the world and my sister forever. The end.”

Lightning glanced at Nia and was surprised to find that her half-assed story had nearly moved the girl to tears. “Aww... you saved the world AND your sister, and not even the police are grateful? That’s terrible!”

“Is this girl for real?” Lightning shook her head. “No, it can’t be. It has to be an act. No one could possibly be this dense-” Lightning thought back to a certain musclehead that her sister was engaged to. “Okay never mind.”

“You can say that again.” Lightning said. “It didn’t help that I took the blame for leading everyone there to become L’cie in the first place. Couldn’t let her ruin her career as a fashion designer just as it was getting started...”
Nia’s tears welled further. “And you took the blame for your sister, too?! You really are the greatest!” she sneezed into a handkerchief. “But wait, How did you get onto the police?”

“Well for one thing were supernaturally blackmailed; Our focus was to either destroy the city, or go insane and turn into monsters that would destroy the city anyway. The fact that we saved Tokyo helped. Plus, I was a cop beforehand. I had great credentials; a dual major in criminology and forensics, and I already had a few years experience under my belt. Once I was cleared of all charges I was allowed back on the force. Do you have any more stupid questions?”

“Well, I was thinking... if you prefer fieldwork so much, perhaps I can talk to someone about it... you know, ‘pull a few strings’, as they say?”

Lightning closed the curtain. “No thanks.”

Nia pulled them back open. “No, seriously! I’ve got some high-society friends! Maybe they can-”

“Nia, you’re dating a grease monkey with a hero complex and testosterone poisoning, your father was a supervillain. If anyone listens to you, it’s because they’re too polite to do otherwise. Please go away.”

“How? We’re stuck in the same room together...”

“...I was- look. I don’t know. Just watch TV or something.”

“...okay...” Nia closed the curtain, and got back onto her bed. She looked up at the ceiling, and tried her best not to think about what kind of agony Simon was going through, cooped up in that hospital room all day.

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Simon tried his best not to think about what kind of agony Nia was going through, cooped up in that hospital room all day. He figured she was going stark raving mad-

Well, maybe not mad/pe-se. Simon couldn’t imagine his girlfriend being mad in any sense of the word. Loopy, certainly, but not mad. But it’s not like he had anything else to think about, Simon was on the verge of going crazy himself with all the frantic scribbling, rustling of papers, and occasional calls to room service for equipment and caffeine coming from Shulk’s side of the room. It would be bad enough if he had only been doing it all day, but Shulk had managed to keep the racket up all last night as well. And while Simon was no stranger to sleepless nights, after a day like yesterday he had kind of looked forward to getting some shuteye.

Eventually, curiosity got the better of Simon and he decided to peek through the curtain. What he found was a whiteboard covered in equations, and enough thumbtacks and bulletin boards to frighten even the most paranoid of conspiracy theorists. And there Shulk was, hammering away at some kind of math problem like it was his last moments on earth.

Which it very well could be. Simon looked up Machinus Poxxus or whatever the Machine Plague was called, and the results weren’t pretty. It was exactly what Shulk said; transforms the body, destroys the soul, no cure.

But Simon wasn't worried about that. Despite the close quarters, he and Nia were damn careful around that infected girl; they dressed the wound and were careful not to let their improvised bandage come off, and if it was really contagious, then the whole city would be infected by now, so he probably would have caught it anyway.
No, he was just tired and cranky and really couldn’t sleep a wink. He had tried to calm his nerves by watching some television, but just has he turned it on, an old man in a Hazmat suit with tan, wrinkled skin, bleached hair and a thick mustache came through the door. He was apparently a friend of Shulk’s, because the sound of the TV was drowned out by a very long conversation about people he didn’t know and things he didn’t care about. He only started listening in when the conversation turned more to something he could relate to.

“<You really need to get some sleep, boy.>” said the old man. “<You’re not gonna cure the Plague if ya have rocks in ‘yer head.>”

“<I know, Dickson.>” said Shulk. “<And I’m not trying to. I’m just trying to get my affairs in order before-?>”

“<Before what? You head off to the Mechonis by yerself? That’s suicide, boy!>”

“<I’m not going by myself.>” said Shulk. “<Reyn and Dunban have already agreed..>”

Simon heard the sound of someone tearing a piece of paper off a wall. “<Graphs... charts... you’ve even got a bloody map of the damn thing!>” said Dickson. “<Where’d you get all this, anyway?>”

“<Your study. I’ve committed nearly all your research to memory. It was the only way I could without the Association catching wind.>”

“<Heh. You always were a clever blighter.>” Simon imagined that Dickson said this with a smirk on his face. “<But they’re not going to stand for it, you know. You’re the only one who can reliably operate The Monado. The Clock Tower wants to give you a Sealing Designation to keep you out of Atlas, Atlas wants you locked up with the damn sword to keep you away from the Tower, and the only reasons you get to roam free is that you’re too bloody useful to both of ‘em. And they’re at each others throats too much to realize they both just want ya to say in one place. Hearing that you’ve flown the coop might make them consider working together ‘fer once.>”

“<Even more of a reason to go right away.>” said Shulk. “<Whether or not I’m infected, the mere chance that I am can be used to my advantage. Besides, there’s still a chance that Fiora->”

“<Fiora’s dead, Shulk. Get that through yer head already.>” said Dickson. “<This is the first time we’ve heard of a Mechon using the Machine Plague for anything. For all we know the attack on Okinawa was just some loony who reprogrammed a horde of Mechon for kicks and stuck a virus in there for good measure.>”

“<But they’ve abducted victims in all the other attacks!>” said Shulk. “<Maybe... they synthesize the virus as part of their digestive system. Maybe they’ve got a clockwork army just waiting to->”

“<Say you’re right then.>” Dickson interrupted. “<Say you’re right and the Mechon abduct people and turn them into robots for God knows what reason. If so then she’s worse than dead; just a soulless shell that once used to be the sweetest girl you ever knew.>”

“<But what if she’s not?>” there was a sound of someone hastily pulling something down from a wall. “<Look, right here! Fenette’s soul capacity is at 94 percent, well within average! But all accounts she’s late enough into the transformation that she should be a 63 percent at best.>”

“<So she’s an exception. Big deal. This word’s fulla freaks like her.>”

“<But the point is that it’s possible! Unlikely, yes, but possible. And I’d rather die out there fighting for a hopeless cause than in here, watching my humanity slip away.>”
“<Assuming you’re infected, o’ course. But if yer dead set on dyin, I won’t stop ya. Just so you realize I can’t officially help you in any way... though if I just happened to be on assignment and I just happened to be there, and I just happened to have some extra supplies...>”

“<That’s more than I could ask.>” said Shulk. “<Thanks, Dickson.>”

“<My pleasure. Just promise me you’ll get some sleep. Never a good idea to plan things without some shuteye.>”

“<Yes, that is probably a good idea. Good night, Dickson.>”

“<G’night Shulk.>”

A few minutes after Dickson left, Shulk made good on his promise. After shuffling his papers one last time, he turned off the lights, and crawled into bed.

Relieved to finally have some peace and quiet, Simon slowly closed his eyelids...

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Amazingly Powerful Girlborg, better known to her friends as Shirley Fenette, couldn’t sleep.

It was bad enough that she embarrassed herself on her first day as a superhero, but the thought that just by surviving she might have accidently doomed her friends to a slow, painful death was just too much to bear. She agonized over trying to recall each and every time she sneezed, but only succeeded in falling deeper and deeper into a never-ending panic spiral.

Even trying to take her mind off things by browsing the internet on her cell phone didn’t help, as the slightest stray thought flooded her mind with information confirming her worst fears; failures to cure the Machine Plague, studies on the symptoms of the Machine Plague, studies showing how far the virus could spread via “carriers”, philosophical debates about consciousness without a soul.

She threw her phone against the wall, forgetting for a moment exactly how strong her robotic body was. Her fancy iPhone shattered into a million pieces, fragments of the screen and hard drive clattering to the ground with a dull tinkle. She instantly regretted her mistake, and added it to the list of other regrets regretted.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. An green haired nurse in hazmat gear peeked her head into the room and said; “Excuse me, miss Girlborg? You have visitors. Friends of yours, I believe...”

“Friends?” Shirley felt a sinking feeling deep within the pit of her stomach. “Oh no... not now...”

Before she could protest, a curvaceous young woman with thick, platinum blonde hair barged into the room wearing a form-fitting Ashford Academy uniform, carrying a burlap sack. Shirley immediately recognized her as Milly Ashford, the student council president. She was shortly followed by Rivalz Cardemonde, a purple-haired youth who was the council secretary, Nina Einstein, a nervous, mousy-looking girl with dark green hair and thin glasses who nevertheless somehow managed to be elected. Following them was Lelouch Lamperogue, a thin young man with raven hair purple eyes pointed features, who was the council’s vice president and Shirley’s crush as far back as she could remember. He was accompanied by his sister Nunnally Lamperogue, a blind girl with extremely long brown hair who was in a wheelchair that was being wheeled in by their brother Rolo Lamperogue, a short boy with brown hair and a very childlike face.
“Shirley!” Milly said, her face beaming with a wide grid. “Thank god you’re alive!”

“You have no idea how worried we were!” said Rivalz.

“Guys...?” Shirley looked at them quizically. “What’s going on?”

“The school’s been sealed up tight for quarantine. Nobody’s allowed in or out.”

“But big brother managed to convince one of the officers to bring us here.” said Nunnally. “And then he got a girl he once dated to let us in!”

“But... you’re not wearing any protection.” Shirley pointed out. “Does that mean...”

“The virus has been all over the news.” said Nina. “The press doesn’t have your name yet, but they’re going to have to release it to aid quarantine efforts.” Nina’s knees trembled slightly. “A-and we’ve been around you longest.” she continued. “I-If anyone is infected, it’s probably us...”

Tears began to form in Shirley’s eyes. “God... how could I be so stupid!” she cried. “I’ve probably killed all of you. I’m sorry! I’m so sorry...”

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry...” said Rivalz, tears dripping from his eyes. “I’ve been on paranormal websites for so long, I should have recognized this!” he then dropped down on his knees. “PLEASE FORGIVE ME!” he begged.

“And I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard to become a superhero.” Milly added, biting her lip as she did so.. “I guess I shouldn’t have assumed you were caught up in some kind of origin story...”

Lelouch put his hand on Shirley’s shoulder, and smiled ever so slightly. “We’ve all made mistakes. Even I was a bit too caught up giving lectures to think things through. Don’t worry about it.”

“And Kallen?”

“We can’t reach her.” said Rolo. “I’ve been trying for hours, but all I’ve gotten so far was her answering machine. It doesn’t bode well...”

“Oh, but you know Kallen!” Milly said, trying dismissing Rolo’s worries. “She’s always disappearing off the face of the earth for one reason or another. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was in the same hospital from another one of her fainting spells!” She reached into the sack she was carrying, and pulled out a colorful, cardboard box. “Now, if we’re going to die or lose our souls or whatever, we might as we go out with a smile! Who’s up for Apples to Apples?”

Lelouch flinched slightly as felt his phone vibrate. He glanced at the message briefly, and then said. “Sounds great! But first I need to take this call. I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Allight, if you say so.” Milly said without even looking up from the game she was in the middle of setting up. “Now, I’ll be the judge for the first round, and the first adjective is... ‘excellent’. Now does everyone have their cards?”

For probably the first time that evening, Shirley Fennete cracked a smile.

Shirley Fennete was not alone.

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Shinji Ikari was alone.
Not for the first time in his life, mind you, and certainly not the last. It’s just that when it came time to choose hospital rooms there was only one single-room left, and of course the Prime Minister’s son got preferential treatment.

His dad stayed as long as he could, trying to reassure Shinji through the thick plastic of his hazmat suit that everything would be alright. But Shinji almost wished that the Plague would come and consume his soul. Then, perhaps, he wouldn’t feel so lonely.

He knew he was lucky to have such doting parents. After his mother died, his father took months off of work to help Shinji get over the loss. But no matter how many trips they went on, Shinji felt more isolated than ever. His father’s position made it hard for people to see him as something other than “The Prime Minister’s Son”, and even if they weren't intimidated by such a title most kids his age were probably scared off by the guards that followed him everywhere. After Gendo, Lightning was probably the person he knew the best, and even then that’s because the pink-haired officer was obviously cast from a different mold than the dime-a-dozen suits that made up the rest of his father’s security team. It’s not like they talked or anything; all Shinji knew about her was that she was sometimes there during big public events, and that she was quite attractive.

So imagine his surprise when a nurse called to let him know a visitor here to see him. At first he thought it was his dad coming back from work, but instead through the door stepped a middle aged man with messy blonde hair that never seemed to stay down properly. He was wearing a pair of thick, horn-rimmed glasses underneath his hazmat suit, and carried a clipboard and several pens underneath his shoulder.

“Shinji Ikari?” he said.

“Yes...” Shinji said before sinking into his sheets.

“My name is Dr. Calvin Summers, and I’m your new psychologist.” He pulled up a chair, and sat next to Shinji’s bed. “But please, call me ‘Cal’.”

“...okay.” Shinji barely replied.

“So, Shinji, your father tells me you have superpowers. Is that correct?”

Shinji said nothing.

“...no need to be shy, Shinji. I do this for a living.” he handed the young man a white business business card with the name “Dr. Calvin M. Summers, Superhero Psychologist” printed on it in a red, retro-futuristic font. “That’s ‘psychologist who treats superheroes’ he added. Not “Psychologist who is also a superhero. Very different.”

Shinji still said nothing.

“Of course it’s okay if you’re not a superhero.” said the doctor. “Most metahumans aren’t. Little known fact, but over sixty percent of all metas are lifelong civilians. The heroes and villains are just the ones who get the most attention.” he smiled. “And as I said, I’ve been doing this for a while. You wouldn’t believe the stories I’ve got.”

Shinji continued to remain quiet.

“Did you ever hear about Dorothy Spinner, for instance? Very interesting girl. Had the power to bring her imaginary friends to life, which was a bit of a problem given her active imagination and made even worse given how she had a physical deformity that led her to isolate herself from others, leading to self-image and self-control issues. After her stint on the Doom Patrol ended in disaster,
she sought me out and I took on her case pro-bono and through therapy she gradually learned to keep her powers reigned in to a certain extent. You’d barely even recognize her nowadays.”

...Still nothing. Not even a smidgen of interest. Dr. Summers worried that the kid might have gone comatose without him realizing.

“You know what? How about I just skip storytime altogether and we could just sit here, staring at each other in silence until you think of something to talk about. Your choice.”

A few more minutes passed without much. Finally, Shinji rolled onto his side and said. “...what’s it like being a superhero?”

“A superhero? Hmm...” the doctor bit his pencil nervously. “From what I’ve heard, it’s not easy. You’re constantly in danger, always watching your back, ready to dart into the nearest phone booth at the slightest sign of trouble.” he then pointed his pencil at Shinji. “Plus your mere existence endangers your friends and family, especially if you don’t have a secret identity.”

“...are there any good things?”

the doctor scratched his head. “Well, assuming you're not looking for endorsement deals, it’s apparently quite a thrill to nab a crook in the middle of his crime. Plus, you do meet a lot of interesting people...”

“How do they get started then?” asked Shinji. “Superheroes, I mean.”

The doctor eyed Shinji suspiciously. “Why do you ask?”

“Just... curious, I guess...” Shinji sighed.

The doctor gave shinji a concerned look. “Shinji. I can’t tell you what to do with your life, but if you decide to take up a cape you’d be putting yourself in danger. Now, I’m not going to tell your father, but if you’re going to be taking up a cape it’s probably best to let him know. Trust me, I’ve seen too many families torn apart by this sort of thing.”

“...can’t you do it?” said Shinji. “I mean, let him know that I’m thinking about it...”

Dr. Summers shook his head. “...I’m afraid not.” he said. “This is something you have to do..” he handed Shinji a phone. “But don’t worry, I’ll be right beside you. And if your father truly loves you, then he’ll be right there with you.”

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“...while the Third Child’s awakening was unexpected, it does not change our plans in the slightest.” The aged vocal cords of SELEE-01 spoke in an accusatory manner, as he always did. “However, the Third Child’s possible infection may require us to hasten our timetable for Instrumentality. Number ten, have you identified the ultimate source?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” said SELEE-10 “But rest assured, any rogue elements will be dealt with swiftly.”

“See to it that it does.” SELEE-01 paused to let his message sink in. “Number two, risk analysis..”

Gendo Ikari turned on his microphone. “The outward symptoms of Orthopoxvirus Machina usually last three weeks before soul deterioration begins. We believe that while success is possible, it is unlikely that the third child will develop enough control over his AT field to initiate Second
Impact. Suggesting we turn our attention to the other children.”

“You’re too soft, Two.” said SELEE-11. “We will look into the others, but the Third Child still has the most potential...”

“I quite agree.” said SELEE-03. “I say we put him in a crucible and see what happens. If he crumbles under the pressure... well, it was clear that it was not meant to be.”

“Sounds like a plan!” said SELEE-06.

“This is far too important to leave to chance, Three.” said SELEE-05. “The more time we have the better.”

“What? So you still have time to make your own bid for power?” said SELEE-12. “Don’t act like we don’t know who you’ve been associating with...”

“This is why I said we needed fewer members...” said SELEE-08

“Gentlemen, please.” said SELEE-07 “We are not barbarians... well, most of us anyway.”

“HEY!” said SELEE-06.

“We are looking out for humanity’s best interest in the long term.” SELEE-07 continued. “What we do outside these meeting halls is not the subject of our discussion.”

“Seven is right.” said SELEE-04. “I’ve seen too many of these gatherings fall apart because one of us loses focus. We should be talking about the Third Child.”

“Thirteen.” barked SELEE-01. “I notice you have nothing to say on the matter.”

“...if I have opinions, I will tell you them.” SELEE-13 replied.

SELEE-06 then spoke up. “Well enough of this blathering, I believe I have a plan that will change everything. All we need is the Emerald Eye of Ekron, a corkscrew, several tons of...”

Just then, Gendo’s phone began to vibrate, and looking at it appeared that his son was trying to contact him. He turned volume down, so that the ongoing speech didn’t get in the way.

“Uh, hey dad. It’s me.” Shinji gulped on the other end of the line. “Um... listen. This might sound kind of strange, but... well... I think I kinda want to be a superhero.” Pause “Maybe not even ‘kinda’. Like... I really want this. I dunno. I guess I just want to meet people... like myself?”

Gendo feigned surprise. Shinji had always seen the world in black and white, and given how he ran out of the limo yesterday to save complete strangers he knew that this day would come quite soon. For years, Gendo had been preparing the perfect speech to dissuade Shinji from heroic aspirations, carefully tailored to guarantee that he would never so much as look at a cape as long as he lived.

“Well, Shinji, that’s quite a... a...”

But when he tried to start his often-rehearsed speech... he found the words just wouldn’t come.

If only he had been a more heartless bastard. If only he had buried his emotions more thoroughly, perhaps then Yui might have a chance to...

But no. She wouldn’t want that. He learned that first hand.
“Dad?” said Shinji. “Are you still there?”

“Sorry, line cut out.” said Gendo. “As I was saying, that’s quite a decision you’ve made. But it’s your life and I respect your decision. In fact I’ll support you every step of the way.”

“...really?”

“Of course! After all, what kind of man would I be if I supported metahumans but didn’t allow my own son to become a hero?” he chuckled. “Just think of the polls, for one thing.”


“No problem. And remember; if there’s anything on your mind that you feel you need to talk about, just let me know.”

“Okay dad. Good night.”

“Good night, Shinji.” he waited for the sound of Shinji hanging up, and then he put away his cell phone. He then turned the volume back up on his computer and skimmed through the transcript to see if he had missed anything. He apparently hadn’t, as SELEE-06 was just finishing up the explanation of his plan.

“...and then if we have leftovers, we feed them to the wolves!” SELEE-06 concluded. “What do you think?”

“You, sir are an abomination!” cried SELEE-07.

“Thank you for reminding me why I had your kind of people put to death...” said SELEE-03 “Now does any of you have a real suggestion, or should we call the meeting right here?”

Gendo turned on his microphone. “Gentlemen... I believe I have an idea...”

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“You know, they’ll get suspicious if you keep leaving like this.” said the green haired nurse as she unzipped her hazmat suit.

“Let them.” said Lelouch as he slipped his arms through the sleeves of a gaudy purple jacket. “At worst, they’ll think I have a secret girlfriend I wasn’t telling anyone about.”

“Or boyfriend.”

Lelouch rolled his eyes. “Yes, or boyfriend.” C.C. may have been a loyal companion and an indispensable resource, but her dry wit was something Lelouch would never get used to. Still, he didn’t know what he’d do without her; C.C., after all, was the one who first recognized when Shirley was infected with the Machine Plague. Not only that, but she was also the one who first proposed a theory why Shirley’s strain of the virus was inert outside of her own body: She stated that the girl might have had a metagene that was awakened when she was infected by the plague. When activated, the gene granted her technopathic powers that subconsciously shut down any Machine Plague viruses outside her body. A quick check of what remained of Shirley’s organic DNA coupled with the later manifestation of her powers revealed this to be the case.

Admittedly, it wasn't often that C.C. was so helpful. In fact, most of the time she didn’t really offer to do anything unless Lelouch told her, which is why he suspected that she was hiding something. Though he’d be damned if he knew what it was.
Lelouch considered all this as he continued to tie on his thick, black cape. “I assume the preparations are all made?”

“The sleeper agent altered the security footage just as you instructed, and the Zeta Modulator is ready to receive.”

“Good.” Said Lelouch, putting on his iconic helmet. “Time is of the essence.” He pressed a button on his cufflink, and in a flash or yellow light the famed mercenary known as Zero and his mysterious assistant, C.C., were now standing in the command center of Horai Island, the Headquarters of the Black Knights.

A massive domed room, the command center had a dozen-odd computer terminals with holographic interfaces, at which sat the men and women responsible for coordinating the low-priority missions that Zero couldn’t oversee personally. At the moment, they seemed to be busy dealing with routine zombie outbreak somewhere in the American midwest.

It always astounded Lelouch how many supervillains thought creating zombies was a good idea. Disposable, endlessly-replicating minions were something that looked good on paper but had a few fundamental flaws, most notably their lack of intelligence.

Intending on relaying a few orders to try and finish things a bit more efficiently, he approached his private terminal, a large, dark-purple chair with red upholstery and a pair of ergonomic keyboards sticking out of its sides, when a simple-looking man with curly brown hair and a red bandanna approached him.

“Zero, thank god you’re here!” the man said. “We’ve got a... situation in the medical bay. Kozuki just woke up, but... something weird happened to her.” the man scratched his head. “Erm... you’re going to have to see for yourself.”

“I don’t have long, Ohgi.” said Zero. He turned away from the Secretary General, and turned on his holographic display. “What is it?”

“Well... for starters her eyes have changed color.”

“...What.” Zero looked back at Ohgi.

“Yeah... and I don’t mean like bloodshot. I mean her actual irises had changed from blue to red.”

Lelouch turned off his display, and got out of his seat. “Did you check to make sure she wasn’t a clone?”

“Her I.D. chip was still implanted in her arm. If she is a clone, whoever made her did a remarkably thorough job.”

“Any change in genetics?”

“We tried to check, but when we did the equipment kind of exploded.”

“What do you mean by.. ‘kind of’?”

“I mean it completely exploded, sir.”

“Brilliant...” Zero started towards the medical bay. “Thank you, Ohgi. That will be all.”
Horai Island wasn’t just a glorified Knightmare Frame hanger hooked up to some computers. It was also a training facility, a research lab, a defense platform, a neighborhood for tens of thousands of families, and perhaps most tellingly, a medical research center. While the tactical advantage of being able to patch people up more efficiently was obvious, less so was the potential for building countermeasures against biological weapons, as well as biological weapons themselves in case they ever became necessary. As a result, the doctors here were walking encyclopedias of obscure ailments and afflictions, natural or otherwise.

But in spite of this, the rooms of the Horai Island medical bay weren’t all that different than the ones at Yokoda Memorial Hospital. They were a bit more well-guarded and there was only room for one bed, but the facility was as advanced as anything you could find in Tokyo. Or perhaps even more advanced, as there were rumors that the Knights had managed to acquire a quantity of supertech smuggled away from New Genesis.

Though given the array of tools that the German doctor attending to her had assembled, he looked more like he was from Apokolips. Knives, saws, syringes, an old Polaroid camera... and was that a crossbow? Kallen tried not to think what kind of procedure requires medieval weaponry.

She was doing a pretty good job at that, all things considered. Her head was throbbing, her throat was dry, and she felt sick all the way down to her stomach. She had been injured before, but this felt different, somehow. She didn’t feel like she had any wounds, for one thing.

“Blood pressure, normal...? Hmm, very curious...” the medic was in the middle of writing something down on a clipboard just as Zero entered the door. “Ach, herr Zero! How good of you to make it!” He cheerfully tapped Zero’s helmet with the clipboard, much to Zero’s complete indifference.

“...I’m not in the mood for games, doctor.” said Zero. “Have you figured out what’s wrong with Kozuki?”

“No, I’m afraid not, but I do know what ISN’T wrong with the girl.” He slapped the the clipboard into Zero’s hand. “EVERYTHING! The entire mech was totaled, and not a single scratch on her! Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“...wait...” Kallen strained to speak. “...the Guren... what happened to it...?”

“Save your strength, Kozuki.” said Zero. “We need you to make a quick recovery.”

“Ach, zhat’s another thing I was about to mention.” the medic said. “After the DNA Analyzer went kerplooey, I vhas tryink to get a blood sample, vhen zhis happened!” he grabbed Kallen’s arm, and pulled out a large, empty syringe.

“Wait, no! What are you doing!” Zero shouted.

“I know what I’m doing sir!” he called back to Zero. He then got close to Kallen’s face and whispered “Now don’t cry, dear frauline. Zhis von’t hurt a bit...”

The doctor raised his Syringe into the air. Kallen, too weak to try and escape, closed her eyes in anticipation of a sharp stinging pain... but only felt a faint prick before hearing a snap that she was pretty sure didn’t come from any of her bones.

“Zhee? Vhat did I tell you?” he held up a Syringe with a broken needle. “Didn’t hurt a bit.” He then laughed heartily as Kallen’s heart continued to race. “You should see zhe look on your face,
frauline. Ooh boy...” he took a picture of Kallen with the Polaroid “Zhats vun’s going in zhe journal...”

“Doctor...” Zero’s voice descended to a low growl. “…need I remind what I said would happen if you didn’t improve your bedside manners...”

The medic’s laugh turned from a guffaw into a nervous chuckle. “Eh-he... yes, vell.” He pulled out another sheet of paper. “Besides zhe DNA test everythink else said she vas completely human. So I did some more exotic tests. While she vas stillI sleepink, I tried exposink her to eveything I could think of. Lead, gold, garlic, sunlight, a solar lamp, a red sun lamp, krypton, kryptonite, lemons, her own name said backwards, chocos, EMPs, iron, sounds beyond zhe edge of hearink, chlorophyll, energy drinks, ice, fire, electricity, zhe lemons again...”

“Where did you get Kryptonite?” said Zero.

“ZHAT IS NOT IMPORTANT!” said the medic. “Anyvey, I vas just about to give up, when I decide to see how she vould react to silver...” he reached into his bag and pulled out a big silver cross decorated with a tiny effigy of christ. “…so I got zis old heirloom zhat my grandmother gave to me. She was a big religious kook you see, and whenever I got in trouble she always used to...”

Kallen’s head began to throb, as her stomach tied itself into knots. “What the hell is going on...?” she cried wordlessly. To her ears, each of the medic’s words were completely indecipherable, each syllable sounding more akin to nails on a chalkboard than human speech.

“...ha ha, I remember vonce I vas finding leeches in my bed for weeks. But enough about my tragic childhood. As I said I was lucky enough to get a very stronk reaction from zhe patient. I just held it up to her like zhis and...”

As the cross was held up next to Kallen’s face, the pounding intensified to the point that she swore her own brain was going to break out of her skull. Enraged, she grabbed the crucifix and hurled it right past Zero’s head, screaming “GET THAT THING AWAY FROM ME!”.

Only afterward this did the pain begin to subside, but she felt a stinging sensation in the palm of her hand.

Even more shocking was where the crucifix ended up: it went straight through the wall on the other side of the room and embedded itself in the wall separating the next room over.

The steel plated wall separating the next room over.

Zero looked through the hole in the wall, grateful that his mask hid just how pants-shittingly terrified he was just a moment ago. “…Doctor. You said you knew a wizard, right?”

“Vell, yes...” said the medic. “Technically he’s a ‘magician’ but-”

“Call him. Now.”

“...I’m not sure zhat would be a good idea. He is infamously terrible to verk vith, and I don’t think he-,”

“NOW.”

“Okay, okay. I’m goink, I’m goink...”

Kallen, meanwhile, was less frightened and more confused. She looked at her burnt, scarred hand.
“...What happened to me?”

--------------------------------------------------

“<...so Dr. Insano was like all “Now that I have the horcrux, I will use it to cause meltdown! And then, the TRI-STATE AREA will be mine and stuff!”

And then Batman was like “No you madman! You’re completely insane! And you’ll never get away with this!”

But Doctor Insano did this totally creepy laugh, that sounded like “HeheHEHEhNYAnanAnAnHaha! Oh we’ll see about that, bat-brain! We’ll see about that when my big atomic chainsaw puncher robot murders you!

And then I made my big entrance by riding on a robot pterodactyl with laser eyes and I was all like “NOT SO FAST DOCTOR INSANO!”

and he screamed like “What?! Atomic kitten?! Noooooooo! This is impoossibllleeeeee!” >”

“<Atomic Kitten?>” Detective Keiichi Ikari, a middle aged man with a worn, ragged face, looked up from his notepad. “<...I’m sorry, Hope... who is that again?>”

“<That’s me!>” Hope said. “<It’s like, my superhero name. I gotta have a cool one if I want to impress Wild Tiger. I mean I don’t really have a costume yet, but...>”

The detective jotted some notes on his paper. “Extroverted. Possibly a compulsive liar. Check for records on ‘Atomic Kitten’. Also possibly ‘Dr. Insano’.”

“<Okay, so let’s back up a bit.>” the detective pointed his pen at the girl. “<This... “Wild Tiger” person. What’s so important about impressing him?>”

“<Because I’m going to be his sidekick!>”

“Possibly delusional.” He wrote. “<What makes you think he’ll consider taking sidekick? Have you talked to him? Perhaps made a arrangements of some sort?>”

“<Well I sent him a letter a few weeks ago, so he’s probably marked the date on his calendar and everything.>” She began to swing her legs in an impatient manner. “<And how could he not take me? My powers are just so awesome he’s just gonna flip!>”

Keiichi raised an eyebrow. “<...powers?>” He corrected his pad to read “Very Possibly Delusional.”

“<Yeah! I’ve got, like, seven of em. Well, eight, technically, but the last one’s kinda boring...>”

The detective nodded. “<And those powers are...?>”

“<I’m gettin to em, gramps! You just gotta let me finish my story! Now let’s see... I talked about the dinosaur island, the laser squid...>” Hope began to count on her fingers as she tried to remember how far along she was with her story. “<OH YEAH! My entrance! So Insano was like “NOOO IMPOSSIBLE” and I was like “nuh-uh!” so I sliced his robot to ribbons with my claws!>”

“<Claws?>”

“<Yeah, see...>” She held up her hands, and a spark of electricity seemed to arc over them her fingertips they sharpened into needle-like points. “<These babies can cut through just about anything!>”
“<Uh-huh.>” He wasn’t too surprised at this point that the girl actually had powers. He’d been a detective in one place or another for over twenty years, and has seen far, far stranger in his time. “<I don’t need a demonstration.>” he said, sketching the words “Warning: Armed” into the notepad. “<So what happened next?>”

Hope put away her claws. <Well... then he shot lasers everywhere but they kind of missed, and Batman threw batarangs at the laser and it exploded and I beat up in his minions and said “YOU WONT GET AWAY WITH THIS” and he was like “OH YES I WILL”. And then he pulled a lever that turned all the lights off.>” the girl put her hand over her left eye, and leaned forward. “<But you see he didn’t know that I could see in the dark, so I kicked him in that place you’re not supposed to kick boys.>”

“Night vision?” the detective wrote. “<And was that it?>”

“<Nope!>” said Hope, “<Because he had a TRUE FORM like some kinda video game boss. He drank this potion and then he was all big and green and he blew up the room and tore up all his clothes except his purple shorts. Batman tried to fight him but the potion made him a better fighter so Batman was like “OH NO I CAN’T BEAT THIS GUY!” And then Insano punched my head into a wall and it EXPLODED LIKE A VOLCANO!>” She spread her arms out wide to emphasisize this last point.

“<Your head or the wall?>”

“<BOTH!>” shouted Hope.

“<...that must have been painful.>” the detective nodded gently. “<I guess regeneration is another one of your powers?>”

“<Yep!>” Hope grinned smugly as the detective recorded this factoid. “<So after I got better, I was like “Hey batman I have a plan!” and grabbed a science bucket. “I’m gonna turn to water so you can trick him into drinking me.” and batman said “GOOD PLAN” and wrote the word “juice bucket” on with a permanent bat-marker.>”

“You can turn into water?”

“<Juuust a little bit. Like a puddle or something.>” Hope replied “<I mean I can’t really move around much, but it hurts a lot less than having to regenerate.>”

“I’ll bet...” he wrote the words “Keep Away From Water Supply” in his journal.

“<So I clawed my way out of Insano’s stomach and he bled a lot but then got better because he’d been taking steroids! And then he tried to bite my head off, but I did this!>” She stuck out her arm as another wave of arcing electricity passed over it, changing the skin into what appeared to be carbon fiber. “I mean, I couldn’t move it or anything...” she awkwardly waved her stiffened arm around. “<But it makes a good shield! So good in fact that all his teeth fell out. He had some robot teeth just in case, but he forgot where he put them so he turned the lights back on. He couldn’t find me, though, because I was hiding in his shadow!>” She stuck her hand through the Detective’s own shadow to demonstrate. “<And then I punched him and he fell over and died.>”

“Role: Infiltration? These powers can’t be a coincidence...”

“<And then batman said “Good Job, Atomic Kitten. You just stopped a nasty bad guy.” and I was like “no probs, Batman!” and then the mayor gave us ice cream! The end!>”

“<...I still don’t see how you ended up in Tokyo.>”
“<Oh, uh...>” The girl flinched. “<It was teleporting ice cream! Dr. Insano had it booby-trapped!>”

“Ah, that explains it...” the detective reached into his back pocket and pulled out a blue lollipop. “Thank you, Hope. I need to get home now, so please be a good girl and wait right here, okay?”

“<Okayyyyyy!>” Hope grinned as she stuck the lollipop between a gap in her teeth. “<Oh, can you find a green one next time? They’re my favorite!>”

“<I’ll see what I can do.>” Detective Ikari wore his best fake smile as he left the room, only to immediately drop it as he bumped into his partner, detective Mitsuhiro Maniwa, a chipper young man who naivety nevertheless obscured surprising flashes of brilliance. A clear plastic cup bounced to the floor.

“Seriously...?” Keiichi sighed. “Eavesdropping?”

“What?” the partner said incredulously. “It was a good story! Plus, I lost my keys again...”

Keiichi sighed. “All that manga you read must be rotting your brain.” he slammed the door shut. “That’s no kid, that’s probably a deep-cover assassin manufactured by some nameless criminal syndicate.”

Maniwa frowned as they headed towards the observation room. “...You sure?”

Through the other side of the two-way mirror, Keiichi looked at the kid. “No. But what else could a nigh-unkillable kid with powers suspiciously suited to stealth, espionage and murder be?” the detective and his partner sat down and continued to watch through the mirror as Hope impatiently squirmed in her chair, bending over the chair’s to stretch and then falling over with a loud thud. “Plus, she didn’t mention anything about her parents, family, or any kind of home life, and doesn’t speak a lick of Japanese to boot. She’s got something to hide no matter what way you slice it...”

Maniwa gave his partner a strange look. “So... you think she’s here to kill someone?”

“That’s the annoying part.” the Detective rubbed his forehead. “If she was, there’s no way she’d show her hand like this. Ken tells me she even changed her hair color once because ‘she felt like it’.”

“So... It looks like there’s a few possibilities here.” said Detective Maniwa. He sketched out a Punnett square on his notepad. “She’s either a killer or she’s innocent, and her personality is either genuine or fabricated...”

“Don’t bother with the chart, Maniwa. We don’t have enough evidence to make that kind of judgement call just yet.”

Maniwa hastily scribbled out his notes. “So what are we going to do?”

“Lock her up in the holding cell for the night and stay up late searching through missing persons reports. Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

Maniwa grinned sheepishly. “...I guess I don’t.”

“Well at least you’re honest.” Maniwa’s partner patted him on the back. “Come on, I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat.”

---------END OF CHAPTER----------
BETHANY SNOW: ...and welcome back to Chanel 52 News. Our top story tonight, children across the world continue to disappear. Our field agent, A. Bug, has collected expert opinion on this matter. Let’s hear what they have to say.

RANDOM HILLBILLY: It’s them dang gum weasels I keeps tellin’ the papers about, but no one dun’ believe me! The god damn weasels with their beady red eyes and white fur, whisperin in my daughter's ear sayin she can be a princess in a castle or somethin. But don’t believe em’! Weasels is nuthin but liars, cheats and politicians!

THE QUESTION: Now I’m not saying it’s aliens... but it’s aliens.

DR THIRTEEN: Oh please, don’t tell me you believe that nonsense. This is clearly the cause of something more grounded in reality, like Gorilla Grodd kidnapping children for an imagination-powered devolution machine that he’ll use to turn everyone to gorillas. You know, something logical.

KYOKO SAKURA: How the hell should I know? Do I look like a kidnapper to you?

AMBUSH BUG: And there you have it! It seems all the so-called “experts” are just as clueless about this as I am about everything else!

CALENDER MAN: In other news, it’s supernatural awareness week. To celebrate, Metropolis University is holding it’s 66th annual “Mahocon”, where occult enthusiasts from across the globe gather to exchange potions, arcane secrets, and compare pointy hats. Most intriguing was the “Stump the League” panel, where anyone can ask questions to the team know as “Justice League Dark”, including the famed magician Negi Springfield, the actual Frankenstein's Monster, and the detective L (who is communicating via audio only).

RANDOM DUDE: Constantine, is Hogwarts a real place?

JOHN CONSTANTINE: No. Next question.

OTHER RANDOM DUDE: Is L really an A.I.?

L: Sure, let’s go with that.

THIRD RANDOM DUDE: What is love? Baby don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me. No more.

NEGI SPRINGFIELD: That’s not a question...

FRANKENSTEIN: Can we please stay on topic here?

BETHANY SNOW: And finally, here’s Dr. W, our foreign correspondent, where apparently Super Young Team has once again saved Tokyo from the threat of the Ten Ben Matanga. We now take you live, to the scene of the battle.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Thank you, Snow. I’m here with Most Excellent Superbat, leader of Super Young Team, where we’re apparently riding in a car made of solid gold, as impossible as that might sound.

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: Nothing’s impossible when you have money!

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Very true. So, mister Bat, how much trouble did you have with the Ten Ben Matanga?
MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: They might have fancy suits and a catchy theme song, but they don’t have the heart, determination, or brand loyalty of Super Young Team!

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Yes, well. That is a point. Anyway, I’ve heard that despite your rumored crush on, erm *looks at note written on hand* “Shy Crazy Lolita Canary” (really, is that what she’s actually called?) it turns out that in fact she is actually dating the so-called “Batman of Japan”.
Any comment?

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: Ah, well I wouldn’t know about that. I don’t make a habit of prying into my teammates social lives after all. AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HAH AH HA HA HA HA HA

THE 11TH DOCTOR: ha ha ha ha ha ha..

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

THE 11TH DOCTOR: ha... ha ha ha, ha...

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

THE 11TH DOCTOR: …

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: HA HA... HA.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: …

MOST EXCELLENT SUPERBAT: ...is that camera still running?

AUTHOR’S NOTES:

The “New 52” Reboot doesn't fully apply to this work. While something similar to Flashpoint did happen, the changes it brought weren't quite as dramatic as in the reboot. But instead of yakking on about how stupid DC Comics’ managers are, I’ll instead talk about some background material. Specifically, the Justice League of the setting.

Astro Boy is probably the first Anime character to join the League on a semi-permanent basis. He’s like Plastic Man; heavily associated with the League despite despite not being one of the “Core Members”.

Speed Racer was another character who had been on and off the league, though given that his “power” was that he had a slightly less fancy Batmobile his tenure didn’t last long before writers ran out of ideas. He most recently joined the team in 2008 to promote the movie, and though he eventually dropped out of active duty he and his family remain supporting characters frequently seen on the Watchtower.

Lupin III is considered an “Honorary member” given the number of times he’s helped the team all the way back through the late 70’s, where he was able to steal a weapon later used to stop an invasion from the planet Spectra.

The 70’s were also a time where we got a rotating series of Gundam pilots, including (but not limited to) Amuro Ray, Kamille Bidan, Judau Ashta, Domon Kasshu, Loran Cehack, Setsuna F.
Seiei, and Flit Asuno. Most of them are dead now or have been put out of commission due to their Gundams being completely destroyed, and they’ve rarely lasted more than a few years or so thanks to what fans have called “The Gundam Curse” (which was later retconned to be an actual curse during Morrison’s run because of course he’d do something like that). Domon’s the one who’s probably lasted the longest, flat out refusing to die even no matter how many times he’s been blown up, and has become a Green Lantern at least twice.

Devilman joined the team in the 90’s during the “Detroit Era”, deep within the dark ages of comic books where people craved the kind of violence depicted in the Devilman manga. As in our world, the “Detroit Era” was still terrible, though Grant Morrison’s run managed to redeem Devilman and secure himself a place in the Justice League mythos.
“I’ve got good news, and I’ve got better news.”

The manager of the hospital looked at those assembled in the meeting hall. Simon, Lightning, Shulk, Shinji, Girlborg, Nia and Dickson were all doing their best to look professional, despite few of them being any good at it. There were also over a half-dozen students from Ashford Academy who were all apparently Girlborg’s close personal friends, who were apparently there for moral support. They were attempting to hide their identities by wearing domino masks that the purple-haired boy had brought with him for this exact purpose. One of them had even repaired Girlborg’s arm, something that the rest of the staff had spent hours puzzling over, though the speed of the job was obvious given how a massive seam was still visible.

The manager took a deep breath. “The good news is that, after running some blood tests, we’ve determined that miss “Girlborg” is the only one infected with the Machine Plague.” He shuffled around some papers. “Furthermore, we discovered that all samples of the plague outside of Girlborg’s body have gone inert. We hypothesized that this is because the Machine Plague itself is a technological entity, and that Girlborg has subconsciously disabled the virus samples with her technopathic abilities. This was proven correct when we brought in an outside sample for comparison, which we found to be disabled when brought within approximately ten meters of the subject.”

“Uh, that’s great doc.” Simon grinned awkwardly. “But I got a ‘D-’ in biology. Can you say that without the technobabble?”

“Well basically he said that the virus isn’t in our systems.” answered Nia. “And even if it was, it’s not going to spread because of Girlborg’s powers!”

“So... we can leave?” Shinji’s eyes picked up.

“Yep. Yer all free to go.” said Dickson.

Shirley breathed a blissful sigh of relief, her antennas drooping in response. “Thank god...” she whispered. “I don’t think I could live with causing a pandemic...”

“Well. Glad that’s over.” Lightning got up from her seat. “Now if you excuse me, I have paperwork to catch up on...”

“I wouldn’t leave quite yet.” said Shulk. “He still has something to tell us.”

“Ah, yes, that.” The manager began to scan his papers. “Erm... the ‘better news’ is...”

“...that you are now cordially invited to join Japan’s newest super-team.” Prime Minister Gendo
Ikari, pushed open the doorway, and casually strolled into the room.


“...yes.” Shinji squeaked.

“Good to hear it. You’ll be seeing a lot more of him, too, given how I’ve asked him to be the Society’s personal psychologist...” he then snapped his gloved fingers. “Ah, but I’m getting ahead of myself!”

The hospital manager got from his seat, and offered it to the Prime Minister.

“Thank you, Dr. Woodward.” said Gendo. “That will be all.”

The hospital manager politely excused himself from the room.

“Now. As I was saying...” he picked up a small remote control, and turned off the lights. A projector hidden in the ceiling then turned itself on, and started to display a old black-and-white film.

“Imagine if you will, the late 1940’s; the end of World War II, and the dawn of the age of superheroes...” images flashed by of heroic feats performed by heroes of the era, such as Alan Scott, the original Green Lantern, phasing through a wall as part of a demonstration, or Jay Garrick, the first Flash, effortlessly demonstrating that he could find a needle in a haystack in blink of an eye. “All over the world, people with super-human powers were starting to emerge... and even some who lacked powers were inspired to take justice into their own hands.”

“Chief among them was the Justice Society of America, the world’s first superhero team.” He then began to play footage of the Justice Society brutalizing Japanese soldiers.

Lightning recognized these scenes as being from old propaganda films, and regarded them indifferently. Shirley, however, squirmed in her seat, as she was more used to hearing about the JSA in a more positive light.

“Formed in World War II, these men played a key role in allied victory, forever changing the face of organized warfare.” Gendo continued. Some stock footage of riots in post-war Japan began playing. “As you may recall from history class, American occupation of our fair country was a turbulent time. Sudden democratization, censorship, poverty, food shortages, alien invasions... the people back then had every reason to be afraid.”

The stock footage was of the Diet discussing something. “In order to skirt around the ban on having an armed military, in 1948 the Diet approved funding for the creation of a ‘Justice Society of Japan’, a Japanese counterpart to the American team, pouring billions into the creation of a government-sponsored crime-fighting team that could be deployed in the event of war.”

“While it was technically legal, the United States stopped the plan cold, citing fears that our country was preparing for World War III. The funding, however, was never withdrawn and remains frozen in our coffers to this day.” Gendo turned off the screen, and turned the lights back on. “But now that even the Cold War has passed us by, I feel that now is the perfect time for the Justice Society of Japan to come into being, and I would like to invite you fine people as it’s first members.”

Simon raised his hand. “Uh, yeah. I got a question.” he said. “What if we don’t particularly want to work for the government?”
“The Diet was very careful about how they worded things.” said Gendo. “The group is only to receive funding from the government; the idea that they could be used in warfare was an assumption made on the basis that they would willingly volunteer to protect their country’s citizens. You won’t need to report to me or anyone else if you so choose, though I would recommend that you work closely with the Tokyo police force.”

“What about nepotism?” said Shinji. “I mean, won’t people be kinda suspicious given that I’m your son and all...”

“That’s what secret identities are for.” Gendo said. “But I’m willing to take the risk. And if it comes to it I’ll even step down from office.”

“Can we join?!” shouted Rivalz. “I mean, we’re not superheroes, but every team needs guys on the sidelines!”

Gendo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “…that’s something you should ask the chairman, but I don’t see a problem with it.” he pointed back at the group. “Speaking of which, your first order of business should be to pick a chairman.”

“A what?” said Simon.

“An elected leader, usually acting as spokesman of the group.” said Lelouch. “This is not something to take lightly. Bad PR can make or break a group like this.”

“Oh. That’s easy, then.” said Simon. “We’ll just pick Shulk.”

“M-me?” sputtered Shulk.

“Yeah.” said Simon “You seem like a smart guy, and everyone knows that an English accent makes you sound smart...”

“Yes, well...” Shulk took a moment to collect himself. “...I’m not even sure I’m going to agree to this. After all, I still work with Atlas, and I’ve over Stayed my welcome as it is...”

“The Mechonis ain’t goin’ anywhere, kid.” said Dickson. “Better you spend months preparing for a formal expedition alongside supermen than just head off to fight an army of robots on yer own.” he rapped the Monado with his fist. “I mean you’ve had the bloody thing for what, a month? It takes time to get good at usin’ something like this. ‘sides, the minister got one of those special contracts that says we gotta send one of our mates over, and honestly you’d probably be my top pick.”

“Uh... thanks.” said Shulk. “...but even so, I’m going to have to decline being chairman. After all, this is supposed to be the Justice Society of Japan, and nearly half the team is foreign. I just think it would send some unfortunate implications...”

Simon crossed his arms. “...okay, how about Lightning? She’s a capable, no-nonsense kind of personal.”

“Normally I’d agree with you... but I’m also going to have to pass.” she said. “Let’s just say I don’t have a very good reputation right now and leave it at that.”

“Ooookayyyy...” simon looked around the room. “Then that just leaves... Shinji?”

“Blagaghgggarragblargblarrargblarh!” Shinji stammered. “...I mean, I kinda have stage fright...”

Simon looked down at the core-drill, and wondered; “What would bro do at a time like this?”
The answer, of course, was obvious: First shout “ALL RIGHT THEN!”; leap onto the table, strike
a heroic pose, and say “From this day forward we no longer stand alone! From now on, WE are the
avengers who right all wrongs! WE are the beacon of light in a sea of darkness! WE ARE
JUSTICE SOCIETY OF JAPAN, AND WE’RE GONNA SAVE THE WHOLE GODDAMN
WORLD!”

Those assembled reacted to Simon’s antics with what ranged from stunned silence to mild
bemusement.

“Yay, Simon!” Nia said. “That has to be your best speech yet!”

“If that’s the case, I don’t want to hear his worst.” Lightning sighed. “Seriously, can you tone
down the antics a little?”

“No, keep it!” said Milly. “The public eats up that kind of hammy, over-dramatic stuff! I mean, do
you have any idea how much money Most Excellent Superbat pays his people to write speeches
like that? Not to mention the entire tokusatsu genre would cease to exist if it boisterousness wasn’t
marketable…”

“‘Marketable’?” Lightning shot Milly a stern look. “We’re not a reality TV show, and we’re not
Super Young Team.”

“Well, as the Justice Society’s publicist I feel that I ought to set some-”

“You’re our publicist now? We met you all of ten minutes ago; what makes you think that we trust
you enough to manage our reputation?”

“Look; Shirley can vouch for me that I’m more than qualified to…”

The rest of the conversation faded into the background as Shirley, hands in her head, tried to wrap
her mind around what was going on. “<This is all happening too fast…>” she thought. “<First
powers, then I nearly die, and now they want me on a superteam? I can’t do this, I just
can’t!>” she looked at the rest of the student council, trying not to cry. “<Milly… Rivlaz… Nana…
Loulou… I’m sorry I let you guys down. I know it meant so much to you…>”

Shirley stood up in order to speak, and the whole table went silent.
“I… I…” she began to say, but found that the words just wouldn’t leave her lips.

“What’s wrong?” Shirley turned her head to see Lelouch staring right back at her with a concerned
face. “Is something the matter?”

“N-no! Nothing! N-not at all.” And just as hard as it was to speak just a few moments ago, she now
the words flowing from her mouth at the mere sight of Lelouch.
“InfactIjustwantedtosaythatIthinkImightbeagoodvicechairman!” She slapped her mouth shut as
soon as she realized what she had said the exact opposite of what she had originally intended.

Milly and Lightning looked at each other, and then back at Shirley. “What makes you think that?”
said Lightning.

Shirley tried to correct herself by saying. “Um, I’m sorry, I just misspoke…” but instead it came out as.
“Well I’m in the student council so I have experience not as a vice president or anything but I
might be running for that next year and I being vice chairman could be like leading the next
generation or something I’m sorry if this sound stupid I’ll be quiet now.”

Another round of silence ensued.
“Actually, that’s not a bad idea at all!” said Milly. “A plucky everygirl in a leadership role would be a good thing, perhaps silencing any fears that Simon’s testosterone-filled attitude will be a bad influence to children.”

“W-what, me? Plucky?” Shirley jumped back in her seat, and her antenna suddenly went rigid in fright. “No no no, you’ve got to be thinking of someone else...”

“On the contrary, you’re one of the bravest people I know.” Shirley turned to her side and found, to her great surprise that Lelouch was the one now vouching for her. “On the first day on the job, you put your own life in danger trying to protect Avalon, and even after you got your arm torn off got back up in order to save someone’s life.”

“He’s right! I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you rescuing me!” said Nia.

“And neither would I.” agreed Shulk. “And you were out of your element too, which I found really impressive. I second the nomination!”

Milly began to grinned ear-to-ear. “All in favor of Amazingly Powerful Girlborg as our vice-chairman, say “aye”!”

“Aye!” said Rivalz.

“Aye!” said Nia.

“Hold on, do those two even get a vote?” said Lightning. “Technically they’re not even members...”

“I’m chairman and I say they do!” said Simon. “Aye!”

“Aye!” said Nunally.

“Aye!” said Rolo.

“A-aye...” stammered Nina.

Lightning shrugged. “Well, we could certainly do worse. Aye.”

Shinji looked around the room. He and Lelouch were the only ones without their hands raised. “Well, might as well give into peer pressure... aye.”

Shirley was about to protest, but then Lelouch’s hand shot up to silence her. “Aye!”

“Well then it’s settled!” Gendo clapped his hands together. “A unanimous vote for the Vice-Chairman. Another stunning example of democracy at work.”

“Heh heh... thanks...” Shirley laughed nervously. “I’m just worried I’m not qualified...”

“Oh don’t worry about day-to-day operations.” said Milly. “Our treasurer and I will handle all the details...” she gestured to Lelouch.

“Wait, what?” said Lelouch. “Who said I was going to be-”

“Being a leader is easy!” said Milly.

“(No it isn’t.)” whispered Lightning.
“All you need to do is look pretty for the camera and act inspiring to the group!”

“(And make tough decisions, assume responsibility for mistakes, be at the vanguard of every fight... you sure you’re up to this?)”

“(Uh... I.)” Shirley looked at Lelouch’s smiling face, and then back at Lightning. “(Yeah... I think I can do this.)”

Lightning nodded. “(Allright, if you say so. But just remember; I went through all this once myself. If you ever need to talk about something, I should be the first one you go to.)”

“So, back to business.” Gendo said. He handed Lelouch a thick stack of papers. “These are the records for the Justice Society fund, as well as the stipulations on what it can and cannot be used for. Buildings, vehicles, just about anything is fair game aside from nuclear materials, controlled substances, and weapons of mass destruction. There’s even room in the budget for good-sized salaries, so if you wish you can consider the Justice Society to be your full-time jobs.”

“Woo! I’m rich! ...is what I would be saying if I wasn’t already.” said Rivalz.

“I’m going to need to quit the police force then.” said Lightning. “My guess is that this is going to eat up a lot of my time... think we can get a forensics lab in our headquarters?”

“Probably.” said Lelouch. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many zeroes in one place...”

“I can easily get the stuff in my own lab shipped over.” said Shulk. “We just need to make sure that the building is located on a ley-line. We might even need to construct one if we can’t find one that’s naturally occurring.”

“And a medical center! Some staff might be nice as well.”

“I need some stuff too...” muttered Nina.

“Don’t forget the publicity budget!” said Milly. “We need to get the word out after all.”

“I swear, Milly; sometimes you’re just as bad as Superbat...” Lelouch replied. “But I’ll take that into account. I’ll write up a budget for tomorrow, and by the end of the week we should have our headquarters.”

“Simon grinned. In that case, as your new Chairman, I declare this meeting to be adjourned!”

“I’m sorry, I’m not really following.” said SELEE-06. “Wouldn’t our work better if we had fewer cape-wearing morons running around, not more?”

Gendo sighed. “Because, number six, if you had bothered to actually read any of my research, you would realize that we need an Anti-AT field of biblical proportions, when an Anti-AT field in general is something that is currently only theoretical.” Gendo pulled up his notes in order to make absolutely sure that what he was saying made sense. “Our original plan involved alienating The Third Child to the point that his ego shattered completely, forcing the creation of an Anti-AT field at the peak of his ability. If subject zero’s output was anything to go on, The Third Child will have more than enough power by the time the Angels arrive. However, certain factors have prevented this phase of the plan from being completed...”

“And by ‘certain factors’, of course, you mean yourself.” Gendo could imagine SELEE-03 staring
at him disapprovingly. “Face it, Ikari. You’ve gone soft. What happened to the man who was willing to throw his wife, his career, and even his own son to the dogs for the greater good of mankind? Has his era come and gone without so much as a goodbye?”

“Number Three!” snapped SELEE-04 “I will remind you that we are not allowed to refer to each other by name during these meetings…”

“Oh yes, I forgot how much you scribes love to keep your secrets.” SEELE-03 replied. “Very well then, I’ll humor you. Tell me, Number Two; what is your plan exactly?”

“As I was saying…” Gendo continued, “…an AT-Field is a physical manifestation of the ego, the boundary that separates souls from one-another. Because of this, full understand of another being is impossible…” he scrolled down a few pages into his notes. “…however, the mere act of trying to understand another soul can cause the AT-Field to ‘leak’, and in extreme cases a permanent bond between souls can be formed. This, we believe, is a natural occurrence of an Anti-AT field’s creation.” he took a deep breath. “And, by allowing The Third Child to establish a bond of camaraderie between his peers, by severing said connection we’ll be able to release an Anti-AT Field of the appropriate magnitude.”

“…So you’re seriously suggesting…” said SELEE-07 “…that we cause Instrumentality using the power of friendship.”

“And MURDER!” said SELEE-06. “I like this plan! The second part at least.”

“Number Two, this is unacceptable!” said SELEE-01. “You deviated from the plan without unanimous approval! How dare you-”

“Pardon me if I interrupt…” said SELEE-13 “Number Two’s plan is actually quite plausible. In fact, if successful, it might actually be more efficient than our original plan. I’ve run the numbers myself.”

“As have I.” said SELEE-10. “And I’ve shared Number Two’s concerns over the Third Child, especially after both how the Second Child turned out, and our lack of progress on the Evangelion project.”

“Speaking of which, I still believe the project is a waste of time…” said SELEE-09. “Horrid monstrosities might have been an appropriate test in The Age of the Gods, but times have changed. No one had expected the arrival of Superman, and since then the Earth has only become a more chaotic place. If we took the dead sea scrolls literally, The Angel Invasion would come and go without anyone batting an eye were it not for our plan. Especially when we’ve already had a literal angel invasion.”

“Oh come on!” shouted SELEE-06 “You’re just saying that because you’re a girl! Of course you don’t like giant robots!”

“No, I must agree with Nine.” said SELEE-08. “The Evangelions should not be our first priority. My guess is that the Angel attacks will be more subtle, thus we need subtle tools for the job…”

“The feasibility of the Evangelion project is beyond the scope of our meeting.” said SELEE-12. “May I propose that this meeting be adjourned before we fall further off topic?”

“Seconded.” said SELEE-04. “The lot of you are starting to get on my nerves…”

“Just one last thing…” said SELEE-11. “Number Two, it has come to my attention that you have allowed my children to become involved with this so-called ‘Justice Society’.”
“...as noncombatants, yes.” said Gendo. “They seemed eager to support their friend, and the chairman was more than willing to-“

“I don’t care who’s idea it was. I want them off the team at once” said SELEE-11. “You know as well as I do that non-combatants in any team are the first targets of vengeful supervillains, and the last thing I want is to see their faces in the obituaries.”

“...that’s not under my jurisdiction, Eleven. It would be a gross breach of conduct if I-”

“Well if you can't handle this, then I’ll find someone to do it for me. And I can’t promise that he’ll play nicely with your little ‘League’.”

“Just so we understand; the Third Child is to remain-”

“OF COURSE he’ll be unharmed. What kind of idiot do you take me for?” SELEE-11 rumbled. “That boy of yours is worth more than any of our heads combined. Certainly more that that useless whelp my third wife left behind...”

“...Well, that was very uncharacteristic of you, sticking up for Shirley like that.” C.C. said. “Or are you planning to lead this “Justice Society” from the shadows, ruling with an iron fist through it’s new vice-chairman?”

Lelouch took a long look at C.C.’s latest outfit. He had heard of “hiding in plain sight”, but what she was wearing now bordered on ridiculous. She was wearing a crimson top decorated with images of flowers, detached sleeves of similar design, high heels, a bow tying her hair into a ponytail, and a pink cape that looked more like an old blanket. The only reason why they weren't getting any stares is that the bus they were on was passing through the Harajuku district, and thus was filed dozens of other cosplayers. In fact, Lelouch could probably wear his Zero costume in broad daylight here and no one would notice.

In any case, Lelouch was too used to C.C.’s odd fashion sense to bring this up, and anyway they had more important business to attend to.

“Possibly.” he said. “In any case I’d need to have a plant in their organization; It’s just a stroke of luck I happened to be so close to one of the members.”

“Yes, but is that good luck or bad?”

“...what do you mean?”

“Suppose... someone got the wrong idea about the Black Knights. After all, they are a military force not accountable to any government. Should they send the Society after you, would you be willing to pull the trigger on your own friend?”

“...that’s not going to happen.”

C.C. slouched in her seat. “That’s what you always say right before things go wrong.”

“No, I mean it; the members are anything but government stooges. and in any case our relationship with the Japanese government is-”

“...on the verge of collapsing due to our recent failures. While we did capture Mordred, Morgaine herself escaped and took out our best Knightmare pilot.”
“...look, I’m sure whatever kind of curse Kallen’s under, they’re be a way to break it and-”

“Lelouch. You don’t know what’s actually happened, do you?”

Lelouch raised an eyebrow “And you do?”

“Possibly...” C.C. looked around the room in case anyone was listening in. “Call it a hunch, but I think Kallen might be a...”

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“...VAMPIRE!” screamed the strange old man. “Yes, it is clear to I, MERASMUS, that Kallen Stadfeldt-”

“Kozuki.” corrected Kallen.

“...was bitten by a bloodsucking fiend of the night, and even now is going through a HORRIFIC TRANSFORMATION!”

Kallen didn’t really know what to make of this so-called “Magician.” Draped in brown robs and wearing what appeared to be a ram’s skull on his head, Merasmus appeared less like a powerful magus and more like a crazy hobo with a funny walking stick. Rather than running any sort of test, the moment he arrived he called for all the division leaders to assemble so that he could deliver a “SHOCKING REVELATION!!!” because apparently possessing phenomenal cosmic power was also a license to write flyers in all caps with multiple explanation points. Needless to say, only the medic and those sufficiently bored enough to find entertainment in listening to an crazy man’s ranting (i.e. Shinichiro Tamaki) bothered to show up.

The medic facepalmed.

“Yes, you see it’s quite obvious!” He pulled out the medic’s silver cross again, much to Kallen’s displeasure. “Crosses are a traditional vampire weakness! Therefore, she must be a vampire!” He then opened Kallen’s mouth, and put his fingers behind her teeth, which seemed to be a bit sharper than usual. “And look at these fangs! Clearly, the girl has truly become an unholy creature of the night!”

“Um... dude?” said Tamaki. “It’s the middle of the afternoon, and she’s in direct sunlight.” he pointed to the open window.

“FOOL!” Merasmus raised his arms dramatically. “It is a MISCONCEPTION that all vampires burst into flames in the light! Sometimes it does NOTHING! Other times, it makes them SPARKLE! It’s really kind of a crapshot.”

“Zhen, wouldn’t she have bite marks?” said the medic.

Merasmus looked at Kallen’s bite-free neck. “Oh. Good point.” he scratched his head. “In that case she must be a WEREWOLF!”

“Zhe full moon was out last night, and nothink out of zhe ordinary happened.”

“...err maybe she’s a zombie?” Merasmus reached into his robes, and produced a jar containing a skull with a brain still inside, floating in a jar of unknown liquid. “You don’t have an irresistible urge to eat this PICKLED MONKEY BRAIN, do you?”

Kallen shrugged. “...not really.”
“Good, more for me, then!” the magician reached into the jar and pulled out its contents, before taking a big bite into the brain. “Mnow.” he said as he chewed, “mets see mhat melse is min mere...”

After swallowing, he pulled out a large tome that said “Monster Manual, Core Rulebook III”. “Now let’s see... maybe she’s a kelpie.”

“A what?” said Tamaki.

“A water spirit that causes drownings... oh wait, it’s supposed to be in the shape of a horse. Let’s start at the beginning. Let’s see... Aboleth? No, wait, not enough legs... Acharai? No, too many legs... an Allip? No, wait, those only come out of suicides... you can’t be an Angel, that’s for sure... I’VE GOT IT! You must be an Animated- oh, wait, nevermind, that’s dumb. False alarm.”

Kallen sighed. This was going to be a long day.

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“<I’m BOOOOOOOOORED.>” Hope yelled, her face pressed against the door of her cell. “<I forgot to bring my DS and the cell is really boring and why am I in a cell anyway when I didn’t do anything bad?>”

“Yeah! Come on, Ikari!” Detective Maniwa said. “We’ve been watching her for almost a day...”

“You know as well as I do that this is standard procedure for unknown metahumans,” Keiichi sighed. He then looked at the kid. “<Well, if you want to leave so quickly, maybe you could at least tell me who your parents are so they can pick you up?>”

“<I can’t do that, silly! I’m running away from home!>”

“Told you our patience would pay off...”

Detective Maniwa bent his so that he could talk to Hope at something more akin to her eye level. “<Oh really?>” he said. “<How come?>”

“<Uh... my dad beats me!>” she said. “<With a stick! And shoves hot pokers in my eye!>” she pointed at her eye to emphasize this fact.

“<Really?>”

“<Yeah! And... uh once, Santa gave me a puppy for Christmas, and... uh... my dad threw into a woodchipper because... I didn’t eat my broccoli! Like in that move! What that guy! In Minnesota!>”

Detective Ikari was nonplussed. “<... Aren’t you a little young to be seeing movies like that?>”

“<Uhh... he beat me for that, too!>” shouted Hope. “<And then he made me watch it again! While beating me! With a baseball bat!>”

Ikari got up from his stool. “No more questions. Come on, Maniwa.”

“<Hey, don’t leave me hanging! Can you at least bring me a TV or something?>”

“Actually, we do have an old pocket TV in the supply closet. I’m sure there’s an English language news station or something she could watch. Is that okay?”
Keiichi shrugged. “If it keeps her quiet.”

One trip to the supply closet later, the two detectives were heading out the door of the station, and were soon heading home.

“So...” Detective Maniwa said as they boarded the subway, “...do you think the kid’s telling the truth?”

“About what?” said Detective Ikari. “Running away? Or the beatings?”

“I dunno.”

“Running away is plausible, though I’ll be damned if I knew how she got all the way to Japan...” Ikari looked at his partner, “...but do you really buy that sob story about the beatings?”

“Well, she does have a healing factor...”

“She’s making it up. I can tell. She’s probably some middle-class suburbanite who’s daddy works at S.T.A.R. Labs.” Ikari sighed and buried himself in his newspaper. “My diagnosis? The kid’s seen too much Fargo, and you’ve seen too much Special Victims Unit.”

“...what’s ‘Fargo’?”

“An American movie about a plan that went horribly wrong. Funny in a bleak sort of way. You should watch it sometime.” the detective grabbed onto the nearby bar as the train screeched to a stop. “Well, here’s my stop.” he looked at his partner. “You’re coming with me, tonight. I want you to meet my wife.”

“Uh, actually I had something to-”

“Is someone dead?”

“No...”

“Good. Because there’s this new curry recipe we’ve been meaning to try, and I want an outside opinion.” Ikari started to leave the train. “You coming?”

Detective Maniwa looked at his watch. If he was lucky, he might be able to make it back home in time to...

“Maniwa!” Ikari shouted. “I said are you coming?”

Maniwa looked up, and then chased after his partner. “Uh... okay! Hold up!”

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From his throne, the conqueror watched as the world continued to spiral into chaos...

“<...an armed confrontation in Mexico City...>”

“<...has once again evaded jailtime despite overwhelming evidence against...>”

“<...at least five banks into debt, was awarded a seven billion dollar bonus...>”

“<...tens of thousands thought to be dead in the wake of Brainiac’s latest...>”
Khandaqi terrorists have claimed responsibility for...

...wanted for seventeen counts of rape in the past month alone, continues to evade thanks to his body-jumping powers...

Before him were dozens of television screens, each one displaying a different news broadcast from somewhere in the world. The channels changed occasionally, as an advanced computer program of the conqueror's own design ran in the background, skipping past commercials and human interest stories to only inform him of the most tragic results of mankind’s follies for hours upon end.

To an ordinary man, such a ritual would be maddening. But for the conqueror’s superior mind it was a mere part of his daily routine, a reminder of his purpose.

The world is corrupt, and cannot be trusted to rule itself.” the conqueror stared at his palm, clutching it as if he were holding an invisible globe. “One day, I will succeed where others have failed.” he clenched his fist. “I will bring order and stability to this hopeless planet!”

The conqueror felt his pulse rising, an unstable euphoria as the blood rushed to his head, but rather than act on impulse he instead attempted to remain calm.

...but if I rush too quickly, my plan will be over before it has even begun, Just as the revolutionaries before me...” the conqueror exhaled sharply. “...best, then, that I keep my ambitions in check. For they will no doubt lead to my undoing...”

Just then, the conqueror's highly sensitive ears picked up something coming from one of his monitors. A man with calendar dates tattooed around his forehead was speaking as news anchor.

...In other news, Prime Minister Gendo Ikari of Japan has just announced the unveiling of a new super team, “The Justice Society of Japan”.

The conqueror raised an eyebrow. The news anchor continued to speak. “<For now, little is known about the team’s roster save for it’s chairman, ‘Simon the Digger’, a hero best known for leading the counterattack against the Spiral Kingdom’s sudden invasion, and it’s vice-chairman, an up-and-coming heroine known as “Amazingly Powerful Girlborg”...”

A rare scowl crossed the conqueror's face. His fingernails dug into his palm as his hand tightened even further. “Those...IMBECILES!” In the safety of his own mind, the conqueror raged. “The real Justice Society were nothing if not honorable warriors of the purest intent. And now these pretenders think they can repeat history? Such fools need to be put in their place!”

<Only time will tell if they will be able to surpass the legendary status of Big Science Action, as well as (to a much, much, much lesser extent) Super Young Team...>

The conqueror stood up and beckoned for his minion. “EXCEL!” he cried, his imposing voice echoing through the chambers of his underground palace.

From out of the shadows, a teenage girl scramble to address her superior, carrying a large cardboard box marked with a skull and crossbones. Like any good lackey, she was wearing an outfit that could best be generously described as “iconic”; a tiny white jacket with large, egg-shaped epaulets, a black cleavage-exposing vest with blue trimmings around her bosom, white short-shorts, black, fingerless gloves, and a pair of white boots. Topping off the package was a mop of thick, orange hair that the conqueror swore used to be blonde.

The conqueror would have continued his speech then an there, but the moment his minion was
within earshot she launched into a whirlwind of loquacious babble. “Hey there boss I just got the fireworks you asked me to get! Also I got Lollita Canary’s phone number so we can track her by hacking into her phone except I dropped it and now I have to spend all night fishing through the sewers which I don’t mind really but it’s very unsanitary so I had to steal some scuba gear from the yakuza but they didn't like that so they chased me around for a few hours shooting at me with guns and-

“I’m sure your story is quite fascinating, but I’m afraid we have much more important matters to attend to.” The conqueror hid his arms underneath his cape for dramatic effect. “As of today, we will no longer try to destroy Super Young Team.”

“Aww! Really? And I wanted Superbat’s autograph! I asked Number Seven for it but you know how he is with remembering things always losing his keys and stuff. By the way when are the Ten-Ben Matanga getting out of prison? The headquarters is very quiet without them and I was looking forward to playing parcheesi with-

It was times like this that The Conqueror wished he could just shoot his minions when they annoyed him. But Excel was “special” in more ways that one. Though more dense than a sack of bricks, her loyalty to the cause was unshakable. If only he had a thousand of her, then perhaps their sheer numbers would cancel out her own bottomless stupidity.

“-and Number Two was like “nuh-uh” and I was like “yah-huh” and then he punched me in the face but we’ve gotten off track here what were you talking about again because I think you said we weren’t going to fight Super Young Team anymore but if so then I’m kind of wondering why we’re going to do that I mean wasn’t it just last month that you said that they were scum that were corrupting the youth of our fair country?”

Grateful for the pause, the Conqueror took a moment to adjust his glasses: “That may be true, but recent developments have proved that we were merely swatting at flies. While we chased that band of idiots, we failed to notice the seeds of destruction sown within our midst!”

A click of a remote control was heard, and suddenly all the monitors in the room changed to show but one image; a still frame from the news report on the new Justice Society.

“Youths brought up on nothing but the corrupting influence of anime and dubstep have made it their goal to pervert the image of a proud tradition.” As he raised his voice, the almost empty room seemed to shake with fright. “As well-intentioned as they are, if their so-called ‘heroism’ will inevitably destroy a cherished symbol that is our most noble enemy, then we have no choice but to defend it with our last breath!” The conqueror extended his hand, carrying his cape as he did so, once again putting on a show for the one-woman audience. “From now on, ACROSS is one-hundred percent dedicated to destruction of the Justice Society of Japan!”

“HAIL IL PALAZZO!” applauded Excell, “YOUR LEADERSHIP IS A SHINING EXAMPLE TO US ALL OR AT LEAST THOSE OF US WHO ARE HERE WHICH IS ACTUALLY JUST ME BUT I’M SURE THE TEN-BEN MATANGA WOULD BE HAPPY IF THEY WERE HERE BECAUSE THAT WAS A REALLY GOOD SPEECH IN FACT MAYBE I SHOULD RECORD IT WITH MY PHONE AND BREAK INTO PRISON JUST TO SHOW IT TO THEM AND THEN THEY’LL BE SO INSPIRED THAT THEY IMMEDIATELY BREAK OUT BUT FIRST THINGS FIRST BECAUSE LIKE YOU SAID THE JUSTICE SOCIETY IS OUR TOP PRIORITY AND...”

As he tried to tune out Excell’s babbling, Il Palazzo's trigger finger began to itch. He wondered if next time he should just send her a memo...
BETHANY SNOW: And welcome back to Channel 52 News! And now, continuing his expose on urban legends, here’s intrepid reporter A. Bug with the scoop on so-called “Fan Death”.

AMBUSH BUG: Thanks, Bethany! Apparently in Korea there’s this rumor going around that your ceiling fan could kill you in your sleep. And I don’t mean by falling on you, I mean just by doing normal fan things. Now, if I asked you this you’d probably be saying, “Ambush Bug, that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard! Do you mean to tell me that you broke into my house just to tell me that! Get out of here before I call the cops!” But here at Channel 52 we hold yourself to a higher standard, to get to the truth no matter what! Here are my exclusive interview with Dr. Phelan Porteous, as he answers the most pressing question of our age: Can your ceiling fan kill you?

DR. PORTEOUS: No.

AMBUSH BUG: Well that was disappointing. Back to you, c-man!

CALENDER MAN: Thank you, Bug. In other news, Prime Minister Gendo Ikari of Japan has just announced the unveiling of a new super team, “The Justice Society of Japan”. For now, little is known about the team’s roster save for it’s chairman, ‘Simon the Digger’, a hero best known for leading the counterattack against the Spiral Kingdom’s sudden invasion, and it’s vice-chairman, an up-and-coming heroine known as “Amazingly Powerful Girlborg”. Only time will tell if they will be able to surpass the legendary status of Big Science Action, as well as (to a much, much, much lesser extent) Super Young Team.

BETHANY SNOW: Now we got to our foreign correspondent for an update on the Big Ben mystery!

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Thank you, Snow! I’m here with this fine fellow, who claims to have seen the one who blew up Big Ben yesterday. In addition, we have Squire, of Britain's own dynamic duo, who will use her “communication powers” to translate the man’s incomprehensible rhyming slang for the folks across the pond. Now, tell me, what did he look like.

COCKNEY CHAP: I din’t get a Robin Hood butcher's at 'im, but 'e was wearin' a Hoppin' Pot of gold.

SQUIRE: He says, “I didn’t get a good look, at 'em, but I do remember ‘e was wearin a lot o’ gold.”

COCKNEY CHAP: I adam 'n eve 'e was carryin' 'round a bunch of blades.

SQUIRE: And he also remembered he had lot of swords...

COCKNEY CHAP: ...and I seem ter recall 'is Barnet Fair was as blonde as wheat.

SQUIRE: And that he was blonde. Very blonde, in fact.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Well there you have it, this clearly must be the work of Deathstroke the Terminator. Because who else wears that much yellow and fights with a sword?

COCKNEY CHAP: 'ey! wot do ya fin' you're tryin' ter pull! I said 'e was wearin' gold, not yella!

SQUIRE: He says it was gold, not yellow.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Little known fact: gold is a kind of yellow! Back to you, snow!
Author’s Notes:

New 52 Reboot? What’s that? :P

Okay, I admit there are somethings that I do like about the reboot that I brought over to this story. The Channel 52 segments are one of them (obviously), and I enjoy a couple of the titles that came out of the reboot (most notably Demon Knights), and as of this writing I’m finding the “Trinity War” event to be much more interesting (and less pretentious) than I thought it would be (though that may change :P). And to a certain extent I can understand why DC would want to clear it’s continuity; too much background can make it paralyzing for new readers to get into, and writers need to have an encyclopedic knowledge of their characters if they want to do anything new with them. I know I did.

Still, there are a few things that leave me miffed, most notably the idea that superheroes are only a fairly recent development in the world, retroactively eliminating large swathes of DC canon including the first two blue beetles, and the Justice Society of America, my own personal favorite superhero team. Oh, and naming Captain Marvel “Shazam”. Because if you were going to change his name to avoid confusing with Marvel Comic’s Captain Marvel(s), OF COURSE you should have his name be the same as someone else in his own little cast heard.

So for this story I decided that while an event similar to flashpoint happened in this continuity, the effects weren’t nearly as drastic. I don’t want to define everything outright because then this story would just be me explaining my own made up continuity forever.

Now: onto stuff about the story itself.

I considered not having the SELEE conversation, but trust me; there is a LOT going on in this story. Their plans are just the beginning, folks; not the end. And lets face it. If you’ve seen Evangelion or spent enough time on the TV Tropes wiki, you probably know what they’re up to. And if not, this is explaining things a heck of a lot better than the TV show did.

And now to address the elephant in the room; why the hell did I pick Shirley Fenette as one of the main heroines? After all, everyone else so far makes sense; Simon, Shulk and Lightning are unambiguously heroes, and even in canon Shinji has his heroic moments when he’s not being crazy or emo. But Shirley isn’t any kind of hero, she’s a character who seems like she belong in a Shojo series, not a shonen mecha show. Of Lelouch’s three love interests, she’s the only one who isn’t an action girl to some extent, and is arguably pretty stereotypical. If the show was primarily about her, it would fail the Bechdel Test pretty hard since Lelouch is pretty much all she ever thinks about.

And yet... I felt that she was very endearing nonetheless. Even if Lelouch doesn’t want to have a serious relationship with her, it’s clear that he cares deeply for Shirley and values her friendship. The thought that he was responsible for Shirley’s father’s death visibly shakes him, and I feel that her death towards the end of the series is arguably what pushes Lelouch over the edge. And on Shirley’s side, her discovery that Lelouch is Zero presents a set of serious moral dilemmas: It’s her duty as a Britannian to confront him, but the Black Knights have very good reasons for rebelling. She’s known Lelouch for years and loves him, yet Zero is the one who caused her father’s death. Which of course makes her own death all the more tragic when she finally comes to her decision. Or at least that’s how I see it.

Also:
• C.C. is supposed to be Dressed as Terra from Final Fantasy 6 in her scene with Lelouch.
• The detective guys are leaving a Kōban, not a normal-sized police station. However I chose to call it a police station because most americans don’t know what a Koban is.
• Any discrepancies between how the events portrayed and how the real-life Tokyo Metropolitan Police would actually treat a child who fell from the sky can be put down to “budget cuts”.
• HAIL ILPALAZZO!
Issue #4: All that Glitters

[COVER: The Justice Society of Japan logo is awkwardly covered up by a new logo that appears to be cast from gold and decorated with sparkling gems, reading “Electra Pendragon”. Below is a subtitle that reads “The Savior of our Era” in cursive text. The scene itself depicts said character, a teenage girl with fair skin, red eyes and platinum blonde hair, wearing a suit of golden plate armor decorated with blue patterns as well as a red cape. She is currently trying to pose in an a smug yet elegant manner, but her efforts have been hindered by Hope, who is trying to use Electra as a stepladder (against her will, of course) in order to cover up the Electra Pendragon logo with a crudely-made sign drawn on a piece of cardboard. The sign reads “HOPE” with the subtitle “GREATEST HERO EVER!!” [sic]. Some text off to the side reads, “NOT A DREAM! NOT AN IMAGINARY STORY! A mysterious new heroine joins the Justice Society!” and a block of text below that reads “Also featuring: Deathstroke the Terminator” followed by a little chibi head of Deathstroke glaring at the reader.]

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At the crack of dawn, A single ray of light shined through Hope’s cell, illuminating her face, pulling her out of a deep sleep. But her awakening was far from peaceful; the walls echoed with the cacophonous din of endless incomprehensible Japanese. Groggily, she forced her eyes open to search for the source of the noise, and found it to be coming from the pocket TV the detectives had given her.

“<Mmm. Musta fallen asleep...>” She yawned, and thought about how she had tried to stay up all night watching weird game shows. But while last night the screen was lit up with the antics of hapless contestants running from mascots wielding neon pink baseball bats, now all that was left was an infomercial featuring a sketchy, middle-aged guy who appeared to be desperately trying to sell oven mitts.

She twisted the volume knob down a bit so she could think. “<Alright...>” she tried to stretch out her palms to try and crack her knuckles, but just ended up with sore fingers. “<I overshot my target, but that’s okay. I just gotta let Dad’s men take me to California, then all I need to do is escape and I can hitchhike the rest of the way!>”

But even with her plan in mind, Hope wasn’t quite so confident it would work. So to relieve some stress, she did a headstand on the cell bench to let her worries drain out of her body, and into her head. Or at least that’s what she tried tried to do. Despite her efforts Hope fell off the bench and broke her neck, though thanks to her healing factor she recovered from this normally debilitating injury in just a matter of seconds. She didn’t even scream, as Hope had long ago built up a remarkable tolerance to pain as a result of repeatedly testing her limits by doing stupidly reckless things (such as trying to stand on one’s head to relieve stress).

“<AAAGH!>” she tantrumed, flailing her legs around in the air, “<This is gonna take FOREVER.>” Starved for entertainment, she grabbed the TV, turned up the volume, and began to flick through channels at random, passing channel after channel without understanding a word of what was being said. “<Stupid teleporter... Why couldn’t I end up somewhere that speaks American?>”

As if to answer her prayers, the very next channel she turned to Channel 52, an English-speaking international news network. A man with a British accent wearing a tweed jacket was reporting from what appeared to be a park crowded with people of every shape and size, wearing any number
of colorful costumes.

"<Thank you, Calender Man>" said the guy in the Tweed Jacket. "<I’m here at the Hamarikyu Gardens in Tokyo, following up on your report of the new super team known as ‘The Justice Society of Japan’.>" He gestured to the multitudes behind him. "<It’s been just one day since the roster was announced, and already the team’s recruitment drive is off to a smashing success. I mean just LOOK at all those brave young men, women, genderless aliens, cyborgs, and combinations of the above. I don’t think I’ve seen this many crime-fighters in one place since Super Young Team’s own recruitment drive.>"

The camera then panned over to reveal a busty young woman with blonde hair, sporting a Power Girl costume and a domino mask. It was a pretty good impression, actually, though Hope noted that the real Power Girl was considerably more buff.

Tweed-jacket, meanwhile continued to speak. "<Anyway, today I’m speaking with the group’s publicist, who despite not being a crime-fighter herself has nevertheless decided to hide her true identity for safety reasons.>" He pointed the microphone at the young woman. "<Now tell me, how many new members are you recruiting?>"

"<It’s hard to say, really.>" the young woman replied, "<But we’re estimating somewhere around two, maybe three.>"

"<So you’re saying most of these folks will be going home disappointed?>"

"<Sadly. But it’s not often that the Japanese hero community gets together like this, so I’d like to feel like they’ll be going home with something, at least.>"

"<Well then, would you like to share with the audience what you expect out of a new recruit?>"

"<By all means!>" the young lady smiled. "<We’re looking for someone driven. Someone anxious to go out and save the day each morning. Someone enthusiastic, animated, a real force of personality.>" her smile then turned into sort of a smirk. "<And of course, bringing something new to the table wouldn’t hurt.>"

"<Well that’s about all the time we have, miss!>" said Mr. Tweed Jacket. "<Back to you, Snow.>"

The scene then cut back to a newsroom, where an anchorwoman was sitting at her desk. "<Thank you, Doctor. Coming up, the world’s leading Paleontologists discuss the so-called “Hollow Earth” theory. But first, here’s Joseph Coyne with the latest on Wall Street...>"

Hope turned off the TV, lied down on her back, and began to stare at the ceiling.

"<...I wonder how far away that Hamarikyu place is?>" she asked aloud. She then rolled over onto her stomach, letting her hands hold up her face. "<Too bad I’m locked up in here. Else I might just take a little detour...>"

She looked at her fingernails. Then at the wall, and then at her fingernails again. Instantly, she sharpened them into claws.

"<Hmm...>"

"...you know, ever since I was a kid I’ve always wondered what a superhero meeting actually looked like.” Simon frowned at his half-eaten omelette. “This... isn’t what I imagined.”
Shirley nodded silently. Breakfast at a “Big Belly Burger” franchise wasn’t exactly the kind of place that screamed out for superheroic feats, made worse by all the stares they were getting due to their costumes; even Shinji was trying to hide his identity by wearing a flimsy plastic sentai mask he bought at a dollar store. Still, it was the one place everyone could agree on for lunch.

“Yeah, well, beggars can’t be choosers.” Lightning bit off the end of her french fry. “So, first things first; the HQ isn’t up. What do we do until then?”

“Maybe we should recruit some more members?” Simon shrugged.

“We’ve got six guys as it is, not to mention a support staff...” said Shulk. “How many more do we need?”

“I dunno. As many as we want to join.”

“That’s helpful...” Lightning said.

Shinji, meanwhile was too transfixed on Shirley and her chicken salad. Not because he found her particularly attractive (though that probably helped), but more that there was a nagging question in the back of his mind. “Um... Girborg?” He asked.

Shirley looked to the side.

“I... I don’t mean to be rude,” Shinji stammered “...but aren't you a robot?”

Still chewing her food, Shirley nodded.

“So... why do you need to eat?”

Shirley’s antennae twitched. She took a moment to swallow before replying. “I don’t know. Nina says that my body contains a complete digestive system, but she isn’t sure if I’m actually getting energy from it, or if my brain just thinks I still need food...” Putting down her fork, she looked at her hand and sighed.

An array of things Shinji could have said flew through his mind, such as “Is something wrong?”, “Don’t worry about it.” or even “I think you are a very beautiful young lady even if you are a few years older than me and are a robot please by my girlfriend.”

Instead, he changed the subject. “So... yeah! Recruitment! That would be cool! Lets do that. Like, we’ll get posters and set up a booth in the park or something...”

Lightning shook her head. “We can’t do that. The logistics would be a nightmare. We’d need to rent a venue, contact everyone, find a way to guarantee everyone’s safety should they show up...”

Simon looked at his phone. “I dunno, Milly seems to be doing a pretty good job on her own...” He held the phone up for everyone to see, revealing a picture of Milly, Nia and Dr. Summers at a desk with a yellow tablecloth in front of a large crowd of people with Lelouch and Rivalz in the background, keeping things orderly.

Lightning snatched the phone away. “Give me that...” She tapped it a couple times to reveal the Twitter client Simon was using. The picture had apparently come from “@OfficalJJSJ”, and the accompanying post read “didn’t think there’d be such a turnout, LOL #JusticeSocietyJapan”.

She then shoved the phone back in Simon’s face. “What the hell is this?”
“Well, Milly wanted to do some recruiting so I said she could...”

“...put your girlfriend in danger by sending unarmed teenagers to solicit strangers for help in broad daylight where some revenge-seeking psycho could get to her!? Are you out of your mind?! Why didn’t you tell me about this?!”

“Uhhhhhh...” Simon said. “Well, Girlborg said she was okay with it...”

“What? No!” Shirley panicked. “Milly just... popped this question out of nowhere and I told her to ask you!” she pointed back at Simon.

Lightning facepalmed “...great. Just great. Why don’t we just put Ashford in charge of the team for all the good our so-called leaders are doing?”

“You worry too much, Light.” said Simon. “I mean, we’re not even a team yet. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

Slade Wilson was one of the best assassins in the world. Guns, swords, poisons, it didn’t matter how you wanted someone killed, Deathstroke the Terminator could do it. So he was very surprised this morning when he received a contract not to kill, but to “save”.

Of course he used the term “save” loosely, since as far as he could tell his targets, Lelouch and Nunnally Lamperouge, a scrawny young fop and his cripple of a sister, were exactly where they wanted to be, and of their own free will to boot. He was almost willing to write the whole thing off as the rantings of an upper-class twit who thought that just because he had a fancy title that he could send assassins to pick up the milk, when he saw just how much it was being offered. Not to mention the little detail that they were being guarded by another assassin with a strange power that made the mission that much more... interesting.

But to the world at large, today he was not Deathstroke the Terminator, or even Slade Wilson. He was Hiro Miyamoto, a bedraggled salaryman who always seemed to be in a rush because he was too cheap to afford public transportation. It was one of the many roles Slade had prepared when he did business in Japan, not unlike the ninja of old. The **real** ninja, that is, the ones more concerned with killing people than ludicrous martial arts techniques. All it took to complete the illusion was some makeup, a worn-out suit, a change in posture, and a glass eye. The eye was the important part; everyone was so used to seeing Deathstroke without one that even Batman might skip over Slade if he was doing his job right.

And speaking of his job, Hiro was late to a very important meeting, so he disregarded his usual ban on taking the train in order to get there faster. The fact that Hiro’s route just happened to match the way that Deathstroke’s targets took went unnoticed by all.

Eventually, Hiro arrived at a park at the same time Lelouch did. And just as Lelouch had stopped in order to man some kind of booth, so too did Hiro realize that maybe he wasn’t as late as he thought he was, and maybe his boss wouldn’t be too mad if he bought a hot dog wandered the park for a while. And if he **was** an assassin, then instead of looking quizzically at the gaggle of costumed youths gathered around the booth, he would have been sizing them up, trying to decide how many he could take should it come down to a confrontation.

And while Hiro and not Deathstroke read his newspaper and didn’t perform calculations in his head on just whom he could get away with killing, he walked straight into a caucasian girl with platinum blonde hair and piercing red eyes. She was wearing bright golden armor that looked made for
appearance rather than practicality, and was equipped with over a dozen sheaths holding everything from daggers to greatswords. Some even larger weaponry was strapped to her back, and also carried a pair of pearl-handled silver revolvers that didn’t even look like they had ever been used.

“Watch where you’re going, plebeian.” the girl said, pushing back at the perceived salaryman with enough force to knock him over. “You’re lucky that I haven’t made a name for myself yet, else I would demand more respect!”

Hero bowed as a quick apology, but the girl wouldn’t even stick around to acknowledge this. If he were an assassin, Hiro would have been adding the girl her to his mental checklist of “people I need to kill before I die”. Instead, he just hung his head solemnly and mumbled something about “kids these days”.

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“Milly. How did you get so many people here at once in such a short time?" Lightning was doing her best to stay tranquil.

“It was easy!” Milly turned in her seat to look back at Lightning. “All I did was stir up some hype on some messageboards, and word of mouth did the rest!”

Dr. Summers, meanwhile was too busy talking to the applicants to say anything while Nia took notes. “...yes that is impressive, but I’m afraid that’s not really a superpower... no this is not a cosplay contest... erm, do put that down; you could really hurt someone waving it around like that... I don’t think that costume is really appropriate...”

Lightning performed the rare double-facepalm and shook her head. “Please tell me you didn’t tell any of them ‘yes’...”

“Just one.” The group turned to find a red-haired boy that none of them remembered seeing at any of the other meetings. “A newly-minted magical girl named Sayaka, though she hasn’t picked a code name yet.”

Lightning stared at the newcomer, sizing him up. “Do we know you?”

“I’m Shirou.” he said. “Shirou Emiya. I was at the museum, remember?”

“Oh yeeeaaaah!” said Simon. “You were the guy who tried to shoot a sword out of a bow, right?”

“Yeah, I kinda panicked.” He laughed. “I tried to think of something pointy to use, and I guess I made a mistake...”

“Don’t feel too hard on yourself.” said Shulk “You were untrained, in a tight spot, and I’m not sure if Projection would have done much good anyway...”

“Projection?” said Shirley.

“Conjuring things out of mid-air.” said Shulk. “It’s a form of Magecraft. It can be convenient at times, but it’s not all that efficient.”

“Well, careers have been built out of worse gimmicks...” Simon replied.

“Oh, you’ve got it all rong, I’m just here on the support staff.” Said Shirou. “I mean, you guys saved me, it’s only fair that I help you save as many lives as possible!”
“Now that’s the spirit!” a blue-haired girl around Shinji’s age dropped down from a nearby tree. She was wearing a blue outfit that looked more suited for a medieval adventurer than a child, with a blue bustier that looked constructed more like a breastplate, a cape, gloves, a belt with glowing red gem on it, a blue dress, and white stockings worn underneath a pair of brown boots.

“Sorry for the belated introduction, but wanted to climb a tree and I had to help her up.” She pointed over her shoulder, and from tree branch a pink-haired girl waved back. “Anyway, as carrot-top over here said, I’m Sayaka! Haven’t picked out a code name yet but I’m sure I’ll come up with it eventually!”

Lightning looked back at Milly. “…may I ask?”

“Well, we’re probably going to have a magical girl on our team eventually. And her powers are pretty good, especially for someone so inexperienced…”

“Swordplay and healing magic!” Sayaka unsheathed her blade and waved it around a bit. “I’m just about unstoppable!”

Lightning ignored for the moment that she had the exact same skill set and then some.

“…okay, that’s fine…” said Simon. “But we wouldn’t want your time with the Society to interfere with your duty to stop the emperor of darkness from stealing the sun or whatever.”

“Ah, but that’s just it!” she beamed. “While there are these monsters called ‘Witches’ that I need to fight, there’s not really a time limit. Besides, Kyubey said I could get outside help if I needed it…”

“Kyubey?” said Simon.

“Yeah! He’s the one who made me a magical girl in the first place!” She made a gesture as if she was grabbing something off her shoulder, and then holding it out for the group to see. “Can any of you see him?”

“Uhhhhhh…” Simon looked nervously at Lightning, who just shook her head.

Shinji raised his hand slightly. “I can.” he squeaked. The whole group turned their attention to him. “He’s… um…” Shinji tugged at his collar. “…kind of a weasel-y thing? White fur? Beady red eyes? Erm…”

A voice rang out in everyone’s head. “That’s completely correct!”

Suddenly, within Sayaka’s hands, a strange creature popped into existence. Just as Shinji said, it indeed looked kind of like a weasel, but with a bulbous head and a long, bushy tail, a sort of cat-like grin, and a floppy pair of… antenna things sticking out of his ears.

“Most people can’t see me of course, and we only communicate by telepathy.” the creature “said” in everyone else’s mind. “But since we’ll be working together for the foreseeable future, I figured I might as well reveal myself!”

“…how far does your telepathy reach?” asked Shulk.

“Several light years. Why?”

“I’ve heard the Martian Manhunter relays telepathic signals between Justice League members. Can you do that?”
“Of course! You only have to ask!”

“Well I’m sold.” said Simon. “Consider yourselves members of the Justice Society!”

“...on a trial basis.” added Lightning. “Look, this is all going a bit too fast. Nearly half our team is underage and just at a glance I suspect most of them have some serious psychological issues. If we’re going to recruit anyone else we’re going to need to run background checks, gather psychological profiles and you’re not listening to me are you?”

“Now this, you see, is my Soul Gem! It’s the source of my power, and when I change out of my costume it turns into this little egg-shaped thing. If I used too much magic it gets all cloudy, so I need to hunt Witches and collect their grief seeds to clean it...”

Simon was too busy listening to Sayaka’s explanation to pay attention to anything Lightning had to say. Instead, she looked around the park to see what the others were doing. Shinji was trying to make himself scarce hiding behind a tree, Shulk was scanning the crowd because he had nothing better to do, and Shirley was standing in place, looking unsure of herself.


Lightning watched Shirley’s eyes for a bit. Though they wandered constantly, every so often they would inevitably turn to look directly at Lelouch, who at that moment was talking to a costumed vigilante who was apparently dressed like a giant lobster.

“It’s boy trouble, isn’t it?”

“No! No! Of course not! No.” Shirley lowered her head to avoid Lightning’s gaze.

Lightning had never seen such a terrible liar. “Well, then what is it?”

Shirley was silent for a moment, and then looked up at Lightning and said “I... don’t really know. I mean...” she looked at the crowd. “...all these people here wanting to get in... it’s kind of overwhelming.”

“You do realize we’re only going to pick two or three if we pick any at all, right?”

“But those guys are going to be the best out of all of them! But I’m not amazing, I’m just a girl with an over-enthusiastic agent...”

“Well for one thing, my guess is that they’ll be looking more at Simon than at you. Secondly, if they’re looking to join a team in the first place, most of the time it’s because they either lack the direction to do things by themselves, or that they’re independent enough that they hadn’t thought of forming their own team.” Lightning put her hand on Girlborg’s shoulder. “How about we try something simple. Once we’re done recruiting, how about we gather up the rookies and I’ll show you how to go on patrol?”

“...thanks.” But despite her words, Shirley didn’t seem any more cheerful. “...I’m just worried that-”

“Good news, everybody!” Milly said as she approached the pair, with a short, blonde teenager in golden armor in tow. Simon and Shulk immediately dropped what they were doing to see what all
the hubbub was about. “I’ve just gathered another new member!” She gestured to the girl in gold.
“This is-”

“I believe I can introduce myself, Lady Ashford.” the girl said. “I am princess Electra Pendragon, and I have come from the far future with the purpose of averting a disaster that destroyed the world. And on this very year, in fact.”

“Princess?” Lightning raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. Princess. Why? Do you think something’s funny about princesses?”

“Erm, of course not, your majesty.” Shulk put down the Monado for a second as he tried to remember how he was trained to act in the off-chance that he ever met royalty. “But what royal family are you exactly a part of?”

“That’s none of your business!” snapped Electra. “All you need to know is that my father is the greatest hero of this, or any other era.”

“...you mean Superman?”

Electra’s face turned red. “NO! I do NOT mean Superman!” Her red eyes almost seemed to glow as she said this. “That tyrant is an arrogant blowhard with a god complex! Such a ‘man’ pales in comparison to my father!”

“So... Batman, then.”

“An egotistic plebeian who doesn’t know his place! Do you have any more stupid guesses?”

“...Booster Gold?”

“...give us a moment.” Lightning pulled the others away. “(Okay, what’s the deal here?)” she whispered. “(This girl seems more like a villain than a hero...)”

“(Well every team needs an anti-hero)” Milly replied. “(The Justice League has Batman, the JSA had Magog...)”

“(...and did you ever notice how nobody liked Magog?)” Lightning gave Milly an annoyed look.

“(And besides, I thought Light filled that role.)” Lightning shot another glare at Simon as he said this.

Shirley looked back and forth between the two. “(Wait, who’s Magog?)”

“(An idiot who’s now dead. That’s all you need to know.)” Lightning looked back at Milly. “(Any more bright ideas?)”

“(...well, maybe we should at least give her a chance. Just for a day or two.)” said Shulk.

“(Why on earth would we do that?)”

“(Well, maybe she just wants to do good and just doesn’t know how. In fact, if we left her alone, she might become a real villain instead of a pretend hero.)”

“(...and if she turns out to be an unrepentant sociopath?)”

“(Then she’ll end up surrounded by people with superpowers who have been watching her all day.
“(That’s... actually a good point.)” Lightning admitted. “(I mean it’s not as if her personality’s going to win them over...)”

“I’m WAITING!” shouted Electra. “It isn’t polite to keep a princess busy, you know.”

“(You can say that again...)” Simon winced looked over his shoulder. “(But what if she lies about her powers? I mean, it could all be part of some kinda plan...)”

“(Well you could say that about any of us, but we’re not yet famous enough to worry about conspiracies.)”

Shirley raised her hand. “(Uh... what about that whole ‘end of the world’ thing?)”

“(Another good point.)” Shulk nodded. “(Her backstory might be sketchy and unverifiable, but with a claim like that we can’t throw out the possibility that she’s telling the truth. Not yet at least.)”

“(...all right, but I’m keeping her in sight at all times.)” Lightning looked back at Electra for a moment. “(Shirley and I’ll take Ikari and the new kid on patrol. Just promise me you won’t commit to any new recruits until we get back.)”

“(Uh... yeah! What she said.”) said Shirley.

“(Got it.)” said Simon. “(Good luck, Light, miss Vice Chairman.)”

“(Heh... you’re welcome.”) Shirley blushed with embarrassment.

“(Oh! One other thing!)” Milly pointed to the Tree that Sayaka had left her friend. “(Miki made me promise to induct her friend Madoka as an honorary member, kind of like a team sidekick. Think you could bring her on patrol?)”

“(No.)” Lightning moved her hand horizontally. “(Look, I might be willing to allow a loose cannon onto an unproven team, but if there’s one thing I’m not doing, it’s bringing a civilian on patrol.)”

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“So, Madoka! Howya liken’ going on patrol?” Sayaka began to walk backwards as she asked this question.

“Well, it’s pretty nice so far.” Madoka Kamine looked down at the city through a pair of binoculars she had rented. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to the Tokyo Tower before!” She turned to Shinji and grinned, her smiling face sporting a purple domino mask borrowed from Milly that did absolutely nothing to hide her fluorescent pink hair with pigtails, and would have fooled absolutely no one had anyone actually been looking for her. “You should see this, it’s really cool!”

“Um... Okay.” Shinji tried to look through the binoculars while wearing his own mask, but he just couldn’t get the eyes to line up correctly. “Um... it’s great!” he lied, “I can even see my house from here.”

If Madoka noticed any deception going on, she didn’t show it, instead Giggling at Shinji’s words. “Well, where is it?”

“It’s, uh.” he waved his hand in a vaguely eastward direction. “It’s kind of... over there, I guess.”

“Let me see if I can spot it!” she took the binoculars back and started scanning the area. “Is it that
big, weird looking building over there?"

"...I think that’s a temple."

"...well, is it in that huge skyscraper?"

"...no..."

"...well, is it near the park?"

"Um... you’re getting colder."

Lightning watched the two, arms crossed. Madoka’s presence was keeping the group from doing anything that could put the team in actual danger, turning what was intended to be a training session where Lightning could gauge everyone’s strengths and weaknesses into a glorified field trip. Even Shirley was in danger of being assimilated into the group, as even though she remained silent she was standing near enough to imply that she could join in at any moment.

It was Electra, ironically enough, who was the only one treating this trip with any amount of seriousness. Instead of goofing around, she was instead hard at work staring through something that looked like a diamond encrusted sextant. She apparently called it “The Apoco-Scope”, though she remained mum on what exactly she was looking for.

"...then again, perhaps the kids have the right idea." Lightning found a nearby bench to sit on. "I am getting a bit high strung lately..." She put her hands behind her head, closed her eyes, and relaxed. “Perhaps a bit of time to clear my head would do me some good...”

And then after a few minutes she heard the unmistakable sound of someone jumping through a sheet of glass.

"Of course." thought Lightning as she opened her eyes. “Something just has to go wrong today, doesn’t it?” She looked up, and noticed that Electra was no longer present. Instead, there was a vaguely person-sized hole in the window, and a crowd had begun to gather.

As she got up, Lightning pulled out her wallet, and flipped it open to reveal her police badge. “Police! Nobody move!” she said. She turned to Shirley. “Shinji, what happened here?”

“Well, she just out of nowhere and said ‘Ah-ha!’ And then she looked at us, said something along the lines of ‘follow my lead’, and then she jumped out the window.” he pointed at the broken glass, grimacing. “Um... is this my fault?”

Lightning shrugged. “Madoka, give me the binoculars.” After the girl complied, Lightning then looked down at the crater that Electra left in her wake, then looked panned ahead to see Electra, completely unharmed, chasing after an unseen figure with surprising deftness given her weighty armor. Lightning then looked at Shirley. “Girlborg, there are traffic cameras at every intersection. Can you hack into them and see if you can track down who exactly our golden girl is chasing after?”

Shirley flinched, “I- I don’t know! I've never tried that before!”

“First time for everything. If you can control a robot, a camera should be a piece of cake.”

“O-okay then...” Shirley put her fingertips to her forehead, mimicking a stance she’s seen psychics take on television to boost their mental concentration. “Come on... cameras... I need to see cameras...”
Almost instantly, Shirley was no longer watching the backs of her own eyelids. Rather, her vision had become one with Tokyo itself. Not content with mere traffic cameras, her technopathic powers had reached out to every networked camera in the Minato district. Phones, satellites, security cameras, all of these and more were interconnected with each other to form an unbroken panorama, all witnessed simultaneously and in real time. “Intoxicating” was too small a word for the feeling; “Ambrosic” might have fit better if such a term has existed to describe near-omniscience.

A more ambitious mortal perhaps would have had suffered delusions of godhood if given such an opportunity. But to Shirley the experience was frightening beyond compare. With a sudden gasp, she snapped back to reality.

“I am never going to close my eyes again…” Shirley whimpered.

“…I’m sorry?” said Lightning.

“I found her!” gasped Shirley, “The girl! The person. I think it’s a girl. Heading towards tennis court. Young. Black cloak…. kind that were popular a few years ago… Organization… I think…” She fell onto the floor. “Sorry… that was just… I think I overdid it…”

“Hm…” Lightning put one of her hands on her hips. “That must have taken too much out of her. Probably not as powerful as I hoped…” She then approached the hole in the wall, pushed a couple glass shards out of the way, and slipped on over to the other side. “You guys stay here with Girlborg. I’ll be back soon.” she then pointed out the window, down towards the ground, and said. “Don’t follow me.”

Lightning then leapt through the broken window, out the observation deck, and landed on the northern corner of the Tower. Sparks flew from her footwear as she grinded down the historic landmark, before finally landing on the ground with a running start.

Back up on the deck, Sayaka watched Lightning’s stunt with awe. “Hey Madoka! Betcha fifty yen that I can do that too!”

Madoka looked somewhat concerned. “Well, I don’t think that-”

“Now hold on a second!” said Shirley. “Light said we needed to stay put-”

“Then catch me if you can!” The magical girl took a running leap out the window in full view of the amazed crowd, with Shirley leaping after her, trying to grab Sayaka before she got herself killed.

She succeeded to a certain extent, managing to clutch Sayaka’s body in her arms, but Shirley failed at stopping herself from falling out the observation deck and landing on the same edge of the tower that Lightning had grinded down. Not wanting to experience first-hand the agony of a 500 pound-plus metal body carrying a child crashing into pavement at terminal velocity, Shirley made every effort to stay balanced, ultimately giving the impression that she was running down the side of the tower. A soon as they had reached the ground, Shirley came to a screeching halt in front a Hawaiian-shirted tourist who had decided to videotape the whole thing.

“That. Was. AWESOME!” Sayaka threw her hands into the air, accidently sending Shirley tumbling over. Sayaka, however, just got up and started running after Lightning shouting “Thanks, Girlborg! I owe you one!” in her wake.

“Wait…” Shirley panted, “wait up…” she then began to jog after Sayaka.

Meanwhile, back at the tower, Madoka and Shinji looked at each other in confusion.
“...how about we take the elevator?” suggested Madoka.

Shinji nodded in agreement.

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“...with all due respect, sir, this is a missing persons case.” Detective Keiichi Ikari looked incredulously at Chief Sonoda as they walked down the hallway. “Isn’t this a few orders of magnitude below what the Cataclysm Department would handle?” Ikari’s partner looked at him with envy; Keiichi had long ago mastered the delicate art of questioning superior officers without getting fired.

“Budget cuts.” said the Chief. “Some politician figured the Metahuman Crimes Division was sitting around twiddling their thumbs while vigilantes did all their work for them. So of course all work they did have gets pushed over to the most overworked department in Tokyo.”

“Tragic.”

“You don’t know the half of it...” Sonoda placed his palm on his forehead. “And it’s not just ‘some missing person case’, because I wouldn’t be here if it was.” he leafed through a manilla envelope full of redacted data. “Apparently this “Hope” girl’s the adoptive daughter of some big-shot CIA spook. Apparently she broke into some retired mad scientist’s house to “borrow” a teleporter he’d been working on.”

“Did his name happen to be something like ‘Dr. Insano’?” Ikari’s eyes glazed over.

“Good guess.” Sonoda’s made a joyless lifeless smirk. “That name turned out to be the only thing that wasn’t a complete fabrication. In reality, neither Batman nor Insano ever came within a hundred feet of each other, though we only have the latter’s word to go on.”

“Given that he’s still alive, I’d say that’s a safe bet.” Ikari looked at his notes. “Had she been bugging this “Insano” guy before?”

“Actually, no. They were apparently on good terms, and she had acted as a lab assistant for the past couple months. Probably learned how to use the teleporter there, though that doesn’t explain her choice of destination...”

“Well, she did say she wanted to go to Sternbild.” quipped Maniwa. “Maybe she put in the wrong coordinates?”

“That’s the working theory.” Sonoda’s eyelids drooped as they entered the room full of jail cells. “In any case, I need you and Ikari to help with the drop-off. It should be simple; we just need to take her to the airport, where an escort will be waiting to-”

But when they finally opened the door to the cell, Hope was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was a big gaping hole in the cell wall, surrounded by dozens of scratch marks.

“...DAMN IT.” The chief pulled his radio from his holster, and set it to the local frequency. “This is Chief Sonoda of the Cataclysm Division. We have a 39-44, escaped metahuman child of variable appearance. I repeat, we have a 39-44, escaped metahuman child of variable appearance. Medium priority. Subject is dangerous, but not inherently violent.” The chief then sighed.

Detective Maniwa began to say “Sorry about this, sir, I take complete responsi-” before his partner shushed him.
“No, it’s not your fault...” the chief grimaced. “It’s those goddamn budget cuts again.” he grumbled began to put on his jacket. “I say It would be a good idea to spring for titanium plating, but nooooo, ‘nobody ever tries to break out’ they tell me. And then when somebody actually does they just slash the budget again because we’re apparently not doing our jobs right-”

Maniwa coughed. “You wouldn’t mind if we looked into this case, would you?” Ikari gave him a slight glare.

“By all means.” Sonoda began to march out of the room. “We’re all going to be in hot water if we don’t find her.”

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From the safety of the public restroom, Hope tried desperately to come up with the perfect disguise.

On one hand, Hope couldn’t make herself any taller, shorter, thinner or fatter, and had no control over her clothing. On the other hand, she had free reign over her skin, hair, and even facial features aside from the bright red tattoo on her forehead (which thankfully she could cover up with thick bangs or a hat). She shifted through few different forms to try and find one that would help her blend in, but every time it ended up looking less like an actual Japanese person and more like a caricature of one. So she tried some more exotic shapes. Catgirl, tengu, gorgon, martian, and countless others, Hope on tried every shape she could remember from her time on the TV Tropes Wiki. And she rejected every last one of these for reasons ranging from being really silly-looking to fear of pissing off the Martian Manhunter.

Eventually, Hope settled on something that looked vaguely like a Drow, with jet black skin, purple eyes, silky white hair going down to her knees, and a pair of milky white fangs because they looked cool. She was satisfied by her new form, finding it to be both attention grabbing and completely unlike her true self. And since Elves weren’t actually real (Well okay aside from Santa’s elves BUT THEY DON’T COUNT), no one could call her bluff for not being a cold-blooded sociopath like Drow are supposed to be. But the best part was that if anyone asked about how she got her powers, she could just say “A wizard did it!” and leave it at that.

Her clothing was still a dead giveaway, but her outfit was generic enough that simply wearing her “Wild Tiger” T-Shirt inside-out would be more than enough to fool a casual observer. True, it was still nothing like one would expect an Elf to wear, but she assumed a proper costume would come later; something purple and green, with spikey bits that- oh wait no spikey bits that would be hard to move in.

Well it didn’t matter. The point was that Hope was ready to show the world what she could do.

She exited the bathroom with some modicum of grace, and stepped into what she assumed was the line to the interview table. She didn’t know for certain, however, because the rivals standing in line all towered over her diminutive frame.

Wanting to get a better view, she extended her claws and used them to climb up a huge man wearing a bronze-plated football uniform, taking care not to dig in deep enough to actually hurt him.

“<Hey!>” a gruff voice shouted as the football player swiveled his head to face Hope. “<Whaddya think yer doin, pipsqueak?>”

Hope had no idea what he actually said, but she got the general idea. Frightened, she leapt from his
shoulder onto guy who was dressed like a giant tree, and then rolled onto the ground when a stray branch came flying at her. From there, she crawled on her elbows and knees, secret agent style. At least up until the point that a nerdy guy wearing a viking helmet took just the wrong moment to drop his warhammer head-first right on top of Hope. She squirmed in discomfort as her spine snapped and reassembled itself over and over again. Luckily the faux-viking was a good sport, being kind enough to let Hope cut in line as an apology for almost-but-not-really killing her.

This brought Hope close enough to the front that the wait was almost bearable, though of course it still took a good thirty minutes or so. She instantly regretted leaving her game-filled cellphone back at home, but then reminded herself that dad could probably track her through the phone lines or something. And she couldn’t afford to take any chances, not when she was this close to joining a real-life superhero team.

Sure, maybe it wouldn’t have been as cool as teaming up with Wild Tiger, but even Hope admitted this was a bit of a stretch. Despite her confidence back at the police station, she had no idea if Tiger would even take a sidekick in the first place what with that new partner of his. She grinded her teeth just thinking about Barnaby Brooks Jr., that smug bastard...

“Next...?”

Suddenly, as a man wearing nothing but swim trunks and a jellyfish on his head walked away sobbing, Hope realized that there was no one else in front of her.

Better yet, the tired old geezer conducting the interviews was being tagged out for a blue-haired man with a blue jacket and a drill-shaped Necklace. Simon, she thought his name was.

The judge sitting next to him didn’t look half-bad either; given how bubbly the blue-haired woman with the weird eyes looked, she was probably easy to impress.

It was the last guy that concerned her. A teenage boy with purple eyes and a face obscured by a domino mask, wearing an Allan Scott costume. It looked like she would have to go all out if she wanted to get a positive review from him.

Simon is the first to speak up. “So, whaddya call yourself?” he said.

Hope facepalmed. “<AAAGH THE LANGUAGE BARRIER I COMPLETELY FORGOT MY GOD THIS WAS DUUUUUMB.>”

“<...do you speak English.>” the teenage boy said.

Her hands still on her face, Hope spread out two of her fingers so she should get a good look at him. “<Uh... yes. Yes I do.>” she said. “<I... don’t speak Japanese.>”

“<That’s okay, most people in Japan at least know a bit of English.>” the woman smiled. “<So, what’s your name?>”

Somewhat more confident, Hope opened her mouth to speak, but was then cut off as a hail of shuriken flew over her head and embedded themselves in the table in front of her.

Thinking quickly, Hope turned around and saw a tall man in blue tights, wearing a scaled blue chestpiece, with bright yellow shoulderpads and matching yellow gauntlets. But it was the unusual mask he wore that Hope’s eyes were drawn to; split down the middle it was black on the left side, Yellow on the right, and lacking entirely in features save for a rough contour of his face, and a singular eye on the right.
Back at the booth, a purple haired teen in a cheap batman costume (complete with fake muscles) rushed over to the table. “Oh my god!” he said. “That’s Deathstroke the Terminator! He’s like, one of the world’s biggest badasses!” he then began to make a series of awkward poses out of a combination of both fear of astonishment. “He can think, like, nine times faster than normal, run at least thirty miles an hour, and knows every form of combat known to man.”

“Including a few I’ve made up myself.” Deathstroke bragged. He then cracked his knuckles. “Now look, I’ll make this easy on you. Hand over the boy and I’ll let you walk away from all this. Otherwise…”

Suddenly, the fake viking burst out the crowd to charge at Deathstroke, hammer held high. “Never fear, citizens!” he cried, “Super Cosmic Viking Man is here to save the-”

He didn’t even get the chance to finish, as Deathstroke pulled unheated a worn longsword and stabbed Super Cosmic Viking Man through his unprotected stomach. The would-be hero froze in place for a moment, before limply sliding off the blade and falling to the floor.

Deathstroke glared at the crowd behind him. “Any of you jokers try to pull something like that, and next time I’ll TRY to aim for a vital organ.”

Simon, pounded the table with fist. “Yeah, well, if you want to get to Shinji, you need to get through us!”

Deathstroke raised an eyebrow. “Shinji? Who the hell is that?” he said. He then drew a second blade and pointed it at the teenage judge, much to his surprise. “That’s who I’m looking for. Him and his kid sister.”

“How about you tell me what you want him for?”

“Let’s just say his father has a few choice words for them, and leave it at that.”

Lelouch glared at Rivalz. “We’ll talk about this later. Rolo, NOW!”

...and in the blink of an eye, Lelouch vanished.

Deathstroke looked around fruitlessly.

“Very clever…” he said. He then raised upholstered a submachine gun, and fired it into the air. “ALLRIGHT, LISTEN UP!” He shouted. “I GAVE YOU A CHANCE TO COME PEACEFULLY, BUT I’M THROUGH PLAYING NICE.”

Hope ducked as Deathstroke fired off a clip into the crowd of heroes, striking down dozens of heroes where they stood.

“YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO SHOW YOURSELF, LAMPEROGUE, OR ELSE EVERYONE FUCKING DIES.” A mechanical sound was heard as he reloaded his machine gun, and then immediately fired it at a green-arrow imitator who had yet to master the art of the quick-draw. “AND ANY WISE GUY WHO THINKS THEY CAN TAKE A CHEAP SHOT WHEN MY BACK IS TURNED GETS TO GO FIRST. YOU UNDERSTAND?”

The crowd remained silent. Not one dared make a move, in fear of pissing off merc with an itchy trigger finger.

Suddenly, Hope found herself snatched up by something very cold and metallic as the Lagann
grabbed her with one hand, and charged at Deathstroke with the other. The appendage then transformed into a giant drill, leaving Deathstroke only a split-second to roll out of the way.

But Simon kept going until he was right in front of the crowd, whereupon he retraced the drill, and carefully placed Hope onto the grass.

“<You okay?>” A voice came from the robot, which Hope immediately realized belong to Simon.

“<Well, yeah but->”

“<Good!>” Simon’s robot gave Hope a thumbs-up. “<We’re going to need all the help we can get!>”

Realizing that Simon had just asked for her help, Hope returned with her own thumbs-up, followed by a toothy, fang-exposing grin.

The cockpit of the Laggan then opened itself up, revealing Simon to the world. “Listen up, Deathstroke!” He stood on his chair, and put his foot on the rim of his mech. “You might think you can bully us around, just because you’ve got a lot of guns…”

“And swords.” said the guy dressed like a tree.

“And training.” said the football player.

Back at the booth, Rivalz continued to count up Deathstroke’s advantages in front of Nia. “And super reflexes, enhanced senses, regeneration…”

“...So you’ve got a lot of stuff! Big deal!” said Simon, “But we have something that you don’t!”

“Stupidity?” said Deathstroke.

“Noble hearts dedicated to justice!” Simon pumped his fist, and then pointed it at the mercenary. “And with our noble hearts, we’re going to make a drill... of justice!” He then extended his index finger to point straight forward, and then he raised his hand to point up in the air. “And this drill will pierce through the vault of heaven, and lead us to a better tomorrow! A tomorrow free of fear, where we can live out our dreams in mutual harmony! A harmony that will last till the end of-”

“I don’t have time for this.” Without even bothering to aim, Deathstroke pointed his gun at Simon, and fired off an entire clip of bullets before Simon even had a chance to blink.

But rather than the sensation of led perforating his skull, Simon instead found a shell of glowing red hexagons suddenly blink into being, accompanied by the sound not unlike a nuclear reactor running at full blast.

“Simon! We’ve got your back!” Simon turned to the side, and saw Shulk and Shirou standing among the crowd, decked out in medieval plate armor, Shulk raising the The Monado above his head, and Shirou readying a wooden crossbow.

“Good save!” Said Simon. “I didn’t even know you could do that!”

“Neither did I until three seconds ago.” said Shulk. “You see I had this vision where Deathstroke killed you in the middle of a rousing speech by shooting you through the heart. I didn’t want to alarm you, so I got Emyia to trace up something that could protect you. But we couldn’t give it to you in time so I-”
...and just as suddenly as it appeared, the shield blinked out of existence.

“...Maybe we should talk about this later.” said Shirou.

“Agreed.” said Shulk.

A smirk spread over Simon’s face. “Well, that’s what we get for monologuing.”

He then jumped back into the Lagann, and closed the cockpit, and once again the Lagann began speaking for him. “Allright, in that case I’ll keep it quick. You want to know who the hell we are?! WE’RE THE JUSTICE SOCIETY OF JAPAN, AND THAT’S ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW!”

All the while, Hope watched the whole thing unfold with childlike glee. Even if she didn’t understand a word of what was being said, she could practically taste emotion floating through the air. It was like watching a superhero cartoon come to life, but with better costumes and worse acting! And she was right there in the thick of it!

Even if her father were to show up right then and there to drag her back to Florida, Hope knew that this was a trip well spent.

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A girl ran through the streets of Tokyo. She didn’t know why, exactly, but her instincts told her that when a girl wearing golden armor jumps from the top of a metal spire, lands hard enough to make a crater, and then immediately starts chasing after you, the safest thing to do was run away as quickly as possible.

There were actually quite a lot of things the girl didn’t know, actually. Her own name, for one thing. Followed by who she was, where she was, and how she got here. She did know what she looked like, at least. She remembered seeing a... shiny glass thing that you can see yourself in. She could clearly remember seeing one of those before. What are they called again?

Well, whatever it was there certainly wasn’t time to think. The gold-plated-girl was hot on her heels, showing a surprising amount of grace for wearing something that looks so heavy.

The girl then looked down at her own clothing. It was black. Very black. And quite shiny, like it was made from very fine stuff she couldn’t quite remember the name of that is made of from the skin of those big animals she couldn’t quite remember the name of that live on that place she couldn’t quite remember the name of that also make that white beverage she couldn’t quite remember the name of.

The girl makes a mental note to get this missing-memory thing sorted out as soon as humanly possible.

As for the rest of her outfit, it seems to be dominated by an enormous zipper that seems to run the length of it. The girl notes the irony of knowing what a “zipper” is despite being unable to put a name to more commonplace things. She also notes the presence of a pair of high-heeled boots on her feet, thinks to herself “no wonder I’ve been having so much trouble running” and kicks them off the very next moment. This turns out to be a mistake, however, as she suddenly remembers why people wear shoes in the first place. Specifically, she learns why they wear shoes while running on the pavement in ninety degree weather.

“GAH!” she yelps. But with the gold-plated-girl chasing after her, she has no choice but to press onward, so she splits off of the road and runs towards some kind of... green place that was walled off from the outside world by a chain-link fence. A freestanding net sat on top of a rectangular...
pattern painted out of white lines, both of which the girl puzzled over the purpose of.

Still, the girl knew an opportunity when she saw it, so she ducked through a gate and shut it behind her with some kind of lock. She then walked away from the gate, taking a moment to catch her breath. She was confident that the gold-plated-girl wouldn’t be able to follow her through...

...only to turn around in shock as the sound of a long, golden blade cut through the gate like melted butter. “Trapped like a rat in a cage, aren’t we?” The gold-plated-girl wore a smug smile as she approached. “It’s almost pathetic enough to make me laugh... but a heroine needs to be humble, after all.” She twirled her blade between in her hands.

Just then, a new voice rang out. “Electra!” it said, and soon a pink-haired woman wearing a white jacket and a red scarf leapt between the girl and her gold-plated stalker. “What’s going on here?”

“Ah, Lightning! Good of you to come,” the gold-plated-girl (apparently known as “Electra”) pointed at the girl. “I had just finished tracking down this undesirable, and was about to put an end to her life.”

The girl gasped, and took a step back; her worst fears had been confirmed.

“...that’s not how we do things.” the woman known as “Lightning” glared at her companion. “We don’t murder criminals. Especially when they haven’t done anything.”

“Murder is such a strong word.” her expression unchanging, Electra flipped her hair back. “Royalty doesn’t commit murder. We perform executions.”

“It doesn’t matter what you call it. Maybe they don’t have this where you come from, but in our time we have something called ‘due process’...”

“Oh? Are you willing to die for your so-called ‘due process’?” Electra reached behind her cape, and pulled out a gold-plated sextant (the girl, of course, didn’t know what a sextant actually did, but somehow she still knew what it was called). “The Apoco-Scope identifies her as one of the seven people who will bring about the end of the world! She must be destroyed before that happens!”

“Why? What exactly did this girl do to deserve to be hunted down like a wild animal?”

“Well I... don’t quite know that. The end of the world wasn’t so much a singular event as much as it was a series of seemingly unrelated disasters.” Electa pointed to the Apoco-Scope again. “But the Apoco-Scope says it, so it must be true!”

“...You’re expecting me to believe that you’re passing snap judgements based on a fortune telling tool that might not even work?” Lightning pulled her weapon off her belt. “Are you crazy?”

“A better question is, are you blind!” Electra screamed. “Just look at her jacket; it’s the same kind that the members Organization XIII wore!”

“You’ve either been living under a rock, or you really are from the future. Those jackets were extremely popular a few years ago. My sister has one. Her fiance has one. Even I have one. Does that mean we’re members, too?”

“...you COULD be...” she looked away from Lightning, and towards her own weapon. “I can’t quite discount that possibility just yet...”

Thinking the pair were too busy bickering to give chase, the girl made a break for it. But just as it
looked like she was out of range, she felt a sharp, stabbing pain in her thigh, which seized up and caused her to fall over. Looking at the source of the pain, she saw a Gold-plated knife sticking out of the back of her leg. She tried to pull it out, but when she reached for it the knife immediately lost its luster, turning into what appeared to be an ordinary knife-for-place-where-you-make-food. The knife then made a noise that the girl would probably compare to crumpling tinfoil if she knew what that tinfoil was, and a series of cracks began to form. Before she knew it the knife had fallen apart into a pile of iron scraps. While it did get the knife out, it also caused her wound to bleed profusely, which somehow hurt even more than simply having a piece of metal stuck in it.

The girl then looked back up at the others. As she sat on the floor nursing her own wound, Lightning and Electra had launched into combat. Electra fought with all manner of weapons, from glowing swords and magical maces to some kind of metal tube that made a loud noise when she squeezed it. And all of her weapons were extremely ornate, as they were exclusively fashioned out precious metals and gems, to the point where it eventually got to be a bit silly. After all, how practical is a flail with a giant ruby on the end, exactly?

She swung hard and swung wide, but despite her boasting Electra’s blows were clumsy enough that she would occasionally drop her weapon. And whenever she did, the weapon would instantly take on a less opulent form and then fall to pieces just like the knife had.

Apparently the girl wasn’t the only one who noticed this, as the first time it happened it gave Lightning pause. “What are you, Bizzaro-King Midas or something?”

“Don’t associate me with that pretender!” the girl screamed. “An ounce of my blood is worth more than a gallon of his!”

In contrast to Electra, Lightning’s combat style had a graceful rhythm to it. True, she also swung wide, but she was fast enough that whenever an opponent tried to exploit what appeared to be an opening, Lightning dodged it and immediately made a counter-attack. And while Electra herself left openings whenever she tried to change weapons, Lightning was able to switch from gun to sword to magic without skipping a beat.

It was funny. It probably took years to learn how to fight that well, but seeing it in motion it all looked so easy...

Just then, more newcomers entered the battle! One was a blue-haired girl with a blue chestplate, and the other was a somewhat older, orange-haired girl with two pink, transparent antenna sticking out the side of her head, who was also wearing a silly costume.

“Hey Light! What’s going on! Why ‘ya fighting golden girl?”

“Sayaka, I thought I told you to-” Lightning leaned to the side to dodge an incoming sword thrust. “Nevermind. That girl over there is injured.” she ducked to avoid a swipe at her head. “Heal her up, and get her to safety. Girlborg, you go too. We don’t know who she’s working for.”

Sayaka (the blue-haired girl) returned a salute as she rushed towards the nameless girl’s aid. “You got it, boss!” she charged straight through the fight, sliding as she passed Electra to avoid being struck, and then rolled up to her destination.

She rubbed her hands together. “Allright, let’s see what we can do here...” She pushed the girl’s jacket aside in order to get a good look at the wound. She then held out her hands, and a faint blue light began to emanate from them.

But rather than closing up, the area around the gash began to glow with a sickly, black light,
accompanied by a faint ringing.

Sayaka poked at the wound, bloodying her finger when she found it to still be there. “Well that’s weird.” she looked at the girl. “I don’t suppose you know anything about this?”

“Um... not really.” she replied. “Sorry.”

“Right then.” Sayaka then picked her up, and held the girl over her shoulder. “Hey Lightning! It’s not working!”

“What’s not working?” at this point Lightning had disarmed Electra completely, leaving her to flail her fists helplessly in Lightning’s direction as Light held Electra’s face back at arm’s length.

“My healing magic! It’s not doin’ a darn thing!”

“...Great.” Lightning clobbered Electra with a punch to the face, and tossed one of her own healing spells in the nameless girl’s direction. Unfortunately, this had much the same result; same ringing, same blacklight, same lack of progress.

“She’s probably immune to magic.” Lightning said. She then bent down to pick up the girl, first grabbing her by the hand. “I’ll get her to a hospital. You two finish up the fight with miss high-and-”

But the moment she touched the Girl, the air filled with an intense ringing. Starting from the point of contact, the girl’s arm lit up with the same black light energy that appeared when they tried to heal her. The girl panicked, and tried to break free of Lightning’s grasp, but even if she wanted to Light found herself stiffening, and unable to let go. Then, just as suddenly, she went limp, and collapsed right next to the girl she was trying to rescue.

The remaining heroines looked at their fallen ally’s body.

“So. now what?” Sayaka looked at Girlborg expectantly.

“I...” Girlborg glanced at Electra, who was now recovering from her blow. “...I think we should run.”

There was a rumor that Deathstroke once beat the Justice League single-handedly, back during a time where they had over a dozen members.

But whether this was true or not, it was clear that he was having trouble with the hundred-plus E-List heroes that were now swarming him en masse.

“Eat treebark, ruffian!”

“Hut hut, HIKE!”

“Go for the eyes, Hamtaro! GO FOR THE EYES!”

True, they all had dumb costumes, dumb powers, and most fainted at the sight of their own blood, but he had to give the japs some credit; they can be a real a vicious pack of bastards when they want to. Fighting a group of heroes he didn’t know a damn thing about. It was arguably more difficult than having to fight a trained men, or even a group of A-listers, because at least with someone like Green Lantern you have a reasonable idea of what to expect. This was anarchy at it’s
“Prepare to face the wrath of THE SALARYMAN!”

“This one’s for Super Cosmic Viking Man!”

“Don’t give up now! We’ve got him on the ropes.”

Deathstroke turned his attention to that last voice. He knew that somewhere, Simon was hiding safely in his mech, commanding his own private army through motivational speeches. “Cut off the head, and the rest of the body shrivels up...” Deathstroke mused as pushed through the crowd of attackers until he finally came across Shulk. “…and what better way to expose the neck than with a poke in the eye?”

Though he rarely took stock in magic, Deathstroke knew that The Monado was useless against humans. With this in mind, he pounced into Shulk, grabbed him by the throat, and shoved him into the grass face-first.

“I bet you feel real smart right about now, kid.” Deathstroke said. “You probably wish your so-called ‘leader’ wasn’t so much of a coward...”

“You got it all wrong, Deathstroke!”

Deathstroke paused. He could clearly hear Simon’s voice, but he had no idea where it was actually coming from.

“I wasn’t hiding from you; you were the one hiding from ME!”

A giant drill then sprouted out of the ground, right where Deathstroke was standing. He let go of Shulk and tried to leap away, but his footing was already compromised so it was less than effective than anticipated.

Worse yet, Simon seemed to have anticipated this, as the drill then changed directions to point away from Shulk and towards Deathstroke, and leapt out of the ground like a trained dolphin. The drill then transformed back into the Lagann, which wound up its fist for what looked like a mighty blow.

But even the mighty Lagann was too steps behind Deathstroke. Calculating the angle of the robot’s descent and the most likely arc of its blow, he took one step back, pulled out his sword, and held it straight out.

Gravity did the rest of the work for him. Being unable to change it’s course, the Lagann impaled itself on Deathstroke’s weapon, its arm freezing mid-swing, just inches away from its target.

“Pathetic.” Deathstroke let go of his longsword, plopping the mech on the ground with an unceremonious *thump*. He looked around to admire his handiwork. Where there was once a zealous mob of vigilantes, there was now only a roughed-up gang of rookies shitting their pants.

“Well, I can’t say it wasn’t interesting while it lasted...” Deathstroke pulled his sword out of the broken mech. “Now if you excuse me, I have a pair of kids to-”

Deathstroke froze. There was no blood on this sword.

His mind ran through all the possibilities. Perhaps he had missed. Perhaps the robot was on remote control. Perhaps he teleported out of the way just in time. Perhaps it was a hologram. Perhaps
Simon didn’t bleed at all...

...but the one thing Deathstroke DIDN’T expect was for Simon, a man with no powers and no fancy gadgets aside from his mech, to use his robot’s mass to launch himself high into the air, and then punch Deathstroke on the way down.

The last thing Deathstroke heard before he blacked out (aside from the sound of breaking bones) was the following conversation:

“...you cut it a bit close there.” said Shulk. “My visions can’t predict everything you know.”

“Well you saw enough, at least.” replied Simon, “I mean if you hadn’t told me the exact spot he’d attack you we would have- ERK!”

“Um... how hard did you hit him, exactly?”

“Oh, don’t worry (ow), it’s just a (erk) broken bone or two... or three.” There was another thump as Simon collapsed onto the grass. “Don’t... worry... so... much...”

“Oh bugger. Shirou, get Lightning; she can repair the damage far better than I can. I’ll get Nia to set the bones so he doesn’t get any worse.”

And then, with his brain hemorrhaging faster than his healing factor could fix it, Deathstroke passed out.

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The girl watched helplessly as the two heroines dashed down the hallway of the building they had broken into, each struggling to carry someone larger than themselves. The girl herself was being carried by the one called Sayaka, while Lightning was being carried by the one known as Girlborg. Behind them, Electra continued to give chase. The twisting brickwork hallways did little to deter her pursuit. Rather, it only seemed to aggravate her further, as she began firing at them with a silver revolver. Her aim was poor, but given how the gun was apparently firing rounds that left SUV-sized craters in the walls, it was immediately clear that actually aiming was never a top priority.

“WHAT DO WE DO NOW!?” said Sayaka.

“I DON’T KNOW!” said Girlborg.

“AREN'T YOU IN CHARGE?! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO KNOW!”

“I ONLY TOOK THIS JOB BECAUSE I WANTED TO IMPRESS A BOY I LIKE!”

“THAT'S A TERRIBLE REASON BUT I UNDERSTAND COMPLETELY!”

“THANKS!”

Sayaka then turned her head as if she were listening to an invisible presence sitting on her shoulder. “YEAH, GOOD IDEA, LETS DO THAT.”

When they rounded the next corner, the pair ducked into a supply closet full of sporting equipment. Shirley tripped over a sack of sporting equipment as she entered, dropping Lightning like a limp rag-doll.

She then got on her knees and pointed at a blank wall. “W- What is that thing?” she said.
"It’s a Barrier. It a portal to where a Witch and her familiars live.” said Sayaka.

The still-nameless girl expected that there was a more explanation forthcoming, but if there was, then it seemed to come from a seemingly-ordinary spot on the floor.

Finally, Sayaka spoke out. “Wait, so your plan is that we just run from one fight into another? That girl could be killing people while we’re gone!” Another pause. The presence seemed to be in another spot entirely. “Yeah, well, that’s still not fair!” she added. “Just because the Witch kills more doesn’t mean we can let them both off the hook.”

The girl raised her hand. “…what’s goin on here? Who are you guys talking to?”

Sayaka looked at the girl, and then looked back at the floor. “Hey Kyubey, you think you could let her see what’s going on just for a sec?”

A psychic voice rang out in the girl’s head. “Oh! Sorry about that.”

Suddenly, a large, glowing glyph appeared on the wall. It appeared to be shaped like a neon-green baseball diamond (another pointless thing the girl was surprised that she recognized), with the lines between bases replaced by a string of incomprehensible symbols moving in a counter-clockwise direction. A faint cheering sound emanated from it, accompanied by high-pitched, mechanical organ music.

“There. Better now?”

“Uh…” the girl looked down at the formerly empty spot on the ground. It was now occupied by what looked like a cross between a cat, a weasel, and a bunny rabbit. “…I don’t know.”

“Ah, good! you can hear me!” it said. Or at least, gave the impression that it said something, since it’s mouth didn’t move at all. “I was worried for a moment there that you’d also be anti-psionic, but it seems my powers work just fine!”

“…What?”

“Okay, I’ll make this quick:” Sayaka pointed at the rabbity thing. “This is Kyubey.” she pointed at herself. “I’m a magical girl.” finally she pointed at the glyph. “And that’s a Barrier, and there’s a thing called a Witch inside that eats people.” She then pointed back at Kyubey, back at herself, then back at the Barrier. “Kyubey gave me powers to fight Witches. Understand?”

“…sort of?”

Shirley looked at the Barrier thoughtfully.

“Great!” said Sayaka. “Now I don’t suppose you have a plan, do you?”

“…not really.” said the girl. “I don’t even know my own name, to be honest.”

“Classic amnesia.” said Kyubey. “I’d offer you a Contract so you could wish to fix it, but honestly I’m not sure it would work. And even if it did, it would probably be more prudent to wish for something to help you out of this situation, like a healing factor, or immortality, or—”

It was then that girlborg spoke up. “Guys... I think I have a plan.” she looked at the Barrier. “How hard is it to get out of one of those things?”

“Almost impossible for anyone other than a magical girl. Only a magical girl can enter and leave
whenever she wants, but anyone else needs to defeat the Witch and wait for the Labyrinth to collapse.”

“Well... in that case...” Girlborg bent down to talk to Kyubey. “Do you think you could let her see the Barrier, too? If we could trick her into entering, then leave before she-”

Just then, a golden blade pierced through the front of the door. “OPEN UP!” Electra shouted from the other side. “OPEN UP THIS INSTANT OR I’LL SKEWER THE LOT OF YOU!”

“I think I know where you’re going with this.” said Kyubey. “Consider it done!”

With a mighty heave Electra Pendragon kicked down the door that she swore those mongrels had entered moments before, only to find herself staring at a messy closet full of sporting equipment. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, save for a large, glowing glyph shaped like a neon-green baseball diamond. Which admittedly was pretty damn weird. But given that the most famous heroes of the era were a man dressed like a bat and an alien who flew around in his long johns, it wasn’t terribly surprising, either.

“One of those plebeians must have some kind of... dimensional portal power.” she mused.

After poking around to see if they weren’t trying something stupid like hiding behind the door or on the ceiling, she went up to the glyph to examine the writing on the diamond. She didn’t understand the language, but even so she understood that it read “TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL-GAME, TAKE ME OUT TO THE CROWD, BUY ME SOME PEANUTS AND CRACKER JACK, I DON’T CARE IF I EVER GET BACK” over and over again in an endless loop.

“Of course.” Electra said to noone in particular. “It’s obvious that portal must lead straight to the baseball dimension.” she sighed. “The Baseball Dimension. Really now? The oddities of this era never cease to amaze...”

Electra looked around for a baseball bat, just in case it turned out that it would be a good idea to have one. She ended up taking three; one genuine Louisville Slugger that was probably used for “official” games, and two aluminum bats used during P.E. She took a few experimental swings, before finally deciding to use her power. The aluminum bats took on the appearance of fine damascus steel, featuring organic ripples that appeared to ooze raw power. The wooden bat, meanwhile just changed color from the stark white of maplewood to a fine mahogany brown.

“Hmph. Commoners’ tools for a commoners’ sport.” she glowered at the Louisville bat. “Don’t look so smug. I’ll be rid of you for good once this particular trial comes to an end.”

Without any further hesitation, Electra stepped through the portal, and predictably, found herself in a baseball stadium. An empty frame of a baseball stadium that was ten times larger than usual, constructed out of neon green girders held together by duct tape, and had an empty void in place of a field, but it was a baseball stadium nonetheless. Cheering and organ music could be heard from the stands, but the crowd was either invisible or not present to begin with.

In the direction of first base, Electra could see her target; a young, black-haired girl of vaguely asiatic descent, who may or may not have been an Organization XIII member but was clearly up to no good. After all, look how they’re waiting hand and feet on her, taking care of her even though she clearly hurt their comrade. Electra figured that the girl had some kind of mind control in place.

“In fact, I bet they’ll thank me once I kill her and free them from her grasp.” Electra thought. “And
if they don’t… well, I could always stand to perform a few more executions.”

She approached the group, weapons drawn. As she got nearer, she was able to pick up snippets of conversation.

“…so wait, someone’s been stealing Witches?” said the orange-haired girl with the stupid costume.

“Yeah, Mami was telling me about it just the other day. It’s pretty weird running into all these empty Labyrinths..” said the blue-haired girl with the somewhat less stupid costume. “She thinks someone might be trying to breed them or something.”

“Why?”


“But how?”

“Who knows? But apparently everyone’s trying to find out, expecting to end up with a huge cache of grief seeds.”

“What’s a grief seed?” said the nameless girl.

“Oy, do I need to explain this all again? A Grief Seed is-”

“-AHEM.” Electra stomped her foot on the metal she was crossing to get everyone’s attention. Something that they quickly obliged to.

“Oh. right.” Sayaka grimaced. “I almost forgot.” She formed a cone with her hands, put them up to her mouth, and shouted “HEY MORON. GOOD JOB FALLING INTO OUR TRAP!”

“Moron?!” Electra’s face turned red. “You DARE call ME a moron?!” she pulled out her revolver once again, and aimed down the barrel at Sayaka. “You should know better than to antagonized a member of royalty when she possesses deadly firearms!”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” said a voice from seemingly nowhere. “With no Witch to kill, the only way you’re going to get out of here is with a Puella Magi’s help.”

Electra looked around for the voice’s source. “Where are you? Show yourself!”

“Kyubey’s right.” said Girlborg. “Violence isn’t going to help here. Why don’t you put down the gun, and we’ll make some sort of deal?”

“You dimwitted ignoramuses!” Electra practically began to foam at the mouth. “Don’t you see that we’re on the same side here!? That girl is all that stands between us and planetary annihilation!”

“Well the thing is…” Shirley held her fingers together. “…even if that was true, you’re not doing a very good job of convincing us.”

“I don’t need to convince you! I’m royalty! Why shouldn’t you be listening to me?!”

Sayaka responded by counting on her fingers. “Well one, we live in a democracy. Two, if you are from the future you probably haven’t been born yet so you have no right to rule. And three, you’re just kind of an asshole. How do we know your ‘end of the world’ isn’t just something stupid like
‘my dad gets thrown out by an angry mob so I went back in time to change that’?”

“How DARE you say such slanderous things about my father! He would NEVER allow that to happen!” she huffed. “And besides, the Apoco-Scope is infallible on such matters!”

“Oh yeah?” Sayaka jeered. “Well what does it say about us?”

Electra pulled the sextant from her belt. “Well I’ll tell you what it says! It says...” she left that last word hanging as she looked through the scope. And then she remained silent as she looked through the scope again, this time to confirm that she wasn’t seeing things. Though the scope, the three conscious girls had thick, yellow outlines, and a HUD element said “Keystones Acquired: Eliminate to Negate Timeline” above their heads.

“You bastards...” she snarled as she put down the device. “...no wonder you defend this girl you’ve never seen before! The three of you are in this together!”

“No, that’s not it!” said Girlborg, “We just want to save her from-”

“THE APOCO-SCOPE SEES THROUGH YOUR LIES!” With two baseball bats drawn like swords, Electra charged with extreme ferocity.

“Um... TACTICAL RETREAT!” Shirley grabbed Lightning and started rounding the bases in an attempt to get back to home plate.

Sayaka tried to do likewise with the unnamed girl, but Electra threw her enchanted baseball bats with enough power to rupture the ground beneath her, leaving a huge gap in the path between first and second base. The unfortunate Puella Magi flying across the newly-created gap, and also trapped the girl she was trying to rescue on the other side. The side that Electra Pendragon was still standing on.

“Sayaka!” screamed Girlborg.

“I’m okay!” said Sayaka. “I’ll be fine. But we need to save no-name!”

“Kyubey! You don’t happen to have telekinesis, do you?”

“Nope. And before you ask, I don’t think I’m allowed to make contracts with robots...”

“Oh, Okay then. Um...” Girlborg looked around. There wasn’t anything in hand but the road they were on, which was constructed entirely out of...

“GIRDERS!” Girlborg said. “We’ll make a see-saw out of Girders!” She began pulling one out of the ground with all of her cybernetic might. “If I hold one down, you think you can leap across?”

“I’ll certainly try!” Sayaka pumped her fist in excitement. “Anything for Miss Nobody! Even if she is a literal Nobody! Which I’m still not sure of.”

Meanwhile, on the other side, Electra was slowly walking towards the no-name girl.

“You won’t believe the kind of day I’ve had this morning...” she growled. “First I end up in this backwater time period, THEN I get stuck in line for hours waiting for you morons to hear me out, THEN it turns out that everyone’s moral compass prevents me from doing my JOB...” she took out the Louisville Slugger, and clasped it with both hands. “I think a commoner’s tool would be suitable for a commoner’s death, don’t you think?”
Her fight or flight response no doubt dulling the pain in her leg, the nameless girl searched desperately for a weapon to defend herself with. The closest thing she could find was a chunk of metal just below the edge of that looked just like it was about to fall off.

“Come on...” she thought as she reached out for it. Her hand didn’t seem to be quite long enough. It looked like she could reach it if she leaned over, but she was too afraid of the void below to go too far.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” tease Electra. “Are you going to die pathetically, or will you at least put of a modicum of resistance?”

The girl looked back for a moment, and then closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, and she reached out to grab the shard. She heard something snap, and found herself holding something heavy or at least heavier than expected.

“No answer? Very well, then: BATTER UP!” Electra swung the bat in a downward motion towards the girl’s head.

Instantly, she rolled onto her back to defend herself, trying to use the shard to parry the blow. But when she opened her eyes, she found she wasn’t holding a shard at all. Rather, she appeared to be holding a giant... Key?

“Fascinating!” said Kyubey. “Is that an actual Keyblade? It must be. Otherwise I would have detected it by now.”

“What’s a Keyblade?” said Girlborg, who had just gotten the Girder in position.

“A mystic weapon from long ago that had recently resurfaced in the hands of a young boy named Sora. Though I’m wondering how this girl acquired such a thing? Could more have been left over from the Keyblade war, that are only now just awakening? Or perhaps-”

“SHUT UP I’M TRYING TO FOCUS HERE.” Electra hammered away at the girl with her baseball bat, but each and every one of her attacks were parried by the girl, who suddenly seemed to be moving much more deftly than a few minutes ago.

“And what’s more, you seem to be copying Farron’s exact fighting style after having seen it for a few seconds. Most peculiar. Perhaps you have a meta-gene that records the exact sequence of neurons needed to-”

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!” Electra screamed, her attacks growing more erratic with each passing second.

“No, keep going!” said Sayaka, who was now getting into position herself. “Keep talking about her brain! Keep her angry!”

“...very well then. In addition to a possible metagene, the girl must have extreme neuroplasticity in order to react unconsciously to-”

“I DON’T GET THIS AT ALL!” screamed the girl.

“Yes, well, science can be like that.” said Kyubey. “Now, another possible theory is that-”

From her starting point, Sayaka took a running leap and landed on the other side just in time to block an incoming attack with her own blade. She then grabbed the unnamed girl, and started to run for home plate.
“COWARD!” Electra screamed, “COME BACK HERE AND FIGHT ME!” But enchanting all those weapons wore her out more than she realized, so she could only follow at a plodding pace.

Eventually, Girlborg (still carrying an unconscious Lightning) met up with her Sayaka, and together they passed back through the Barrier.

“PLEBEIANS! IMBECILES! PSYCHOPATHS!” Electra tried to escape through the barrier herself, but only ended up smacking herself in the face for her efforts. “You... YOU MONGRELS! How dare you leave me trapped in here! How dare you...” she then got down to her knees, and began to cry. “How... dare you...”

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Back on the other side of the Barrier, Shirley and Sayaka congratulated each other on a job well done.

“Well, the villain's trapped, and our Jane Doe is safe.” Sayaka slowly put the girl down. “I’d say this was a job well done!”

“Yeah...” Shirley looked at the Barrier. “...you're sure the other girl will be okay?”

“With the Witch gone, the place is cleared out of Familiars. I checked. And unless her swords can cut through dimensions, I’d say she’s pretty safe where she is right now.” Kyubey then looked at the newcomer. “So. You said you lost your memories, right?”

“...y-yes.” said the girl. “At least, I think I did...”

“Well, I can’t restore them without a Contract, but if you want I can do a deep scan of your brain and see what I can dredge up. Would that be good?”

“Yeah. I suppose so...” the girl began to rub her forehead. “This... won’t hurt, will it?”

“Of course not! Now, let's see what we can find...”

Kyubey scampered into the girl’s arms. She lifted him into the air, and she touched his head to hers, and closed his beady little eyes.

There was silence for a full minute, and everyone waited in eager anticipation for the result.

“...Interesting.”

“Did you find anything?” the girl asked.

“Nothing of immediate concern.” Kyubey responded. “But I got your name at least. It’s very unusual, though.”

“...well, what is it?” said Sayaka. “Don’t keep us in the dark!”

“As best I can tell, her name is... ‘Ino Atom Nix’.”

The previously unnamed girl mouthed the words silently. “...are you sure that’s right?”

“Positive!” said Kyubey. “It’s my policy not to lie about anything.”

“Well its just... kind of a weird name...” Ino scratched the back of her head.
“Hey, don’t talk to me about dumb names.” said Sayaka. “There’s an teacher at my school who’s called ‘Pink Supervisor’. Compared to that, your name is practically normal.”

“I guess.” Ino looked around. “So, uh, what happens now?”

Shirley shrugged. “I guess whatever usually happens to mysterious girls with mysterious powers who also have amnesia.”

“I mean with her.” Ino pointed at Lightning, still out cold. “Is she going to be all right?”

Shirley bent down, and tried to take a pulse. “...yeah, I think so. Her heart’s still beating, at least.”

“Until then, I’d try to stay away from her until we figure out why that happened.” Kyubey added.

“Either way, we need to get you guys to a hospital.”

“Way ahead of you.” Sayaka started dialing an emergency number on her cell phone. “Man, I bet the others wish they weren't stuck in that boring old park.”

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Despite budget cuts, the Tokyo Police Cataclysm Division’s response to Deathstroke’s attack was swift and decisive. Only minutes after the smoke cleared, a fleet of ambulances arrived to take away the dead, and give the injured proper medical treatment. Immediately following was a squad of police cars, accompanied by an armored car, and an armored SWAT team that would be on hand just in case Deathstroke woke up and tried to escape.

“...and you say you beat him by... punching him in the face?” Chief Sonoda looked at Simon with his trademark “been there, done that” expression.

“Well, actually it was the head and not the face. But yeah, that’s more or less how it happened,” despite being strapped down in his stretcher and in constant agony, Simon managed a weak chuckle. “I think I overestimated my ability to take a hit, but I did end the fight quickly...”

Sonoda retained his blank expression. “I see.” he said, which, Simon recognized as a very polite way of saying “whatever”. “Well if that’s all you have to say, I suppose I’ll be going now. Paperwork, you know.”

“Okay. See ya.” Simon said as the chief turned to leave, but Sonoda neither seemed to neither noticed nor care.


“What, this?” Simon motioned to his broken arm. “You know it’ll take more than that to keep me down!”

“That, and we’ve got two healers.” said Lelouch. “Speaking of which, I just got word from the others. Electra went bonkers and tried to murder everyone, Lightning’s in the hospital, but the rest are fine.”

“...that’s good to hear.” Simon nodded. “Nia, can you punch Lelouch for me?”

“...I’ve also heard that- wait, what?”

A split-second later, Nia’s ladylike fist crashed into Lelouch’s glass jaw, leaving him sprawled out

“...I deserved that.” said Lelouch.

“YOU DESERVE A LOT MORE! PEOPLE DIED TODAY BECAUSE OF YOUR LITTLE DISAPPEARING ACT! WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?!?”

“First of all, stop shouting.” Lelouch wiped some of the blood off his lips. “Second, my family life is immensely complicated. I have dozens of half-siblings, step-siblings and cousins, all of which are constantly plotting against each other for the family fortune. It could have been any of them. My sister and I have been hiding out here in order to stay away from all that...”

“I thought you had two siblings.” said Nia.

“Rolo isn’t my real sibling. He is, or at least was, an assassin hired by my father that I was at one point brainwashed into think was my brother.” Lelouch’s eye twitched. “Our relationship is... complicated.”

“So why are you telling us this now?” asked Shulk.

“Because it’s become clear that this country is no longer safe.” Lelouch stared at the city skyline. “I’m going to need protection one way or the other. And I figure the best way to do that is to be as high-profile as possible.”

“Well if you just wanted help you should have asked us!” said Simon. “Kidnapping is still a crime, last time I checked. Of course we’re going to help! Just give us some warning, next time!”

“Without even asking for anything in return?” Lelouch smirked. “You guys really are heroes.”

“You bet we are.” Simon looked around. “Say, what happened to Milly?”

“...she took the whole thing pretty hard.” said Shulk. “Erm... it’s probably the whole lot about people getting killed by Deathstroke and the girl she vouched for turning out to be a murderous psychopath.”

“...well, can you let her know I don’t blame her for that?” said Simon. “Getting killed in the line of duty is just something that happens. Nobody expected Deathstroke to show up...”

“I can’t.” Shulk looked uncomfortable. “She’s... erm, in the ladies’ room.”

“Ah, got it. Nia, could you-”

“Sure thing! I’ll be back in a sec!” Nia said before walking off.

“Still, I wouldn’t worry too much about Milly.” said Lelouch. “She can bounce back from anything. My guess is that she’s probably just worried about her image.”

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Milly stared at her reflection in wide-eyed terror.

On some fundamental level it was... wrong.
Oh it was the right shape, certainly, and it mimicked all her movements, but beyond that it was almost completely alien, with snow-white hair, porcelain-colored skin, long pointed ears, and blank, soulless eyes that lacked pupils.

She looked at her hands... her REAL hands, and found that they, too looked just like the ones in the reflection.

“<Oh god, oh god, oh god...>” she clutched her hands to her head as she moaned. “<Okay, let’s think clearly. I haven’t touched any magic stuff, it can’t be the machine plague since that’s not what it does anyway...>”

She looked at her face again, pulling at her skin as if she was trying to remove a mask “<...but LOOK at me! How am I supposed to go out like this? Well, maybe I’d be welcome at a renaissance fair, but->”

The door to the bathroom creaked open. “...Milly?” a familiar voice said.

“DON’T LOOK AT ME!” Milly leapt back onto the sink as if she were trying to crawl away.

“Milly? It’s me, Nia.” She opened the door, and stepped into the dimly-lit bathroom. “What’s wrong?”

“ISN’T IT OBVIOUS?!” Milly screamed.

“Ah, yes. I guess it is. Sorry.” Nia looked at milly with an apologetic face. “...but... Simon says he doesn’t blame you.”

“DOESN’T BLAME ME?!” Milly fell to her knees, and covered her face. “HOW?! I’M A FREAK!”

“Milly, you made an honest mistake. You cared enough about the team to set up a recruitment drive. Even though you didn’t get permission, it was still thoughtful of you.” Nia got down on her knees as well, and put her hand on Milly’s shoulder. “And nobody could have expected Deathstroke to show up. You mustn’t blame yourself for things you can’t control.”

Milly uncovered her face. Could Nia even see what had happened to her? “Um...Thanks, Nia. That really means alot to me.”

“No problem!” Nia replied. “Now let’s go. Shirley’s going to be back any moment now, and I bet you want to get going.”

“Yeah...” Milly glanced back at the mirror. Her reflection was just as freaky as ever. “Nia... do I look strange to you?”

“Not really.” said Nia.

“Describe me.”

“Well... you’re of above-average height, and you’ve got blond hair, blue eyes, white skin, ...”

“When you say ‘white’, what do you mean?”

“Well... you know. Caucasian.” Nia tilted her head to the side. “Are you... feeling alright?”

Milly put her hand to the side of her head. “Yeah, just dandy... I’m just a bit overtired, is all.”
“Well, make sure you get plenty of rest tonight.” Nia said. “If you’re having trouble sleeping, you could always make an appointment and I could prescribe you some-”

“NO! NO EXAMINATIONS!” Milly blurted. “Uh, that is. I’m afraid of doctors offices, so I don’t want to go unless I really have to...”

“Well, to each their own.” Nia helped Milly back onto her feet. “Well if you don’t want to bother with prescription, you could always pick up some melatonin. I’ve always found that hel-”

Just then, a crazed-looking girl with orange hair and distinctly-shaped epaulets kicked down the door and pointed a gun at the pair. “A-ha! “Operation Woman In Refrigerator” is off to a smashing success!” But rather than actually making any kind of demands or something, she just continued to talk. “And to think that all I need to do is kidnapp the chairman’s girlfriend and stick her in a refrigerator to make the chairman angry enough to go after Lord IlPalazzo and fall into his fiendish trap! It’s a good thing that I was able to find a large enough refrigerator or else I’d have to cut her up, and she would die if I did that. And that would be terrible! Much more so than stealing forty cakes, though that’s a pretty terrible crime too. Think of all the birthday parties that would be ruined! And I better make sure it’s warm in there so she doesn’t freeze to death. Actually now that I think about it maybe I’m going about this all wrong; my plan doesn’t sound all that tasteful now that I’m describing it. It would be especially disrespectful to that Green Lantern guy. Is he still a Green Lantern? I forget.”

“...can we help-” Nia began to say, before the girl started shooting up the floor with her machine gun.

“No talking! “Operation That Almost Certainly Has a Woman in it But May or May not Involve Refrigerators” is a black ops mission and those require stealth! If I hear anyone talking loud enough to give away our position I’ll make them do a hundred thousand pushups! And then I’ll shoot them! Or maybe I should shoot them and then make them do pushups! But if they’re dead I’m probably going to be waiting a long time, and that’s no good...”

There was a rustling in the bushes. The crazed girl spun around and said. “Who goes there? Stop or I’ll fire! Unless you’re an enemy of ACROSS in which case I’ll have to fire anyway, so sorry in advance!”

From the bushes, a strange-looking kid kept out, and did an awkward somersault that ended with the girl landing on her back, but quickly scampering back up. Milly instantly recognized her as the drowish-looking kid they were about to interview before Deathstroke showed up. “<Hey you!” she said, pointing at the crazy girl. <“What do you think you’re doing, kidnapping the guys I have an interview with!”> She made a cheesy karate pose, and extended her fingers, the tips of which then transformed into sharp points. “<You’d better give them up right now, else I won’t go easy on->”

Frightened, the orange-haired nut accidently let loose a whole round of machine gun fire in the kid’s direction. “Oh no! What have I done!” dropped to her knees. “I just killed a child! A poor, sweet, innocent child that was threatening to claw my eyes out! Now I’ll have to go to jail run by this bible-thumping warden who lets his guards murder the inmates and I’ll become his right hand man while simultaneously forming a friendship with this worn out old inmate played by Morgan Freeman-”

Nia smacked the girl over the head with a sap, knocking her out instantly.

“...Um...” Milly began to say.
Nia held up the sap. “Never leave home without one!” she said with a stern face. “Now come on, there’s a chance that child might still be alive!”

Exactly one second later, the kid raised her hand. “<I’m okay! I’m okay! I’ve got healing.>” She sat up. “<I just didn’t expect the bullets to hurt so much...>”

Milly looked at the girl for a bit. She looked just like a drow from one of Rivalz’s Dungeons and Dragons books. Pointy ears, ebony skin, white hair, purple eyes... yet her clothes were pretty contemporary.

“Where exactly are you from?” Milly asked.

“<Um... I’m from a...>” the kid’s eyes darted all over the place. “<...a... tangent dimension! ON MARS!>” she pointed up at the sky. “<No, wait! It’s not on Mars, it is Mars! But not our Mars! another Mars that’s on a parallel wavelength... thing.>” She then started using her hands like puppets for illustration. “<And, like, there’s this dragon! Named Trogdor! And he, like, has no stomach, because whatever he eats gets sent to this universe! And my dad was this knight who fought him, but he was all burninated. And mom was a witch, so she gave me a magic seed that I got superpowers from. But she got burninated too. So I fought the dragon but it ate me. So that’s why I’m here!>”

Milly did everything she could not to laugh. That was by far the worst story she had ever been told. It’s a wonder who she thought would believe such a ridiculous-

“Ooooh! Poor dear!” said Nia, who got down on the grass to give the girl a hug. “<Don’t worry, we’ll find a way to get you back. Until then, you can stay with us as long as you want...>”

Milly stared at the scene with disbelief. How could anyone be so gullible?

And yet...

Milly noticed that her own features had suddenly taken on a very “elven” appearance. She was willing to bet anything that the sudden arrival of this new girl probably wasn’t a coincidence. After all, how many elves wore wear t-shirts and jeans?

No, whatever was going on, this girl was her first hint.

“So, tell me...” Milly said. “<What was your name again? I don’t think we ever got that...>”

“My name?” the girl looked startled. “<My name is Ho->” the girl paused, as if her train of thought had suddenly changed direction. “<...oooo-n’kale. Hon’kale. It’s, um, an elf word that means ‘very lucky’.>”

“I see.” Milly smiled. This girl looked like an easy egg to crack. “Well, Hon’kale, how would you like to join the Justice Society?”

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“Well that does it.” Merasmus slammed his book shut. “I’ve run through every test I can imagine, pondered the wisdom of every ancient, scoured every tome of unknowable knowledge that I of.” He pointed his index finger at Kallen. “It is because of these very facts, that I have no choice but to conclude that you, Kallen Stadtfield.”

“Kozuki.” said Kallen.
“Kallen Kozuki, are unmistakably, indisputably, and without any doubt whatsoever... A HORRIBLE, flesh-eating ZOMBIE!!!”

This announcement was made somewhat less impressive by the nearby medic’s snoring.

“Dude.” Tamaki said. “That was one of the first things you ruled out.”

“FOOL!” said Merasmus. “You DARE question a MAGICIAN? I can tell just by LOOKING at her that she is clearly an EMACIATED, ROTTING corpse animated by the FOULEST of oh wait no she doesn’t look anything like that does she?” the alleged ‘magician’ tossed the book over his shoulder, smacking Tamaki in the head. “Well, I’m out of ideas. She’s probably just a freak, then.” he then turned 180 degrees to face Tamaki. “Now, about my fee...”

“Fee? What fee?” Tamaki sputtered. “You didn’t do anything!”

“YOU INSIGNIFICANT MICROBE.” Merasmus was suddenly wrapped in a wreath of flames. “You DARE to deny a MAGICIAN his hard-earned PROFITS? For such insolence, I ought to STRING YOU UP in the deepest, darkest part of THE NETHERREALM, where your body will turn itself INSIDE-OUT in UTTER TERROR, but you’ll still be ALIVE to hear the haunting music of THE DEVIL’S ORCHESTRA OF THE DAMNED! And you know the thing about the damned? They only know one song, AND THEY’RE REALLY BAD AT IT!”

“OKAY I’M SORRY I WON’T DO THAT AGAIN.” Tamaki curled up into a fetal position on his seat.

“...need a... dispenser over here...” the medic snored.

“That’s better.” Merasmus returned to his normal, less on-fire self. “Now, since you clearly don’t have the authority to make such a transaction, I shall await the return of your master. Toodles.”

And then he walked out of the room.

“...I’d better get going, too.” muttered Kallen as she got out of her bed.

“Woah, hey! You can’t just do that!” Tamaki got up from his own seat. “Zero’s gonna throw a fit if he finds out you left before-”

“...what do you think he’s going to do, fire me?” Kallen gave Tamaki an annoyed stare. “Look, I still don’t know what’s going on but I feel fine. Okay?”

Tamaki iched the back of his neck as he looked up at the ceiling with a mild grimace. “Alright, suit yourself. But if anyone asks, I was never here.”

Kallen lurched out of the room, her joints still stiff from all the bed-rest.

“Okay. I’ve got annoying superpowers and an easily avoidable weakness:" she thought.“I’ll be fine if I just stay out of jewelry stores and churches.”

The door-handle snapped off as Kallen tried to leave the medical wing. She glared at the broken handle as she continued to ponder her situation. “Either whatever happened to me isn’t supposed to be a curse, or the bad stuff hasn’t quite kicked in yet.”

She looked at her watch. If she left now, Kallen could probably make it back to the academy in time for lunch. Not that it was an option at this point, seeing how she still couldn’t walk through a door without tearing it off its hinges.
“Best thing to do at this point is go home, see if Dad’s old library has anything on this, and then get help from an actual wizard.” For probably the first time in her life, Kallen was grateful that her father had an unhealthy obsession with the occult. Unless it turned out that these powers were his fault in the first place. Though it’s not like her opinion of him could really be any lower at this point.

Now out of the medical bay, Kallen tried to fetch a 10-yen piece out of her pocket to buy a soda from a vending machine, only to accidentally bend it into kind of a taco shape. “Of course that’s assuming I don’t get arrested for destroying something by accident.”

“Well whatever’s going on here, I’m not going to get anything done just by sitting around.” she mused. She looked up into the cloudless afternoon sky, and watched as an albatross passed overhead.

“I wonder...” Kallen looked around to see if anyone was watching her.

The coast clear, Kallen broke into a brisk run. She accelerated faster and faster as her feet hit the ground with superhuman force. Kallen quickly realized that she had to be careful if she wanted to avoid hurting anyone, so she stuck to the road when she could, steered clear of the island’s more crowded areas, and tried to avoid uneven terrain.

But most importantly of all, Kallen did not stick her arms out in front and pretend to be Superman. Because of course that was the sort of thing that little children wearing bathtowels around their necks, not teenagers who moonlighted as hardened mercenaries. “I mean what am I, nine?” she thought.

She then came across a very long stretch of road with nothing of note ahead except for a T-shaped intersection overlooking a long, rocky slope that fed into the ocean.

“...well, might as well give it a shot.”

From her jog, Kallen made a mighty leap. She soared, up over the roadway, up over the intersection, up over the-

And then Kallen began to fall as discovered that flight was not, in fact, one of her powers.

As he tumbled down the rocky slope and into the water, Kallen made another discovery: While her body was still invincible, her clothes were not. Nor were they waterproof. She considered herself lucky just to get away with some scuffed shoes and a few tears in her jeans.

“Well, there goes another nostalgic childhood fantasy.” Kallen thought as she climbed out of the ocean and onto the rocky beach. “I wonder how much a pair of lead weights cost these days...”

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BETHANY SNOW: Good evening folks. And welcome back to Channel 52. It is a very solemn night at the station, as we mourn the passing of Earth’s greatest protector.

AMBUSH BUG: It is with a heavy heart that I announce the death of one and only Superman. We will never forget his noble sacrifice, as he was horribly murdered fighting a kryptonite elemental created by- hold it, I’m getting an update... this just in! He’s already back! False alarm, everyone!

CALENDER MAN: In other news, the Green Lantern Corps. have reported that the notorious space pirate known as “Captain Harlock” has been spotted in the vicinity of our solar system. His current bounty is at seven hundred and seventy seven billion space dollars, and is likely to rise in
the coming weeks. Harlock is the third such notorious, intergalactic criminal to be spotted in the past week, after the mysterious “Mister” and the even more enigmatic “Monkey D. Luffy”, who is so mysterious that we don’t even have a photograph of him. He must really be that scary. And now here’s our foreign correspondent, Dr. W, with an update on the new Justice Society.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Thank you, Calendar Man. I’m here at the Hamarikyu Gardens in Tokyo, following up on your report of the new superteam known as “The Justice Society of Japan”. Just one day since the roster was announced, and already the team’s recruitment drive is off to a smashing success. I mean just LOOK at all those brave young men, women, genderless aliens, cyborgs, and combinations of the above. I don’t think I’ve seen this many crime-fighters in one place since Super Young Team’s own recruitment drive. Anyway, today I’m speaking with the group’s publicist, who despite not being a crime-fighter herself has nevertheless decided to hide her true identity for safety reasons. Now tell me, how many new members are you recruiting?

TOTALLY NOT MILLY ASHFORD: It’s hard to say, really. But we’re estimating somewhere around two, maybe three.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: So you’re saying most of these folks will be going home disappointed?

TOTALLY NOT MILLY ASHFORD: Sadly. But it’s not often that the Japanese hero community gets together like this, so I’d like to feel like they’ll be going home with something, at least.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Well then, would you like to share with the audience what you expect out of a new recruit?

TOTALLY NOT MILLY ASHFORD: By all means! We’re looking for someone driven. Someone anxious to go out and save the day each morning. Someone enthusiastic, animated, a real force of personality. And of course, bringing something new to the table wouldn’t hurt.

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Well that’s about all the time we have, miss! Back to you, Snow.

BETHANY SNOW: Thank you, Doctor. Coming up, the world’s leading Paleontologists discuss the so-called “Hollow Earth” theory. But first, here’s Joseph Coyne with the latest on Wall Street...

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Omake #1: Wherein I Attempt to Write a Humorously Over The Top Drizzt Do’Urden Parody Without Actually Having Read Any Books About Him

Deathstroke was about to pull the trigger, when suddenly an AWESOME drow ranger just came right the fuck out of nowhere and defeated Deathstroke with a single flying karate kick to the face.

“Drizzt Do’Urden?!” Simon exclaimed, “Whaaaaaat are you doing here?!”

“Well, I was just on my way back from fighting Lobo, Larfleeze, Sephiroth, Bizzaro, Solomon Grundy, Gorilla Grodd, Darkseid, Lord English, the Anti-Monitor, the Anti-Sun, the Anti-Christ, the Anti-God, the Anti-Anti Devil, the regular Devil, Vandal Savage, Lolith, Sauron, Morgoth, and my evil twin from the antimatter universe all at the same time (I won of course) when I decided to drop by to see how my daughter was doing!”

“Yay, daddy!” said Hope.

“Hey there, champ!” Drizzt said. He then looked at his watch, which was beeping rapidly. “Uh oh, looks like Mandrakk is trying to eat the multiverse. Again.” He winked and gave everyone the thumbs up. “Don’t worry. This will only take a minute.”
He then got on his Mobius Cycle (which used to be Metron’s Mobius Chair before he lost it in a card game because DRIZZT WAS THAT AWESOME) and then zoomed away in a flash of non-euclidian light.

And then everyone swooned and said “He’s so dreamy!”.

Yes including Deathstroke.

Author’s Notes

My god, this chapter turned violent in a hurry. o_0

But that’s what you get when you add Deathstroke!

One of the goals for this story was to take fanfiction cliches and kind of reconstruct them. If you’ve read Hope’s entry in the character guide, you know what I’m doing with her, and her behavior in coming up with her own “OC” just reinforces this. Those familiar with my MST series are already familiar with Electra’s brand of “KID FROM THE FUTURE WHO MUST SAVE TEH WORLD”ness, with the added problem that she’s pretty much the opposite of a hero.

But Ino is a combination of three well-worn cliches; two of which are kind of general, and the other is fandom-specific.

First of all, she’s amnesiac. That should already be sending out some “alarm bells” for those well versed in fanfiction cliches. But unlike most examples of laser-guided amnesia, she’s clearly forgotten more than the name of her childhood friend who killed her parents and then raped her or whatever. In reality, she probably wouldn’t be able to function without constant coaching and supervision.

As for the ‘mysterious power’, I’d say I’m ahead of most because the power is well-defined, limited in use, and even somewhat inconvenient. You’ll see what I mean in later chapters.

Finally, she’s an OC Keybearer. The Kingdom Hearts fandom is plagued with the damn things, and the revelation that there used to be a fuckton of Keyblades lying around certainly hasn’t helped matters. In fact there was even a game that deconstructed this by having a 14th member of Organization XIII appear who had a Keyblade, but she turned out to be a replica of Sora’s memories or something.

But I think the thing that saves these characters from being Mary Sues is that they’re part of an ensemble cast. You see, it’s my personal belief that a true “Mary Sue” is a character that the world revolves around for no clear reason. These OCs are important, to be sure, but so is everyone else in the cast. At least I hope so.

Also:

- I’ve decided that while Batman is probably Lelouch’s favorite superhero, he likes Alan Scott’s/Golden Age Green Lantern’s/Sentinel’s costume better since he digs the opera cape. As Linkara puts it, it’s a costume that really shouldn’t work and ought to look really silly on an old guy, but somehow looks awesome instead.

- And in case anyone asks, I don’t mind the fact that Alan Scott of Earth-2 is now gay. What I do mind is that the Allan Scott of Earth-1 no longer exists, at least in canon. *sigh*
• For geography nuts, there actually is a tennis court near the Tokyo Tower. I think it belongs to a school or something.

• Canonically, Sayaka’s magic can only heal herself, buuuuut given the nature of her wish I’m going to say that she can heal others as well. ;)

• Excel is still the most fun character to write.

• Fun fact: I had a cape when I was a kid, but I didn’t pretend to be Superman; I pretended to be Mario.

• HAIL ILPALAZZO!
“Doctor? What are you doing up there?”

From his vantage point on a thick tree branch, Dr. Summers took a peek at the ground below. There, he saw Shinji looking back up at him with a puzzled look on his face.

“That is an... excellent question.” Dr. Summers responded. He began to inch down at a methodical pace. “Erm, sorry. It was the supervillain attack. I’m powerless and slightly out of shape; not the kind of person built for spontaneous heroics.”

Shinji nodded silently.

“Now then...” the doctor brushed brushed his hands against his shirt. “How was your patrol?”

“Well... one of the new girls went crazy and tried to kill someone, but I didn’t really make it over in time to do anything.” Shinji eyes drooped, likely in anticipation of the speech he was sure to get.

“Ah.” Dr. Summers tried to come up with something comforting to say. “...That’s okay; it’s probably best if you just watch for now.” He coughed. “Did you... erm, make any friends?”

Shinji thought back to that afternoon, back to the blue and pink-haired girls he had spent most of the day with. “...maybe?”

“Ah, thats good!” said the doctor. “Tell me about them.”

Shinji scratched the back of his neck. “Well, Madoka is nice, and Sayaka is kinda nice too...” Just then, he remembered why he had sought out Dr. Summers in the first place. “...oh! That reminds me! That girl Electra tried to kill is kind of... off.”

“Off? What do you mean?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain. Here, I’ll show you...”

“So, Ino. What can you remember?”

The raven-haired girl looked behind her back. “Who’s Ino?” she asked.

“...Isn’t that your name?”
“Oh! I guess it is.” Ino blushed. “Sorry, almost forgot.”

“Uh-huh...” Lightning remained unamused. “Tell me, what do you know about Electra?”

“Who?”

“The girl who attacked you.”

“I was attacked?”

“...yes. We spent the better part of the afternoon trying to rescue you.”

“From what?”

“From Electra. Remember? The girl who tried to kill you?”

“Someone tried to kill me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, that’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

“Why?”

“Because after all the trouble we went through, I think it’s only fair that we learn why.”

“Why what?”

“Why we had to rescue you.”

“...I had to be rescued?”

“Thank you, Farron, that will be enough.” Dr. Summer adjusted his spectacles, and turned to the assembled heroes. “At this point it’s clear that Ino suffers from something that we like to call ‘Anterograde Amnesia’. And before you ask, it’s when the mind has trouble forming new memories, leading to poor short-term memory.”

“Well even I knew that...” Simon lied.

Nia spoke up. “And there’s no sign of head trauma, nor are there any signs of unusual toxins in her bloodstream. So whatever it is it’s probably not recent. ”

“And it’s not being caused by nanomachines or a mind probe or whatever.” said Shirley. “...I checked.”

“And I can’t get a good scan in with the Monado, so it might be magical in nature.” said Shulk. “Problem is, from everything else I’ve seen this girl is downright anathema to magic; one touch was able to drain most of the mana from Lightning’s system. I shudder to imagine what prolonged contact would do...”

Milly took a nervous step back.

“I’ll just get a pair of gloves.” said Lightning. “Sayaka carried the kid around everywhere, and she was just fine. Skin contact has to be the vector.”
“Still, be careful in the future.” said Shulk. “Your body needs every drop just to stay alive, and now that we know how badly you react to anti-magic-”

“<Hey mom, this is boring. Can we go now?>”

Everyone looked at the little drow girl tugging on Nia’s dress.

“Um... Nia?” said Simon. “Who is that?”

“Oh, this is Hon’kale!” said Nia, her face flustered with embarrassment. “She’s a... what do you call it? An ‘Orphan’, I think?” She bent down and put her hand on the girl’s shoulder before launching into a hastily constructed pitch. “She’s from a tangent dimension where her parents were killed by a dragon isn’t that sad? And you know we don’t even know yet if our biologies are remotely compatible, and you know she’s rather taken with me so maybe I was kind of hoping that maybe we could possibly adopt her? Please?”

“<Pweeeeeeze>” said Hon’kale, her eyes tearing up in the most saccharine way she could manage.

“Eh-heh...” Simon’s face froze. He felt everyone’s stares piercing him like so many red-hot knives. “If I say no, she’ll be devastated. If I say yes, we might regret it later. So the only solution is to say... ‘maybe’?”

“Um... well... I’m not sure a kid is in the cards right now...”

“But Si-mon...” Nia’s lower lip quivered as she gave Simon her own puppy-dog eyed expression. It was a face that Simon found impossible to say no to. It reminded him of the day they first met, when he found a young, vulnerable girl locked up in a big metal crate, jettisoned by one of the Spiral Kingdom’s cargo freights like she was common trash, abandoned by the father she once worshiped...

“...buuuuuut I guess she could stay for a little while....” Simon conceded.

“<YAAAAAAAAAY!>” Hon’kale bounced up and down, ecstatic to hear the news. “<He did say ‘yes’, right mom?>”

“<He’s giving us a... I think it’s called a ‘trial run’.,>” said Nia. “<And I’m not quite your mother just yet...>”

<“Awwwwwww...”> Hon’kale pouted.

“Now hold on just a second.” said Lightning. “First of all, I’ve never heard of any such thing as a ‘Tangent Dimension’. Second, how do we know she’s telling the truth, and not just some kind of runaway?”

“Well first, you’ve never heard of Hypertime either and I can tell you first hand that it exsists.” Simon replied. “So maybe there’s tangent dimensions, too.”

Lightning looked unconvinced. “... ‘Hypertime’?”

“It’s a bit of a complicated subject...” Shulk explained. “Some of the higher-ups don’t like talking about it, but I can assure you that ‘Hypertime’ isn’t just something Simon made up. Nor is it something he saw in an old B-movie.”
Lightning shook her head.

“As for your second point…” Nia cupped her hands together. “If Hon’kale’s parents are alive and it’s easy to go between here and whenever her home is, then they’ll probably come looking for her very soon. If getting here is hard, then she needs a caretaker until they come to pick her up, assuming they ever do….”

Just then, Ino decided to speak up. “Um…” she began, “…I don’t really have a place either. Do you think you could... I dunno... maybe let me stay, too?”

“Sure, why not?” said Simon. “<The more the merrier> I think the saying goes...?!”

“<Awesome! That means we’re going to be sisters!>” Hon’Kale wrapped her arms tight around Ino, and squeezed her tight. “<You can understand what I say, right?>”

“<Mostly.>” Ino replied.

“<THAT’S EVEN MORE AWESOME! We’re gonna play video games, and eat sugary cereal until we explode, and watch youtube videos, and have pillow fights, and...>”

As hope continued down the list of things she and her new “sister” would do together. Simon began to wonder where they put the spare futon. This was going to be a long night.

“We’ll take it from here, thanks.”

Shirou backed away as the paramedics lifted the guy in the viking helmet onto the stretcher, and slowly raised it into the ambulance. Immediately, the high-tech autosurgeons inside the ambulance got to work sewing up the wounds Shirou had previously bandaged. Of course the autosurgeons couldn’t do everything, but a few days bedrest and Super Cosmic Viking Man would be back to his old self.

Shirou reflected on how hard it was for a relatively ordinary guy to help out in a situation like this. He had magic, true, but nothing that had any obvious application when it came to saving lives. Projection magic only goes so far when all you have is a high-school education. He couldn’t even begin to describe how an autosurgeon worked, or what kind of chemical compounds made up an anesthetic. But a bandage? That was easy. Even a defibrillator wasn’t all that complicated when you came down to it; it was just a battery controlled by a simple circuit board. And a bit of first aid training always came in handy, especially when the most the Ashford students knew was what they saw on TV. Rivalz in particular had a rather skewed view of how CPR worked.

Just then, as the ambulance was speeding off into the distance, Shirou felt a faint buzzing in his pocket. It was Ms. Fujimura, his stepmom, likely calling to see how he was doing.

“Heeey, Shirou.” slurred the voice on the other end of the line. “Howzit goin’ over there in Tokyo ‘n stuff?”

“Well... Taiga? Are you drunk again?”

“Waa? Me? Naaaaawwww... you know me, I js’ had a little drink ‘isall.” Shirou felt as if he could smell the sake on Taiga’s breath. “So whynya comin’ back anyway? You’ve been missin’ school ya know. Are ya still in the hospital? I always thought you healed faster than that...”

“Aha, well... It’s just that I got a job with the new Justice Society.” it was a half-lie, to be sure.
Shirou had only been volunteering up until now, but he figured he could probably get a full-time job if he asked Simon politely. Simon seemed cool that way.

Taiga laughed “Always figured you’d end up in tights one day! So what are ya? Kendo-Boy? ‘Wrench-Lad’? Hope the costume doesn’t suck...”

“...actually I’m not a costumed hero, I’m just part of the support team.”

“Oh.” Taiga sounded slightly disappointed. “Well that’s still cool; you still get to save lives n’ stuff. Bet ‘yer dad would be proud.” she hiccuped. “So, you quittn’ school or do you want me to keep sending your homework?”

“Erm... I’m not sure really. Call me in a few days and we’ll see.”

“Okay great. G’night Shirou!” he was about to hang up when Taiga blurted out one more sentence. “Oh, and if you ever meet Booster Gold, get me his autograph!”

“...who’s Booster Gold?”

“Oh, you know. The green guy, with the ring. ‘In brightest day, in blackest night’, that sorta thing.”

“...you mean Green Lantern.”

“Yeah, thats the one!” Taiga hiccuped again. “Okay, I need beauty sleep. Buh-bye!”

There was then a clattering noise in Shirou’s, most likely the sound of Taiga failing to hang up the phone properly. Shirou saved Taiga the trouble by hanging up on his end, and pocketing the phone. He then looked at his watch.

“10:30” he thought. “Not much more I can do here. Better get some rest myself. Then I can worry about long-term employment...”

Kallen struggled to keep her eyes open as she stared at the pile of dusty tomes before her. To the left were the books she had already looked through that she found to be unreadable, useless, or both. Like much of the idle rich, Gregor Stadtfeld had his hobbies that he obsessed over but lacked the conviction to focus on any of them long enough to actually accomplish much of anything.

Kallen’s childhood memories of her father followed a familiar pattern: first Gregor would disappear to search for a lost city or some ancient artifact. A month later, he would arrive back home without finding the object of his quest, but nevertheless brought with him a pile of new books. Then he’d lock himself in his study for weeks at a time, only pausing to brag about his findings at the dinner table (which is why Kallen’s stepmom made it a point not to invite company while Gregor was around). Eventually Gregor would announce his intentions to set off in search of whatever his latest obsession was, and would then spend the next couple days making travel arrangements before finally departing.

And then one day, on Kallen’s tenth birthday, Gregor left to find Shangri-la and never came back.

Kallen didn’t know what to think at the time. Gregor wasn’t a particularly caring father, but unlike Kallen’s stepmom he wasn’t particularly spiteful, either. He was fairly nice to his servants all things considered; he thanked them for the work they did and only rarely got them involved in his
obsessions. The only reason that he had the affair that Kallen was born from was that his wife was sterile, yet insisted that he produce an heir.

But as Kallen looked back on things, she realized that there was no love between them. At best, Gregor regarded Kallen as a conversation partner. At worst, she was a captive audience for his lectures. And they weren't even very good lectures; Gregor had this rambling way of speech that seemed to jump between topics with very little warning. He spoke like a man who was certain about everything up until he was inevitably proven wrong.

Though looking at the books that filled his personal library, it wasn’t hard to see where he got the habit from. Rather than the fonts of forbidden knowledge that Kallen expected, she found herself swimming through volumes of lore that was apocryphal, if not downright contradictory. At one point she even read that Atlantis was on the Moon, under Japan, and on Ireland all in the same sentence.

The only reason she pressed onward was that for every few dozen books purporting that aliens invented the printing press, she came across something that seemed more plausible (at least as far as weird magic stuff was concerned). *An Encyclopediae of The Faerie*, for instance, was a highly-detailed hand-written notebook that meticulously chronicled dozens of bizarre creatures, and contained detailed instructions for everything from taming a Kelpie to rooting out a Fetch.

Sadly, nothing in the book even remotely described anything Kallen was experiencing. So she moved onto one of the more promising tomes; *Daemonology: The Current Studey and Classification of The Moderne Daemon, Year of Our Lord 1679*. She turned to the book’s preface, and began to read:

"*The Daemon is the most wicked and deceitful of creatures. They are innumerable in forme, and unparalleled in craftiness; only by the grace of God Almighty are we not over-run by their endless numbers. But ‘tis foolishness to think that faith alone will protect thee. While steadfast adherence to dogma is enough to thwart Neron, Shabranigdo, or even Lucifer himself, the ‘Moderne Daemon’ has little respect for the ways of olde. Scratch, Femto, Mundis; these are the names that you must commit to memorie, as their ways are more subtle than their kin. While their disciples are few in number, they remain yet hidden, working in the shadows to slowly corrupt our world in hopes of creating an infernal paradise on Earth.*"

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in.” Kallen said, not wanting to risk anything given how much trouble she was having with doorknobs.

Shortly afterwards, the doorknob turned, and Miyu Kozuki stepped into the room. She was a demure Japanese woman with light brown hair that was tied into a short ponytail, and wearing a nightgown in lieu of the french maid outfit she usually wore. She walked into the darkened room carrying a plate of milk and cookies in one hand, and a flashlight in the other.

“Kallen?” she said. “What are you doing up so late?”

Kallen’s family life was complicated, to say the least. One of the few stipulations that Mrs. Kozuki had when she let Kallen be adopted by the Stadtfelds was that Miyu would be employed as a maid so she could watch her daughter grow up. In fact, late-night was probably the only time Kallen felt safe to even acknowledge her birth-mother let alone speak freely. Kallen figured she had a right to know that everything was going okay even though it wasn’t.

“Oh, hey mom.” Kallen put on a ‘sullen teenage look’ to try and scare her off. “Big paper due
“I see...” Ms. Kozuki continued to approach, only to stop a few feet away. “Are you... wearing colored contacts?”

“Frig, forgot about the eyes...” Kallen thought to herself. “...yeah. It’s this new style Milly wanted me to try. She says they go well with my hair.” she pointed at her left eyeball. “Just be glad I didn’t take her first suggestion; she wanted this one to be green...”

Kallen’s mom nodded. “She is a very strange girl, isn’t she?” she then put the tray down next to Kallen. “Well, I’m sure whatever you come up with will be just fine.” She gave Kallen a quick peck on the cheek. “Just try not to get any crumbs on your father’s old books.”

“Yeah...” Kallen felt her skin crawl whenever she heard mom refer to Gregor as ‘your father’. “Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Kallen.” And then Ms. Kozuki left the room.

Kallen looked at the tray of cookies her mom left behind. “Hm... chocolate chip.” She imagined how the freshly-baked confections would taste in her mouth, especially when rounded off with a nice, tall glass of milk. “Well I am getting hungry...”

Very carefully, Kallen reached out to grab one of the cookies on the tray. She gripped the edge of the cookie by her forefingers, taking great care not to crush it with her newly-enhanced strength.

She was somewhat less successful with the milk: the moment she wrapped her hands around the glass, it exploded in a shower of pointy shards. The milk got everywhere, but the demonology book seemed to get the worst of it. The milk soaked straight through the center of the worn pages, leaving only a pulpy blob of ink and parchment in its stead.

“Great...” Kallen looked over the mess. She figured she could get things cleaned up in about thirty minutes, fifteen if she was lucky. But despite the numerous tomes she had yet to sort through, the incident discouraged her to much to try anything else.

“Ugh, I’m overthinking this.” she thought. “At this point, the best thing to do is go to school, let the rest of the council know what happened, and then get Nina to build me some kind of... I dunno, a strength-dampening exoskeleton or something.” She then left for the kitchen to grab some paper towels. “Hell, they’ve probably been sitting around twiddling their thumbs while I was gone. At least now they’ll have something to talk about...”

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Madoka and Sayaka were lucky to catch the last train out of Tokyo. Even with Kyubey’s warning, they really had to hoof it in order to make it to the station on time. It was only once they were on the train that they began to relax. They handed their tickets to the teller, and made themselves comfortable on their cushioned, metal seats.

Madoka looked up at the sky. Even as the countryside sped past them at frightening speed, it was comforting, to see the stars hanging in place. Today was an interesting day, but it was also very stressful; it was hard to see her friend go off to fight when Madoka herself was helpless to change anything.

Unlike Shinji. Thinking back, Madoka figured he might have stopped all of this before it started, but he just wasn’t fast enough. The poor kid probably beat himself up about that all the way back to the park. The most Madoka could do was be strong, like Sayaka.
Speaking of Sayaka, Madoka had worried how they were going to explain how they were so late coming back home. Kyubey tried to ease her fears by explaining that he was sending psychic signals into their minds keeping them from worrying about the girls’ absence, but now Madoka was worrying about exactly how much power Kyubey actually had. After all, he could grant wishes and give people superpowers, why he doesn’t just go out and hunt witches himself?

This train of thought was interrupted by a loud yawn coming from Sayaka’s direction. “Aw man, I’m beat...” she said. “If I wasn’t scurrying around like a frightened insect, I was healing every Tom, Dick and Harry that scraped his knee fighting Deathstroke.” She stared at the inky presence swirling around her Soul Gem. “…and I’m down to my last Grief Seed, too.” She reached into her backpack, and pulled out what looked an onyx gem trapped in a metal cage, with a pointed spire running straight through. Impossibly, the gem stood on it’s tip as Sayaka held it out in her palm. “Looks like I’m gonna need to borrow from Mami again...”

Madoka looked thoughtfully at her friend. Kyubey did say it was rare for Puella Magi to use their powers to fight ordinary crime. Perhaps the lack of Grief Seeds was the problem? “How many do you owe her, anyway?” she asked.

“Well, there’s the one she gave me right off the bat to show how they worked, the one from the time I wore myself out searching all those abandoned labyrinths...” Sayaka held up her Soul Gem to the Grief Seed, drawing the darkness in her gem into the seed like a magnet. “Plus there’s the one I’m gonna owe her friend for taking care of that blonde weirdo...”

“What did you say her name was, again?”

“I dunno, Kyoko... something. She’s part of a death cult or whatever, I wasn’t paying attention.”

An image flashed through Madoka’s head of a dominatrix-themed magical girl tying Electra to an inverted cross surrounded by a pentagram, with a bloody pendulum suspended overhead. “Um, when you say ‘take care of her’...”

“Don’t worry, she’s just going to bring Electra to the police. Mami says she’s long since gotten over that cult stuff. She’ll probably rough her up a bit, but probably nothing too serious.”

Now Madoka was picturing the slightly-less frightening scenario of the dominatrix girl strangling Electra while she was bound and gagged.

“Hey, don’t worry. Mami says the girl is trustworthy as long as we actually pay her.”

“Well... if that’s the case... I guess that’ll be fine.” Madoka tried to change the subject. “So, did you get the concert tickets for tomorrow?”

“Yes! Three front-row seats to see Hatsune Miku, live on stage!” Sayaka grinned as she held out a trio of aqua-blue tickets. “You have NO idea what kind of hell I had to go through to get these. Fighting Witches has nothing on Ticketmonster.” She put the tickets back in the bag. “With any luck, Kyousuke will give me his first kiss, and you’ll be there to record it!”

Madoka raised her finger in nervous objection. “Are you sure that’s such a good idea? Don’t you think he’d rather prefer privacy?”

“Oh he’s not gonna notice; He’s gonna have his eyes closed all romantic-like.” she snapped her fingers. “Be-sides; worst case scenario Kyubey can just make him forget all about seeing the camera. Right, Kyubey?”

“Of course!” said Kyubey. “After all, it is a fairly minor thing to do, and it is a continuation of the
“Well... I guess if nobody knows about it I guess that’s fine.” Madoka tried to ignore the sinking feeling in her gut for the sake of her friend. “And I guess if it gets out I could just say it was an innocent mistake...”

“There ya go! Problem solved!” Sayaka snapped her fingers. “Man, you guys are great. This really means a lot to me, you know...”

Madoka nodded. She still didn’t quite understand why Sayaka would spend her wish to heal the arm of Kyousuke Kamijou, the world-famous violin prodigy, but then again Madoka had never fallen in love before. Presumably she would understand when she got older.

Her thoughts flashed back to Shinji, and how lonely he seemed to be. “Think you could get another ticket?” Madoka asked.

“This close to the concert? I doubt it...” Sayaka closed her eyes and rubbed her chin, as if she was thinking hard about something. “Unless Kyubey has something up his sleeves.”

Kyubey shook his head. “Sorry, I just checked the listings. At this point it would take a miracle to get another seat, let alone one in the front row. And I don’t think something as temporary as concert tickets are worth spending your wish on...”

“I was afraid you’d say that...” Madoka sighed.

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Electra Pendragon was not having a good day.

Her first problem was the approaching end of the world. That was still a thing, at least according to the Apoco-scope, and despite her best efforts Electra had made virtually no progress in the matter. Her second problem was that was still stuck in… well, whatever this weird baseball dimension was called.

It’s not as if she hadn’t tried to escape. But one could only whack an invincible portal with a magical baseball bat for so many hours before descending into a fit blubbering hysteria. And as it turned out, blubbering hysteria wasn’t very productive either.

But after hours of trying to bribe, threaten, seduce, sweet-talk, strangle, humiliate, and blackmail the portal, Electra found herself in a more lucid state on the other side of madness. A state that most of us would call “boredom”.

Electra leaned back in the L-shaped lump of metal. It had been straight once, but a few hours of whacking it with a club had fixed that. She stared into the void above, and began to daydream about what she would do when she escaped.

She wouldn’t quit; that was for sure. Considering the lengths she went to in order to go back in time in the first place, Electra would be a laughing stock if she returned without accomplishing anything.

Instead, she thought about starting over, finding a new group of heroes she could manipulate into helping her. Ones that would show her more respect.

Perhaps Super Young Team? They were gullible enough, but Electra wouldn’t trust those idiots to polish her armor, let alone attempt any kind of multifaceted plan. Big Science Action?
Traditionalist simpletons stuck in their ways; trying to convince them of anything would be like talking to a boulder. The Justice Leagues? Well, she had nothing but contempt for the main league and the JLA, and based on what she heard about the so-called “Justice League Dark” she’d, probably get roped into helping John Constantine exorcise a piss demon from Green Lantern before she got anywhere close to earning their trust. Not to mention the fact that all three of them would probably mistake Electra’s father as a common villain, despite his most noble of intentions...

And then a thought struck Electra. Perhaps she was going about this all wrong? What if instead of looking for “heroes” (and Electra used that term loosely) she sought the aid of villains instead? Normally Electra would never associate with such vagabonds and thieves, Electra’s father had done just that in times past.

Electra rattled down the list of directionless fools she could easily draft into her “Injustice Society”, before settling on an imaginary team consisting of Felix Faust, Vash the Stampede, Bolphunga the Unrelenting, Albert Wesker, and a Doomsday clone (she figured that Lex Luthor had one lying around somewhere). True, they’d probably betray each other once the job was done, but it was only a means to an end. If they weren’t done killing each other by the end of things, electra and her father would simply dispose of them personally. It was a foolproof plan, if she did say so herself.

Of course, this all led back into her main problem; Electra still had no idea how to escape.

She got up and walked over to the edge of one of the pathways and stared at the void below. For a second, she wondered what would happen if she jumped. She ran through the possibilities: She could, for instance, fall forever through an endless void until she starved to death. Or perhaps the world looped in on itself like in a video game and she would just end back started, albeit at terminal velocity. Or maybe there was something down there she couldn’t see. But whatever would happen, Electra concluded it wouldn’t be pleasant, so she pushed the thought out of her mind.

Just then, the incessant droning of the crowd was broken by what sounded like a pair of sharp scissors tearing through paper. She turned her head towards the source of the noise and found that a second, irregularly-shaped portal had appeared. It was very much unlike the ones she was familiar with; it appeared to be a glistening pool of molten silver suspended in mid-air.

Electra walked up to the portal, and prodded it experimentally. A wave of cascading ripples emanated from the point of contact. She felt a chill sweep through her spine. It felt… wrong, somehow. Though she couldn’t quite put her finger on why…

...and it was then Electra began aware of a slight prickling sensation on the back of her neck, one of the few places on her body that wasn’t armored in some way.

“Don’t turn around.” said a voice behind her. It was unmistakably a child’s voice, but her tone had that unmistakable hardness to it. “You’re Electra, right?”

Electra laughed. Obviously this commoner thought she could be captured like a mere nobleman. Best to lead the girl on a bit, see what she knows. “I see my reputation precedes me,” she said. “And what are you called, pray tell?”

“None of your beeswax,” said the assailant. “I ask the questions here.”

“That you do.” Electra began to turn her neck, but the spear began to press deeper into her flesh. It was… more painful than she anticipated, as the thought had never occurred to her that a mere mortal would be capable of hurting her, if ever so slightly. “A-ask way then!” Electra stammered as she tried to maintain her composure.
“Okay then. First off, what the hell is that?” A childlike arm stretched past Electra’s face, and pointed at the portal in front of her.

Seizing the opportunity Electra grabbed the arm, intending to turn the tables on her captor. But instead the opposite happened; she underestimated the girl’s strength and dexterity, and with a deafening “clang” Electra was tossed to the floor like a tangled-up marionette.

As much as she mentally insisted that this was all part of the plan, the only thing she thing Electra could really call a “success” was that she now had a good look at the girl that was currently standing on her stomach with a spear pointed directly at Electra’s throat. Just as she suspected, it was another child; a magical girl around the same age as the blue-haired tramp that outmaneuvered Electra earlier that day. She was wearing white sleeves with black wristguards, a red, sleeveless vest that extended into a frilly skirt, and red boots with black stockings. Her hair was an untamed mess of crimson locks, tied up into a flame-like ponytail with a black bow. Below the neck the was a piece cut out of the vest that vaguely looked like an eye, complete with a large, red gem in the place where the pupil should be.

But to Electra, the most readily apparent aspect of the red-haired girl was that she was giving her an intense glare.

“Now let’s try this again.” Keeping one hand on her spear, the girl pointed at the silver pool. “What. Is. That.”

“Why… it’s a portal to the Infinite Plane of Candy, of course.” said Electra, a bead of sweat descending from her brow. “Just stick your head in, and a trio of singing leprechauns will feed you the most delectable jellybeans in all the land.”

“Okay.” The girl demonstrated a surprising amount of strength for her diminutive frame as she grabbed Electra by the neck, and shoved right in front of the portal. “You first.”

“Ah… that was just a mere joke, child!” Electra leaned back and gazed at the distorted reflection of her own face. “No, no, in reality I have no idea what that thing is but I’m sure it’s of no concern to us now if you please just give me a chance to explain myself-”

A large, metal hand emerged from the portal. Electra screamed as Kyoko pulled her away, leaving the hand to swipe at empty air.

“Fucking idiot.” a nasally voice echoed from the pool. “You missed by a fucking mile. You need glasses or something? Let me show you how it’s done… Avada Kedavra!”

Seconds later the green bolt shot out of the pool, heading straight for Electra and her captor. The redhead pushed Electra aside in order to gain enough leverage to dodge the blast herself.

“…I don’t get it.” said another voice, this one deep and gravelly.

“Shaddup, Blade!” said the first voice.

“I told you, my name’s Vash…”

“And I keep telling you that name’s fucking retarded! It’s ‘Blade’ now, you understand?”

“But-”

“Which one of us in charge here?”
“...you are, boss.”

“EX-actly. Now pipe down and let me do the talking.”

The portal rumbled for a few seconds more, and with a faint “plorp”, a pair of figures emerged. One was a broad-shouldered, heavyset man with red eyes and silver hair, wearing a plain red jacket. The other, a pale-skinned teenager with long, ebony-black hair with purple streaks and red tips that reached down to her mid-back. She was wearing a bizarre outfit that consisted of a black corset with matching lace around it and a black leather miniskirt, pink fishnets and black combat boots. For a moment, Electra forgot about her standards and snickered.

The redhead, however, remained calm and professional as ever. “Okaaaayyy…” She raised an eyebrow. “And you are?”

“None of your beeswax!” the pale girl hissed, spittle flying from her lips.

“We’re looking for someone…” said the man. “She’s… kinda on the tall side.”

“And blonde.” said the girl.

“Very pretty.”

“And she’s white. You know, like an American.”

“And she’s got these big, round…” The man cupped his hands up to his chest. “…squishy things. Like, big ones.” he pointed at Electra. “Not like yours. Yours are too small.”

“And you’re not tall enough either.” said the pale girl.

Electra’s eye twitched slightly. “You… don’t… say...” She gritted her teeth.

“I see…” The redhead nodded gently. “Well I’m afraid I can’t help you there. Unless, of course you’d be willing to answer a few questions about all these disappearing Witches…”

The man bent down to whisper into his partner’s hear. “Boss, I think she’s talking about that thing The Locksmith is doing...”

“Don’t you think I know that?” the pale girl replied. “Now act like a good dog and stay quiet! Else I’m sending you back to the mines where I found you!”

“I don’t wanna go back to the mines.”

“EXACTLY. SO SHUT THE FUCK UP ALREADY.”

The redhead girl pointed at the bickering couple “Friends of yours?”

“Oh-ho, I should hope not.” replied Electra. “No friend of mine would be caught dead in such attire...”

The pale girl’s neck snapped towards Electra. “SHADDUP, PREP!” she howled. She then pointed at them and said. “Blade! Sic, boy!”

Moving almost too fast to see, Blade’s launched himself at Electra with his muscular legs. There was a slight scraping sound from inside his jacket as he drew a katana with a silver blade and a green hilt.
But right just as Electra was bracing for impact there was a flourish of steel, and the redhead was standing between them; spear raised to block the feral strike.

“Oh, a katana. How original.” she twirled her weapon, and the her hilt collided with the her opponent’s blade, snapping the blade in two. “Let me guess, the ebay auction said it was a ‘Genuine Masamune’?”

Blade snarled and wordlessly lunged at the girl, his arms held out like claws, when suddenly a barrier of floating cards appeared between them, separating Blade from his would-be prey.

“...So, it seems your attitude has changed!” said Electra. “Have you realized your place yet, or has my natural charm won you over?”

“Very funny…” the redhead replied. “You’re worth a whole Grief Seed if I bring you in alive, and jack squat if you’re dead.” She strained to keep the barrier up, as Blade began to claw through it. “And I know you’re not going to betray me, because if you did you’d be stuck-”

Electra brought her baseball bat onto the girl’s head with delight, taking great pleasure in savoring metalling “clang” it made as it rattled the petite juggernaut’s skull. The wall of cards collapse immediately, leaving Blade staring listlessly at a pile of cardstock.

“I suppose that’s the least an insubordinate cur deserves.” Electra slung the baseball bat behind her shoulder. “Now, obviously you people have a way out of this… place. Am I not mistaken?”

Blade nodded.

“Good, then we’ll settle this diplomatically!” She kicked the redhead lying at her feet, sending her tumbling towards the pale girl. “Consider this prisoner a gift, I’m sure your sovereign would appreciate another slave digging up… whatever you people mine for.” She waved her hand dismissively.

The pale girl looked down at her new captive, and then at Electra. “I see…” she rubbed her chin, no doubt suspicious of Electra’s motives. “What did you say your name was?”

Electra made a smug chuckle. “Who am I but Electra Pendragon, heir to the mightiest empire that will ever be, and future savior of the world. For now I am a nobody, but soon I shall no doubt become a household name.” She brushed her hair in a dramatic fashion. “But enough about me… by what name do you go by?”

The pale girl glared at Electra for a moment. She then produced a thin piece of wood from the inside of her sleeve, pointed it at Electra and shouted. “Stupefy!” A piercing red bolt shot out from her wand, and struck Electra right in the chest.

Electra wasn’t worried, however, as she expected that her innate magic resistance would be able to shrug off such a pathetic attack. But then her limbs began to feel heavy, and her eyes began to droop, and before she knew it Electra had begun the slow march into unconsciousness.

She struggled to keep her eyes open, as Blade effortlessly hoisted her into onto his shoulder. “What do we do with this one, Lady Ebony?” he asked.

“We’ll bring her to the Queen, and see what she thinks.” Electra made out slight footsteps as Lady Ebony approached. “What a prep. She’s almost as bad as the princess.”

Electra tried to raise her voice in protest by exclaiming that she too was a princess and that her father would have their so-called queen’s head when he found out. But at that point she had drifted
to far into dreamland to care.

--------END OF CHAPTER--------

AMBUSH BUG: Heloooooooooo, I’m Ambush Bug! I report the news, so YOU don’t have to! And welcome back to Channel 52.

BETHANY SNOW: Our top story tonight, the case of the disappearing children continues to capture America’s attention, as the police come up empty.

AMBUSH BUG: Even the media has gotten in on the action! Why, just take a look at a clip from this week’s Lawyers and Orderlies: Sensational Victims Unit!

DETECTIVE STAPLER: You’d better tell us how you and your child-killing crime syndicate kidnapped thousands of babies from middle class Americans and strangled them to death!

IVAN MCNASTY: Foolish detective! You will never pin anything on me, not as long as the FBI is in the pocket of my comrades in the NAZI PARTY!

DETECTIVE STAPLER: Damn you, McNasty! Damn you and your big, sinister, Russian eyepatch to hellllllllll!!

CALENDER MAN: In other news, the vigilante known as “The Red Hood” has been sighted heading towards Las Vegas, where it’s rumored that he is in pursuit of “Lina Inverse”, a wicked sorceress whose penchant for destruction rivals that of Vash the Stampede. Even now, bets are being made on how much of the city will remain intact, with the odds of coming out unharmed hovering around 1 in 300.

AMBUSH BUG: Coming up, a politician from that party you don’t like said something stupid today! Find out which one, here on Channel 52!

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Omake #2: Rebootpoint, in which the Author Makes an Attempt at Satire

“Oh my god!” said The Flash. “My selfish attempt to change history has broken the timestream! I must now set right what once went wrong!”

“No, wait!” said Super Mysterious Guy #157, “Before you do, I need you to combine the timestreams.”

“Um, why?” said The Flash.

“Because doing so will somehow strengthen the cosmos against some kind of looming threat!”

“How?” said The Flash. “I mean, the world looks like it’s in pretty decent shape to me. Plus we’ve fought plenty of those before and came out just fine, relatively speaking. And wouldn’t adding more universes just make things more chaotic?”

“DON’T ASK QUESTIONS JUST DO IT OKAY.”

“Geez, fine, fine...”

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Just then, Edrobot burst into the author cave. “This just in, everyone!” he said, waving around a
stack of papers. “The reboot is official! I have you new assignments!” He then began to hand out pieces of paper to everyone. “Hope: You are now sixteen, and are a member of the Teen Titans.”

“Sweet!” said Hope.

“Don’t get too excited; you get killed off in your debut issue.” Ed handed a paper to Lightning. “Light, you’re on the Doom Patrol. Also, your sister is dead, and you are now sensitive and emotionally disturbed because you were abused by your father.”

“Just... super.” Light glanced through her revised backstory. “Wait, hold on; this says I was raped how many-”

“Shirley, you are now gay.”

“But I-”

“Simon, you are now a raging alcoholic who is dating Lady Shiva.”

“Uhhhh...”

“Shinji, you don’t exist.”

“God damn it.” and then Shinji vanished in a puff of logic.

Electra began to wave her hand in the air. “Ooh! Ooh! What about me?” said Electra.

“Good news! Not only is your character unchanged, but you’ve now got a spot in Justice League International...” Ed looked down at his watch “...which was cancelled five minutes ago. Sorry, tough break! But at least you and Shulk get to be killed off- I mean guest star in the next issue of JLA.”

Seconds later, Electra smashed Edrobot’s brains in with a baseball bat.

“So much for death of the author!” said Simon. (“Oh god I’m such a horrible person...”)

“Still, Electra has a point.” said Sayaka. “Whether or not the reboot was justified, DC Comics doesn’t seem to have a clear direction in mind. The reboot itself alienated longtime fans by erasing vast swaths of continuity, and they don’t seem to have any intention of trying to bring in newcomers.”

Then Hope pulled out a convenient megaphone. “THE JOKE IS THAT THE REBOOT SUCKS!” she said. “ DO YOU GET IT NOW, EVERYONE?! DO YOU GET IT?!”

And then Edrobot swore never to write satire again because he was really bad at it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry folks, can't think of anything interesting to say right now!

In the meantime, feel free to update the TVTropes Page!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[FRONT COVER: A shot of Wild Tiger and Hope making a back to back pose, with a neon cityscape behind them. Hope is wearing armor that looks just like Wild Tiger’s costume, except that it’s black and red instead of white and green. Their costumes are covered in sponsor logos, including Kord Industries, KaibaCorp, Black Knight Securities, Wayne Enterprises, Square Enix, and DC Comics. A billboard that says “Tiger and Kitten” can be seen in the background, styled like the “Tiger and Bunny” logo. However, this is all just a thought bubble that stretches onto the back cover, where we can see Hope fast asleep on her futon. The words “NOT AN IMAGINARY STORY” are clearly visible, though the place where words “NOT A DREAM,” would be are cut off by the edge of the thought bubble.]

Tokyo’s Shibuya district was oddly calm at 4 in the morning. It was too late for any kind of nightlife, yet too early for the afternoon crowds the district was famous for.

If a normal person had been around at this hour, they wouldn’t have seen anything except maybe a drunken partygoer desperately searching for a cab to take him home. But if they happened to be sensitive to spiritual energy, perhaps they would have witnessed a most unusual duo.

The first was an American man with a muscular build, a broad chin, and a pencil-thin mustache. He wore an orange helmet with three lights, one red, one blue, and one green, that had a small camera built into the forehead area. He also wore a patchwork garment assembled from bits and pieces of dozens of designer brands, from the casual sweaters of Mus Rattus to the fancy suits of Dragon Couture. But the most unnerving thing about him was the way he moved. He couldn’t see like normal people; instead he depended on the camera in his helmet to see the world for him. Because of this, his head swiveled erratically, constantly adjusting its position like an owl looking for prey.

But even he looked normal compared to his partner, a living shadow that walked like a man. Light reflected off of him in odd ways, sometimes being immediately absorbed into the inky void of his body, other times passing straight through like he wasn’t even there. In contrast to the jerky, purposeful movements of his partner, this one had a smooth, unpredictable gait. Sometimes he would step normally, sometimes he began to skip, and yet other times he’d twirl around and start walking backwards. But nonetheless it all seemed natural in some way, as if he had planned it all along. Of course any menace this could have had was negated by the fact that he was wearing a giant, novelty sombrero with the words “MEXICAN DOG” written in big red letters, as well as a crude drawing of a stereotypical Mexican enjoying a hot dog.

Neither of them liked each other, that much was clear. But the fact remained that they needed each other, if only for the next few hours.

They approached the scramble crossing, where they saw a large junk pile sitting smack dab in the middle of the street. Slouched atop the pile was a third man, a gaunt young man in a black leather jacket with torn, grey jeans as well as a black baseball cap that sat on top of a red bandanna. A black tattoo of a flame pattern covered the entirety of his right hand, which was presently occupied with flicking around a slide rule as if it was a butterfly knife.
As soon as the pair were in speaking distance, in one quick motion he pocketed the slide-rule and swapped it for a blue megaphone with a black handle.

“TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH!” he shouted through the megaphone. The others reflexively covered their ears, just as the man decided to put the megaphone down. “Man, I can’t believe a buncha zeroes like you made it this far.” His face widened into a sinister grin as eyed the pair, first the shadow, then the fashion-impaired man with the creepy helmet. “Mr. Nobody and Crazy Quilt… you two were the last digits I expected to be the remainder!”

“Oh cut the theatrics!” said Crazy Quilt. “Just give the mission already!”

Mr. Nobody, however was a bit more enthusiastic. “So, whatsit gonna be today? Make Gattito the most popular brand in the Mexican Dog restroom? Collect a hundred boar heads? Win an interpretive dance contest?”

Crazy Quilt glared at his partner for a moment, before snatching the sombrero away.

The man on the junk pile pulled out his cell-phone, held it upside-down, and took a photograph of the two. “Hold your hypotenuse, It’s coming riiiiight up…”

Seconds later, the pair’s phones began to ring. Crazy Quilt took out his own, and looked at the message. It was an upside-down picture of them, with accompanied by the caption “P * GM = C^-1, where C is the concert, and P is you morons.”

Crazy Quilt ground his teeth. The GM was always keen on these kinds of riddles. He remembered going into art to get away from this sort of crap, back when he was just Paul Dekker, the no-name art student with a chip on his shoulder.

“I know what the answer iiiiiiiiis!” Mr. Nobody said in a sing-song tone.

“Well what is it, then?”

“I’m not telling until you give me the sombrero back. In song.”

“No! This is preposterous! I refuse!”

“Well then, I guess we’ll just be standing here until we get Erased.”

It took all of Paul’s willpower to avoid strangling his partner. “Okay, Mr. Nobody, you can have your sombrero baaaack…” he warbled.

“Much obliged, my good sir.” Mr. Nobody put the hat back on his head, and adjusted it with smug satisfaction. A few seconds later, he then pulled it back off and stuck it over Crazy Quilt’s helmet. “You know what I changed my mind, I don’t want it anymore. It looks better on you anyway.”

The lights on Crazy Quilt’s helmet began to blink. Mr. Nobody ducked just in time to avoid the blinding beam of light projected from his partners forehead, disintegrating the ludicrous headpiece in the process.

“Ha! This is better than teaching Calculus!” the GM said.

“Now as I was saying…” Mr. Nobody continued. “P times GM mean the players and the GM. And C to the power of negative means the inverse of C. So he wants us to go to a concert, and help him turn it into whatever the opposite of a concert is.”
Crazy Quilt shook his head, and turned to the GM. “And how do you expect us to do that?”

The GM continued to smile. “I thought you radians would never ask...”

Shulk glanced up from his clipboard. “<You’re doing great, guys. Just a little more to the left.>”

“Whose... left?” Dr. Summers wheezed, his knees shaking under the weight of the server tower he and Shirou were carrying.

“...my left. Okay, now just set it down gently…” Shirou said.

Dr. Summers jerked as he lowered his end of the rectangular device to the floor. He yelped as he accidentally dropped it on his fingers, sending the machine toppling towards Shirou. Thinking quickly, Shirou braced himself against the computer to keep it from falling any further, and then pushed it back into an upright position.

“Nice catch, Emiya.” said Shulk. “Now we just need to bring in the thaumic modulator and we’ll can get started on moving Nina’s stuff.”

Dr. Summers gasped for breath. “I don’t... know about... you... but I’m feeling... kind of winded...” he slumped against the side of a bizarre machine that looked like a cross between an Aztec pyramid and a stainless-steel mushroom. “I don’t suppose we could ask the woman with super-strength for help?”

“Her stuff’s set up already; Shirou got that done before you arrived. She wanted to get it out of the way early since she was planning to have breakfast with her sister...”

Shirou didn’t seem to be paying attention, however, as he was too busy gazing at the array of oddities that surrounded him. Flasks and empty test tubes gleaming in their racks sat next to clay jars full of colored powders, while modern computer consoles sat next to shelves of ancient books with tattered, yellowing paper. After about a minutes of looking around, he asked “...what’s this all for, anyway?”

“You would need a degree in both Magecraft and particle physics for me to even begin to explain.” Shulk said. “As a non-Magus working for the Association, I’m in a unique position where I can only stay competitive if I augment my knowledge of magic with advanced technology.”

“Why’s that so unique?” said Shirou.

“...well, it’s like this.” Once again, Shulk struggled to put his thoughts into simpler terms. “Most Magi have sort of a taboo against technology. It’s not that magic causes computers to explode or anything, But the way they see it something is only ‘magic’ if you can’t do it with technology.”

Shirou nodded gently.

“Of course, given that magecraft itself is a human-made invention at least partially based on mundane science, as well as the fact that extraterrestrial technology has been shown to be eons ahead of magecraft in some areas, a minority in the association believe that this notion of technology being the antithesis of magecraft is flawed at a fundamental level and that we would all be much further ahead if we just...” Shulk paused as he found himself staring at Shirou’s listless expression.

“...you lost me.” said Shirou.
“Right, sorry. Rambling again.” Shulk shook his head. “The point is that the association has a
taboo against technology for complicated political reasons. Some find a way around the ban by
inventing spells with very specific purposes, but most of the time they rely on people like me to
handle that kind of thing.”

“Oh. I got it.” said Shirou, though Shulk wasn’t quite sure if he actually did.

“Now, as I was saying; before we start moving the Sakuradite reactor, there’s some protocols we
need to review. Now I’m sure Miss Einstein did a fine job fixing it, we have to make sure we know
what to do in case there’s a-

Shulk found himself standing in a small amusement park. It was late at night, and he was
surrounded at all side by unlit booths, depowered roller coasters, and other closed attractions. But
in spite of everything that surrounded him, for some reason his attention was transfixed on a lone
ferris wheel at the center of the park.

The ferris wheel… Shulk recognized that wheel… it’s the one from the amusement park at the
Tokyo Dome, wasn’t it?

So why was he staring at it? What was so important about the ferris wheel? But maybe it wasn’t
the wheel he was supposed to be looking at. Maybe it was something he just couldn’t see. It
sounded like he was saying something but…

Suddenly, there was a noise. It sounded like a small jet engine rocketing overhead. But Shulk
didn’t turn away, in fact he somehow felt much more desperate than ever to look in that direction.

But when ground shook and the jet engine stopped, it was then that Shulk turned around to find
himself face-to-face with a creature straight out of his nightmares.

It was an enormous, charcoal-colored mechon in a vaguely-humanoid shape. It looked both
hulking and slender, with a thin, almost anemic torso connecting to hulking limbs via spindly,
golden joints. Its arms ended in gilded claws that were at the very most a passable simulacrum of
human hands, and a tall upward-facing turret protruded out of its back, along with a pair of golden
“wings” that looked stiff and unyielding. And then there was the face; a stark, white skull with an
elongated chin, glowing red eyes, and a mouth with blunted teeth that had been stitched shut by
blood-red cables.

But the worst part was when it opened it’s mouth. Shulk had never heard of a Mechon speaking
before, but it wasn’t quite like he imagined. It’s jaw quivered ever so slightly, as a gruff, almost
human voice poured out. He couldn’t make out the words, but they sounded… angry.

Yes, that was it. It was angry. Which was just fine, because Shulk was angry, too. He knew that
mechon by heart, because it had haunted his dreams ever since the night it killed Fiora.

Back then he was only able to drive it away, and he had some help with that. But now Shulk had
mastered the Monado. Now he was the master of his own fate. Now, perhaps, he could put an end
to this madness, and finally avenge everyone who lost their lives to that-

The Monado bounced off the mechon like was nothing. The Mechon snatched Shulk in its claws,
cutting deep into Shulk’s flesh as it did so. It then held Shulk upside-down by the leg, and pulled
the Monado away from his hands as it unleashed a horrible, inhuman laugh that echoed through
the park. And then it-

“<Shulk! Are you okay? Say something!>” Shulk awoke from his vision to find Shirou vigorously
shaking him.

“<Emiya, calm down!>” Dr. Summers pulled Shirou away “<The only thing that’s going to accomplish is giving him whiplash.>” he then pointed at Shulk. “<See? He’s already coming to.>”

Shulk shook his head. His visions were never calming, but this was the most traumatic one yet.

“<Yes, don’t worry… it was just another vision.>” he then looked at his watch. It was still early in the morning. “Shirou, is there anything happening at the Tokyo Dome tonight?”

Shirou scratched his head. “I… think there’s a concert, but I wasn’t really paying attention. I could look it up for you…”

“You do that.” Shulk pulled out his phone. “Something’s going to happen at the Tokyo Dome tonight, and we need the entire Justice Society ready for when it goes down.”

“Right!” lacking a modern smartphone Shirou ran off to find a computer terminal.

Meanwhile, Dr. Summer coughed. “<…should I be doing something?>” he asked.

“<Do you know how to fight invincible robots?>”

“<No.>”

“<Can you pilot a mech with any degree of precision?>”

“<I… don’t think so.>”

“<Do you have a cellular?>”

Dr. Summers pulled an outdated iPhone out of his pocket.

Shulk started to dial a number on his phone. “<Call Sayaka and ask Kyubey to set up a telepathic link with me. The sooner we can get the team together, the better.>” Shulk then flicked through his list of contacts, until he found Simon’s number. He then held his thumb down on the screen, and anxiously waited for the chairman to pick up...

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“Oh the horror!” said Wild Tiger as he rode atop the world’s largest pig in a cowboy hat. “My partner turned out to be a cyborg robot from the future!”

“YAAR!” said Barnaby Brooks Jr. “Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum, walk the plank or give me a sub!”

“Never!” said General Big McLargeHuge. “Next to the President, sub sandwiches are the most important thing in America!”

“Adotele dato~!” said Super Mario.

“Don’t worry!” said Hope. “I know exactly what to do!” she reached into her safe and pulled out a trombone, and began to play Beethoven’s fifth symphony on it. Somehow, it ended up sounding like it was being played on a harmonica.

Barnaby then shouted. “NOOOO MY ONLY WEAKNESS!” before exploding into a pile of confetti.

Everyone present began to applaud. The king then approached Hope and said “Mah boi! As the
king of Batman City, I hereby award you the world’s largest marshmallow.” A giant robot then teleported in, carrying said marshmallow in on a giant plate.

“I’m so hungry I could eat an octorok!” Hope then pounced on the marshmallow, and began to dig in. But to her despair, she found she was having trouble chewing it. So she pulled and tugged, and bit, but no matter what she did, the marshmallow would not stay in her mouth, until finally...

...Hope woke up with the corner of her pillow stuffed in her mouth. “Not again...”she murmured before spitting it out.

But in spite of the ending it was still the most exciting dream she had in awhile. In fact, the reason she didn’t go right back to sleep was because of something even more exciting; her first day as a real-life superhero. There was nothing she found more thrilling than the idea of going out on the streets to fight bad guys, except possibly going out on the streets to fight bad guys as Wild Tiger’s sidekick.

“And all I need to do is play along with my backstory and act like a heartwarming orphan!” she thought. “Piece of cake!”

Hope looked at her watch. “Let’s see… it’s 5 PM back home, so that means it’s… uh...”she looked around the room for a clock, a cable box, a microwave, or anything that could tell her what time it was. But the room was so dark that the only thing she could see was a faint sliver of light coming through the shrouded window on the opposite side of the room.

Taking care not to step on her roommate, Hope crawled over the futon and peaked her head behind the shade to see if looking outside would give her any insight. Through it, she saw a street lined with modest-looking apartments, windows glistening as the sun rose over the city.

Impatient as ever, Hope dashed back over to the futon where Ino was still asleep, and began to vigorously shake her awake. “<C’mon, sis!>” she shouted. “<It’s already morning! You don’t wanna sleep the day away, do ya?>”

Ino gasped as she startled awake, before shoving Hope backwards into a nearby wall. She then crawled backwards until she was off the futon, and began to hyperventilate as she scoped out the unfamiliar room.

“<Oh, right. You’ve probably forgotten, haven’t you?>” Hope reached for the nearby lightswitch and illuminated the room. It was a traditional, Japanese living room that had been converted into a makeshift bedroom. There was a tatami floor and what appeared to be paper screens on all sides, though upon further inspection these turned out to be panels that rested upon more modern, concrete walling. The illusion of tradition was also somewhat ruined by the tastes of its occupants: Simon had a shelf full of gaming consoles in one corner of the room next to a TV and handful of beanbag chairs that were stacked on top of each other to make room for the futon, while Nia had a desk with a mac workstation seated next to a large number of books dedicated to both her profession, and her numerous hobbies on the opposite side of the room. Hope had a sneaking suspicion that Confucius would be rolling in his grave if he saw all this bad feng shui.

Ino, meanwhile, was now staring at the notecard Simon had taped to her wrist. She then looked up at Hope, and pointed at her. “<Hon’...kale? Is that right?>”

“<Uh-huh!>” Hope nodded. “<I’m your new sister!>”

Ino scratched her head. “<...funny. It didn’t say anything about you being my sister…>”
“<Ah, well. I guess he left out a few details.>” Hope bluffed. “<I’m gonna wake up Simon, and see if I can get him to make us breakfast!>”

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“Your name is Ino Atom Nix.
You have anterograde amnesia, so you have trouble making new memories.
You are currently living with Simon Doriru and Dr. Nia Teppelin.
Simon is the man with blue hair. Nia is a woman who also has blue hair, but it’s very long and she has flower-shaped pupils.
Also living with us is Hon’kale, a girl from another dimension. She has charcoal skin, pointy ears and white hair.
If you ever get lost, call the following number on your cell phone...”

No matter how many time Ino read the words taped to her arm, it always seemed like there was something that she had forgotten. It was especially bad when she had to pause mid-conversation to look something up, just because she forgot the name of the person she was talking to. Making matters worse was the fact Hon’kale kept throwing her off by referring to Ino as her “sister”, even though there was nothing on the card to indicate that.

For now though, she was content with listening to Hope and Simon’s conversation about something they had apparently seen on TV.

“<And then what happened?>” said Simon. “<I can’t imagine Wild Tiger got out of that one okay...>”

“<Oh but that was the best part.>” Hon’kale trembled in delight. “<Ya see he’s got this thing “Hundred Power” that lets him do really awesome stuff, but he has to save it up because he can only use it for five minutes at a time.>” she then began making a series of complicated hand gestures that supposedly mirrored her hero’s movements. “<So he used it to do this cool triple-backflip off a flagpole, and then he grabbed Killer Moth by the ankles and said... something. I forget what, but it was pretty cool. And Killer Moth couldn’t carry him, so they crashed straight through the frozen lake.>”

“<Yikes! That must have been chilly!>”

“<I know, right? But a few minutes later he came climbing out of the lake with Killer Moth on his shoulder, near-dead from hypothermia.>”

“<Heh. It takes real guts to save your enemy like that.>” Simon grinned. “<No wonder you want to be a superhero, if a guy like that’s your idol.>” He leaned back in his chair and looked over at Nia, who was busy cooking up a delicious-looking breakfast on a chrome-plated stovetop. “<Hey Nia, have we met this guy before?>”

“<I don’t think so,>” she replied, “<...but I have met Mr. Maverick. Maybe I could ask him to introduce us sometime?>”

Having finished her cooking, Nia carried a tray stacked with a pile of golden-brown flapjacks over to the counter where the others were sitting. Hon’kale began to drool as Nia lifted one with a pair of tongs, and plopped one right onto her plate. She did the same thing with Simon and Ino, before finally pulling up a stool to serve herself.

Ino watched the others. Simon dug into his food without hesitation, cutting it into bite-sized chunks before carefully lifting the bite into his mouth. Hon’kale, meanwhile, was taking her time to drizzle
genuine imitation maple syrup onto her own pancakes.

Ino followed Simon’s example and mimicked his motions, cutting the pancake on her own plate into bite-sized chunks, and similarly lifting them to her mouth very carefully...

“<Oh, I almost forgot.>” Nia said. “<We were out of baking powder, so I just used some extra salt. Is that okay?>”

“<Oh yeah,>” said Simon. “<They’re great, just like always!>”

Ino spit out her half-chewed bite of pancake. Despite having no basis for comparison, she was almost certain that this was the worst thing she had ever tasted. It was like biting into the contents of a garbage disposal, with just a hint of spoiled milk and rancid pork.

Nia and Simon looked somewhat worried. “<Are you okay?>” said Nia.

“Uhhhh…” Ino searched for the words to adequately describe just how revolting Nia’s cooking was without hurting her feelings. Eventually, she settled on “It’s… not very good.”

This led to Simon and Nia beginning to discuss possible reasons for Ino’s peculiar tastes, with Nia suggesting that her taste buds are arranged differently somehow. But given the fact that when Hon’kale took a bite her face froze for a good three seconds before she drowned the chunk of pancake with an entire glass of orange juice, Ino suspected that she wasn’t one who thought poorly of Nia’s cooking.

Before things became any more awkward, the kitchen phone began to ring.

“...Teppelin residence, Simon speaking.” Simon said into the receiver. There was a short pause as the person on the other end began to speak. “...woah, calm down Shulk. What’s up with the what now?” Simon furrowed his brow as he continued to listen. “Well, no worries; that sounds pretty lax as far as time limits go. We’ll be there as soon as possible.” He then hung up the phone, turned to Nia, and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Sorry to eat and run, honey, but we’ve got work to do. Shulk says a bunch of robots are going to attack the Tokyo Dome tonight...”

“Well, it sounds like nothing you can’t handle.” Nia replied. “I’m working late tonight anyway, so feel free to order a pizza when you get back.”

Ino sighed with relief upon hearing that last bit.

Hon’kale, on the other hand looked back and forth between the couple in incomprehension.

“<Whatcha guys talkin’ about?>”

“<Hero stuff. Apparently our first day just got interesting!>” Simon grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair, and slipped it on. “<So, do you want to do a bit of sightseeing on our way to work, or do you wanna take The Cannon?>”

Ino “<...what’s “The Cannon”?>”

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“<I had no idea the divorce was that complicated, Mister Dayton.>” said the young, overly-perfumed woman sitting across the table. “<I imagine it must have been hard on your son…>”

“<Ah, well. Garfield’s a strong boy.>” Steven Dayton, fifth-richest man in the world, looked into his wine glass with a heavy heart. “<...and to tell the truth, we’ve been drifting apart for years
anyway. He’s off on his own now…>

Steve looked back up at Lyra, the woman that invited him to the charity brunch he was attending. She was an obvious social climber, and likely a gold digger to boot. After all, nobody ever calls him “Mister” unless they were either employed by him or they wanted something.

Lyra was twirled her finger around the rim of her glass. “But you know… it has been a few years. Perhaps it’s time to start looking for someone new?”

Yep. Definitely a gold digger. No wonder she seemed so guarded. Steve almost wished he could read her mind, but that never turned out well.

Still, getting rid of her would be an easy task. All he’d need to do is act uninterested and occasionally ask awkward questions about her personal habits (such as all the perfume she wore. Steve swore he could smell it from halfway across the room). With any luck, she’d give up and go off to shmooze with someone a bit more receptive to her feminine charms.

Just then, there was deafening noise as a giant robot head parachuted through the skylight, before getting caught on the enormous ice sculpture. There were to be three people sitting in it: a blue-haired man, a child with charcoal-colored skin, pointed ears and white hair, and a teenage girl in a black, hooded jacket.

“...and that’s what happens when our timing is just a little bit off.>” said the man.

“<Got it!>” said the kid.

The teenager just looked down at the ground below, biting her lip all the while.

Steve thought he recognized the blue-haired man from the news somewhere. But Steve had made an effort to ignore most of the pieces on superheroes ever since he broke up with Rita, so he wasn’t quite sure.

Lyra, on the other hand, seemed to know exactly who these people were, judging by the horrified expression on her face.

“<Hey, it’s Lyra!>” the blue-haired man pointed at Steve’s date. “<She’s one of Nia’s friends! Let’s wave to her!>”

The teenager silently gave them a soft wave.

The kid, on the other hand, swung both hands in the air as if her voice somehow wasn’t loud enough. “<HIIIIIIII LYRA!>” said the kid, “<HOW’S IT GOING? YOU ON A DATE? HE LOOKS NICE!>”

Lyra’s face turned red as the entire hall turned their eyes towards her. Her face red with embarrassment, she wordlessly excused herself from the room.

“<...maybe that wasn’t her?>” said the teenager.

“...yeah. Maybe.” the blue-haired man pulled at his collar as if he was aware that he had just done something stupid, but he didn’t know what it was. He then looked back up at the broken skylight. “<You know, I think this might be a good time to teach you two a little something about repairing collateral damage...>”

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“Okay, let’s get down to business.” Milly circled the table, handing out sheets of paper as she did so. “We’re going to need need to rejigger our schedules a bit now that we’re working with the JSJ. Sadly, this will mean that some of us will have to cancel our after-school activities, but I think we can all agree that this is more important in the long run…”

Milly’s voice faded into the background as Kallen pretended to skim the document in front of her. As she did so, Kallen wore a glazed-over expression, her hair combed down from it’s normal position into something slightly more formal, and her posture ever-so-slightly altered to look as if she was having trouble sitting upright.

Normally, this look was an act meant to keep people from prying into her personal life: Reputation was everything in an institution like Ashford Academy, and while the student council members were a pretty understanding bunch, she doubted that many of the other students would have sympathy for a mixed-race bastard like herself. Even with Shirley they had to go to extreme lengths to try to keep her new powers a secret, even going so far as to convince Milly’s grandfather to repeal the rule about wearing hats during class in order to hide her “antenna” (or “robot ears”, as Rivalz liked to call them).

Today, however, there was some truth to her projected demeanor; as oxymoronic as it sounded, trying to get her daily routine with the addition super-strength had exhausted Kallen. Originally she worried that she would have to walk on eggshells to avoid killing someone by bumping into them, and came up with a complicated route to minimize contact with other people on her way to class. But it was actually the little things, like opening a backpack without tearing it apart, that Kallen found herself tormented by. She was at least grateful that she hadn’t developed super-hearing (yet), else Kallen feared she would have to endure people calling her a klutz behind her back.

But things got weird during Calculus. She at her desk waiting for class to begin, when an animated marionette walked into the room. It was wearing a pair of glasses, a crudely-painted face that moved erratically, and a brown wig tied into a ponytail. At first, Kallen didn’t know what to do. No one else seemed to have noticed it; it even took a seat right in front of someone without even noticing. It wasn’t until it raised it’s hand during attendance that Kallen realized what everyone else was seeing. Somehow, the entire room seem convinced that the puppet sitting in the chair was actually Rosaline Potter, a 3rd-year student Kallen had seen many times before.

“Or maybe that really was Rose…” Kallen pondered as she thought back to the incident. “The guy with the padlocks did say that I would ‘see things as they truly were’.” she glanced up for a moment, before looking back at her paper. “Or maybe someone is just trying to psych me out. Ugh, I hate mind games…”

Needless to say, Kallen had planned on bringing this up at the council meeting. The problem was, Milly had also changed. Drastically. From her seat, Kallen could see that Milly’s hair and skin were now both a startling ivory white, her ears were long and pointy, and her baby-blue eyes had been replaced by shiny black orbs that betrayed no hint as to what direction they were looking.

Like Rose, no one brought up Milly’s sudden change in appearance. Nobody commented on it, or said “Hey, Kallen; Milly’s lookin’ kinda weird today, doncha’ think?”. And while it wasn’t unheard of for her to go out in costume, normally she would force the rest of the council to dress up for the occasion as well. Rivalz at the very least would have tried to join in, given how he was weekend gamer and Milly looked like something straight out of a D&D book.

But unlike Rose, Milly seem to be cognizant of this fact. A slight twitch in the eye, a short pause between her sentences… it didn’t take a genius to see that Milly wasn’t comfortable in her own skin, in sharp contrast to how she usually acted.
It didn’t take a genius to notice the connection. But Kallen figured it was best to play it safe, so she pulled out her cell phone and (carefully) tapped out a message to her boss;

“smthg weird is going on some people look strange and im the only one who can see it please reply”

She then turned towards Lelouch. He was typing something on his laptop, no doubt pretending to take notes while playing DOTA or something. She couldn’t believe she ever suspected that irresponsible half-wit of being Zero, even if he does vanish for inordinate periods of time. Sure he’s got brains, but given that his best plan so far has been “when Deathstroke finds me, run away and hope nobody gets killed”, she seriously doubted he had what it took to lead a group like the Black Knights.

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As Milly continued to blather about schedules and budgets, Lelouch was busy enjoying a game of DOTA.

Or at least that’s what he appeared to be doing. In reality, the game was an elaborate U.I. that allowed Lelouch to manage the Black Knights’ operations remotely, even while he and his computer were plain sight. Every unit on the battlefield represented some aspect that Zero was focusing on, and every chat message was a coded transmission from an agent, whose meaning was hidden in an intricate pattern of typos and juvenile insults.

Yes, it was an odd way of doing things, but Zero didn’t pay “Radical Edward” ten million dollars to come up with a mundane solution. He wanted something that no right-minded person would ever suspect, and no wrong-minded person would ever be able to crack.

The fact that Lelouch was also a champion-level DOTA player in his own right only added to the illusion. Sometimes he wished he had a bit more time to go to tournaments, but the Black Knights (as well as the Student Council, and now the new Justice Society) were too important for such frivolities.

Just as Rivalz was leaning over his shoulder, Lelouch got a message from his teammate that accused his mother of fornicating with a nymphomaniac hamster. Lelouch recognized it instantly as a message from Kallen. She was apparently concerned that Milly Ashford has been replaced by an imposter, but that only she could see it.

Lelouch glanced up from his computer to ask an innocent question: “Uh, Milly! That just reminded me; with all the budget cuts, will we still be having a Golden Week celebration this year?”

“Ah... I was just getting to that.” Milly replied with a soft smile. “Now the student population is only about thirty percent Japanese, so we won’t be having our own celebration per-se. However, Ouran Academy has expressed an interest in holding their annual celebration on our campus…”

Lelouch watched Milly’s body language as she expounded on her plans for the summer ice-sculpting contest. “<Kallen’s right. It does look like she’s hiding something…>” Lelouch thought as he went back to his “game”. “<And unless Kallen’s having some very specific hallucinations, I doubt this is all a big coincidence…>”

Fingers flying on the keyboard, Lelouch sent back a coded message of his own.

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“Follow her.” the message from Zero read. “See if she’s up to anything, but don’t approach until I
“Give the O.K.”

“Hold back and wait for my signal,” Kallen thought. “Just another sign that something’s up. Glad he’s taking this seriously, at least.”

Just then, there was a follow-up message. “Also, try searching through some old photos of Milly to see how far back the effect persists. Then we can start searching for the cause, assuming it isn’t on your end.”

“Aaaand there goes his vote of confidence.” Kallen shook her head, and loaded up the Facebook app on her phone. “He probably thinks it’s just a mind virus. Hell, for all I know it probably is…” she flicked through the cavalcade of Milly’s photos, each and every one of them showing the same change in appearance that Milly now displayed.

“God, I hope I’m not crazy.”

...suddenly, a synthesized melody filled the air as Shirley’s phone began to ring. “Hello?” Shirley said. Then she went silent for about a minute. “Uh… well… school technically doesn’t end for a couple more hours… oh, no rush? Okay, sure. We’ll be there. See you in a few.”

She then put the phone down. “…that was Shulk. Apparently I’ve got my first mission. It’s something about evil robots, I think?”

“Were they the same ones that gave you super powers?” Rivalz asked.

“Uh… maybe?”

“COOL! Can I come!? Please! PLEEEEEEASE!”

“We’re the support team, Rivalz,” reminded Lelouch. “We don’t go on missions. Our job is to stay at the HQ and make sure their mission goes according to plan.”

“…do we at least get cool headsets?”

“I specifically ordered some with you in mind.”

“YESSSSSSS!” Rivalz threw his fist in the air in a victory pose.

“Well I… I’m going to sit out of this one.” Milly said, the smile slowly dropping from her face. “I just don’t feel so good…”

“But It’s not your fault, Milly!” Shirley said. “We told you; nobody could have seen Deathstroke coming!”

“…no no… it’s not that.” Milly’s face drooped further. “…I feel kind of ill, is all. Just need a bit of time to lie down.”

“Yeah.” Kallen spoke up. “I’m not feeling so hot myself. Maybe there’s a bug going around…”

“Did you see the nurse?” Nina said quietly. “If it’s that bad…”

“Oh don’t worry so much!” Milly suddenly brightened up, though Kallen noted some hesitation in her voice. “I’m just getting over a… cold! Just give me a few days and I’ll be back to my old self!”

“Allright, if you say so.” Lelouch closed his laptop. “Anyway, I have to get going; there’s an English test in a few minutes I don’t want to lose credit over a technicality.”
Kallen looked at her watch. History was next, followed by chemistry. With any luck, she’d meet up with Milly in Home Ec, and Kallen could start stalking her from there.

She gritted her teeth, and grabbed was was left of her backpack. Today was not going to be fun.

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The Zenigata Building was one of those places that oozed history. It was built on the site of “The Meeting Place”, a pre-war tavern that was frequented by heroes of all stripes up until it burnt down during the bombing of Tokyo. Ever since it was built, the building traded hands between several Japanese superhero teams, including The Yokai Patrol, Big Science Action, The Justice Brigade… even Super Young Team did a tenure at the Zenigata Building up until they got that satellite of theirs.

And each team had left their mark on the building: the Yokai Patrol added a rooftop courtyard decorated with shrines dedicated to forgotten deities, while Big Science Action built an underground garage that doubled as a dojo. The Justice Brigade had built oddly-shaped spires that somehow redirected local ley lines and expanded the sleeping quarters. And finally, Super Young Team demolished the building next door to build a massive indoor pool in the shape of a ringed planet (which at the time was the team’s logo) and gave the whole place a fresh coat of paint. With every addition, the Zenigata building began to look less like the drab, grey rectangle it had started out as, and more like a piece of modern art.

Simon was already quite familiar with the place; he and his bro, Kamina, used to sneak into tour groups to get out of the sun on hot summer days. He had fond memories of the time they snuck away from the tour group just to get a better look at the place, even considering the lecture Waveman gave them when they were caught, it was still worth it. Especially given the expression Waveman had on his face when Simon ended up saving the city a couple years later. That was just priceless.

But never once did Simon expect to actually get to work at the Zenigata building. Despite Kamina’s hopes, after the Spiral Kingdom was defeated the Dai-Gurren Brigade never amounted to anything more than the occasional get-together. Kittan was the only one left with any kind of piloting skill, and he was needed at the shop more often than not.

Sure, he was invited to a Justice League tryout once, but compared to the guys he had competed against, Simon was pretty lackluster. He was too old to join Super Young Team, not established enough to join Big Science Action… really, Simon was the last person he expected to be invited to any kind of team, let alone be elected chairman.

But for all of Simon’s nostalgia, Hon’kale was somewhat less impressed by the building. “<I thought it would be bigger.>” she said, sitting on the edge out of the Lagann’s cockpit to get a better view.

“<…it looks pretty big to me.” said Ino. “What would we need the extra space for?>”

“<Lotsa stuff!>” Hon’kale exclaimed as she tumbled back into the Lagann. “<We could have a hologram room, or an elevator to the center of the earth, or a weapons range, or a dinosaur jungle… >”
“<...what’s a dinosaur>?”

“<Big, man-eating lizards with pointy teeth.>” Hon’kale stuck her arms out from her sides to imitate a T-Rex’s stubby arms.

“<...why would we want one of those?>” Ino asked.

“<Because they’re AWESOME, that’s why!>” Hon’kale said. “<Plus, Superman has one.>”

“<I see…>” Ino produced an index from the satchel she was carrying, and wrote something down on it. “<...what does ‘awesome’ mean?>”

“<Uhhhhh…>” Hon’kale was at a loss for words. “<...do you know what the word ‘sweet’ means?>”

“<No.>”

“<How about ‘cool’?>”

“<...so Dinosaurs are like ice cubes?>”


At this point, Ino started to become very concerned with Hope’s ramblings. “<...does it involve people’s heads exploding?>”

“<Well, sometimes it does. Buuuut…>” Hon’kale pointed at the satchel. “<Why don’t you just look it up on your phone?>”

Ino reached into her bag. Sure enough, there was light blue smartphone that had once belonged to Nia. “<Good idea…>” she said as she tapped on the screen a few times. About three seconds later, she then held it back up to Hon’kale and said, “<What am I trying to do, again?>”

Given the groans coming from the screen, Simon guessed that she had opened up a game of Plants Vs. Zombies instead. “<I’ll show you how to use the phone once I find a place to park.>” Simon said, glancing at his own phone, scratching his head. “<The garage should be somewhere around here…>”

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When it wasn’t being used by super-teams, the Zenigata building was a museum. And nowhere was this more apparent than the conference room, a circular chamber lined with framed newspapers, photographs and drawings from every era commemorating the teams that inhabited the Zenigata building, celebrating their victories and mourning their losses. Further in was a circle of glass cases, each of which contained an artifact of great sentimental value to one hero or another, from the lodestone than The Red Oni famously carried around for good luck, to a one-of-a-kind “Most Excellent Superbat” Duel Monsters card that Super Young Team received as a reward for rescuing the President of Industrial Illusions from the villainous “Card Shark”. And in the dead center of the room, standing atop the circular table, was a golden statue of Ultimon Alpha, the 11th century folk hero whose strange powers and unwavering dedication to justice were said to have inspired the very idea of super-heroism, at least as far as the East was concerned.

It was the most Shulk could do not think about the weight of history on his shoulders. It was a sensation both intoxicating and anxious, like being within mere feet of a great work of art and being transfixed on the “do not touch” sign. Shulk was a foreigner, after all, and centuries of
Western guilt were now racing through his mind. Not even his usual rationalizations or his pre-existing knowledge of Japanese culture and history could dismiss the fear that he was coming across as the bossy, privileged, white guy telling everyone else what to do (again, despite all the hardships Shulk had to ensue during his apprenticeship. Atlas was far from the cushiest branch of the Mages Association, and Dickson himself was notoriously strict).

It was especially troubling to Shulk given that Shirley, the vice-chairwoman, was a white American. Again, while Shirley seemed to be a perfectly nice person Shulk worried that her passive nature came across as lazy and uninspired, which (combined with Chairman Simon’s own laid-back attitude) would further cement the idea in the public eye that the JSJ was not a meritocratic, bi-partisan force for justice, but rather a transparent token gesture to “prove” that Japan was no longer beholden to western powers.

But then Shulk took a step back, and realized that he was getting wound up over nothing. It’s like his friend Reyn used to say whenever they talked about superheroes. “<Yer’ thinkin too hard about this, ya knucklehead,>” he had said. “<Hero stuff is easy. Ya ‘jus gotta smile for the camera when ya bring in the bad guys and don’t talk about politics (unless yer Green Arrow), and ya’d be on easy street ‘far as the press’ concerned. They always love hearin ‘bout bad guys bein’ clobbered!>”

With his focus renewed, Shulk tried to ended his presentation on a confident note. “...and… uh... that’s the plan.” He said. “Any questions?”

A half-dozen hands immediately shot up.

“...any questions that don’t involve getting autographs?”

Rivalz lowered his hand.

“Thank you…” Shulk looked around the room. Lighting, Shirley, Sayaka, Shinji and Madoka still had their arms raised, though he guessed that Madoka was just going to ask Sayaka’s question for her. He agonized over who to pick first; if he picked Shirley, Shulk feared he’d send the wrong kind of message, but on the other hand she was the vice chairman. And while Farron’s analysis was always helpful, Shulk wasn’t sure how long he could put off calling on the younger members before they lose interest, perhaps missing out on a valid concern in the process...

He then looked at Shinji. The boy hadn’t said anything, even before the meeting began. He was just sitting there, staring at the room’s artifacts listlessly, listening to music on a portable device that was so outdated that Shulk didn’t even know what it was called. Now would be a perfect opportunity to establish some sort of group chemistry. Taking a plunge, Shulk curled his lips into a soft smile, and said, “Ikari! You had something to say?”

Shinji reeled back a little. Shulk kicked himself for changing moods too quickly; it probably came across as patronizing.

“Yeah…” Shinji’s left arm stiffened up for a moment as the room focused its attention on him. “...what team am I on, again?”

“You’ll be on Simon’s team.” Shulk replied in a slightly cooler tone in order calm Shinji down somewhat, but it only seemed to be making things worse. “The two of you will patrol the east wing, while Farron’s team patrols the west wing.”

“Oh. Okay…” Shinji said, though Shulk noticed that Shinji lost interest after he stopped talking about Simon. Shulk made a mental note to mention that to Dr. Summers the next time they met. He
then pointed to the blue-haired magical girl who was impatiently waiting to be picked next. “Sayaka,” he said in a somewhat neutral tone.

“I… kinda, sorta had a date at the concert.” she said, clutching her Soul Gem nervously in her left hand. “Is it okay if I sit this one out?”

“Well…” Shulk began, only to be interrupted by Lightning.

“We’ll need someone who can direct civilian traffic.” she said. “A flashy costume would go a long way in getting that done.”

“Uh, yes. What she said,” Shulk concurred. “Just be prepared to be pulled out at any moment if we need reinforcements.”

Sayaka’s face brightened up. “You can count on me!” she said, giving the group a big thumbs up.

“Glad to hear it. Farron; you have something to add?”

“Yeah.” Lightning replied. “The police and the hospital are on standby in case things go wrong, though it would help if they had a bit more information than ‘hordes of invincible robots that may or may not carry viruses’…”

“Well, It’s not like I’m authorized to say much more…” Shulk tried to avoid staring at the inspector’s new outfit, but given the lack of anyone else in costume he found it to be inevitable. She was dressed in sort of a purple, knee-length dress, trimmed in gold with a pair of bright yellow triangles outlining her bosom, red sleeves that ended in gloves with the fingers cut out, topped off with a pair of yellow goggles around her neck and an enormous witch’s cap, which Lightning had set in front of her.

“Uh… may I ask-” began to say.

“My sister made this.” Lightning said in an oft-rehearsed manner. “Serah’s a fashion designer, and she likes to make me model for her. Yes, I have asked her to stop, but whenever I do that she either cries until I’m sent down a guilt trip or she just just hides the rest of my clothes.”

“I shudder to think what would happen if she met Milly…” said Lelouch.

Lightning shook her head. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Right then… that just leaves one last thing on the agenda.” Shulk looked right at Shirley. “Now, I probably know what you’re going to say. But don’t worry, I’ve taken it into account; we’re only patrolling the rim and exterior of the Dome.”

“Uh, question?” Rivalz’s hand shot up. “What’s so important about that?”

Shirley squirmed in her seat. “Well… it’s just my dad programmed all the vocaloids. And he owns the company that made them.” Shirley gulped. “And… Miku’s close enough to the family that… she’s practically a sister to me.”

Rivalz planted both his hands on the table. “WOAH! Get outta town!” Rivalz sputtered. “You’re telling me that your dadis the CEO of Soundwave Entertainment?”

“…you didn’t know that?” said Shirley, somewhat surprised. “He’s kind of a big deal in the robotics industry.”
“NO!” said Rivalz. “My dad’s company makes freakin’ aglets for Christs’ sake! You know the things on the end of your shoes? How on earth would I know about something like that?”

“Because rich people send their kids to private institutions like Ashford Academy expecting them to network with their peers?” said Lightning.

“Because he’s like Bill Gates and Will Magnus rolled into one?” said Sayaka.

“Because he spoke at last year’s science fair when your guest speaker couldn’t make it?” said Lelouch.

“Okay, fair enough….” Rivalz slumped back down into his chair, and began to stare at the ceiling. “Still, what’s the big deal? If she’s so close to you that means she can keep a secret, right?”

Shirley fidgeted in her chair. “…I’m worried about losing control.” she said. “I mean… I’ve never used my powers on a sentient robot before. Who knows what could happen?”

“Can’t you just… not use your powers?” asked Rivalz.

“It doesn’t work like that!” snapped Shirley. “Sometimes technology just… does stuff when I’m not thinking about it!” She looked like she would be sweating if she were still human. “…Traffic signals change instantly to let me pass, roombas crowd around my feet like puppies, even electric toothbrushes in the bathroom turn on when I’m just trying to get a glass of water…”

Shulk noticed that Lightning’s somber expression dropped for a brief moment, as if she had suddenly remembered something.

“And, if she recognizes me, I-I could accidentally wipe out her memories in a blind panic.” Shirley stammered. “Or worse; w-what if I somehow rewrite her programming so that she’s nothing more than a mindless thrall who obeys my every command? Or what if-”

“Relax. As I said, there’s no need to fear any accidental exposure.” Shulk said, not entirely convinced. “If all goes according to plan, you won’t even come within fifty feet of her.”

“<Howdy, yall!>” said a young, high-pitched voice. The the entire group turned towards the entrance of the conference room, where Simon, Ino and Hon’kale were now just arriving.

“Sorry we’re late!” Simon said. “There was a repair job that took a bit longer than expected.” He gave a nervous smile to try to diffuse the situation. “So… you said you already had a plan?”

Shulk shook his head slightly, and glanced down at his papers. “I guess I should start from the beginning…”

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Electra Pendragon awoke with a sudden jolt, as a plank of blackened wood came up to meet her face.

Were she a mere human she might have chipped a tooth, but her noble heritage made her much tougher than that. Which wasn’t to say it didn’t hurt; on the contrary a dull pain coursed through her gums as she spat out a few stray slivers of wood.

It was then that Electra noticed that she had trouble moving her arms. Or her legs, for that matter. The reason for this was quickly apparent; rightly expecting her to escape, her captors had relieved Electra of her armor and weapons, replacing them with heavy iron chains that even now scraped
against her skin.

Just as she began to wonder what she was doing here, the floor made a sharp jostle, rolling Electra onto her side and smack-dab into the red-haired girl she had been fighting earlier. The memories quickly came rushing back: her mission, the chase, everything up until those plebeians knocked her out.

“The nerve of those people!” she thought. “I make their job easier by taking out a common enemy, and what do they do? Tie me up and treat me like some kind of animal!” Drumming up a few ounces of willpower, Electra began slithering over the magical girl, using her to try and get some leverage. “Well, at least now I know what the first kingdom dad and I are going to go and crush after I save the world…”

Now that she was sitting upright, Electra was finally able to get a better grasp on her surroundings. She and the red-haired girl were sitting in the back of a horse-drawn wagon built out of a strange sort of wood, trapped inside of a grated cage that covered the top of the wagon. Rather than the subtle shadows and variations of light one came to expect from normal objects, the wood was a pitch black, with stark, white lines providing the rings and notches that one came to expect from wood. The bars of the cage were also pitch black, and instead of having patterns on them they seemed to have a faint white outline that seemed equally thick no matter how close one got to it. And up in front were the enchantress, her pet, and a large man whom upon further inspection appeared to have a rat’s snout, and seemed seemed to be driving the whole contraption.

The outside of the cage was a whole different story. They were riding through a town, past a strange series of buildings. Like the wagon she was riding and the cage she was trapped in, the town’s primary colors were black and white, the latter of which was reserved almost exclusively for outlines. There splashes of color here and there, mostly on signs and posters. But aside from Electra, the magical girl, and the mongrels in the front seat, there was nary a hue to be found. Electra would have thought she was being driven past a highly detailed chalk-drawing, if not for the occasional figures watching from the sidelines.

As for the buildings themselves … well, calling them “gothic” would be a bit of a cliche, but it was a good starting point. Pseudo-Victorian structures seemed to roll into one another little rhyme or reason, decorated with foreboding archways topped with gargoyles, crooked metal gates, and ominous black spires. Streets turned at unnatural angles, and were lined with obsidian cobblestones that the cart clackered over with willful abandon. Bridges criss-crossed over sections of the city, forming foreboding archways decorated with solemn gargoyles that kept watch on the general populace with their disappointed gazes. And if Electra had cared about such things then she would have noticed some actual gothic architecture, all of which were facsimiles of famous cathedrals, twisted to the point that historians and students of architecture alike would both be crying blasphemy.

And towering above the endless city was The Castle. Electra took one look at it and knew that it didn’t need any other name. It was simply “The Castle”. And it was a proper castle, one that fully deserved a definite article and superfluous capitalization. It was built on a massive hilltop that to loomed over the horizon, surrounded by concentric rings of walls, each of which seemed to have a small city buried within them. Along the walls were pathways where stoney-faced guards would no doubt opened fire upon the first sign of dissent. And inside in the innermost ring was the keep, a rectangular structure whose corners were marked by cylindrical towers, their shape not unlike that of a rook in chess.

But even these were dwarfed by the central tower, one of those impractically tall spires that could only ever be used for one of three things: astronomy, wizardry, or locking up princesses. Given
what Electra remembered her captors saying before she fell unconscious, it was most likely the latter. Though in all fairness she’d probably keep the princess there after she conquered the castle for herself, assuming her father didn’t simply have the other princess executed. “We can’t have rival royalty vying for the throne, after all.” Electra mused.

The window in central tower emitted a radiant light, the only light in the city that dared to shine any brighter than the dim, jerky constructs that approximated as lampposts. As Electra stared at the structure, she noticed that the radiance was not a steady glow, rather, it was pulsing. Slowly at first, but with increasing frequency until the tower looked more like strobe lite. And just when even Electra’s finely-tuned eyes couldn’t distinguish one frame and the next, the city was swept in a blinding flash.

And then everything changed.

The crude pseudo-Victorian structures were replaced by charming white, sun-drenched buildings with thatched roofs and hardwood beams, with little heart-shaped windows near the attics for the barn owls to roost in. The narrow, jagged, disorderly streets became wide cobblestone boulevards, lined with merchant stands stocked full of all manner of crafts and curiosities. But most importantly of all color suffused the entire scene, and Electra realized how starved for it her eyes had become since she awakened.

But as much as Electra wanted to persist in this magical, fairytale kingdom, the illusion began to fade after only a few brief seconds. The sky went from a cerulean blue to an inky black, while the buildings deformed back into their unnatural shapes with barred windows and unfeeling brickwork. The streets sunk back into shadows, swallowing the merchant stands with them. And once again the world outside Electra’s cell was devoid of color, save for the purple streaks in Ebony’s hair, and the cherry-red jacket of her associate.

“That’s been happening a lot lately, hasn’t it?” said Vash. Or possibly Blade, Electra didn’t care what the wolf-man called himself as long as it was consistent.

“Yes.” said Lady Ebony.

“...Shouldn’t we be more worried?”

Ebony glared at Blade. “Haven’t you been paying any attention at all? We’ve got prophecy on our side.”

“I don’t think The Locksmith cares.” said Blade. “It’s never stopped ‘im before.”

“Well fuck the locksmith!” Ebony snapped. “That idiot’s going to get what’s coming to him; once his precious little princess is snuffed out, he’s going to be next!”

Blade paused for a moment. “She’s not little.”

Ebony gave her partner a blank look. “Wat.”

“The Princess. She’s not little. I’ve seen her.” he raised his right hand high above his head. “She’s like, this big. I think.”

“ITS A FUCKING METAPHOR OKAY?!?!” The rat-faced man nearly leapt out of his seat as Ebony began to shriek. “MY FUCKING SATAN DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE EVERYTHING SO LITERAL?!”

“No ma’am.”
“THAT WAS A RHETORICAL QUESTION!”

“Yes ‘mam.”

“DO YOU HAVE ANY MORE STUPID THINGS TO SAY?!?”

“...is that a rhetorical question?”

“YES. No. Maybe.” Ebony began exhaling deeply as she tried to collect herself. “...do you?”

“Well, uh…” Blade scratched the back of his neck. “...shouldn’t we at least be going after the Locksmith’s agent?”

“It wasn’t that important. If you read the intel, then you’d know that she’s just on a mission to kill her Fetch.”

“...yeah, but-”

“NO BUTS!” raised her hand in front of Blade’s face. “Tell me again, who’s in charge here?”

“...you are, ma’am.”

“And WHO is it that am I going to murder, chop into little pieces and bake into a pie if they fail to obey my every order?”

“...me, ma’am.”

“So unless it’s REALLY IMPORTANT, I want you to SHUT THE FUCK UP! Do I make myself clear?!”

“...crystal, ma’am.”

With that out of the way, Ebony resumed focusing on the road ahead, arms crossed and hunched over, grumbling something about incompetent minions. The rat-faced man looked at Ebony for a moment, and got a stern glare that said “what are you looking at?” before he went back to steering the cart.

Electra, having seen more that she cared to, figured that now was the perfect time to make her escape. She scoped out a building with an open door, the entrance to a tavern of some sort where a crowd of strangers would no doubt be wordlessly drowning their sorrows with cheap ale. Naturally, this would make the perfect escape route, as the confused patrons would probably buy Electra a little time even if her pursuers literally tore through them. All she had to do was call upon her superhuman strength to break through these chains…

...but just as it seems like she was making some headway, a slight tingling sensation ran through her skin. She looked down at them, and noticed that they no longer had the rusty coating of aged iron, but rather the shiny gloss of magically-reinforced platinum.

“Not again…” Electra thought. “...if only these cretins were dignified enough to let me keep my armor. Maybe then I could turn this blasted power off, and break through these chains like they were nothing!” She struggled against her bindings a little more as she tried to get her arms into a comfortable position. “Perhaps I can work my way through this…” she thought. “...it’s my Noble Phantasm, after all. Why should I not be able to command this power with greater precision?”

Electra looked at the chains. She then closed her eyes and began to moderate her breathing. “I am
in control of this power.” she thought. “I am it’s master, not it’s slave. It springs from my legacy, of what I have done, and my destiny, of what I have yet to do. It would be nothing without me, a unique existence from which my power spawned. It exists only to serve me, and serve me it shall. When I next open my eyes, my power will have retracted, and the chains that even now bind me will have withered away...

She opened her eyes and looked again. The chains were now diamond.

“GAAAAH! WHY WON’T THIS STUPID THING COME OFF?!” Electra threw herself onto the floor of the cart, and began to thrash about in a vain attempt to break free of her bonds, occasionally smacking straight into the red-haired girl as she did so. She grew so desperate that she crawled up to one of the bars, and tried to tear it apart using only her teeth.

Hearing the ruckus going on behind him, Blade leaned back in his seat and turned around to face Electra. He then turned back to face Ebony. “’Ma’am?”

“What now?!” Ebony yelled.

“One of the prisoners is trying to escape.”

“Oh.” Ebony looked slightly embarrassed. “Thank you for reminding me.” Ebony glanced backward, and pointed her wand at Electra before blasting her with another Stupify curse.

And so Electra Pendragon, daughter of the greatest heroes who ever lived, fell limp once more as she began the long, slow march into unconsciousness.

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BETHANY SNOW: And welcome back to Channel 52!

AMBUSH BUG: Tune in, or the world is doomed!

BETHANY SNOW: Our top story tonight; Uwe Wood, Writer, Director, Executive Producer, and lead actor of Lawyers and Orderlies: Sensational Victims Unit is being sued for copyright infringement. The lawsuit claims that Wood had stolen concepts, characters, and even dialogue to produce a “vastly inferior copy” of NBC’s similarly-titled, Emmy award winning show; Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. When contacted, Wood refused all questioning and instead challenged our field reporter to a boxing match.

AMBUSH BUG: Which I won, by the way!

BETHANY SNOW: Attention has also been brought to Wood’s other project; Fracturing Villainously, in which a bald school-teacher turns to cooking meth in order to pay for his cancer operation. More on that as it develops. And now here’s Joseph Coyne with the latest news from wall street.

JOSEPH COYNE: GENOM’s stock plummeted today in light of recent rulings against their line of homicidal androids that went berserk for no reason. The company was subsequently bought out by Gilded Serpent Securities, one of the world’s leading Private Security firms. Similarly, the long-suffering Aperture Science corporation was recently bought out by KaibaCorp, who I’m sure will use Aperture Science’s world changing discoveries to create even more incredibly over the top ways to play children’s cards games. Back to you, toots!

BETHANY SNOW: Um… thank you, Coyne. And now here’s Dr. W, with part two of our series on Super Young Team.
THE 11TH DOCTOR: Evening, everyone! I’m here at “Russian Sushi”, one of the most “hip” and “happening” places in Ikebukuro. Tonight we’re speaking with Big Atomic Lantern Boy, one of the founding members of Super Young Team. As you can see he seems to be enjoying himself, stuffing food down his gullet like there was no tomorrow. So tell me, Lantern Boy; what’s it like being on Super Young Team?

BIG ATOMIC LANTERN BOY: Omnomnomnomnomnomnomnom...

THE 11TH DOCTOR: I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.

BIG ATOMIC LANTERN BOY: Omnomnomnomnomnomnomnom…

THE 11TH DOCTOR: Ah… I see. And what do you think of Superbat?

BIG ATOMIC LANTERN BOY: Omnomnomnomnomnomnomnom…

THE 11TH DOCTOR: …I’m starting to regret letting you pick the meeting location.

BIG ATOMIC LANTERN BOY: Omnomnomnomnomnomnomnom…

Omake #3: The Justice Substitutes of Japan, Part 1

DR. SUMMERS: Thank you for coming to try out for the Justice Society. Now tell me, what power do you have?

FUBUKI: I have the power to play video games really, really well. But only while upside-down and wearing passion panties.

DR. SUMMERS: That’s… very specific.

LELOUCH: Next.

DAN HIBIKI: I am Dan Hibiki, inventor of the world-renowned Saikyo-style of martial arts! Allow me to demonstrate my newest technique: ATOMIC DRAGON KUCKLE DIVER- Oh god leg cramp! Leg cramp! Shit, give me a moment to stretch...

LELOUCH: Next.

T.K. (NOT THE ONE FROM DIGIMON): <I’ll make a supersonic man outta you!>

RIVALZ: <Uhhhhhhhhhh… are you saying you have super-speed?>

T.K.: <Another one bites the dust!>

RIVALZ: <You… eat dust? What?>

LELOUCH: <Do you even know English?>

T.K.: <He’s the one that makes ya feel alright!>

LELOUCH: Next.

TEDDY BOMBER: I am the infamous Teddy Bomber! Unless you give into my demands-

RIVALZ: What’s with that costume? You’re just wearing a T-Shirt and a plastic bear mask.
TEDDY BOMBER: ...look, it was all I could find on such short notice, okay? Now, as I was saying…

LELOUCH: Come back when you either have a better name, or a better costume.

TEDDY BOMBER: But I-

LELOUCH: Next.

COMMANDER BEEF: My name is Commander Beef! My power is that I am at the peak of physical fitness, because I eat a balanced diet with lotsa calcium!

LELOUCH: Yes, I can see that by your very visible paunch.

RIVALZ: Why is your helmet shaped like a fish if your name is “Commander Beef”?

COMMANDER BEEF: Ah! Well, you see; fish are a vital source of calcium, and I-

LELOUCH: Next.

SOME TIME LATER
AT A MAID CAFE OR SOMETHING

FUBUKI: Awwww maaan! I can’t believe I didn’t make it on the team!

DAN: Well at least you can learn to be better. I, on the other hand, have the opposite problem. I was just so AMAZING that they’re afraid that I’ll outshine the rest of the team.

T.K.: <Your very first kiss was your first kiss goodbye!>

DAN: You said it, crazy blindfold guy!

COMMANDER BEEF: Well buck up, kid. It ain’t the end of the world or anythin’. Just keep yer eye on the prize, and things’ll turn around eventually.

FUBUKI: Yeah…

TEDDY BOMBER: Attention, patrons of this establishment! I have hidden an explosive device somewhere in this-

SUDDENLY A BIG HOLOGRAPHIC SCREEN APPEARS RIGHT OUTTA NOWHERE

?????: GREETINGS, Justice Society!

DAN: *looks around* You mean us?

?????: PRECISELY! I am MYSTERIOUR, a mysterious new villain who hates you all for MYSTERIOUS reasons!

COMMANDER BEEF: What, did the old Justice Society run over ‘yer puppy or somethin’?

MYSTERIOUR: MAAAAYBE they did. MAAAAYBE they didn’t. But what you should know is that I will do something very, VERY mysterious unless you placate me!

TEDDY BOMBER: Now hold on a second, I was in the middle of a-
MYSTERIOUS: You have twenty-four MYSTERIOUS hours to give into my MYSTERIOUS demands!

FUBUKI: What kinda demands?

MYSTERIOUS: My demands... are ALSO A MYSTERY! MWA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

T.K.: <We are the champions, my friend!>

COMMANDER BEEF: T.K.’s right. I think. The only way we’re gonna stop this creep is if we work together. I now officially declare the formation of the “Commander Beef Bridage!”

DAN HIBIKI: I think you mean “Dan Hibiki’s Howling Commandos”.

T.K.: <Dynamite and a Laser Beam!>

COMMANDER BEEF: Alright, fine. Until further notice, we’re “The Howling Dynamite Beef Commando Brigade”! Now, Fubuki: You and Dan go search the docks. T.K. and Teddy, you head for the shopping district.

TEDDY BOMBER: Wait, who said I was part of your-

COMMANDER BEEF: Howling Dynamite Beef Commandos, DISMISSED!

TO BE CONTINUED!

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AUTHOR’S NOTES:
The Zenigata Building is not named after Koichi Zenigata from Lupin III, but rather his ancestor Heiji Zenigata.

So let’s talk about clothing. And I don’t mean costumes, I’m talking about the clothing the characters wear in their civilian identities. While I go out of my way to describe a character’s outfit if it’s pretty unusual, I don’t always describe their civilian clothes. So here’s what I’d be instructing the art team to draw if this were an anime or an actual comic book:

Simon: Iconic outfit. Whenever he’s in public and not at a formal event, he wears his signature post-timeskip jacket over whatever he’d be wearing otherwise, usually a T-Shirt.

Shulk: Rummage Sale Reject. Seems to have a uncanny knack for finding unusual clothing and armor that only looks odd if you take the time to scan him over completely. As a result, he ends up looking like a JRPG character more often than not (which he is, admittedly).

Hope/Honkale: Name-Brand T-Shirts and either jeans or shorts, depending on the weather. Wild Tiger t-shirts are her favorite, but she’ll wear anything that has something from a video game or cartoon that she recognizes.

Shirley: Designer clothing. She doesn’t go out of her way to wear anything outrageously skimpy, but neither does she have a preference for dressing modestly. She simply dresses how a normal teenage girl with her wealth and social standing would dress.

Sayaka: She dresses pretty normally for a girl her age, though her clothing isn’t nearly as expensive as Shirley’s. Started to wear a lot more blue after she became a magical girl.
Shinji: Never wears t-shirts with brands on them, because he isn’t a particular fan of anything.

Shirou: Yet again, he doesn’t have any particularly unusual tastes in clothing, though he probably has a Superman T-Shirt somewhere.

Lightning: Arbitrary. Most of her more outlandish costumes come from Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII, though unlike said game they don’t actually grant her any powers. At most, she’ll express mild indifference towards what she’s wearing, especially when it’s shamless fanservice.

Ino: Should never be wearing “girly” clothes, such as skirts or dresses. In formal situations, she’ll be wearing a suit and a tie.

Electra: Never wears anything skimpy if she can help it, and always wears gauntlets even if doing so would be impractical for the task at hand.

Milly: She’s very proud of her figure, so she’ll usually be wearing something that accentuates it in some way by virtue of being tight, revealing or some combination of the two.

Kallen: When not in either her Ashford uniform or her Black Knights uniform, she usually wears something that’s loose and easy to move around in.

Also, because I didn’t have an Author’s Notes section in the last chapter, here’s everyone’s favorite Superhero, real (at least in-universe) or fictional.

Simon: Green Lantern Guy Gardner

Nia: Her boyfriend, Simon

Hope: Wild Tiger

Ino: Can’t remember any of them long enough to decide.

Lightning: She’ll never admit it, but Green Lantern John Stewart.

Shulk: Steel

Shirley: Uhhh… Superman?

Nina: Superman, I guess…

Rivalz: SUPERMAN!!!

Kallen: Superman, Lady Blackhawk

Milly: Guy Shishioh, from GaoGaiGar

Nunnally: Booster Gold

Shirou: Superman

Taiga: Booster Gold, Green Lantern Kyle Rayner

Lelouch: Batman, though he thinks Sentinel had a cooler costume.

C.C.: Frankenstein

Detective Ikari: Batman (he would certainly make his job easier)
Detective Maniwa: Batman

Police Chief Sonoda: Anyone other than Most Excellent Superbat

Excel: A three-way tie between Most Excellent Superbat, Whoever the current Flash is, and Ambush Bug

Il Pallazo: V, from V for Vendetta.

Ebony: Scarecrow (Yes I know he’s a villain, but don’t correct her. Ebony hates being corrected.)

Bladevash: Vash the Stampede

Sayaka: Wonder Woman

Madoka: Superman

Kyubey: If he has one, he’s not saying. 🌟∕ caves🌟∕ caves

Electra: ...you’ll find out later. ;)

Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah. And it would be nice if you left a review!
This chapter was posted on Christmas 2013, so if you’re just now reading it, Merry Christmas!

Kyosuke Kamijou was used to crowds. As a world-famous violin prodigy, the boy had been living around them all his life. People came from all over to watch him play in both orchestras and on his own, and even when his fingers weren’t working their magic Kyosuke was constantly swarmed by poseurs and sycophants. To Kamijou, crowds were just another fact of life.

But while it was one thing to face a crowd interested in seeing you, it was quite another to be part of a crowd out to see someone else; sandwiched between masses of squealing kids and fanboyish adults, weaving down concrete corridors lined with stands selling overpriced snacks and souvenirs, scrambling around in search for the right section with a pair of girls he barely knew.

“And Gate 22 should be riiiiight… here.” Sayaka frowned as she looked at her map. “Or maybe I’m holding it wrong,” she said as she tried turning it upside-down. “Unless I’m looking at it funny…”

“No no, you got it,” chimed Sayaka’s pink-haired friend (Madoka, Kamijou believed it was). “It’s right over there, see?” The girl pointed at a white sign with black text outlined in orange.

“Ah. Right.” Sayaka hastily folded up her map, leaving some uneven edges. “Told ya’ my innate sense of direction would get us there!”

Kamijou sighed. What could he say about Sayaka? She was just as guilty as anyone else of giving Kamijou special treatment, what with talking about him like he was in already league with the greats, bringing him albums of classical symphonies he had heard a dozen times before, and visiting Kamijou in the hospital every single day like they had some kind of manic pixie dream girl ritual going on.

“Twenty-three… four… and five! Looks like we’re here!” Sayaka pulled back the seat on the right and made herself comfortable, while Madoka took the seat on the far left. Sayaka then pulled down the middle seat, and gestured for Kamijou to take it. Kamijou’s eyes rolled at how obvious this gesture of affection was.

Still, for all her troubles, Sayaka did have her good points. If nothing else she was certainly a lot more loyal than most of Kamijou’s fans, as she kept up her visits even after the doctors told her that Kamijou was never going to play the violin again. And there certainly must be something her friend Madoka likes about her, or else the two wouldn’t hang out so much. He just wasn’t quite
Now that he was seated, Kamijou got his first good look at the concert floor, which he had only
caught brief glimpses of as they made their way to their section. The baseball diamond had been
transformed into a futuristic setpiece featuring black, geometric shapes whose edges were outlined
in glowing blue lights, the largest of which was an enormous cube hovering above a torus, slowly
rotating in place. And on every face of the cube was a clock that was slowly counting down,
presumably to the concert start time. He wasn’t exactly a fan of the style, but admitted it was a
pretty well-designed set all things considered.

Suddenly, Kamijou felt someone nudging at his ribs. Not surprisingly, when he turned to the side
he found that “someone” to be Sayaka.

“So, waddya think?” she said. “Sure beats sitting around at home waiting for your arm to heal, am
I right?”

That it certainly did. Miracle recovery or not, it would still be a few days before Kamijou would be
strong enough to start practicing again. “I guess that’s one way to put it,” he said. “There are
certainly worse ways to kill a Friday night.”

Sayaka looked worried for just a moment. Apparently, that wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Don’t
get me wrong, it’s not that I’m ungrateful,” Kamijou said. “Honestly, I think I’d actually be feeling
worse if you took me to a classical concert. I’d spend the whole time envying the guys who
actually get to play.”

Sayaka gave a nervous laugh in response.

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“Sooo… what exactly are we looking for, again?” said Shirley.

“Anything out of the ordinary,” Lightning replied. “Hidden explosives, scouting dones, chemical
weapons… anything that an advance party would leave behind before an invasion.”

“Are we likely to find something like that?”

“Doubtful. From what little Shulk could tell us, subterfuge doesn’t seem to be the Mechons’ style.”
Lightning pulled up the brim of her cap at as it once again fell over her eyes. “Then again, it never
hurts the be cautious.”

“Ah.” Shirley continued to fidget with a stress ball he picked up earlier that day. Between the
music emanating from the inner stadium, and the cellular signals bouncing all over the place, she
was finding it hard to stay calm and collected.

That being said, as bad as Shirley was, Ino looked worse. While trying to keep pace with Lightning
and Shirley, every once in a while she would look at the index cards taped to her arm, and without
fail she would leap away once she looked up at Lightning. She would then launch into a quiet
panic attack before calming down into a slight case of jitters, only for the cycle to repeat again a
few moments later.

Shirley wasn’t sure if watching this spectacle was more sad or disturbing, but either way it raised a
very interesting question…

“Why isn’t Ino wearing any shoes?” asked Shirley.
“She didn’t bring them,” Lightning said. “Said she had a hard time walking in heels. Which begs the question of why she was wearing a pair of heeled boots in the first place, but that’s not really a huge concern right now.”

“So… what are we doing here, then?” said Shirley. “I mean it’s pretty obvious what we’re doing here in the Tokyo Dome but I mean why are we on this team or I guess a subset of the greater team and I’m sorry I’ll shut up now.”

“No, that’s a good question.” Lighting stopped, and began looking around. They were in the food court of the Tokyo Dome, which was closed off for the concert. No people were around, and all of the benches had been moved to storage. “Given my weakness, normally I’d be staying as far away from Ino as possible. But I need the both of you for something.” She stepped forward a few more paces, and then turned around to address the girls. “I need to test the limits of your powers, because it’s clear that the two of you don’t understand them.”

“Um… okay.” Shirley looked at Ino. She was now completely transfixed on Lightning. “So… how do we do that?” Shirley asked.

“We’ll do Ino first, since her abilities are still unclear.” Ino flinched as Lightning looked at her. “Ino, Kyubey told me you have a talent for mimicry. Is that true?”

“Uh… I don’t know,” said Ino. “What’s ‘mimicry’?”

Lightning sighed. “It means you’re very good at copying what other people do.”

“Oh.” Ino was flush with embarrassment. “I… guess I am pretty good at that.” She reached into one of her jacket’s side-pockets to pull out a marker, some tape, and an index card to take notes with.

“Not right now,” Lighting said. “This is too important.”

Ino put the office supplies back into her pockets.

“Right…” Lighting pulled out her strange gun-blade weapon, and held it out for the girls to see. “There are only a handful of people in the world who know how to use a weapon like this.” She took a couple steps back. “Now I want you to watch closely…”

A split-second later, Lightning launched into a dizzying series of kicks, backflips and swordstrikes, as if she were trying to strike an invisible enemy from all sides. This went on for a good five seconds, before she landed in front of Ino, flipped her weapon back into gun form and handed it to Ino. “Your turn,” she said.

Shirley stared at Lighting, slack-jawed. “…Just for the record, I’m not expected to be able to do that, right?”

Ino ignored Shirley. “Okay. Um, that looks pretty difficult. But I guess I could give it a try…” her hands shook as she reached out to take Lightning’s weapon, being careful not to make skin contact. There was a brief spark of dark energy as she put her hand around the grip, but other than that nothing out of the usual happened.

Ino moved to where Lighting was standing just a few moments ago, and took a deep breath. Then, with a diving leap, she began to flawlessly replicate Lightning’s every move down to the last pirouette and kickflip.

“How did I do?” the girl asked.
“You did just fine, Ino,” Lighting said, taking back her weapon. “Now let’s try something a little harder.” She reached into a pouch, and pulled out a small, striped piece of metal shaped like piece of pie, which unfolded into a red-and-white target. “I use these for practice,” she said. Lightning then placed one up against a concrete wall before getting back into position. Once she done so, Lighting then stuck her hand out palm-first, shooting out a small fireball, striking the metal target with deadly accuracy. “Now the real question is; are you able to do that?” said Lightning.

Ino gulped, and then stuck out her hand in an identical manner. She closed her eyes and grunted, but nothing happened. “Sorry… I tried my best…”

“Well, I guess that would make sense,” Shirley said. “I mean Ino is anti-magic, after all.”

“If that were universally true, she wouldn’t be able to use a Keyblade,” Lightning rebuffed. “I might only dabble in magic, but even I know that magic resistance doesn’t usually apply to one’s own magic. Either that or Keyblade’s aren’t magic, but I doubt that’s the case.” She then looked at Ino. “Try pulling it out and then casting the spell. Maybe try using it as a focus; I’ve heard that can help.”

“Right…” without quite understanding what Lighting said, she out and summoned her Keyblade, which appeared in a flash of light. It was an odd-looking thing with a large, two-handed grip, all of which was connected to a long, metal shaft. At the end of the shaft was a metal extrusion that looked like the ‘bit’ of an old-fashioned key, which provided the weapon’s namesake. It was very plain-looking, manufactured, even, with all the jagged edges forming perfect right angles. And finally, it had a uniform grey coloration that looked neither shiny nor dull.

Neither Shirley nor Lightning had ever seen a real Keyblade before. In fact if Kyubey hadn’t been helpful enough to put a name to the weapon, they wouldn’t even know what to call it. Apparently Lighting had done some back-checking, but didn’t really find out much about the weapon; all of the pertinent research materials were locked up in libraries that were very hard to get into, even for an investigator of her caliber. The only thing she could find was a news report mentioning that an American kid named Sora somehow found a Keyblade and used it to defeat a group called “Organization XIII”.

Shirley was familiar with that name. Rivalz had mentioned it several times back when she first got her powers. Organization XIII was a nebulous group of metahumans, aliens or cyborgs (accounts varied on that front) that were supposedly responsible for every unexplained disappearance, murder, or other disaster in the last decade, even the ones that seemed impossible. While it was clear the group did exist in some capacity, finding any reliable information on the group was an exercise in frustration. This is because they made good targets for conspiracy theorists, especially since they all wore conspicuous black cloaks like the one Ino had. But the idea that one kid (admittedly with the help of a space cop and some sort of magic user) were able to take down the group single-handedly was… absurd, to say the last.

Regardless of whether Sora had told the truth about his exploits, Lightning had intended to get in contact with the kid with the keyblade to see if he knew Ino. But of course, the current mission took priority.

“Oh, I know this might not make any sense…” Lighting said to Ino, “Try to do what you saw me doing, but try to do it with your keyblade instead of just your hand.”

“Okaaay…” Lighting watched as Ino pointed her weapon at the target, and began to concentrate.

Moments later, Ino flew back as a shadowy fireball traveled down the shaft of the Keyblade, and launched itself in the direction Ino was pointing. There was an explosion of black light as the
“fireball” missed its mark and collided with a nearby trash can, causing a small explosion that sent bits of flaming refuse flying everywhere.

“Shirley; sprinklers, now!” Lightning pointed up at the ceiling.

“Right!” Shirley looked up at one of the sprinkler heads situated above the inferno, and tried to turn a couple of them on. But instead she ended up soaking the entire room, herself and her partners included.

“Heh… sorry about that.” Shirley tried to laugh off the accident, only to hang her head in shame, water dripping off her long, orange-red hair.

Lighting, however, continued to stare at the sprinkler right above them. “You know these sprinklers are mechanical, right? Not a single computer operating them.” She looked back at Shirley. “Same goes for the water faucets that turn themselves on at night. A purely computer-based technopath wouldn’t be able to do something like that.”

“Okay… so what does that mean?”

“It means you’ve got more options than you think. Pretty much everything we use is some form of technology. Even a simple wooden club counts if you stretch the definition far enough.” Lighting looked around as water began to pile up by her feet. “Now I’m not saying you’ll be able to tie people’s laces togeather but…” she suddenly paused as she looked at the destroyed trash can.

“Wait,” she went over, and picked up a worn, plastic rectangle, with some wires jutting out of it that were connected to an old-fashioned alarm clock.

As she got closer, Shirley realized that it was a tape recorder, the sort you might find in a thrift store or a used electronics shop. And on the tape recorder, were printed four simple words in bright red, permanent marker. “Are We Cool Yet?”

“Damn it…” Lightning muttered. “This better not be what I think it is…” she popped open the recorder, and handed the tape to Shirley. “Tell me what’s on this tape,” she barked, “but whatever you do don’t listen to it.”

“Excuse me?” Shirley gave Lightning a befuddled look.

“It’s a cassette tape. It’s a magnetized strip with a pattern encoded to it. Tell me what the pattern looks like.”

Shirley held the tape in front of her forehead, and closed her eyes. She thought back to the time her father showed her how a Vocaloid voice synthesizer worked because she had asked how they could sing if they didn’t need to breath.

The question came up when Shirley was six. Miku had been built and programmed, but her A.I. still needed a few years of life to develop, so she was placed into safe, childlike body and became Shirley’s playmate. Milly was visiting that day (since her father was a major investor in Joseph’s company), and had just met Miku for the first time when she decided to see who could hold their breath the longest. They all went through a few rounds of the game before realizing that Miku didn’t actually breath at all, she was just programmed to look like she did.

Joseph spent an entire hour trying to explain the basics of sounds through simple conversation, so he brought the trio into his office showed them an olioscope. He then let them play around with it, making all sorts of silly sounds into the microphone. He explained that the lines on the oscilloscope represented the noises they made, and that a taller wave meant a louder sound. They
then plugged the microphone into a computer, to demonstrate that computers can read these waves as well, and convert them into data. He then went on to explain that when Miku wanted to say something her processor constructed the appropriate sounds based on known data, but Shirley wasn’t thinking about that. She was thinking about the interface of the sound-recording program, how it let you “read” a sound without actually listening to it. She wondered if that was what Lightning wanted her to do…

Picturing the interface in her mind, she tried to coax the electromagnetic signals on the tape into the imaginary screen. At first Shirley thought she had failed, for all she saw was a straight line with some. But as she looked closer, she noticed there were faint faint imperfections, including a soft sound that played three different times, as well as a faint rhythmic sound, and some slightly more sharp sounds that appeared at what Shirley assumed were beginning and ends of the tape. She was curious as to what these sounds could be, but remember Lightning’s advice she resisted the temptation to play them, even in the confines of her own head.

Opening her eyes, Shirley snapped out of her trance.

“So. What was on it?”

“I’m not really sure…” said Shirley. “There were sounds on it, but it was so quiet most of the time…”

“Of course…” Lightning looked over the tape. “You didn’t listen to it, did you?”

“Of course not! Why?”

Summoning a stationary fireball, Lightning melted the tape in her bare hands. “This thing is a powerful cognitohazard that messes with people’s brains to the point where they can’t hear, or even comprehend music anymore.” She tossed the melted plastic on the ground, where it sizzled in the water that continued to pool up around their feet.

“That’s horrible!” said Shirley. “Who would do such a thing?”

“‘Are We Cool Yet’, a group of so-called ‘art terrorists’ who like to do pretentious bullshit like this because they think they’re really clever.” Lightning turned around. “The problem is, they’ve already tried this before. Normally they’re picky about not doing the same thing twice. Stranger still, everyone involved is supposed to be dead…” Lightning glanced at the clock that the tape recorder was connected to. “No time to dwell on that, though. If there’s any more of these things, it looks like we only have an hour before they all go off.”

Shirley looked at Ino, who appeared to be rather confused about all of this. Shirley was too; Lightning’s explanation had gone far too fast for her to get more than a couple bits and pieces. But unlike Ino, Shirley at least could act like she knew what she was doing.

“…Right,” she said. “So how are we going to do that?”

“We search the rest of the arena,” Lightning said. “We can’t expect to evacuate the place in time, but there’s only so many places where you can hide something like that, and… wait. What’s that sound?”

Shirley picked up her ears, and tried to listen through the sound of the water rushing out of the sprinkler system. There was indeed a sound approaching them. A voice, in fact. Most likely male, but you could never tell sometimes. As it got closer, Shirley was able to make out a song...

“<I'm siiiiiiinging in the raaiin
Just siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing in the raiiiiiiiiiiiin
What a glorious feelin'
I'm happy again…>”

It was then that the trio saw what was perhaps the strangest thing they had seen all day; a man made of living shadow, with a head that was almost shaped like a question mark, skipping down the abandoned food court, carrying a brightly-colored umbrella with the face of a popular cartoon character printed on it, singing one of Gene Kelly’s most famous songs. The group continued to stare at the man as he continued his impromptu musical number, before Ino decided to speak up.

“<Um. Can we help you, mister…?>”

“<Mister Nobody’s the name, and nothing is my game.>” He made a motion as if he was tipping his hat, and then handed Ino a white business card that had word “FISH” written on it in big, blocky letters. “<I produce nothing, sell nothing, clean nothing, and can introduce you to any number of nothings, nobodies and neverweres.>”

“<Uh-huh.>” Ino politely nodded, not really understanding.

He then pointed at Shirley. “<Tell me young lady; have you heard of the Brotherhood of Dada?>”

“<No, not really…>” Shirley began to lean away from the strange man who was now invading her privacy.

“<Of course not!>” he shouted. “<They were the biggest nothing I ever made! A testament to nothingness! Oh but that’s a story for a different time.>” Mr. Nobody then moonwalked back a few paces, his feet sloshing around in the puddles on the floor as he did so. “<Anyway I’m working on nothing important right now, so would you girls be dears and leave the rest of the tape recorders alone?>”

“So you’re the one behind this.” Lightning pointed her weapon at the shadowy figure. “<What exactly does ‘Are We Cool Yet’ have to do with the Mechon?>”

Mr. Nobody shrugged. “<‘Coolness’ is such an overused term, don’t you think? It’s just a social construct the haves use to make the have-nots feel worse about themselves.>”

“<Answer the question!>” Lighting switched her weapon back into gun form.

“<WOAH there darlin’, no need to turn this into a gunfight, ya’hear?>” Mr. Nobody said, suddenly speaking with a fake Texan accent. “<I ain’t heard of no such thing ‘round these here parts. I’m just an ol’ wanderin’ cowpolk, wanderin’ wherever the wind takes me,>” he made a motion with his arms as if he were throwing a lasso.

“<You’re lying.>” said Lightning.

“<That is completely possible!>” Mr. Nobody reverted back to his original northeasterly American accent. “<I’m such a good liar that even I don’t even know if I’m telling the truth half the time!>”

“Well then you’re stalling,” said Lighting. “<You’re either waiting for backup or waiting for the tape recorders to go off. Either way I’ll give you one last chance; surrender now, or we’ll have to do this the hard way.>”

“<Hey now, man!>” Mr. Nobody said. “<Can’t we all give peace a chance? You know, learn to
love one another in mutual respect and- SUCKER PUNCH!>” he hollered as he threw himself towards Lightning with inhuman speed, winding his fist back for a punch.

Just as the blow was about to connect with Lightning’s face, Lightning grabbed Mr. Nobody’s fist with her free hand, stopping him in his tracks. She then twisted the hand back until it made a sharp, snapping noise.

“AIEEEEEEEEEE!” Mr. Nobody screamed. “OH GOD THE PAIN! I’M NEVER GOING TO BE ABLE TO USE A PENCIL AGAIN! WHY COULDN’T I HAVE BEEN LEFT HANDED!? WHYYYYY!”

He then collapsed onto the floor, and began to sob.

“Well that was deceptively simple,” Lightning said. “Now we need to get this guy locked up, and then find his co-conspirators…”

Ino began to approach the sobbing wreck on the floor. “Excuse me… are you okay, mister?”

Just as she was getting into arms reach, however, Mr. Nobody sprang up from the floor and shouted “SUCKER PUNCH 2: ELECTRIC BOOGALOO!” and sprang into a leaping somersault that ended in a dive straight into Ino’s chest, where he seemed to disappear entirely.

“INO!” Shirley yelled as the raven-haired girl collapsed onto the floor.

Lighting, on the other hand, trained her weapon on Ino. “Shirley, get back! Now!”

Shirley turned around and began to ask “Why?” before she was suddenly smacked in the back of the head with what felt like a sharp, metal object. Falling face-first onto the concrete floor, she began to right herself when suddenly Ino pointer her Keyblade right at Shirley’s throat with her right hand.

“Oooh… I’ve never possessed a girl before,” Ino said. “You know I’ve always wanted to do this ever since high school. Just wish she was a little older so I could feel her up without looking like a pedophile.”

Listening to the words coming out of Ino’s mouth, a chill ran up Shirley’s spine. “…Ino?”

“Wrong,” said Lightning. “That’s Mister Nobody in there,” she grabbed Shirley and helped her up. “And it looks to me like things just got a bit more complicated…”

“You got that right!” Mr. Nobody laughed using Ino’s voice. “It’s pretty roomy in here, actually; no memories to hold me back, nor pesky free will to get in the way. Where’d you find her, anyway? Some kind of… fleshy… robot… Illuminati factory?”

Lightning’s voice suddenly rang out in Shirley’s head. “Don’t worry. I have a plan.” Shire was startled for a moment, before she remembered Kyubey’s psychic link. “Kyubey. Let the others know about the tape recorders. Tell them to search the trash cans, but don’t turn them on. Destroy them, if you have to.”

“Right!” Kyubey responded. “Don’t worry, just leave everything to me…”

“So let me get this straight,” Lelouch said over the psychic link. “What you’re saying is that we have a little less than an hour to find and destroy an unknown number of tape recorders before art
terrorists mess up everyone’s heads while the girls fight a man who can possess people.”

“Yep! That’s pretty much the gist of it!” Kyubey replied.

“...well, it’s not exactly what we planned for, but I think we can handle that. Tell the others to stay on guard. Lelouch out.” Lelouch turned to address the rest of the support team, which at the moment consisted of Rivalz, Shirou, and Nina. They were hanging out by the surveillance van that they had rented for the occasion. It was parked right next to Rivalz’s motorcycle, which the young man had brought despite Lelouch’s insistence not to. “So. Did you get all that?” Lelouch asked.

“Most of it,” Rivalz said. “So what’s the plan? Drive around in a motorcycle smacking trash cans with baseball bats?”

“Don’t be absurd!” Lelouch snapped. “There’s already one villain in there, and I doubt he’s working alone. We just need to call Sonoda, and wait for his department to show up.”

“But who knows how long that could take!” said Shirou. “Every minute we waste is another minute an innocent could get caught in the crossfire!”

“Which could be us if we’re not careful.” Lelouch put his hand to his face. “Look. I know the two of you are eager to help, but we can do more good by-”

Just then, Lelouch heard a revving sound coming from the direction of the van. By the time he knew what was going on, Rivalz and Shirou were both long-gone, taking Rivalz’s motorcycle with them.

(Of course…” Lelouch clenched his fist. Those two were going to get themselves killed, no doubt about it. He then looked at Nina, who cringed a little as Lelouch’s icy stare enveloped her. “Guard the van,” he said. “And call the police, making sure to ask for Police Chief Sonoda. I’ll be back shortly.”)

Lelouch then broke into what he considered to be a run, but to most people was more of a slight jog. Once he was sure that he was too far for Nina to hear, but not close enough for Shirley to listen in, he pulled out his phone and dialed C.C.’s number.

“C.C., where are you exactly?” Lelouch said.

“At the base. Where you told me to be.” C.C. responded in her monotone way. “Sayoko has been doing an admirable job impersonating you, by the way, and found a very creative way to dispose of the wizard that’s been haunting your office the past few days. Oh, and I managed to get in contact with someone who might be able to explain Kallen’s condition. You see he thinks it’s-”

“Not now!” Lelouch yelled as he began to chase after the runaways. “Listen, is there ANYONE who can get to the Tokyo Dome within the hour?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” C.C. said. “The Knights usually despatched to that region are on a mission to Okinawa, fighting an army of skeletons led by a giant-”

“Nevermind then, forget I asked.” Lelouch hung the phone without another word. He had only been running for a few seconds, and he was already starting to feel winded. “If I make it out of this alive...” he wheezed, “...I need to get a gym membership...”

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Just as Lightning and the girls were patrolling one half of the Tokyo Dome, so too were Shinji and
Simon busy with the other half. Their vigil was a silent one, with Shinji keeping to himself while Simon guided the Laggan through the corridors of the arena, broken only by the occasional person running from their seat in order to use the bathroom.

In a way, Shinji was glad that nobody else was around to see him; the “costume” he currently wore consisted entirely of his street clothes, plus a plastic sentai mask picked up from the 100-yen shop that covered his face but little else.

Eventually, Shinji decided to break the awkward silence with a simple question: “Why did you become a superhero?” he asked.

“Well… I guess it was for the money,” Simon joked. “I’m kidding, of course. I’m not Booster Gold, after all. No, really I was just kinda caught up in a moment.”

Shinji nodded. The Spiral Kingdom’s invasion of Tokyo was one of his earliest memories. And while it wasn’t quite as catastrophic as even the whole “Fal’cie” thing, it was the first time that he realized how dangerous the world was outside of the ivory tower he lived in. He remembered his dad dragging him by the arm through the streets of Shibuya, as the Gunmen descended from the skies, their steely faces wide with malicious grins as they began their rampage. He remembered the bunker that the government officials and their families were sent to. And he remembered his mother, who on that day swore that she would find a way to protect her son...

“Oh. I see,” said Shinji. “The day you found that old mech in the junkyard…”

“And the keys, too,” Simon said. “I dunno if it was a coincidence, but it was bound to happen eventually.” He laughed. “Then Kamina got the idea to steal his own Gunman, and, well, it kinda spiraled out of control from there.”

Shinji once again agreed. He and his family had watched the final battle from a grainy pocket television.

“You know I don’t think it really clicked untill I met Superman,” Simon said. “It was, like, a few days after the battle and everything, and Superman had just gotten back from his mission to the sun, and he stopped by and was like ‘Hey you’re the guy who saved Tokyo while I was off fighting sun demons from the future. Good job! But maybe a little less killing next time’. And I was like ‘HOLY SHIT SUPERMAN TOLD ME I DID A GOOD JOB! Guess I’m a superhero now!’”

Shinji looked stunned. “Wait… you’ve killed someone?”

Simon’s eyes twitched as he realized what he just said. “Ah, well… we didn’t really have a choice,” he said. “It’s hard to empathize with the enemy when you’re fighting for survival.”

“Ah...” Shinji wasn’t sure whether to feel disappointed that Simon quite as perfect as he had hoped, angry at himself for not realizing something so obvious, or relieved that his mentor was being so honest with him.

But before the conversation could continue any further, a red laser beam shot past Shinji’s head, causing a nearby soda machine to explode. Slowly they turned their heads towards the source of the laser, and found a most peculiar sight; a man with a pencil-thin moustache wearing a garishly-colored patchwork suit as well as three colored lights.

It was then that Simon had a flash of recognition. “Hey… I recognize you!” he said. “Paul Dekker, AKA Crazy Quilt. Am I right?”
“So what if I am?!” the villain said.

“Well… you’re kinda supposed to be dead,” said Simon. “How’d you come back to life? And what are you doing in Japan, anyway?”

“None of your business!” Crazy Quilt screamed before firing off another laser from his helmet, which bounced harmlessly off the Lagann as Simon ducked into the cockpit.

Not wanting to become a target himself, Shinji threw up a shield of his own. “You seem pretty calm about this!” he yelped.

“Hey, I’ve heard of this guy. He’s kind of a one-trick pony,” Simon said flatly. “Nothing really to worry about-”

And then Crazy Quilt tackled Simon out of his mech and pinned him to the floor. “OH IS THAT A FACT!!” he screamed. “Do you know how many people I’ve killed because they didn’t take me SERIOUSLY?!?” He grabbed Simon’s head and pushed it up against his own, letting Simon see the villain’s blank, soulless eyes in more detail than he ever wanted.

“Oh that’s just Crazy Quilt, just another run-of-the-mill loony.” He slammed Simon’s head up against the concrete floor. “Oh, that’s just Crazy Quilt, the guy who goes after Robin because he’s not good enough for Batman.” He reached into one of his pockets, and pulled out a large paintbrush whose wooden end had been sharpened to a point, and began to hold one of Simon’s eyes open using his free hand. “Oh, that’s just Crazy Quilt, the guy who ended up with as suckey name because all the GOOD ONES! WERE! ALREADY! TAKEN!”

His eyes mad with sadistic glee, Crazy Quilt was just about to jab the crude implement right onto Simon’s eyeball, with every intention of skewering it like an olive. But before he could do any damage, the mad artist was knocked off his feet by a hexagonal force field slamming into him.

Now free of the villain’s clutches, Simon leapt to his feet and leapt back into the Lagann. He then looked at Shinji.

“Did you do that?” he said, pointing at the free-floating transparent hexagon that was even now trapping Crazy Quilt between a nearby wall.

Shinji nodded.

“How do you do any more of those?”

Shinji shook his head. “I’ve only been able to make one of them at a time…” he then clenched his forehead. “And… I don’t think I can hold it forever…”

Simon looked at the trapped villain. Sure enough, Crazy Quilt was slowly but surely prying Shinji’s forcefield away from himself.

“We just have to be a bit more creative then…” Simon said. “Try giving it a bit of slack.”

Following Simon’s directions, Shinji relaxed and let Crazy Quilt push the forcefield away, the sudden change throwing him off balance and sending him toppling over.

“Okay, now press him against the floor.”

Complying once again, Shinji reoriented the hexagon to face downward, and pressed down on the furious evildoer.
Now too enraged to speak, Crazy Quilt pointed his face at Shinji and fired a green laser directly at his head in retaliation, only to be blocked by the Laggan stepping into the laser’s path just as Simon winced in anticipation.

Unfortunately, Shinji’s momentary distraction proved to be all that Crazy Quilt needed in order to escape. He slithered out beneath the forcefield, and broke into a mad dash before vaulting over the Lagann towards Shinji.

Simon tried to grab the flying artist with the Laggan, but the clumsy robot hands lacked the dexterity to grab the moving target. So he abandoned the controls and leapt after the villain, latching onto a section of his colorful costume and falling out of the mech once more.

From here, the fight descended into an all-out brawl between Simon and Crazy Quilt, while Shinji stood on the sidelines trying to figure out who was winning. For a moment, Simon thought he had the advantage; he had more experience with fistfights, and had peripheral vision. But then one of the lights on Crazy Quilt’s helmet emitted a blinding flash; leaving Simon barely able to see anything but a blurry afterimage. This gave Crazy Quilt a home field advantage, which he demonstrated with a left-hook to Simon’s jaw, throwing Simon against a nearby vending machine.

Shinji tried to intercede by placing his barrier between Crazy Quilt and Simon, but he merely vaulted over it just like he did with the Lagann. Even Shinji’s attempt to ram the villain nearly ended in tragedy when he ducked out of the way, almost sending it crashing into Simon.

“DO YOU PEOPLE SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I GET ANGRY!?” Crazy Quilt exclaimed. “DO YOU?”

Slowly, Simon pushed himself off the soda machine, and got back up. “You call that angry?” he asked with a soft chuckle. “You’re just throwing a tantrum over how dumb your name sounds. You wouldn’t know real anger if it slapped you in the face.”

“MY NAME IS NOT DUMB!” Paul Dekker, alias Crazy Quilt pointed his helmet straight at Simon’s chest, and launched a trio of deadly lasers, all of which were focused to a single point. But by the time he did Simon was already out the way, so rather than the shower of blood that he had been expecting, Crazy Quilt was instead met with a shower of fizz and bubbles as the other vending machine exploded.

Thinking on his feet, Shinji directed his forcefield so that Simon would land on it, allowing Shinji to carry Simon to safety.

“...It looks like you made him angry,” said Shinji, watching as Crazy Quilt fired at the soda cans that were now rolling across the floor.

“That was the idea,” Simon replied. “He can’t shoot straight when he’s frothing at the mouth. Plus we have his attention.”

“So now what?”

“Well, now I come up with a better plan. But first I need to make sure everyone’s safe…” He concentrated for a moment and thought, “Kyubey; let me talk to Lightning.”

There a moment of silence. Then, Simon heard Lightning’s voice say “What is it? We’re kind of busy,” her words aching with tension.

“Oh boy, let me guess; you’ve got your hands tied fighting a supervillain?” Simon replied.
“Yeah, some lunatic who possesses people. What’s on your end?”

“An artist with a trippy helmet who needs to take an anger management class. You know, one of those Gotham crazies. But he’s way tougher than he sounds.”

“I’ll bet.” Simon swore he heard a tinge of envy in Lightning’s voice. “Look, I can’t exactly drop what I’m doing...”

“Don’t worry, I understand. Just make sure that Hope and Ino get out of there safely.”

There was a brief pause. “Wait... I thought Hope was with you?” said Lightning.

“What? No!” Simon’s heart began to race as he tried to hold back the panic. “I told her to go with you!” said Simon.

“Well I certainly can’t find her anywhere,” said Kyubey. “And the support team seems to be busy with other matters at the moment, so I doubt they’ll be any help.”

“Oh no... Something must have happened!” Simon said.

“But what are we going to do!?” Shinji whimpered. “We can’t just stop fighting and look for her!”

“Calm down, she can’t have gone far,” said Lightning. “For all we know she’s probably with Shulk...”

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Shulk never really liked concerts very much. As someone who liked to do a lot of thinking, large masses of people were usually an unwanted distraction. Which isn’t to say he was a misanthrope, far from it; human ingenuity was one of the few things he had absolute faith in. It’s just that he would much rather spend a relaxing afternoon with a close group of friends than getting lost in an endless sea of strangers, even if they all shared a common interest. This, combined with his relative lack of combat experience, was ultimately the rationalization he came up with for deciding to tackle the amusement park solo.

“After all I can get more research done on my own,” he told himself. “I just need to be careful, is all.”

From a little hide-away inside a shaved-ice stand, Shulk had set up his own base of operations. His laptop had been patched through to the security feed (the Tokyo Dome’s security team had been very cooperative in that regard) and had an eye on the entire park. Only a few feet away, a series of weapons, mechon scraps and alchemical components were scattered around the floor, all of which were experiments in various stages of completion.

While Mechon armor wasn’t quite invincible, it proved to be extremely durable against anything except for The Monado, even shrugging off explosive weaponry and all but the most powerful of spells. Only the Monado proved to be able to consistently pierce through their defenses, and if Shulk’s vision was correct they had found a way around even that. Because of this, finding a way to defeat the Mechon without the Monado was now a top priority. He’d been trying everything from acids to silver nitrate to goat’s blood, but nothing seemed to be able to leave any kind of impact on the armor samples he had been supplied with. In fact, the only reason he had an armor sample in the first place was because they once managed to capture a Mechon scout that had gotten stuck in a tree and disassembled it.

As for The Monado, Shulk had the weapon slung across his back, thanks to an ingenious strap that
Shirou had made for him.

Shulk looked at his watch; it was nearly 10:30, and by now the concert was well under way. He peeked out from his hiding place behind the counter of a shaved ice stand, and combed the sky at the sky. If the Mechon were going to attack, now would have been a perfect time. All he had to do now is watch the sky until...

Shulk looked towards the ferris wheel, saw a formless mass off in the distance. It was suspended in mid-air, close enough to the ground that Shulk figured he could walk right up to it, but far enough so that it was noticeable even without a pair of binoculars (which Shulk was still kicking himself for forgetting to bring).

He looked at the security feed. Whatever it was, it wasn’t visible on any of the cameras; either it was sitting in a blind spot or the intruder was somehow tampering with the cameras.

“Now this is curious...” Shulk thought. “The question is, is this the first wave, or is somebody trying to tell me something?” He looked at the hilt of the Monado. “But even if it is a mechon, it isn’t anywhere near as large as THAT one. Theoretically, it could be perfectly safe.” He then looked at the exit door. “Then again, it could just as easily be an elaborate trap set by a Dead Apostle, or a shape-shifting lizard person. But no matter what it is, I have to stay on guard...”

Clutching the Monado in his hands, Shulk left the shaved ice stand, and began to creep towards the hovering object.

But as he continued, a realization began to dawn on him. Wasn’t this more or less how his vision began? Right in front of the ferris wheel, in plain view of the roller coaster, surrounded by midway booths? Could it be that in an attempt to thwart the destiny foretold by his vision, he might have accidentally caused the chain of events that led up to this moment in the first place? He shuddered at the thought; If this was true, how was he supposed to know which visions he could change, and which ones he couldn’t? What did this say about free will, and self determination? And furthermore-

“How are things going, Shulk?”

Shulk’s heart skipped a beat as he turned around to see who was addressing him, but found nothing more than his own shadow, lying against the ground. It took him a couple seconds to realize that the voice in his head was Kyubey, addressing him telepathically.

“Don’t scare me like that,” Shulk replied. “You really caught me off guard there.”

“Ah. Right, fear. Another human emotion I keep forgetting,” said Kyubey. “In that case I will try to take your emotional state into account before updating you. Should I come back later?”

“No, now’s fine.” Having collected himself, Shulk resumed his methodical approach. “I’m very good at multitasking. What’s going on?”

“Simon and Lightning are currently engaging an enemy; apparently from a group called ‘Are We Cool Yet’, who are planning to use an acoustic weapon to make everyone in the stadium unable to hear music.”

“That does sound like something they would do,” Shulk replied.

“So you’ve heard of them, then?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Shulk grimaced. “We have a couple of their more dangerous creations locked
up back at Atlas and we still don’t know how they work... but we’re getting off track here. Any signs of Mechon involvement?”

“Nope!” Shulk imagined Kyubey raising his ears as he said this. “Perhaps this is all a big coincidence, and the Mechon haven’t arrived yet.”

“There are no such things as coincidences,” thought Shulk. “Everything up until now has implied that while the Mechon themselves are non-sentient, an intelligent entity is either controlling, producing, or directing them. Something like that could easily manipulate a group as undirected and unfocused as Are We Cool Yet.” the metaphorical gears in Shulk’s mind began to spin. “Perhaps they’re trying to get the local superheroes all in place so they can... kill them? Harvest them? It’s a bit early to say at this point.”

“What should I tell the others?”

Shulk held his breath as he approached even closer to his target. “Tell them that I’m busy, but I’ll join them when I’m done.” He began to make out a humanoid figure, slouched over on a floating chair of some sort. “Whatever the Mechon are up to, it won’t matter if the artists get to them first. I’ll tell you if I find anything.”

“Very well then. Good luck!” Kyubey said, and with that, Shulk was once again alone in his own mind.

And just in time, too. For Shulk had managed to get close enough to the floating figure that he was able to see it quite clearly. It was a man, or at least something that looked like one, wearing a blue jumpsuit with an intricate design printed across his chest that was not unlike a symmetrical circuit board. He rested on an enormous green chair that was, sure enough, floating in space. It looked like something out of a 60’s science-fiction pulp, with a sleek, elegant design that harkened back to how people imagined the future that ultimately never was.

But it was the face that really got to Shulk. It was cold, distant, and uncaring, but also focused and dignified, as if the man wearing it was contemplating a dozen more important matters, and that Shulk’s presence was an unfortunate but necessary distraction.

Slowly, the man’s eyes directed themselves towards Shulk. And without even bothering to move his head, the man on the green chair began to speak.

“Greetings, human,” the man said. “I am Metron, of the New Gods.” His eyes swivelled as they examined Shulk from top to bottom. “Being a member of Atlas, you have no doubt heard of me. Have you not?”

“I believe so...” Shulk said. “You’re the time-traveler, right?”

“Correct,” Metron said.

“That’s what I figured,” Shulk had nearly frozen in fright, but he found that his mouth was still quite eager to move. “Even if I hadn’t know about your involvement with JLA operations, I still would have guessed who you were based on the occasional trace you’ve left in Earth’s history. The Mages Associations has actually recovered inscriptions depicting you and you and your time-traveling ‘mobius chair’, mostly from powerful clairvoyants who were sensitive to spiritual-”

“I did not arrive in this time period to hear a lecture about myself.” Metron continued to watch Shulk without moving. “Even if I did care for such things, for now there is little time. Please hand
Not eager to find out what happens when you say ‘no’ to a time-traveling deity, Shulk gracefully handed over his weapon.

“At the moment I am locked in a struggle with a cosmic entity colloquially known as ‘The Time Trapper’.” Metron began to examine the blade that Shulk had given him, this time moving his head just enough so he could examine the Monado while it was in his lap. “Not any Time Trapper you may know of, but rather the original Time Trapper, of which all others are mere echoes.”

“I… see.” Shulk stared at Metron, futilely trying to grasp what could possibly be going on in that nearly-alien mind of his. “And I’m guessing it’s like a vast, cosmic chess game far beyond any human’s ability to comprehend…”

“It would be more apt to describe it as an eight dimensional strategy game where the full rules are unknown, half of pieces are invisible, and both sides are cheating.” Metron flipped the blade over, and began fiddling with the interface.

“And is that what you’re doing right now? Cheating?” Shulk watched as Metron sorted through menus and screens that he had never seen before, attempting to memorize them so that he might be able to experiment them later.

“For the sake of my clumsy, three-dimensional metaphor, yes.” He raised the Monado up into the air, and extended the laser portion of the blade, which began to glow bright green. “The Monado is a true anomaly, having power over not only Mana, but also the very concepts of Fate and Destiny. Keeping it from falling into the wrong hands is nothing if not essential to stopping His plans.”

Shulk stared at the spectacle with disbelief. “...and how exactly are you planning to do that?”

“I have just started transmitting a charged signal backwards in time using 5-dimensional anti neutrinos. When the signal collapses back into 4-D space, it will resonate with your past self and produce a vision of near-future events. This will inspire you to start an investigation of the Tokyo Dome, which will in turn lead you down a very specific series of events including this very conversation we are having now.”

Shulk blinked. “This… raises so many questions.”

“Which I will attempt to answer. As long as they do not involve the specifics of the future, operation of the Monado, The New Gods, The Time Trapper, or any technology or magecraft that your species has not yet discovered on it’s own.”

Shulk thought carefully about what he would say next. “What’s so important about the Tokyo Dome?”

“The Dome itself is irrelevant. It is someone inside the Dome who will ensure that best path is achieved.”

Not satisfied with this answer but aware that Mentron wasn’t likely to budge, Shulk changed subjects. “Why did you not appear in my vision?”

“When I created the signal that alerted your past self, I carefully edited myself out of the proceedings in an attempt to hide my tracks from my adversary.”

“I guess that would make sense…” Shulk said. “And I’m guessing you added the Mechon in order to convince me further, correct?”
“No, I’m afraid not.” Metron handed the Monado back to Shulk. “The appearance of that particular Face Unit will be a natural consequence of both you and I using the Monado. In fact, I have taken the liberty of temporarily reducing the Monado’s signal shielding in order to accelerate that time table, ensuring that your next encounter will take place very shortly.”

Shulk was taken aback. “What?! But why?!”

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you that. But rest assured that if you survive, this path will eventually lead you to a powerful ally who will be essential in the trials to come.”

“Are you MAD?!” Shulk exclaimed.

“Perhaps.” Metron continued to wear his steely, unflinching expression. “Many have accused me of insanity before, and occasionally it was warranted.”

“And I don’t suppose I have a choice but to help you?”

“You’ve never had a choice in the matter. No one has. Not until now, anyway.”

“How… ominous,” was about all that Shulk could bring himself to say.

Metron pushed a few buttons on his chair, which began to crackle. Then, both it the deity seated upon began to fade out of view. “And now I must go,” he said. “There is much to do, and only a finite period in which I can accomplish it. We will not meet again until either after the final battle has been won, or the chance of victory has dropped to exactly zero percent.”

Having said all that he wish, Metron disappeared back into the mists of time, leaving Shulk bewildered beyond all compare.

“...what on earth have I gotten myself into?” he said.

Realizing there wasn’t a moment to lose, Shulk looked to the sky to begin a fearful search for the Mechon that the enigmatic had warned him about. This fear turning to panic when he suddenly heard the deafening roar of a jet engine flying overhead; the same roar that he had heard in his vision.

“Okay... don’t panic.” he thought. “Metron said he didn’t make any changes to this part, which means it’s going to land right... behind me!”

A brief “thunk” echoed from behind Shulk, prompting him to bolt in the opposite direction, sprinting towards the ferris wheel.

“Okay, what are my options?” he thought. “Fighting it directly is no good, the rest of the team is occupied, and leading it towards the Dome would just result in casualties.” Shulk looked behind his shoulder to see how far away he had gotten. “The brute looks too slow to win in a short-term chase, but he might have the stamina for something more long-term. My best bet is to find somewhere to hide and...”

Another rocketing sound was heard from behind Shulk, and suddenly the obsidian monstrosity from Shulk’s vision flew right past him, making a generous swipe at Shulk as it passed, missing only because Shulk had the good fortune to have correctly guessed its move. Its feet screeched as they scraped across the ground as it decelerated to a sudden stop. The robot then began turning itself around to face its prey, revealing itself in all of its horrible majesty.

It was just as Shulk had remembered it from both his vision and his last encounter with the beast.
Same emaciated body, same sharpened fingers, same skeletal mask stitched shut by unidentifiable wires that groaned as the machine opened it’s mouth.

But this time, instead of releasing a bloodcurdling laugh, the Mechon began to speak.

“<Thought you could get away, didn’t ya’, boy?>” it began to say. “<Thought ya’ could just up and run off with the Monado, and leave me behind?>”

Shulk tried to move, but found that his knees had frozen in place. Every word that machine said sounded like the gnashing of gears over heavily distorted speech. The fact that it spoke with the accent of a British thug did nothing to alleviate Shulk’s fear; if anything the implication that the machine held a humanlike intelligence was deeply worrying.

“<Well, boy? Are you just going to stand there gawking, or are you gonna try and fight back?>” The Mechon began to swivel it’s fingers eagerly. “<Not that it matters; you was dead the second my sensors found that blade of ‘yers!>”

“Which means he didn’t spot Metron...” Desperate to keep him speaking while he rummaged through his stuff, Shulk said, “<So you can talk, then?>”

“<Surprised?>” the mechon asked. “<I bet you thought I was just some nameless grunt, just another unruly animal to be put to down!>” the ground shook as the robot began to march towards Shulk. “<Oh but I’m no animal; I can think, after all. In fact I’ve spent sleepless night and endless days doing nothing but thinking. And do you want to know what I think about, boy?>” The Mechon began dragging his claw across the ground, throwing up concrete and leaving enormous claw marks in the ground. “<I spend all that that time thinking about what it would be like to TEAR THE MONADO FROM YOUR COLD, LIFELESS BODY!>”

The Mechon then charged forward, claws bared and ready to cut Shulk to ribbons.

Thinking quickly, Shulk threw a vial of powder onto the ground, where it cracked open. He then flicked on a handheld lighter, and tossed it to where the vial had landed, and covered his eyes before it erupted in a bright flash.

Reflexively the Mechon covered its own eyes, it’s momentum carrying it past Shulk, where it crashed into a nearby restroom while Shulk himself used the distraction to dash down alleyway between the two nearest booths.

“Magnesium and ammonium perchlorate… a potent mixture to be sure, but I only had enough to do that once.” Having put some distance between himself and the Mechon, Shulk ducted into a booth with a taffy machine in order to catch his breath. “I doubt it will set him off the trail for long, though. I need to come up with a new plan...” He pulled out the Monado, and began fiddling with it, trying to recall the sequence Metron had used on it in the first place.

“Wacha’ doin?” Hon’kale said.

“I’m trying to figure out how to create a distraction,” said Shulk. “Metron was able to use it to attract the Mechon’s attention, but I think if I can focus its energy into a plasma I might just be able to...”

He then looked up with puzzlement, and turned to his side to see that Hon’kale was now leaning over him, lying across the counter that sat right above Shulk’s head.

Shulk immediately pulled her down, and whispered. “What are you doing…? Where did you…? How did you get here?”
“Oh, I just hid in your shadow.” the girl said, pointing behind her back. “It’s probably my coolest power. Wanna see?”

“...not right now!” Shulk whispered frustratedly. “Go back with Simon and... actually no, it’s too dangerous. Just stay here and be quiet while I try to figure a way out of this.”

The girl peaked her head out from behind the counter to try and get a look at the robot. “<Okay, cool, I got a few ideas myself. Like, maybe you could call a giant laser from the sky? Can it do something like that? Ooh! I know! Maybe you could use it to cut a hole in reality and send him straight to the bottom of->”

Shulk pulled the girl down, and covered his hand over her mouth. “<Listen, I appreciate the help, but I need to focus on creating a distraction.>” He looked back down at the Monado. “<Once that’s out of the way, I can start putting together a method by which we can trap the Mechon, and possibly even dismantle… it…>” When shulk looked back up, he found that Hon’kale was no longer with him.

It took him about three seconds to figure out what was going to happen next. “Oh bloody hell…” he muttered.

Just a moment later, a childish voice echoed through the park. “<HEY, UGLY!>” it shouted. “<YO MOMMA’S SO FAT, THAT WHEN SHE GOT ON A SCALE, BUZZ LIGHTYEAR POPPED OUT AND SAID ‘TO INFINITY, AND BEYOND!’>”

Now it was Shulk’s turn to peak out from behind the counter, and it was from here he saw Hon’kale scampering about, dodging the Mechon’s clumsy swipes with careful leaps, ducks and sidesteps.

“<GAAH! You little brat! I’ll squash you like an insect!>”

“<Yeah, well, first you’ll have to catch me!” the girl then displayed some very impressive parkour as she scrambled up a nearby flagpole, leaping off of it and onto the roof of a nearby gift shop just as the mechon cut it down.

From there she leapt onto the roller coaster track, and turned around to give the killer robot a childish raspberry.

The Mechon then activated its boosters, and took to the air in attempted to follow the girl, but every time he got close he would accidentally brush up against one of the rails, inadvertently bending the structure into a new shape that made Hope’s escape that much easier.

And for a solid minute, Shulk just stood there, watching the spectacle unfold. “Well... that is technically what I was asking for.” He then pulled up a map of the amusement park on his phone. “And at least she has the good sense to try and keep him away from me.” He glanced over the main attractions for a moment, and then opened another window so that he could look up how one would go about hotwiring amusement park attractions. “All I need now is something I can use to keep the Mechon held down...”

Shulk looked at the taffy machine. His plan then started to click into place...

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Madoka Kamine was having a hard time enjoying the concert. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the music, it was more the fact that her friends didn’t seem to be enjoying it either. Every so often Sayaka would try and engage Kamijou in a bit of small talk, but Kamijou would only give vague,
noncommittal responses, as if he was more interested in the music than whatever Sayaka had to say. He even moved his hand when Sayaka tried the whole “innocently grasp the hand of the boy sitting next to you” thing that Sayaka said always worked in movies, though Madoka hoped it was just a coincidence.

And then there was all the psychic chatter that Kyubey was directing. Since Sayaka wanted to pay full attention to “Operation Kyosuke” (or “Operation True Love”, Sayaka kept flip-flopping on that), she left it to Madoka to pay attention to how the team was doing.

And truth be told, things weren’t going well. Two fights with supervillains had already broken out, and while this did mean that a fleet of invincible robots wasn’t going to arrive anytime soon, everyone in the Dome was still in danger, and they didn’t even know it. It was amazing how Kyubey, who even now was seated comfortably in Madoka’s lap, could be so calm about all this.

Still, Madoka had faith in the Justice Society to pull through. After all, there was still time to…

“Sayaka? Are you there? Hello?” Shulk’s voice suddenly rang in Madoka’s head.

“Sayaka said she didn’t want to be disturbed right now,” Madoka replied. “She’s kind of busy....”

“Well tell her to drop whatever she’s doing because this is important!” Despite not being able to see him, Madoka could tell that he sounded worried. “I’m with Hon’kale, and we’re pinned down at the amusement park by a rogue Mechon. I’ve got a plan to escape, but until then we need someone to go to the sound room.”

“The what?”

“The sound room; the place where all of the speakers are controlled, and- look, just put your friend on the line will you?”

“Actually, I connected Sayaka back up to the psychic link approximately fifteen seconds ago,” said Kyubey. “You see I interpreted your emotional state as being ‘panicked’, so I bypassed Madoka in order to-”

“Yes yes, you did a good job,” interrupted Shulk, “Now Sayaka, can you hear me?”

“Uh... yeah, I guess so,” thought Sayaka, though Madoka thought she heard a tinge of worry in her “voice”. “What’s going on? And no technobabble this time.”

“Actually it would be ‘magibabble’, but um, yes. A group of art terrorists are going to play magic cassette tapes for evil ironic hipster reasons. It would be a very bad thing if they did this.”

“But wait,” Madoka interjected, “I thought Rivalz and Shirou were on that?”

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Meanwhile, Rivalz Cardemonde wheezed as he and Shirou slowly pushed Rivalz’s motorcycle up a flight of stairs.

“I don’t know if this is really worth it...” said Shirou.

“No way, this is going to be awesome!” Rivalz replied, shoulder braced against the vehicle while his hands were clutched tightly to the baseball bat he was carrying. “Now keep pushing! We’re almost there!”
Madoka thought she could hear someone sigh.

“Rivalz and Shirou are… not my first choice,” said Shulk. “And in any case they wouldn’t be able to fight back if they came across a rogue metahuman.”

“But the tape recorders in the trash cans…”

“Are a distraction,” Shulk with an air of finality. “While they might be able to get some sick kicks off of ruining the lives of a few people, Are We Cool Yet would settle for nothing less than a full public display. That means they’d need to have hijack the sound system.” There was a brief pause for a moment. “And unless stopped, my guess is that they’ll throw the switch and expose everyone to that tape.”


“I heard Lightning telling Kyubey, about it,” Madoka said. “It’s some kind of… mind thing that makes it impossible to hear music…”

Having heard this, Sayaka suddenly leapt up from her seat. A frantic look in her eyes, she turned to Kyosuke and said, “Hey I’m going to the bathroom but it might be a while okay so you should leave- no wait I mean you shouldn’t leave- no wait I mean you may or may not have to leave, depending on if anything bad- I mean if Madoka says you should okay?”

Kyosuke Kamijou looked back at Sayaka, meeting Sayaka’s rambling with a thoroughly blank expression. “Um… okay?” he said.

“Great see you later!” Sayaka called back as she ran off to find a safe place to transform.

Kyosuke then looked at Madoka. “Is she always doing this?” he said.

“Heh-heh…” Madoka did a nervous laugh, and tried to figure out what to say in order to smooth things over. “She’s really nice once you get to know her…”

“I’ll bet…” Kyosuke looked back at the concert with an uninterested gaze.

Madoka hung her head in shame. She didn’t think she was making things any better. “But at least they can’t get any worse…” she thought.

“Madoka?” said a somewhat familiar voice, “is that you? I didn’t know you were coming to this concert!”

Maoka looked up, and saw the familiar face of Hitomi Shizuki, one of Madoka’s friends from school. She had messy green hair as well as a pair of matching green eyes, which always seemed to wear a soft, almost forgiving expression.

“Where have you and Sayaka been?” she asked. “It’s like, you guys just disappear off the face of the earth whenever school gets out. You got cram school or something?”

Madoka felt a twinge of regret. Unlike Sayaka and Madoka, Kyubey had never approached Hitomi with an offer to become a magical girl. Apparently she “wasn’t the right type”, as Kyubey had put it. “Yeah, that’s us!” she said. “I mean you’ve got piano recitals, and we have cram school!”

Kyosuke looked at Hitomi with raised eyebrow. “You play the piano?”
“Occasionally,” she said. “I started out playing for fun, but I’ve got family who likes to come over and listen.”

“And let me guess;” Kyosuke said, as if he had heard it a thousand times before. “Your favorite piece is Pachelbel’s ‘Canon in D’. Or maybe something by Beethoven?”

“Nothing so clichéd!” Hitomi giggled. “Actually I’m more partial to contemporary pieces, especially some of the stuff produced by Japanese musicians, especially—”

“Um…” Madoka interrupted. “Don’t… you… have a seat to get to?”

“Oh don’t worry, it’s actually right over there.” Hitomi pointed to an empty seat a few spaces behind them. “I just wanted to catch up with some of my old friends. Is Sayaka with you?”

“Yes, but…”

“I understand; sometimes you just have to go. I’ll just wait until she comes back.” She inched her way past Madoka, and sat down in Sayaka’s seat. “I’m Hitomi, by the way.” She extended her hand. “Hitomi Shizuki.”

“Kyosuke Kamijou…” the young man replied, accepting her handshake.

“Oh yeah, you’re the violin prodigy, aren’t you?” Hitomi said, holding onto Kyosuke’s hand a bit longer than one would expect for a handshake. “I heard your hand is doing better, how long until you’ll be coming back to school?”

“…a few days, I guess,” said Kyosuke. “I’d like to say I’m not looking forward to it, but all the time in the hospital hasn’t exactly been a vacation… Kinda looking forward to getting to solve a math problem without having to dictate it to someone else.”

“I can imagine. I’m guessing it’s like, ‘now just carry the two… no that two!’”

“Don’t even get me started on what I have to go through for long division,” Kyosuke joked. He looked at his only recently-healed hand. “I’m not quite ready to hold a pencil yet, but I’m getting close.”

“I bet you’re excited to play again.”

“For sure,” he said. “I was practically green with envy from all the music Sayaka kept bringing me…”

“Hey, I’m actually working on this new composition. It’s kind of amateurish, but I think it’s off to a good start. Think you could come over and give me a few tips?”

“…Well piano music isn’t exactly my specialty, but I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “What kind of piece is it?”

“Well, it’s… kind of this short… happy song, like something you’d want to hear on a nice, spring day. I don’t have the lyrics just yet, but it’s probably more important to get the melody down first.”

“Understandable,” Kyosuke said. “Too many godawful pop song have been produced because they wrote the lyrics first and couldn’t find a good melody for them.”

“Ha. You can say that again…” said Hitomi.

Madoka watched as Kyosuke and Hitomi continued to talk, without even so much as looking at the
concert was going. Madoka wanted to intervene, but wasn’t sure if she should. Or even if she could in the first place. After all, what would she say? “Kyosuke, you can’t fall in love with Hitomi because Sayaka made a magic wish to fix your arm”? Even if he believed it, it would just convince Kyosuke that Sayaka was some kind of crazy stalker. And furthermore it would break Sayaka’s heart to have her best friend betray her secret identity like that.

So Madoka sat in her chair, and watched helplessly as Kyosuke and Hitomi got to know each other.

“You could wish for them to fall in love,” Kyubey said. “Or better yet, wish for the power to make other people fall in love, so you could reuse it!”

“But that’s mind control.” Madoka gave Kyubey a concerned look as she stroked his ears. “I don’t think anyone would like that, especially not Sayaka. I’m talking about what I can do without magic.”

“Well, you did ask.” Kyubey closed his eyes and raised his chin to let Madoka scratch it. “Human emotions are not something that my species has, so I don’t think I’ll be the best help with this.”

“I see…” Madoka sighed. “I guess we just have to hope that Sayaka gets back soon…”

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Back at the food court, Shirley and Lightning continued to face off against Mr. Nobody. The only sound breaking the tension was that of the rushing water thanks to the sprinkler system. That, and the sound of Mister Nobody making do karate poses while hollering like an Idiot.

“Someone’s seen too many Bruce Lee movies...” Lightning looked at her gunblade, which even now was refusing to change back to gun form. “Looks like Ino disenchanted it,” she thought. “There goes the plan to use stun rounds... and even if I had a taser it’s too wet to use right now.”

She then looked at Ino’s Keyblade, which was even now lying on the floor. “The only bright side is that he doesn’t recognize his advantage...”

She looked at Shirley, who was currently biting her lip, and repeatedly looking back and forth between Lightning and the possessed Ino. “The girl needs to work on her poker face, but at least she seems to get what’s going on.”

The Inspector then looked down at the water pooling around their feet. “I really don’t have time for this. Let’s hope this doesn’t freeze any pipes or anything...”

Lightning pointed her hand to the floor, and focused the mana in her body until a small blue orb appeared in her hand. She then shouted “Girlborg, think fast!” before hurling the orb into the ground. It disappeared with a soft crackle, and suddenly the water on the floor became frozen solid, leaving a frozen ripple at the point of impact.

Both Shirley and Mister Nobody tried to leap just in time to avoid the cascading freeze, but Nobody’s timing was slightly off; Ino’s feet ended up stuck in the ice while the rest of her body had toppled over.

“GAAH!” Mister Nobody shouted. “What the hell? This kid isn’t even wearing shoes!” He grunted as he tried to pull Ino’s feet out of the ice. “What kind of irresponsible parents does she have, anway? I mean come on...”

Shirley looked at Lightning. “So... now what?”
“Now we find a way to secure Ino until either Mr. Nobody decides to stop possessing Ino, or we find a way to make him stop,” Lightning replied. “Just put him in an arm lock for now; that way if he figures out how to summon the Keyblade, he won’t be able to use it.”

“...Right...” Shirley approached Mr. Nobody, who even now was forcing Ino to claw at the ground, desperately trying to dig the Keyblade out from beneath the ice. “How exactly do I do that?”

“It’s not too difficult.” Lightning took a deep breath as she tried to figure out a way walk Shirley through the process. “First, wrap your right arm around her neck... yes, like that. Now put your your left arm under her right... no that’s her left. Her right is on your left. Okay. Now grab her by the shoulder... with your left hand, not your right. Now gently pull her forward, and then let go of her left... no, no, that’s her right! Arg...” Lightning shook her head. “I think we need to find a martial arts tutor for you.”

“No, no! Please, continue!” said Mr. Nobody, who had just finished replicating Lightning’s steps to the letter. “And then if my legs were free, I’d kick her in the face, right?”

“...you know what? Forget the armlock.” Lightning cupped her palms in her face. “Girlborg, I know you’re stronger than Ino. Just... hold her arms together or something.”

“Okay...” Shirley said. By slowly pushing Ino’s arms away, Shirley was able to break free from Mr. Nobody with minimal effort. She then circled around and seized Ino’s body in a tight bear hug, her metal arms closing around Ino’s more ones like a bolt caught in a vice grip.

But in spite of the complete reversal, Mr. Nobody did not appear to be distraught. “Oooh!” he said. “I need to get a photo of this.”

He then leapt directly out of Ino’s chest, and rolled back into a standing position, where he pulled out his cell phone and began snapping pictures of Shirley staring dumbfounded at him while still holding onto Ino.

“Man,” he laughed. “If they aren't writing slash fic about you guys yet then they certainly will now!”

Lightning responded to this with a swift karate chop to the neck, causing Mr. Nobody to fall to the floor.

“If I end up taking these lessons, will I get to learn how to do that?” asked Shirley, point to Lightning.

“I hope so,” said Lighting. “Wouldn’t be a very good teacher otherwise.” She looked down at Mr. Nobody. “Now we have to get him secure, before he either wakes up or decides to stop playing possum-”

But once again, Mr. Nobody sprang up from what should have been an incapacitating blow, and shouted “SUCKER PUNCH III: RISE OF THE SUBTITLE!” before diving feet-first towards Lightning.

Instinctively, she pulled her weapon out to block, but only succeeded in shattering the disenchanted gunblade as Mr. Nobody’s foot collided with it en route to Lightning’s chest, which he phased right into.

At that moment, Lightning felt her muscles go both limp and tense at the same time. She could feel Mister Nobody’s presence taking over her nervous system one synapse at a time, with each victory
stabbing Lightning like a thousand red-hot pokers drilling into her skin.

And then, just when Lightning felt like she couldn’t take it any longer, she heard her own voice say. “Now this is more like it!” She then watched helplessly as the being locked within her skin poured over every inch of her body. “Looks like this body is stronger, faster, not jailbait…” Lighting then felt the sensation of fish hooks pulling at her skin as felt her own arms move to clutch her own chest. “And if I’m not mistaken, it looks like this body has much larger blargagargagagragagerg…”

Mr. Nobody stumbled over as Lightning focused every ounce of her willpower on freeing her body from his clutches. As bad as the pain was it was nowhere near as painful as becoming a Cie’tih. With pain like that hanging over their heads, it was no wonder that L’cie always try to complete their Focus. But during the Tokyo Incident, Lightning and her allies had the will not just to fight back, but to win. Something that, as far as she knew, nobody had ever done before.

No. Compared to that, whatever pain Mr. Nobody could dish out was nothing.

“Still… this isn’t much more than a distraction. It’ll only be worthwhile if Shirley figures out how to take advantage of an opening…”

Through Lightning’s eyes, Mr. Nobody watched Shirley carefully. The girl hesitated for a moment, but then charged forward with her fist held wide, clearly ready to swing for the head.

Mr. Nobody fought Lightning over dodging the attack, with Lightning concentrating on planting her feet on the ground, and holding her arms to her side, while Mr. Nobody struggled to find a way to avoid the attack anyway. Lightning finally eased off a little when Mr. Nobody had the idea to try to block Shirley’s attack with Lightning’s breasts, thinking that they would both cushion the blow and provide a bit of “accidental perversion” that he could taunt the girl with.

What he didn’t know was that the chest is actually one of the more sensitive parts of a woman’s body. He also didn’t know that while a L’cie was far more durable than a regular human, they were also no more intolerant to pain, and that being punched by a super-strong robot girl is seriously going hurt no matter where the blow lands. As a result, Mr. Nobody violently ejected himself from Lightning’s body just a few moments after Shirley’s fist connected, sending him crashing through the ceiling, screaming like a banshee as he soared into the night sky, screaming “LIKE A BANSHEEEEEE...” all the while.

After looking up at the hole in the ceiling to make sure that Mr. Nobody was gone, she got down and helped Lightning back up to her feet. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lightning said before casting a healing spell on herself. “How’s Ino doing?”

Shirley Looked at Ino, who had finished hacking her way out of the ice with her Keyblade and was now sitting on a chair in order to avoid stepping on the ice. “She looks fine to me. No sign of frostbite or anything...”

“Good,” Lightning said. “Things would have been tricky if we had to amputate.”

Shirley winced at Lighting’s remark. “…you’re joking, right?”

“ Mostly.” Lightning gathered up the broken weapon pieces on the ground. “Now let’s hurry; we have to track down whoever’s masterminding this before something else goes…” remembering what happened the last few times she tempted fate, Lightning stopped herself mid sentence.

But by then it was already too late. She heard a voice cry “…EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” First
looking at the hole, then at Shirley standing under it, Lightning began to say “Get away from there!” but only managed to blurt out the first two syllables before a falling Mr. Nobody rocketed straight into Shirley.

Shirley then went limp, her eyes hanging open as she fell straight to the floor…

“SUCKER PUNCH, UN-NUMBERED THIS TIME BECAUSE WE’RE REBOOTING THE- oh wait nobody’s around to hear me, damn.” Mr. Nobody looked around for a bit. He always ended up in some kind of weird mental world whenever he tried to take over someone’s mind, and had to fight his target’s own metaphorical demons before he could seize control. The pink-haired woman had a pretty tough setup; a maze of twisting, neon tunnels covered in crystalline artwork that would inevitably unfold into a cascading array of lasers, turrets, tripwires, buzzsaws, and laser turret wisersaws. The little girl’s on the other hand was much easier; it was just a blank white room that held a lobotomy patient, who was drooling a small puddle on the floor.

But this one was a bit different. It looked like a cathedral of some sort, but with hospital beds in place of the pews and altars one would normally expect. The entire room appeared to be made of shiny brasswork, but a few parts had fallen off, revealing a hidden layer of bones and rotting flesh.

But as strange as this was, it would not compare to the activity at the far end of the room.

The air smelled of grease and motor oil as Clockwork angels, made of gears so fine and intricate that they appeared almost skeletal in form that were dressed in metallic togas carried staves decorated with gears and springs that radiated a brightly flickering fluorescent light. Their synthesized voices trumped in unison, chanting Latin phrases that sounded more like assembly instruction than religious verse. The automated choir was gathered around a iron cross, upon which a body was crucified. Black smoke was pouring out of the crucified body, collecting on the ground like pools of blood instead of rising into the air. It looked like the girl he had just possessed, but most of her flesh had rotten off to reveal a shape that was not unlike the clockwork angels themselves.

Every so often, the angels would gather their power and try to drive back the smoke. But each time, the smoke coiled back only for a moment, before impaling the clockwork angels with trendels of darkness, leaving their clockwork innards strewn across the cathedral floor. Moments later, more angels would fly in from a hole in the ceiling, and the cycle would begin once again.

Mr. Nobody was about to say something snarky; perhaps a comment on how heavy-handed the meaningless symbolism was, but something about the place seemed to drain all the life out of him. His most primal survival instincts, once buried under eons of evolutionary conditioning, had now unearthed themselves. They screamed for him to get out, begged to put the scene in front of him out of his mind, pleaded to go anywhere, ANYWHERE else from the place he currently was.

Yet all this screaming was in vain. Curiosity got the better of Mister Nobody and he found himself drawn ever closer to the spectacle, figuring that whatever it was that was making him so fearful was probably worth a look...

But just when he was close enough to reach out and touch one of the “angels”, the ground shook with unprecedented force. Chunks of metal and rot fell from the ceiling as the cathedral began tearing itself apart, while the angels fled to higher ground. Soon, the roof and walls had disappeared completely, revealing a vast, artificial cosmos, with lightbulbs for stars, vast, whirring gizmos for planets, upon which little tin men lived simple, orderly lives, along predetermined paths like so many slot-cars.
And in the center of this cosmos stood a vast shape, ever-changing in nature. At one moment, it was a metal worm with gears for teeth, that devoured entire continents. The next moment it was a great mass of cogs, spinning endlessly as it awaited tribute. In another moment it wasn’t even a physical being at all, but a sentient language that could only be understood by those who could not speak.

It was then that the great being turned its attention to Mister Nobody, an insignificant speck on the great tapestry of creation. The being then assumed all of its forms simultaneously, operating in a state of incomprehensible flux. It then opened its infinite mouths to speak, and said but a single word. A word that was not a request, or even an order, but rather an absolute statement of authority made manifest.

“Leave.”

“...Hey? You awake?”

Shirley opened her eyes to see Lightning standing over her.

“Yeah… at least I hope so.” Shirley felt like her head was pounding. “I mean there’s always the chance this could all be some kind of nightmare…” she tried to get up, but found that her arms had been bound with a pair of handcuffs.

“Wouldn’t that be a weird twist…” Lightning fished through her pockets for the key. “You were out for nearly a whole minute, and then he just leapt out like he was running away from something.” Lightning then began to undo Shirley’s handcuffs, giving Shirley a perfect view of the window that Mr. Nobody had jumped out. “What exactly happened in there?”

“...aaah…” Shirley wasn’t really really sure what to say; she had blacked out as soon as Mr. Nobody took control. “Y-your guess is as good as mine,” Shirley said. “I don’t really know.”

Lightning gave Shirley a doubtful look, but decided against pursuing the matter any further. “Now get up,” she said. “He might have run off, but he’s still at large. We’d better catch him before he does something drastic.”

“Right…” Shirley got up, and brushed the ice crystals off off her skirt. “Sorry about punching you, by the way…”

“Don’t worry, it had to be done,” Lightning said. “I can take a hit or two, and he was the one feeling all the pain. It’s not like we had too many other options.”

“I guess…” Lightning looked over to see what Ino was doing, and found her sitting next to a pile of broken ice with her legs crossed in such a way that her bare feet were folded into her jacket, and weren’t touching the ice-covered floor. She seemed lost in thought, almost as if she was trying to remember something…

“Is something wrong, Ino?” Shirley asked.

“What does ‘Nobody’ mean?” Ino cocked her head to the side. “That guy called himself ‘Mister Nobody’, right? And I think I’ve heard that word before…”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. It’s a pretty common word,” Shirley said. “It means… um…” Shirley paused as she tried to find a way to explain such an abstract concept.
“No person, or a lack of a person,” said Lightning. “As in, ‘nobody is here’; that is, there are no people here. It could also mean ‘an unimportant person’.” she then looked at Ino suspiciously. “Why do you ask?”

Ino closed her eyes, and shook her head. “I dunno… I thought I remembered something for a moment there, but it’s gone now.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out an index card to jot out an additional note to herself.

“I see…” Lightning watched Ino scrubbing for few moments more, and then started off towards the hole Mr. Nobody left in his wake. “Now come on, it looks like he’s heading towards the stage. Grab Ino and follow my lead.” Almost immediately, Lightning broke into a run and lept through the same broken window.

“But I-” Shirley began to protest, but Lightning was right. As long as that maniac was still around people’s lives were at stake. Even if meant accidently brainwashing Miku or revealing her secret identity, Shirley wouldn’t be able to forgive herself if someone got hurt due to her own inaction.

“Right!” In one swift motion, Shirley scooped Ino into her arms and dashed through the window as well, aiming for one of the landings on the staircase that separated the different sections of seating. Unfortunately, Ino then took that moment to wrap her arms around Shirley’s head, distracting Shirley enough that she missed the spot she was aiming at and ended up tumbling down a few more sections, where she landed face first into a bucket of popcorn.

“Uh… excuse me, miss?” said the red-haired young man who evidently was not used to attractive teenage girls literally falling into his lap. “Are you ok-?”

“EVERYTHING’S FINE!” Shirley shouted as she pulled her face out of the bucket. “NOTHING GOING WRONG HERE. By the way did you see the other girl I was-” the young man pointed at Ino, who had miraculously landed on her feet only a few meters away, slightly dazed but otherwise uninjured. “Oh thank god…” Shirley breathed a sigh of relief. She then turned to the young man and said “Sorry about the popcorn, here, I’ll pay you back…” and reached into her back pocket for her wallet, only to realize that her outfit didn’t actually have pockets. “Um… okay. I don’t know how this usually goes, but… just… send a letter to the Zenigata building and I promise I’ll pay you back, okay?”

Shirley then began to run towards the stage, leaving the young man to explain things to what was either his girlfriend or his sister (Shirley couldn’t really tell). “I am so sorry…” Shirley heard him say, “…I have no idea what just happened…”

...but as much as Shirley wanted to go back and explain things, what was going on now was far too important; Mr. Nobody was about to get on-stage and who knows what would happen after that. Grabbing Ino by the hand as she passed, Shirley continued to race down the stairs...

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“Sound room sound room gotta find the sound room...” The magical girl sped down the hall, desperately searching for anything that looked like it could be the entrance to a “sound room” of some sort. So of course she wasn’t looking at where she was going when she ran through a section of the building whose floor was inexplicably covered in ice. Naturally, Sayaka lost her balance as her feet slid across the slippery floor and landed flat on her own back, knocking the wind out of the magical girl. She then started to hyperventilate as she glanced around to see if anyone was watching her, a sensation that only got worse when she realized that all her worrying was making the soul gem on her belt fade into sort of a dark grey. “Oh god I gotta save Kyosuke,” she thought. “I gotta save everyone and I can’t save everyone if i’m flat on my back how am I supposed to fight
“Sayaka!” Lelouch’s mental voice shouted over the psychic link. “Calm down! You’re not going to save anyone if you panic like this! Just take a deep breath...”

Focusing on the sound of Lelouch’s voice, Sayaka took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly.

“Good,” Lelouch said. “Shulk told me about the plan, and I found the room you should be looking for. It’s called the A/V Room, and it’s in the administrative section of the building. Where are you right now?”

Sayaka sat up, and examined her surroundings. “Um… well… there’s some fast food places nearby so I think I’m in the food court, but the floor’s all slippery.”

“Interesting…” Lelouch said. “This could mean there’s an unknown metahuman around, so stay sharp.”

Sayka nodded, only realizing afterwards that Lelouch couldn’t see her.

“Now, you see the door marked ‘employees only’? Enter it, and follow the stairs up to the third floor.”

It took a moment for Sayaka to find the right door, but when she did it was obvious that she was on the right track; The normally drab, concrete walls were covered in black paint, upon which was written blood-red graffiti depicting all manner of mathematical equations. The pattern coiled around the staircase all the way up to the third floor, where the metal doorway had the words “x2 die” etched on its surface.

“Okay, I’m there. Now what?” Sayaka looked behind her shoulder to make sure she hadn’t stumbled through a Witch’s barrier by accident.

“Now head left down the hallway, until you come to an intersection.”

“Right…” Sayaka held her breath as she began to pull the door open the door…

...only for her to back away in fright as a pudgy man in a security outfit slumped through the doorway. His face was lax but eyes were wide open, caught in a state of perpetual fright. But most disturbing of all was the slide rule stuck through the side his throat. Syaka clutched her neck as she imagined someone actually being killed like that. Was their throat slit open, and then the slide rule was shoved in? Or was the person responsible strong enough that they didn’t need to?

Whatever the case, Sayaka dropped to her knees, pulled out the slide rule, and tried to use her healing magic to fix him. But by then it was already far too late; as powerful as her magic was, it couldn’t bring back the dead.

“Sayaka? What’s wrong?” Lelouch asked. “You should be there by now, did something happen?”

“Um… no.” Sayaka lied. She did so in order to avoid a weighty conversation. If she didn’t stop this madman now, no doubt more people would die. Just like this nameless security guard...

She got up, and went down the leftmost hallway, following the trail of mathematical graffiti that the guard’s killer had left behind.

“Now when you get to the intersection, head right until you find room 101. It should be clearly
marked as the AV room…”

But Sayaka wasn’t listening. For one thing, the Graffiti showed her the way, but what really caught her attention were the dead bodies littered around along the path. Sayaka didn’t know if they were hunted down one by one, or if they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The victims were all sprawled out in different positions. One was a salaryman carrying a cup of coffee. Another was a custodian, who was no doubt anxious for the night shift to end. Yet another was a guard who had just raised their gun to fire. Sayka thought about taking the guns, just in case her magic didn’t hold out...

...But memories of Lightning’s voice echoed in her mind. “We don’t kill people,” she had said. “That’s not how we do things.”

And that wasn’t how Sayaka wanted to do things, either. By becoming a Puella Magi she had dedicated herself to justice. And no matter how sick this freak was, a true heroine would never take the life of a sentient being unless there was no other option. Even if no one would ever know...

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“...are you sure this is going to work?” Shinji whispered.

“Positive,” replied Simon. “I’ve done this plenty of times; usually with a bit more prep work, but it’s the same principal.”

From inside the gift shop there were hiding in, Simon took a quick peek out to look at the Lagann, which they had left sitting out in the hallway as bait. “So… how do we tell when he’s getting near?”

Suddenly, a green laser beam bounced off the Lagann’s face, burning a small hole in the ceiling. “I KNOW YOU’RE OUT THERE SOMEWHERE!” they heard Crazy Quilt shout. “COME OUT AND FACE ME LIKE A MAN!”

“Never mind…” Shinji squeaked.

“Don’t think you can fool me by leaving that stoney-face robot behind!” he said, now coming into view. He then circled it a few times to check if the two heroes had hidden behind it, and then leapt up to the rim to see if they were inside.

“Aaand now!”

On Simon’s command Shinji tipped the Lagann over using his psychic shield, which he had carefully hidden underneath the mecha’s feat, sending Paul Dekker falling face-first into the cockpit. The shield then carried them both into the air for a brief moment, before suddenly swiveling around to plant the Mecha upside-down, trapping the mad artist like a spider underneath a plastic cup.

“Alright, good job Shinji!” Simon gave Shinji a hearty slap on the back. “You bagged that crook without breaking a sweat!”

Shinji made a nervous glance at the Lagann. “Are you sure he’s really trapped under there?”

“Not unless he can lift a metric ton of solid steel!” Simon grinned. “Of course if he had the Core Drill he could just turn it on, but we all know that’s safe and sound riight here...” he pointed to a bare spot on his neck. The Core Drill was nowhere to be seen.
Suddenly, Simon’s eyes widened as he heard the sound of the Lagann powering up.

“Uh… Simon?” said Shinji as he watched the mecha sputter to life. “How hard is it to drive that robot of yours?”

“It’s pretty simple, actually.” Simon felt a pit in the bottom of his stomach. “In fact I’d say even a novice could do well with it…”

“That’s what I was afraid of…”

The Lagann’s retractable hood sealed itself shut as the mecha tumbled onto it’s back, and then rolled into an upright position.

“A-HA!” The mouth of the Lagann moved in an unsettling way as Crazy Quilt spoke through it. “So this is what that necklace of yours is for!” he shouted. “And here I thought it was just some sentimental jewelry!”

“Of course!” Simon grabbed his neck. “You must have taken it when you were trying to gouge out my eyeballs!”

“CORRECT!” Crazy Quilt made the Lagann point at Simon. “I mean I was a master thief after all… but NOOOOOOO, everyone gets caught up on the whole ‘crazy artist’ bit. Now, let’s see how we turn on the weapons…” the hand pointed at Simon suddenly folded into a drill, which began to spin rapidly. “Ah, much better. Any last words before I paint the arena with your blood?”

“Yeah, I’ve got something. Just a bit of advice.” Simon grinned as he removed a wrench from his coat. “Practice that speech a bit more, and you MIGHT be able to scare off Ambush Bug. Maybe even Blue Beetle if he was having an off day. But who do you think I am?” he then pointed the wrench right at the Drill. “Simon the Digger, invincible leader of both the Dai-Gurren Brigade and the Justice Society of Japan, that’s who!” His smirk widen into a toothy grin. “So BRING IT ON!”

Shinji, not really in the mood to stick around, tugged on Simon’s arm. “What do you think you’re doing?” his voice trembled as he whispered to Simon. “There’s no way you’re going to win with just a wrench!”

“Relax, I know what I’m doing,” said Simon. “Just remember. Don’t believe in me, believe in the me that believes in—”

“ARE YOU IDIOTS DONE BABBLING?!” Crazy Quilt shouted. “MY GOD, WHAT IS IT WITH THE HEROES HERE WITH THEIR ENDLESS SPEECHES?! CAN’T YOU PEOPLE JUST HAVE ONE LINERS AND BE DONE WITH IT?” He then thrust the drill-arm forward, only for Simon to catch it in the mouth of the wrench.

“Yeah… like you’re one to talk,” Simon said as he struggled to keep the drill from getting any closer to him. “From what I heard American villains are just as bad. Especially ones from Gotham. I mean don’t you just looooove talking about how much you want to kill Robin?”

Crazy Quilt turned the Lagann’s other arm into a drill, and then thrust it at Simon. “I’ve got hobbies you know! I don’t just lie in my room all day and imagine what it would be like to kill The Boy Wonder!”

“Especially since someone already beat you to the punch.” Simon smirked. “Twice, I might add.”

“FUCK YOU!” one of the arms came dangerously close to Simon’s neck, but he was able to direct
it into a nearby wall.

“No fuck YOU!”

“STOP COPYING ME!”

“No stop copying ME!”

As Shinji watched this battle of wits from the sidelines, it became increasingly clear what Simon was trying to do: Simon was trying to get the villain angry, and for the large part he seemed to be succeeding. Shinji couldn’t see inside the mech, of course, but he imagined that Crazy Quilt’s face was beet red.

“But it’s powered by fighting spirit, isn’t it?” thought Shinji. “If he’s getting the pilot angry, Isn’t he just making the robot more powerful?”

He thought back to the last time he saw Simon get angry, back when they were fighting Mordred. Looking back, that kind of rage seemed uncharacteristic for a guy usually so laid-back.

But then he thought about what he did with that anger. Simon didn’t let it consume him, he just focused all the rage on exactly what was bothering him. He might act on impulse, but it was never without purpose. Not like a hammer, but a drill...

Shinji clenched his fist. “He said he believed in me… he’s expecting me to do something, but what?” He looked around the room. There didn’t seem to be anything that could easily stop him.

But when he looked back at the mecha, Shinji realized something. As much as Simon was moving his arms around to try and angle the drills away from him, his feet remained planted on the ground. And since he didn’t move, that means Crazy Quilt didn’t either...

“Guess anything’s worth a shot,” Shinji thought. “Hope I don’t explode his brain or something by accident…”

A couple seconds later, there was a faint clanging noise coming from within the Mecha, followed by a sharp “Ow!” from Crazy Quilt.

The innards of the Lagann clanged a couple more times.

“Ow! Stop it!”

Finally, Crazy Quilt retreated a few steps back and threw open the cockpit, revealing Shinji’s shield, reduced to a fraction of its former size, repeatedly knocking on the villain’s helmet.

“Stupid little pest…” he swatted at the floating hexagon without much of a result.

Simon then used this opportunity to counterattack, rushing past the drills and leapt back into the Lagann with both wrenches drawn, drumming on Crazy Quilt’s helmet until the villain gave up trying to take the mech, and made a break for the arena.

“Looks like we got him on the ropes!” Simon cheered. He then turned to Shinji. “Quick, get in! It’s the only way we’re gonna catch up!”

Shinji thought about this for a second. “Actually, you go on ahead. I’ve got another idea I want to try…”
The world was garbage, and Sho Minamimoto was the only person who could see it.

He knew it all along, of course, and it wasn’t just because he was picked on in elementary school for being the smartest kid the class. It was the rat race that everyone aspired to join, the status quo kept up by the greedy politicians, and the media that brainwashed all the sheeple into allowing it to happen.

He tried to escape that life, once. He worked his fingers to the bone in his uncle’s ramen shop, just so he could go to Tokyo U and become the youngest PhD of mathematics in the institution’s history. Math made SENSE. It was the same for everyone, no matter what family you were born to or how much money you had. Even a blind man could do math if he had the patience.

But when he finally made it he found it was the same old thing; rivalries between professors, bickering between departments for funding, students who were more interested in a diploma than actually learning anything…

But then he met these guys at a cafe who were like “hey you sick of running in that wheel all day? We’re doin’ something real, and we could use a smart cookie like you to do all the hard stuff.”

So they brought Sho out backstage, and showed him all the stuff they were working on. The crying bomb, the absence of a shark, the living graffiti, wonders Sho had never even imagined. They were going to wake the sheeple up, they said, make them realize what a wonderful world they had been squandering.

And that was when Sho Minamimoto finally found his purpose.

His new career started off slow; while he was really proud of that 11th digit he added to the base 10 system, the MIBs never found the note, so they thought it had been created by accident and Sho never got the credit. But as his skills grew, so did his audience, as the case was with the iPhone app that made people do pointless things for no reason, or that photograph that makes people literally unable to “think outside the box”.

But his crowning moment had to have been The Blank Tape. Just the slightest exposure, and anyone who listens can never even comprehend the idea of music, let alone listen to it. And why should they? Music wasn’t art, it was garbage; just some pop-culture trash cobbled together by innumerate yoctograms.

The plan was to leave these tapes all around Shibuya, all within tape recorders set to go off when traffic was greatest.

But evidently some son-of-a-digit snitched, and called the cops on him. But Sho wasn’t going to let himself go to prison, oh no. He was going to fight until his dying breath...

...And that’s exactly what happened. For all his wit and gusto Sho was just one man. The moment he drew a gun his skull was riddled with bullets.

But then the Reaper’s Game gave him a second chance. A chance to come back and get revenge on the world that crushed his aspirations like an empty tin can. And the moment they offered to make him a Reaper he instantly jumped aboard. After all, why go back up the rabbit hole when they were just going to kill you again?

Ever since that day, Sho Minamimoto has been biding his time, searching for the right variables to complete his victory equation; the one that finally let all those hectopascals, human and Reaper alike, see the the world the way he did.
And maybe then they could all be cool.

...but for now, as he sat in a swivelling office chair, surrounded by television monitors displaying all the camera feeds in the Dome, Sho had to content himself with something a bit more... cathartic. Perhaps it was bad form to try the same plan twice, but Sho wasn’t one to leave a problem unsolved. Especially when he had accounted for every variable... all except...

He glanced at the monitor depicting the big skeleton robot chasing after the little drow girl in the amusement park. “What the zeta is up with that robot, anyway?” he thought. “Ah well, a couple outliers won’t hurt anything; it’ll all add up to the same result...” It probably just thought the park looked like a good place to fight.

Speaking of which, it seemed like the blue-haired girl had just found his installation. But seeing how shaken she was by something as pathetic as a few dead bodies, Sho figured that this fight would be as easy as 3.14...

But enough gawking, it was time to get down to tactics. Judging by what she carried in the video feed, the girl probably used a sword of some sort.

“Fine by me.” He patted the revolver that he had holstered in his right pocket. “An integer that brings a sword to a gunfight deserves to be subtracted anyway.”

A rattling at the door interrupted sho’s train of thought. Figuring the kid was about to open it, he swiveled around in his chair, pulled out gun, pointed it at the door, and fired all six rounds into it.

The rattling immediately stopped. A few seconds later the door swung open to reveal the girl Sho had seen on the monitor, albeit with several gaping wounds in her torso. But even with all the dripping down the side of her body, she was still standing, and apparently still strong enough to unsheathe her blade.

“Stop… right there…” she sputtered, “In the name… of justice… I will-”

Sho wasted no time whatsoever. Leaping up from his seat, he used his superior reach to administer a swift kick to the girl’s head, knocking her over so he could stomp on her face again and again and again.

And he thought that would be the end of it, but the girl rolled aside so that she had the space to get back up, making a swipe at Sho’s legs with her sword as she did so, cutting a small seam around the ankle-section of his pants and digging in ever-so-slightly into his skin, leaving about as much damage as a paper cut.

“Yeah, as if a hectopascal like you is really gonna kill me,” Sho laughed, “You heroes are so zetta lame!”

“Says the guy… who thinks math equations... are ‘gangsta’.” The girl coughed. “And your mom was a hectopascal.”

Sho’s mad smile widened even further. “Well well, looks like this radian has a bit of spunk!” he said. He took a couple more steps towards the girl, until he was close enough to notice that all of her wounds have closed. “And I bet you have an attitude cuz that healing factor makes you think you’re invincible, am I right?”

The girl made a clumsy lunge forward, but Sho stepped to the side and grabbed her by the arm, snapping her bones in two with a knee jab, sending the sword clattering to the ground. “But really it just means that I don’t have to hold back.” He smirked. “Not that I normally do.”
The girl gasped in shock, but she didn’t scream. The pain was far too great to even do something like that. She just got down to the floor and watched in agony as her twisted arm repaired itself, her bones slowing moving back into alignment before before trying to reassemble themselves. Sho had once heard that the sensation that a regenerative metahuman felt when healing their own bones was almost worse than having them broken in the first place, since when you break your bones you get the worst of it over quickly, but when you put them back together it tends to drag on a bit.

“I bet you don’t even know how to use a sword.” Sho kicked the girl’s blade underneath a nearby desk. He then picked the girl up by the neck, holding her in just the right position so that she would have no choice but to look into Sho’s amber eyes. “So what makes a kid like you tick, the formula from which you derive your answers? Are you just some kinda attention whore, or do you just get some sorta kick outta being a goodie-two-shoes?”

“L… love…?” gasped the girl.

“Love?” Sho snorted. “It’s just a social construct; a rationalization for the way our genes make us reproduce! Love is garbage!”

“That’s what… she said…”

Sho was now grinning wider than ever before. “Oh I see what you’re trying to do.” he said, “You think you’ve got me all figured out. You think I’m the kind of guy who’s gonna get angry from schoolyard taunts and make a mistake.” He dropped the girl to the floor, reached behind the desk with his feet, and kicked the sword back to her. “Well tell you what; I’m in such a good mood that I’m gonna give you an extra credit problem.” He snapped his fingers, and the mechanism he set all day setting up for just this sort of occasion activated, changing all of the monitors so that they displayed a single countdown. He then held up a tape recorder that had been plugged into one of the monitors. “You probably know about the tapes already, so listen up; one of them is going to play over the concert loudspeaker in fifteen minutes, more than enough time for a clever little radian to get her operations ordered. You can either be cool and leave with that lover boy you’re so worried about, or you can risk it all and stay to try and divide by zero.” Sho shoveled a handful of bullets out of his pocket, and then started loading his gun. “So, watzit gonna be?”

Slowly, the girl once more got to her feet, and assumed a fighting stance, sword drawn and ready for battle. “Do you really have to ask?” she said.

Sho Minamimoto chuckled to himself. “Sohcahtoa…”

Having scrambled up to the stage, Mr. Nobody snatched the microphone from Miku and shouted “Helllooooo, Tokyo! Are you ready for a hostage situation!”

The crowd mumbled indecisively as they tried to decide whether or not this was all supposed to be part of the act.

“NOW THAT’S WHAT I LIKE TO HEAR!” Mr. Nobody pumped his fist in the air a couple times before grabbing Miku with the arm-lock that Lightning had accidently taught him. “Alright, so this first one goes out to my good friend The Quiz, wherever the hell she is right now. It’s a bit of a number I like to call ‘Mr. Nobody makes a daring escape from the concert while carrying a robot celebrity. Incidentally it’s also our last number for the night, so for those of you from out of town I hope you enjoyed Tokyo.” With Miku in hand, he began to inch towards the door leading backstage. “Feel free to pick up some useless crap at the gift shop, and be sure to watch out for my new album ‘Reading Random Words From the Dictionary in Pig Latin’, a delightful little piece on
how life has no inherent meaning or value, in stores NOW.” He then started moving Miku’s free hand around in order to pretend that she was waving goodbye. “Goodbye! Do svidaniya! Annyeong! Hyvästi~”

But just as he was about to reach for the doorknob, the backstage door swung open, revealing Crazy Quilt, flustered and out of breath. “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING DOWN HERE?!” he shouted.

“Oh some freaky shit really scared the crap out of me so I was just trying to kidnap this diva here and use her as a hostage so I can escape,” said Mr. Nobody. “How about you?”

“NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!” sputtered Crazy Quilt.

“Let me guess.” Mr. Nobody continued to hold Miku in an uncomfortable position as he made a thoughtful pose. “You had the same escape plan for when things went all wahoo-nee-shaped?”

“OF COURSE NOT!” Crazy Quilt’s face turned a deep shade of red.

“Your lips say ‘no’, but your eyes say ‘yes’!” Mr. Nobody pointed his finger and winked. “Well, you know what they say; great minds think alike!”

“WE HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON!” Crazy Quilt was absolutely livid with rage. “And now that you’ve bungled things royally, we don’t even have an escape route!”

“Au’ contraire!” Mr. Nobody held up a finger. “We do, in fact, have one option left to us.”

“And what, pray-tell, would that be?”

Mr. Nobody then licked his thumb, and stuck it high up into the air. “Intergalactic hitch-hiking!”

There was an awkward silence as both Crazy Quilt and Miku stared at Mr. Nobody’s thumb.

Finally, something snapped deep within Paul Dekker’s twisted little mind. Sure, maybe he was going to get Erased when this was all over, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to let himself die before his partner. He shoved Miku aside as he pounced on the amateur hitchiker, and began strangling him. “THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!” he screamed. “WHAT DID I EVER DO TO DESERVE SUCH AN INCOMPETENT PARTNER?!”

“Well let’s see… there’s all the murder, the thievery, your overall arrogance…” even while being strangled, Mr Nobody continued to wheeze out his answers. “…oh and the strangling! Strangling is kind of big on the list of cosmic no-nos…”

“Hey, get a room, Lovebirds!” Crazy Quilt raised his head for a moment, just in time to see the Lagann drop right in front of him. “Some people are trying to watch the concert!”

Instead of trying to come up with a comeback, Crazy Quilt went straight for violent retaliation, and fired a laser beam out of his helmet, but Simon just held up the Lagann’s palm to reflect the shot back at the villain’s feet.

“Come on, is that really the best you can do?” Simon said.

“Careful!” Lightning shouted as she and Shirley leapt up onto the stage. “If a stray laser bounced into the crowd you could blind someone! Or worse…”

“Oh yeah, good point.” Simon pointed at Crazy Quilt with the Lagann. “Hey, Girlborg. You think
you could maybe turn that guy’s helmet off before someone gets hurt?”

“Sure, no problem.” Shirley reached out into the mad artist’s helmet, searching for a way to turn it off…

...but then she saw that Miku was staring at her. “Oh god...” she thought. “...Miku's looking right at me. She probably recognized my voice already and now she’s seeing if my face matches and oh god she’s going to reveal my secret identity and...”

And Shirley grew worried, she began to lose her focus, causing the helmet to crackle as it started overloaded.

“MY EYES!” Crazy Quilt screamed as he began to tear at his non-functional eyeballs. “IT'S ALL SO BRIGHT... IT BUUUUURNS!”

The screaming was loud enough that Miku turned her attention away from Shirley, and turned to face Crazy Quilt, just in time to take a laser to the face as madman’s helmet began to fire uncontrollably.

“Miku!” Shirley dived to catch the robotic idol as she fell to the floor, stopping her fall right before the back of her head smashed into an angled stand that held one of the on-stage props.

But it was already too late. When Shirley looked into Miku’s eyes, instead of the warm, almost-human glow that her father’s company had spent millions trying to perfect, all she saw were soulless, empty shells, burnt out of their sockets by the laser.

Shirley felt her muscles tense up as her mind tried to comprehend the magnitude of what had just happened. She heard some shouting in the background, and was vaguely aware that Simon had exited the mech in order to give Crazy Quilt a good punch in the face. But Shirley was frozen in that one, single moment, as if her whole life had been building up to this one self-inflicted tragedy.

Shirley should have never tried to become a superhero. What was she thinking? She wasn’t brave, strong or cunning. She was just a girl who was lucky enough to develop superpowers after being bitten by a robot. She should have just lived out her days in silence, trying to salvage what remained of her “normal” life before the inevitable reveal would take it all away.

“I'm sorry,” she sobbed, “I'm so sorry...” she clutched Miku’s body as tears streamed down Shirley’s cheeks. “I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt...”

And then she heard a faint whisper. “Thank... you...”

Shirley opened her eyes. She could hear Miku’s simulated breathing; slow at first, but getting stronger with each passing breath. And before she knew it, Shirley felt Miku hugging back.

“You... saved me...” she said. “Your name is... Girlborg... correct?”

Shirley held her breath. She couldn’t tell if Miku was playing dumb, or if she seriously didn’t recognize Shirley.

“Yes... that’s right,” Shirley said. She figured that either way it would be best to follow along. “I’m a robot. Like you.”

“Really? ...I didn’t know.” Miku pinched one of Shirley’s cheeks, and tugged at the synthetic flesh that hid her metal bones underneath.
It also gave Shirley a second look at the damage that had been done to Miku. Yes, Miku eyes had been burnt out, but it was clear that the lasers didn’t penetrate any further. Shirley felt like an idiot for not realizing this sooner.

“Whoever built you must be very proud!” Miku said, smiling with closed eyes in an attempt to hide the damage. “Or disappointed, if you were made by a bad guy. But you don’t seem like the type a villain would build.”

“Um… thank you.” Even the thought of having to lie like this made Shirley’s stomach turn. But as long as Miku was just simply coming up with her own explanation, Shirley supposed that would be fine…

“…Oh how touching, Mr. Nobody said.” Mr. Nobody said. “But little did the Justice Society expect for Mr Nobody to use this distraction as an opportunity to make his daring escape...” he then rubbed his hands together in an extremely sinister way.

“You do realize we can hear you, right?” pointed out Lightning.

“Uhhh… SMOKE BOMB!” Reaching behind his back, Mr. Nobody pulled out a small, round object, and threw it to the floor where it exploded into a dense cloud of thick, white smoke.

The smoke cleared only a few seconds later, but by then the supervillain was halfway up the staircase, leaving behind a large pile of people that he had been yanking from their seats in order to block their way up.

“I’M A FREE MAN! A FREE MAN ON THE LAND!” he shouted to the dumbfounded heroes behind him, “MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL, AND TO ALL A GOOD-"

But before the villain could finish his irrelevant commentary, a teenage boy clinging onto a large, transparent hexagon with both arms flew in and swooped down on Mr. Nobody, striking him in the forehead with the edge of his geometric construct. This sent the villain tumbling down the very stairs he had been ascending, leaving him face-up on top of the pile of people he had been throwing down.

“Thank you governor I would love to have more lobsters stuffed down my underpants…” Mr. Nobody mumbled.

“Shinji- I mean anonymous person on our team whose real name I don’t know!” Simon said, catching himself before he revealed Shinji’s secret identity. “Good save back there!”

“Oh, thanks.” Shinji scratched his neck in embarrassment. “I’m just worried I hit him a bit too hard...”

“Well it’s not like a concussion would make him any morecrazy…” Simon rubbed his chin as he watched Shinji hover on his shield. “You know I think it would look better if you were standing on it.”

“Well, I guess it would but it’s kind of wobbly...” Shinji tried to stand up on the floating hexagon, but his legs turned to jelly as soon as his hands let go. “WooaaAAHH-!” Shinji clutched his arms around the shield once more. “I don’t think I’m ready for that just yet...” Shinji’s head swivelled as he took a nervous glance at the crowd that was currently watching him.

“Hey, don’t worry; we have plenty of time for practice.” Simon waved his hand to dismiss Shinji’s worries.
The Mechon’s claws tore through wood and concrete like tissue paper as it ripped apart the hot dog stand animalistically. He had given up trying to catch the kid through wit or dexterity; while certainly fast, his frame lacked the dexterity to keep up with such a frustratingly small target.

What was that girl, anyway? A DNA scan identified her as human without any kind of metagene powers, but she appeared to be anything but normal. Or human for that matter. Was she a Magus? It was certainly possible; the Mechon’s built-in “ether detector” spiked every time the girl used one of her powers.

Well whatever the girl was, she was also the Mechon’s only lead to the whereabouts of the idiot with the Monado. Maybe she was the one who tipped him off about FACE units being immune to the Monado’s power. It was doubtful, but certainly possible. Stranger things certainly have happened.

He looked at the wreckage of the souvenir shop that the girl had originally used in her first escape attempt. “Damn gel’s been leadin’ me ‘round in circles, she ‘as…” He flexed his pointy metal fingers. “Well once I ‘ave the Monado, she’s gonna get what’s coming to her, whatever the hell she is.” His fingers then clenched themselves into a fist. “Same with the Monado brat.” The fist then began to shake. “What is he, 18? 19? Too young and inexperienced, that’s what I say. Why, If I was still around, I-”

The Mechon lost his train of thought when suddenly the lights turned on in a nearby section of the park. Trendy J-pop filled the air over the park’s loudspeakers as a nearby attraction sprung to life; one of those “flying chair” rides where a bunch of swings suspended by metal chains are spun around a rotating tower. This variant in particular was apparently tornado-themed, with the tower itself resembling a rubbery cyclone with several spokes sticking out of the top so that the swings actually had room to, well, swing. There was also a very tacky statue of some wierdo in colonial-era clothing and a tricorne hat holding a wooden staff decorated with feathers and turtle shells. It was called “Mister Twister’s Twister Whisker”, a name which made the Mechon want to groan every time he thought of it.

Yet in spite of the tacky name the Mecon felt drawn to the structure nonetheless, as he felt the presence of the Monado in that direct. His optic sensor swivelled in their sockets as they tried to get a lock on it’s position, eventually finding it just underneath the rapidly-spinning ride. Apparently the brat was just hanging underneath, holding the blade up into the air, almost as an invitation.

It was a trap, to be sure. But what could a mere human possibly do to against the Mechon’s armor-plated body? Against a FACE unit, the Monado would be as useless as a toothpick, and anything less would be laughable.

As the Mechon lumbered ever closer to his target, it watched as the young man with the Monado rushed off to the ride’s control panel, reaching underneath before pulling out a pair of wires whose ends had been stripped bare. The young man touched the wires together, and the swing began to come to life. Slowly, at first, but as time went on it began to pick up speed. Soon, it was moving far faster than the ride was ever designed to go.

“So that’s ‘is plan?” the Mechon chuckled. “He’s just gonna ‘it me with a buncha chairs? Can’t wait to see the look on ‘is face when all ‘is hopes come crashing down...”

But just as he was about to active his rocket-boosters, the Mechon spotted the kid he was chasing just seconds ago, hanging on one of the spokes that held up the swings. Apparently spotting him back, the kid waved, and then swiped her claws through the nearby chairs, releasing the chair it
was attached to from the tornado-shaped ride and sending it hurtling towards the Mechon.

Furious, the Mechon swung his arm in order to slice through the incoming projectile, only noticing the cardboard box that lay within the chair when he broke it open, splattering the Mechon with a pink, gooey blob.

“What the-?” He scraped some of the blob off with one of his fingers as the sensors informed him that the warm paste consisted primarily of sucrose, vegetable oil and butter, and that it was a treat more commonly referred to as…

“The taffy?! The Mechon exclaimed as he began to wipe the confection off his arms. “Yer’ tryin’ a fight me with Taffy?! Of all the boneheaded, idiotic, downright insulting ways this could have played out, by far this has got to be the-”

But in the time it took the Mechon to start ranting, the girl had already swung over to the next spoke, in order to release another chair loaded with a box full of taffy at just the right angle to cover his jaw. And then she did it again. And again. And again. Over and over until there were neither chairs nor taffy left, at which point the sugary confection had seeped into his gears and electronics, leaving him completely unable to do anything but stare straight forward.

Even his vocal processors were covered in the sticky mess, denying him even the pleasure to helplessly rant in the general direction of his mortal enemies as they circled around him, likely just to add insult to injury.

“Oooohhh, I see now!” The girl said as she approached the frozen Mechon. “The taffy made him all sticky and broken, like when you spill orange juice on a computer keyboard.”

“I suppose that’s one way to put it,” said Shulk. “Mechon armor may be functionally indestructible, but the underlying components should still only have finite strength.” He then started taking pictures with his smartphone, and the girl soon did the same with her own (albeit in a more haphazard manner). “Just as I thought, the exposed joints proved to be a fatal weakness. This unit in particular is likely first-generation model of some sort, assuming that there’s a rational intelligence behind all this.”

“Oh rub it in why don’t ya?” the Mechon thought.

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While being able to recover from certain death was undoubtedly useful, during her fight with the math-spouting artist Sayaka discovered that her regeneration powers had a few limits. One of which was the fact that even with the aid of magic, recovering from a mortal wound was very tiring, so that while fighting the villain she hit her peak early, gradually slowing down as her opponent inflicted injury after injury.

Her opponent, on the other hand, had no problems running at full blast. Over the last ten minutes the villain had been subjecting the poor girl to every torment he could think of. When he ran out of bullets, he started throwing furniture. When he ran out of furniture, he started throwing computer monitors, leaving only the ones that displayed the ever-loomings countdown to abject failure. And when he finally ran out of those, he alternated between using what was left as an improvised bludgeon, and simply going at her with some sort of unidentifiable martial arts technique.

But Sayaka stood her ground nonetheless, because while the psycho mathematician could chip away at her all night, it would only take one solid blow with her sword to defeat him. And then she’d finally be able to save Kyosuke…
“Man, this is boring. Keeping you occupied is barely worth the effort.” The man cracked his knuckles as he stood in front of the doorway. “Might as well stop playing around and just beat you into unconsciousness.” He rolled up his sleeve and flexed his arm. “Too bad you’ll end up missing the performance. But I guess I can leave a remainder as long as it all factors out.”

Wishing she had paid more attention in health class, Sayaka’s hands quivered as she pointed her blade towards the man’s stomach, praying that the man would survive what she was about to do.

“What? You scared?” The villain threw his arms out to the side. “You digits are all the same; prancing around frilly outfits fighting monsters, but the moment you get a taste of real combat you just crumple up—” he pounded his fist into his hand, “—and add yourself to the heap.” His eyes glinted as he gazed into the monitors displaying the countdown. “Just five more minutes and this’ll allllllll be over,” he said. “Or rather, it’ll just be beginning! Every time you look at a radio you can’t play, every time you see someone singing along to a song you can’t hear, you’ll know that you failed everyone, including your pathetic little friends—”

Enraged, Sayaka lunged forward, sword drawn pointed at the mad mathematician. She ran the villain straight through, burying her sword halfway through his gut, freezing the madman’s maniacal mug mid-laugh. Sayaka held her breath as she saw the blood running down his black leather jacket and dripping onto his shoes, staining them with deep red splotches. The air stood still a the girl held onto her blade for dear life.

And then, just as Sayaka was about to declare the man dead, she heard a chuckle….

“Ha…”

…then came a guffaw…

“Ha… ha…”

Then the guffaw evolved into a giggle, and then a chortle, and then finally a howl of sick, twisted laughter.

“Ha ha... ah ha ha ha… AH HA HA HA!”

Sayaka looked up to see that the villain’s face had warped into a fiendish grin, his smile stretching ear to ear as he shrugged off the blade in his stomach.

“You’re so zetta slow!” he grabbed onto the blade of the sword, and slid his bloodied hand across the razor edge. “Our entire world is built on numbers. A work of art can move entire generations.” He then removed his hand, and pressed his bloody palm onto Sayaka’s terror-stricken face. “Now what makes you think something so mundane would be enough to kill a master of both?”

As the timer’s final minutes continued to tick down, the villain pulled himself closer to Sayaka, impaling himself on her blade even further… “But you know what?” he said “Even if I die here, even if you go against your half-assed moral code and kill me outright, even if you somehow manage to get away with it, one thing will never change. A radian like you is not cool.” he bent over the scared little girl’s shoulder, and whispered into her ear. “And you never will be.”

Suddenly the door flew open, and a gust of wind blew into the room, carrying with it an indistinct blur that violently tore Sho away from Sayaka in the blink of an eye.

When things finally calmed down, Sayaka was surprised to find that the villain was no longer skewered through the blade of her sword, but rather lying on the floor, tied up with a fire hose, with Hon’kale sitting on top him, glaring at him with claws drawn, ready to strike if he made so much
the slightest movement.

Sayaka then glanced behind her, and watched as Shulk smashed a cassette tape with the hilt of the Monado, the monitors behind him now reading “NAN” instead of the timer that was there just a few seconds before.

The magical girl’s eye twitched as she tried to make sense of what just happened. “Wha-”

“After defeating the Mechon in the amusement park, Kyubey told me that you were in danger and that time was running out.” Shulk turned on a nearby computer as he said this, and began typing on the keyboard. “I then used the Monado to tap into the Speed Force, and rushed over to finish the job.”

“But-” Sayaka began to say.

“Sayaka, please,” Shulk said, “Wait until I finish searching this computer for digital copies of the tape if you have any more questions. The minds of hundreds, if not thousands are on the line here, and I want to make certain that there weren’t any more backup plans.” He then spoke through Kyubey’s mind link. “How are the other tape recorders coming?”

“Well the good news is that the police just arrived, and they’re making quick work with finding them,” Shirou said. “The bad news is that they arrested us for bringing a motorcycle indoors.”

Shulk shook his head. “Talk to Lightning about it,” he said. “And how go the other fights?”

“We just wrapped them up,” replied Simon. “The concert is ruined, but at least everyone’s safe. Shirley and Shinji got the final blows, and-”

“We can go over the details later,” Shulk responded flatly. “For now, just try to make sure the audience stays calm...”

“Actually, Miku wants the whole team to come out,” Simon said. “You sure you don’t want to-?”

“I’m fine.” said Shulk. “I’m sure there will be plenty more chances to do public appearances, but right now I want to make absolutely sure that there aren’t any nasty surprises waiting for us.”

“...oookay then.” Simon paused for a moment. “Well, in case you change your mind we’re going to be on the stage. So just come down when you’re ready.” And once more, Simon disconnected himself from the mental link.

A few minutes passed as Sayaka watched Shulk mash on the keyboard in front of him. “You should get down there, too,” he said, turning away from the screen. “I’m sure your friends in the audience are worried about you.” Shulk delivered a faint smile, but Sayaka only had to look at the slight twitch in his eyes to see that he was just a mask to hide his worry.

And yet Sayaka didn’t really have anything to say that would calm him down. So she responded with a weak “yeah, I guess…” and began to leave the room. But before she closed the door, she looked back and saw Shulk, already back on the computer, hammering away at whatever it was he was trying to do.

She then glanced at the maniac that was tied up on the floor, unconscious, with Hon’kale tugging at his face as if she was expecting a latex mask that would reveal him to be a robot duplicate or something. His face was almost serene in slumber, even as the girl forced it into sorts of silly expressions.
“<Hello!>” she said in a deep voice, squeezing the villain’s lips as if imitate speech. “<My name is Bendy McCrazyhead. I love the color pink and I want to be pretty, pretty princess when I grow up!>”

“<Hon’kale, don’t play with the supervillain. It’s not nice.>” Shulk said. “<Now where is that diagnostic tool…?>”

Sayaka sighed as she shut the door behind her, ready to put as much distance between herself and the maniac tied up on the floor as possible.

------------------------

Heading down to the concert floor was harder than than getting to the A/V room in the first place. After all, it was one thing to find a dead body in the hallway, but knowing the body was there ahead of time was almost worse, because Sayaka kept anticipating how bad it was going to be.

Nevertheless, she forced her legs to lurch down the hallway through sheer willpower. After all, Sayaka was a hero. And what kind of hero would let a couple dead bodies scare her?

As she left the office complex, Sayaka saw a few police officers chatting about a mess that some of the other heroes left in the food court; something about a sprinkler system and lots of ice. The cops paused as she walked past, their eyes drawn to the blood that the villain had wiped on her face.

Sayaka ducked into the women’s room to escape the stares, and began to wipe the blood off with some soap, water, and a paper towel.

She then stared into her reflection, and saw what a wreck she had become. Her hair was an unruly mess, sticking up in all sorts of ways it shouldn’t. Her eyes were bloodshot, veins popping out, almost ready to burst. And while there were no signs of scarring, her face twitched every so often. But the worst part was her Soul Gem, which was now nearly pitch-black, with only the faintest specks of blue.

“Okay… get it together, girl.” she thought. She cupped some water into her hand and dumped it on her head so that she could smooth out her hair. “Remember, you’re a superhero. You have to look strong for everyone. You have to give people hope.” She clenched her fists, and bumped them togethier, knuckle-to-knuckle. “Witches might kill indiscriminately, but psychopaths can do a lot worse. You’re doing good work here. It’s all worth it…"

Sayaka left the bathroom, and headed down the stairs to the concert floor, where everyone seemed to be giving introductions. By time she had gotten down to the stage it was Shinji’s turn to stammer at the mic, while Hon’kale (who evidently made it there first despite Sayaka’s head start) awaited her turn with eager anticipation.

“Well, I’m Shin… juh… I mean…” Shinji tugged at his neck, which was already dripping a bit of sweat.

“<Say your name is Hexagon!>” Hon’kale whispered.

“…Hexagon? Uh, I mean, yeah. Hexagon. That’s my name,” Shinji said. “It’s because I have this… shield… thing… that’s kind of shaped like one…” he made his shield appear in mid-air, and had it spin around a bit as a demonstration. “I guess it’s not the most impressive power, but-”

Hon’kale then snatched the microphone right out of Shinji’s hand, and began to shout. “<HI EVERYONE! MY NAME IS HON’KALE AND I’M AWESOME!>” she pulled Ino over from the side “<THIS IS MY SISTER, INO! SHE’S AWESOME TOO, JUST NOT AS MUCH!>”
Hon’kale then shoved the mic into Ino’s face. “<SAY HI FOR THE AUDIENCE, INO!>”

Ino stared at the crowd with a bug-eyed expression for a few seconds, before picking up the microphone. A few more seconds passed before she gave a stiff wave and said, “...hello,” in a meek tone of voice. She then looked and Sayaka, and handed the microphone to her, saying “Here. You take it.”

Sayaka took a deep breath as she accepted the microphone. She had been thinking about this moment for a while now, about the time when she’d be confronted about her identity, and would finally be forced to choose what to call herself. She had gone through several possibilities; Magic Knight, Azure Guardian, and Aqua Blade were all some of her favorites. But no matter what name she came up with, she couldn’t help but feel that she had no reason to hide.

Sayaka looked out into the crowd. To them, she was just another magical girl, an unknown soldier in the fight against evil. Wouldn’t they feel safer if they knew that there was an ordinary girl underneath her costume? Someone approachable? Someone they could relate to? Why not reveal herself, to let everyone know that they were being protected by someone like themselves?

And of course there was the fact that Sayaka had just saved Kyosuke’s career yet again. If this didn’t score any brownie points with Kamijou what would? In fact, he had probably fallen in love with Sayaka’s magical girl form already-

Sayaka froze as her gaze drifted to the front row, where Kyosuke and Madoka were sitting. Except that instead of seeing an empty seat between them, Sayaka saw Hitomi Shizuki sitting in her spot, holding hands with Kyosuke.

And worse, Kyosuke didn’t seem all that impressed with the superheroes, never mind Sayaka herself. He stared at her with a glazed-over, apathetic expression… no, not apathetic. Dissapointed. At what, Sayaka couldn’t stay, but she felt his unmoving stare piercing her like a pair of ice-cold daggers.

And why shouldn’t he be disappointed? For there was Sayaka, the self-proclaimed role model, just standing there, wordlessly opening and closing her mouth over and over again like the idiot she was.

How could she have not seen this earlier? Of course someone like Kyosuke wouldn’t be interested in a hopeless spaz like herself. Who cares about plain ‘ol Sayaka? Hitomi was the more popular one, anyway...

“Sayaka?” Shirley whispered through though Kyubey’s link. “Are you okay?”

Without saying a word, Sayaka dropped the microphone and darted off the stage, faint tears streaming down her eyes. And as she ran past the puzzled faces of the crowd, a single thought consumed her mind:

Whoever that villain was, he was right.

Sayaka Miki was not cool. And she never will be.

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On their way out from the concert, Kyosuke mulls on how obvious it is that the Magical Girl in the JSJ is actually Sayaka. He also noticed when Sayaka froze up when she looked at him, but doesn’t realize that she was staring because Hitomi was holding his hand (which he actually found annoying, but was too impolite to say so). The chapter closes with Kyosuke vowing to stop
stringing Sayaka along, making plans to formally break up with her in order to avoid all the problems that come with being in a relationship with a superhero."

Sayaka didn’t show up after the concert ended. Madoka claimed she got a text that saying she had to go home because she had some chores to do, but Kyosuke saw it a transparent gesture because it was obvious what was really going on.

“Who was that magical girl?” Hitomi said. “I think I’ve seen her before…”

“It… must have been on television!” Madoka said with slight hesitation. “I mean, the Sailor Scouts and stuff are always on the news. Maybe you saw her there.”

Hitomi looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yeah, that must have been it,” she said.

Kyosuke rolled his eyes. Despite being a good conversationalist, it was clear after only a few minutes of talking that Hitomi was dumber than a sack of hammers. After all, Sayaka just happened to disappear right before a superhero fight started, and the team that saved her just happened to have a blue-haired magical girl who just happened to have the exact same height and face.

Admittedly, there was the outside chance that this was actually Sayaka’s identical twin sister. But given how Sayaka took the chance she got to tell Kyosuke about her family life while he was in the hospital, he found the idea of Sayaka omitting such a detail (either on purpose or by accident) to be incredibly unlikely.

“She probably thinks we’re living in an American comic book,” he thought. “That I’m going to just ignore the blatantly obvious and let myself get kidnapped by every nutjob that can afford a spandex costume and a little bit of detective work. And who do I have to protect me? An adolescent girl with stage fright.”

He cupped his hands to his face. “I can’t keep stringing her along like this, leeching off fannish devotion. I have to break things off before she does something stupid that gets us both in trouble…”

“Is something wrong, Kamijou?”

Kyosuke looked up to see Madoka staring at him with her big, pink eyes. It then occurred to him that Madoka likely knew about her friend’s secret identity all along. This meant that Madoka was a sycophant, plain and simple. She depended just as much on Sayaka’s fragile charisma as Sayaka depended on Madoka’s absolute loyalty. Keeping this in mind, Kyosuke figured she would be the best person to deliver the bad news...

“Yeah, is something wrong?”

Kyosuke looked at Hitomi, who also seemed to be concerned. Emphasis on “seemed”, as she was likely just parroting Madoka’s reaction.

“Oh nothing… I’m just kind of tired.” Which was true; Kyosuke was tired of everyone centering their lives around him. Tired of being treated like some kind of delicate treasure. But most of all, he was tired of everyone lying to him about how they really felt.

But of course he didn’t say that. That would be unbecoming for world-famous violin prodigy. So instead, he said “Give me a sec; I’ll call up the taxi. If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to catch the next train home…”

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BETHANY SNOW: Today’s top story tonight; the Teen Titans were puzzled to discover the time-traveling arch-villain “Harvest”, head of the N.O.W.H.E.R.E. organization, impaled by a pair of “haunted sugar tongs”. It is believed that the murder has something to do with the U.S. government’s own N.O.W.H.E.R.E., a government organization that was disbanded ten years ago due to creating a cosmic horror that almost destroyed the world for very confusing reasons. Vriska Serket, of the Teen Titans, had this to say:

VRSISKA SERKET: Speaking as a former villain, It’s o8vious what happened; someone who was part of the old N.O.W.H.E.R.E. group got pissy about this moron stealing their name and decided to settle things violently. Though why anyone would fight over a name like “N.O.W.H.E.R.E.” is 8eyond me.

BETHANY SNOW: Karkat Vantas, current leader of the Doom Patrol, declined to comment.

CALENDER MAN: In other news, Lobo has been defeated in Mortal Kombat. Literally. During the international Mortal Kombat tournament, a man identified only as “Largo” defeated the infamous bounty hunter. While Lobo had promised not to kill any of the participants, this did not stop him from ripping off his opponent’s arm. Largo is in very high spirits in spite of his injury, and says he looks forward to using his tournament winnings to get a “cool robot arm”. And now here’s Dr. W, our international correspondent, on the Clean Air Summit in Beijing, China.

11TH DOCTOR: *wearing a filtration mask due to all of the very obvious smog* Mrrmmrmrmrmrm rmrm rmrm rrmm rmrm rrmm rmrm rrmm rmrm rrmm rmrm rrmm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm.

*gestures to Merasmus the Wizard, who in his underwear, hung up on a statue of Mao Zedong* Mrrrm rmrm rrmm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm rmrm.

*points microphone to The Pyro, who is holding a protest sign that says “CLEAN AIR NOW!” in Chinese.* Mrrrm rmrm, mrrrm rmrm mrrrm rmrm mrrrm mrrrm.


Mrrmmrm rmrm mrrrm rrmm rmrm mrrrm rrmm rmrm. Mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm.

11TH DOCTOR: Mrrrm mrrrm! Mrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm, mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrm: *points microphone to Grant Morrison*

GRANT MORRISON: *clearly not wearing a filtration mask or anything that should impede speech* Mrrm mrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm, mrrmm mrrrm mrrrm mrrmm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm.

11TH DOCTOR: Mrrm mrrm mrrrm. Mrrm mrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm mrrrm!

CALENDER MAN: Thank you, Doctor, I’m sure that whatever you just said was very important.

AMBUSH BUG: Coming up; a crazy guy wearing a tinfoil hat tries to convince us that the members of the royal family are actually shape-shifting lizards. Only on Channel 52!

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OMAKE: JUSTICE SUBSTITUTES OF JAPAN PART 2

HereutleMR. SATAN: So, uh… what are we doing here again?

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: We’re here to lure the so-called “heroes” into a dastardly trap.

MR. SATAN: What kind of trap?
PURPLE PURPOSELESS: A trap whose elegance lies in it’s simplicity. First we lure them into this spot.

MR. SATAN: Yeah? And then what?

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: And then we do nothing!

MR. SATAN: ...your plan stinks.

FUBUKI: Look! It’s the bad guys!

DAN HIBIKI: Well well, if it’s Hercul- I mean Mr. Satan, my Arch-Nemesis who I met online this one time.

MR. SATAN: Ha! You ready for a beatdown, runt?

DAN HIBIKI: Who’s the runtier one? The runt, or the one who’s calling the other person a runt?

MR. SATAN: Uhhhhhhhh...

DAN: HOOOAH!

MR. SATAN: Kiii- YAAAAH!

DAN: YooooooOoooo!

MR. SATAN: WOOWOOWOOWOOWOOWOOWOOWOOWOO!

DAN: EEEEE-yooooooWAAAAAA!

MR. SATAN: HAYooooo000WAAAAA-YA!

DAN: You are indeed the master of making Bruce Lee noises. But tell me, can you perform the One-Palm Mantis-Style Candlemaker?

MR. SATAN: The One-Palm Mantis-Style Candlemaker? You mean the secret technique that can win any fight, but kills the user if performed wrong? Yeah, sure, I can do that. Can you?

DAN: Yes, of course. I do that move all the time.

MR. SATAN: Oh yeah? Prove it!

DAN: Um… I’m kind of rusty. How about you show me how it’s done?

MR. SATAN: What me? I’m practically an amateur. You’re the one who should be doing it.

DAN: Oh no no no, you’re the real master here. You should go first.

MR. SATAN: No, I insist! You’re clearly the one I should be looking to for inspiration-

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: Fool! I don’t care which of you can perform that move! For I am the Purple Purposeless, master of not giving a shit!

DAN: Nooo! Apathy! My only weakness!

FUBUKI: Ditto!
DAN: Nobody... paying... attention... losing... will... to live!

FUBUKI: Must... talk... in... ellipses!

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: Kneel before my overwhelming not caringness!

MR. SATAN: But you care about my stuff, right?

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: Not really.

MR. SATAN: Nooo! Apathy! My only weakness! *faints*

DAN: Only... chance... must use... phone... must... take... photo-op...

FUBUKI: Must... say... something... hilarious... on... twitter...

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: It’ll do you no good, fools! You’ll never find more followers in time! You might as well wish for a Deus Ex Machina to fall out of the sky.

GREY LANTERN RING: Purple Purposeless; you have the ability to instill great indifference. Welcome to the Grey Lantern Corps.

PURPLE PURPOSELESS: Wait, what? *GETS HOISTED INTO THE SKY*

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAISTILLDONTCAREABOUTANYOFTHIIIIIIIIIIIIIS!

FUBUKI: Huh.

DAN: That was weird.

FUBUKI: For sure.

TO BE CONTINUED

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So let’s talk about combat. Action scenes are fun to write,

I think of the characters as being on a “cognitive spectrum”, that is, how much they think when they fight. Among the main characters, the order is:

<THINKS MORE------------------------THINKS LESS>

Shulk, Shirley, Lightning, Kallen, Ino, Simon, Shinji, Electra, Sayaka, Hope,

Note that one approach is not necessarily better than the others; it’s simply a measure of how their personality is reflected in their combat style.

Simon’s fighting style is somewhat close to that of Indiana Jones; he uses whatever means are available, isn’t afraid to fight dirty, and can quickly come up with a plan when required. The only reason he doesn’t carry a firearm on foot is that this version of Simon is somewhat more concerned with preserving life than his canon counterpart, and he’s more willing to go all-out on an immortal or non-sentient being.

Lightning, by contrast, is much more methodical. She strikes only when there’s an opening, and tries to either block or parry other incoming attacks despite being the most physically durable member of the team. The reason for this is twofold; not only does it keep Lightning from fully
relying on her L’cie powers, but it also makes her opponents underestimate her.

Shirley leans a bit more on the cognitive side, since she doesn’t have the combat experience that anyone else does. And while being a rookie is a trait she shares with Shinji, Shinji is less likely to be able to think things through in an emergency.

Hope’s combat style is fast-paced and childish. Like Simon she thinks on her feet, but never comes up with a concrete plan for more than a few seconds ahead. Sayaka is similar, but her healing factor isn’t nearly as powerful as Hope’s so she has more to worry about.

Electra does think while she fights, but never about strategy. Rather, her mind is occupied with how much she hates the person she’s fighting, and fantasizing about what she’s going to do when she wins, which only succeeds in riling her up further. While powerful emotions can be useful (especially in anime), they need to be tempered with skill, something that Electra is far too impatient to learn.

With Kallen, it’s not so much that she lands in the middle so much as that she hits both ends of the spectrum simultaneously. She’s no master strategist, but she’s experienced enough to keep her head cool in a fight, smart enough to spot traps, and trained enough to channel her rage effectively. At least that’s how I interpret her both in-canon and out; feel free to debate me on this.

Ino we can talk about later, since she doesn’t have enough character development yet to come up with a style that is completely her own.
Electra Pendragon awoke to the sound of Blade’s (or possibly Vash’s) voice. “Your majesty,” he said. “We caught these trespassers on our way to the human world.”

Electra opened her eyes. Though she was still in chains, she was no longer caged like an animal. Instead she was in a nightmareish throne room, a twisted parody of the royal courts she was familiar with. On the surface everything seemed to be in place: there were elegant tapestries, crowds of noblemen and noblewomen draped in their finest garb, a velvet carpet leading up to the throne... there was even a chandelier hanging up above just begging for a crafty swashbuckler to cut it loose at a dramatic moment.

But for every feature in the room, there was also something that was more than a bit disquieting: The tapestries depicted symbols that were constantly arranging themselves into new shape, the “noblemen” were nothing more than empty suits with blue, flaming dots where their eyes would be, the carpet slowly undulated, almost as if was alive. The only thing that was even remotely normal was the throne itself; an imposing, monolithic chair carved from solid obsidian, and draped in purple velvet.

And slouched in the throne was a massive figure, female most likely, standing nearly nine feet tall. She was wearing chitinous, soot-black armor with sharp, jagged edges along the rim of each section. On her shoulders were a pair and spike-covered pauldrons, which held up a black cape with mystic runes embroidered on the back. And on her head was a tall, face-obscuring helmet, with long, vertical protrusions that made the helmet almost resemble a crown.

Standing next to the Queen was a more masculine figure, a humanoid torso glued to a quadrupedal torso that was as tall as a house but as thin a pole, as if a centaur had been stretched out like rubber. He… no, IT also wore black armor made of jagged plates, aligned so that they were all facing away from the pointed snout of the helmet, giving the impression that the entire suit of armor had flown outward from that spot.

Electra looked around; there were no other guards. If she could somehow free herself, maybe she’d be able to overpower the queen…

“Oh of course, your darkest majesty.” Electra watched as Lady Ebony kneeled down before her master. “We would never dream of defying you, oh wicked one, it’s just that-”

Ebony suddenly stop speaking. Electra looked at Ebony’s master, expecting to hear her voice at some point, but the queen remained silent.

“Yes, but the time of prophecy is about to arrive,” Ebony continued. “What could the Locksmith possibly do to-”

Without saying a word, the queen raised her hand at her subject, and produced a stream of
electricity that sent Ebony into screaming convulsions while her companion watched in wide-eyed horror. This went on for nearly five minutes, during which time Electra made a faint smile, smugly satisfied that her kidnapper was getting what was due.

But all good things had to come to an end. Having evidently grown bored of torturing Ebony the queen ceased frying her, and instead let Ebony wallow on the floor, groveling for forgiveness.

“I AM SOOOOOOOOOO SORRY!” she screamed. “I SWEAR TO SATAN I WILL NEVER GO AGAINST YOUR WORD AGAIN NO MATTER HOW INCONSEQUENTIAL-”

The queen zapped Ebony with lightning for a few more seconds.

“-NO MATTER HOW SEEMINGLY INCONSEQUENTIAL YOUR ORDERS ARE. PLEASE HAVE MERCY, YOUR VILENESS!”

“Uh… ditto,” said Bladvash.

A couple minutes passed, where presumably the queen was relaying orders to her subjects. “Yes, yes, send them to the mines!” Ebony, her voice warbling with delirious giggling. “Let The Warden break their spirit while I make up for lost time for Tom Bombadil and the space monkeys on the merry-go-round of life. Ha ha… ha ha… ha.” Ebony suddenly fell over with a dizzying grin on their face.

Blade or Vash looked down at Ebony, and then back at his master. “Yes, ma’am, I understand,” he said. “I’ll dispatch them immediately, with orders to find Ashford or her fetch and capture them unharmed.” Another pause. “Well, ma’am, I’m no good at thinking about things, so I tend to repeat orders just to make sure that I know what I’m supposed to do.” another pause still. “Yes ma’am, shutting up.”

And with that, Vash (or Blade) slung Ebony’s twitching, unconscious body over his shoulder, and began to leave the room. Shortly afterwards, the quadrupedal knight also began moving. It grabbed Electra and Sayaka it’s metallic fingers wrapping around their torsos, and began hoisting them into the air before carrying them off.

As the Knight began to leave, Electra cried out to the queen. “That’s it?” she said. “You’re just going to lock us up like common criminals?” Her face went red with indignation. “I am a PRINCESS!” she said. “Heir to the greatest empire the world will ever see!” She then began to kick and flail in an attempt to get free. “Why, when my father hears about this, he’ll destroy this decrepit kingdom of yours, burning it down until nothing more remains! Then he’ll make you work in his mines, and see how that feels! And then he’ll-”

The knight then stopped in it’s tracks and looked at the queen, who made a small, dismissing gesture. It was then that the knight reared back, and slammed Electra’s head against a nearby wall. And once again, Electra Pendragon blacked out.

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“MOYA GREENLIEF: PSYCHIC” read the neon sign, bathing the streets in a faint red glow. Below the sign was a glass door, upon which an inscrutable mystic symbol of some sort was printed, followed by the words “No Refunds” and “Open 24/7”. Through the window any number of decorations could be seen scattered about without any sort of unifying theme, from plastic zodiac symbols to statues of obscure Indian gods dimly lit by flickering “flames” of fake candles.

Milly Ashford had never taken much stock in so-called “psychic readings”. Not because there were
so many fake ones, but because even the real ones tended to produce prophecies that were vague enough to be useless. But right now she was running out of options in regards to her condition; it didn’t seem to be getting any better and in fact it actually might have been getting worse. Her fingers were starting to grow numb, for one thing, and her skin was taking on a waxy sheen that made her shudder every time she looked in a mirror. And if that wasn’t enough, Kallen had been giving Milly weird looks all day, as if she believed something was wrong but didn’t quite know what.

But the worst part was that Milly still didn’t know what to call her condition; a cursory search of the internet produced nothing but erotic fan-fiction and obscure tabletop role-playing games. And even if she had the patience to sort through a library of mystic lore, the only one she knew was the one Kallen’s family owned.

Of course that was assuming this was all magic. For all she knew, she could be some half-alien sleeper agent, or she could have had a dormant Metagene that only recently activated. But the only way to know for sure was to start narrowing things down one by one, like a deadly game of twenty questions. Once she knew for sure it wasn’t magic, she’d move onto other theories until she found something that worked.

But back to the psychic; Milly’s method of finding someone who had “the gift” was simple, but very methodical; she’d go in, put on an act about looking for true love, and get the most basic reading. She would then skip past anyone who tried to whitewash their predictions (such as removing the “death” card from the deck before starting), came up with a prediction that they thought she wanted (i.e. “you will meet a tall, handsome stranger with lots of money”), or deliberately came up with dramatic yet non-specific predictions of certain doom in the imminent future.

Needless to say, there were a lot of frauds in Tokyo. As of yet, the only positive hits were a strange woman in a green hood who literally demanded Milly’s firstborn child, and a pale woman who basically requested an unspecified period of indentured servitude. Though the latter was at least kind enough to point Milly in the direction of this particular shop, mentioning something about “destiny” as she did so.

“Well, I’m not going to get anywhere standing out in the street like this…” Milly said to reassure herself.

Slowly, she pushed the door open and stepped into the shop, pausing for a moment to see if there was anyone else there. Just as she was about to turn around to leave, a small spotlight lit the far side of the shop, illuminating a small table with two chairs. Seated at the table and facing her was a masked woman in a red Kimono, with long, greying hair tied into a very long ponytail.

“Milly Ashford,” she said. “I had been expecting you. Was the Witch of Dimensions’ price not to your liking?”

Milly rolled her eyes. The pale woman and this one must have been in cahoots somehow.

“Now… what are you searching for; true love, or perhaps something else?” the woman said. “I can see it in your eyes… you are searching for answers to questions that cannot be asked, are you not?”

“If I say yes, are you going to say something cryptic and unhelpful?” Milly replied.

The woman sighed, and began shuffling a set of tarot cards. “I will not lie to you, child. Divination is far from an exact science to all but the most gifted. And while I am quite talented in my ways, I’m afraid even my most advanced methods would leave you wanting.”
Milly examined her dismal surroundings. “You know with that kind of pitch, I can see why you don’t have more customers.”

“I never said my predictions aren’t accurate,” the fortune teller said. “I just said they weren’t precise. I simply don’t want to leave you disappointed if you don’t find what you’re looking for. And believe me, my customers seldom do.”

Milly thought about leaving, but instead pulled up a chair and sat herself right in front of the fortune teller. “Might as well give it a shot. How much for the most basic reading?”

“For you, skeptic as you are, I will provide this one free of charge.” The fortune teller placed the deck in front of her, and then placed three cards from the deck on the table. “For the past, we have the Nine of Cups,” she said, pointing at the first card. “A symbol of wishes granted. From this I can gather that up until recently you have lived a life that is fulfilling on many levels. A sign of good friends, good fortune, and good faith in all of life’s bounties.”

Milly nodded gently. It was true that her life was generally a happy one, aside from the death of her parents. Perhaps the fortune teller was assuming that Milly was the sort of person that only went to see a fortune teller when something had gone wrong, or more likely she just saw the designer brands Milly was dressed in and assumed (correctly) that she was from a well-off family. Either way, Milly wasn’t quite convinced that the Psychic had any sort of power.

“Now… as for the present,” the fortune teller pointed to a card that depicted a skeletal figure riding a horse. “Death. But do not worry, the card is not an ill omen in of itself. Rather it is a symbol of change, of transition to a new state of being. And by fighting that change you are simply making things worse for yourself.”

“Uh-huh.” Milly nodded gently. While that did describe her situation quite well, it was also vague enough that it could really apply to anybody. After all, what person wasn’t in a “state of transition”? Dead people perhaps, but even that could be seen as a transition from being a corpse to being even less of a corpse.

“The Ten of Swords, on the other hand, is more or less at it appears to be.” The fortune teller pointed to a card showing a man being impaled by a number of swords. “In this position it represents destruction in its purest form; an impending disaster that brings utter annihilation of the self.” She then pointed to a sun on the card’s horizon. “But even this has a silver lining. For the sun could be rising upon a fresh start, or it could be setting on something much worse.”

Of course; she just had to end with a generic prophecy of doom. Wordlessly, Milly got up from the table and began to walk away. “I don’t even know what I was expecting...” she said as she began to leave the building.

“If you manage to survive what may happen in the future, be sure to come again,” the fortune teller called out behind Milly. “I’ll be waiting right here, any time you wish...”

Hiding behind a nearby convertible, Kallen watched as the thing that may or may not have been Milly Ashford left the fortune teller’s shop. She’d been visiting such places all over town, and Kallen was beginning to suspect why. While it was certainly possible that Milly was a recruiter for some sort of psychic hive-mind, it was far more likely that she had just as little clue to what was going on as Kallen. With this in mind Kallen planned to reveal herself and what she knew to Milly so that they could compare notes, but this would involve revealing that Kallen was not only slowly transforming into some sort of inhuman monster herself, but that she had also been stalking Milly
all through the night. Not a very good way to start things off, all things considered.

No, Kallen’s best bet was to follow Milly home, wait for a bit, and then confront Milly somewhere she felt safe. At least then she wouldn’t have to let Milly know about the stalking.

But then Kallen noticed something strange. There was a light on the roof of a nearby building where there hadn’t been before. It wasn’t something like a streetlight or a flashlight, but it was more like a candle, flickering erratically as it slowly burned its wick. Wondering perhaps if someone was following Kallen herself, she pulled out her binoculars and pointed them right at the figure.

What Kallen found was not what she expected. Rather than a person holding the candle, Kallen instead found that the person herself was in fact the source of light, which was pouring out of the eye and mouth holes of a thick, iron mask that completely obscure the face. She was wearing a loose, brown trenchcoat, but was full-figured enough that Kallen could easily recognize her gender and little else. However, what was much more interesting was that she seemed to be watching Milly with a hawk-like stare, as if waiting for the perfect moment to swoop in and grab her prey.

As Milly began to pass by her hiding place, Kallen considered her options. This person likely knew more about what was going on with Milly than Kallen did, so taking her down with lethal force was right out. But hiding in wait for the perfect opportunity could prove equally disastrous if the mystery woman decided to take Milly out with long-ranged weaponry.

Then Kallen thought about using her new powers. If she was careful, she might be able to jump onto the building the mystery woman was hidden in, and confront her-

Suddenly, there was a slight crumpling sound followed by a shrill, mechanical cry as Kallen accidently made her decision. She looked down at her hand and saw that it was holding onto a door that had been torn off, tripping the alarm as it did so.

Milly looked at the car for only a split second before bolting off down an alley in the opposite direction.

“Wait! Stop!” Kallen cried, but then realized that Milly wouldn’t feel any better knowing that one of her close friends was behind this destruction. Instead, Kallen raced after Milly, turning her head to the sky as she searched for signs of the woman in the iron mask. A search that ended abruptly when a pile of rags that Kallen ran by sprung up and struck her in the head with a metallic object.

Kallen then found an arm wrapped around her neck, and a dagger placed on her throat. A SILVER dagger that burned her skin on contact, decorated with a small Christian cross that made Kallen nauseous to even look at.

“Not one step further!” Kallen’s captor shouted in a voice that sounded strangely familiar. “Not unless you value your friend’s life, of course…”

Milly immediately stopped running.

“Now that’s a good Fetch; doing what you’re told, just like always...” Kallen found herself gasping for breath as the figure dragged her forward. “Funny. I’ve waiting years for this, and I expected it to be much more bombastic,” the iron-masked woman said. “An epic battle on the academy grounds, where I chase you down the hallways, mowing down your friends in a hail of bullets as you fly past them.”

The figure suddenly Jabbed the dagger into Kallen’s shoulder, and threw her to the floor before grabbing Milly by the neck, all in one swift motion. “And all the while you’d be wondering. ‘Who
could hate me this much? Who would go through all this trouble just to kill some bratty, well-endowed trust fund kid?” Kallen tried to move, but the pain was too great. Her limbs felt like they were made of ice, while her stomach felt like it was made of Jell-o. Slowly, she tried to reach for the dagger. “And then when I’m done playing with you, I’d corral you to a place I’ve blocked off explicitly for this purpose. And then I’d explain to you EXACTLY what you’ve done.”

Just as Kallen was about to collapse from the pain, she finally grabbed the dagger by the hilt, and pulled it out, causing blood to trickle down her arm. She looked up at the masked figure, who had had now discarded her trench coat for a distinctive-looking blue tailed coat that was buttoned down the middle, with a pair of white sashes across her chest (which did little to hide her voluptuous figure), bright red epaulets on her shoulders, red trimmings along the fringes, cuffs, and collar, as well as a pair of plain red slacks. She was now holding Milly up with one hand, and pointing a rapier directly at Milly’s heart with the other.

“All wealth is built on the suffering of others; you would know that even if you were as dumb as you looked. But I’m not some irate factory worker who bled for a soulless corporation, or an orphan whose home was bulldozed to make room for that rich kid school of yours. No, this grudge is directed at you and you alone.”

Just as Kallen got back up onto her feet, the woman flipped open her visor, revealing her face to Milly. And whatever it was she saw, it upgraded Milly’s reaction from general fear for her life to overwhelming existential dread.

“No! That’s impossible!” Milly shrieked. “I mean that’s just... impossible!”

“Is it?” the figure replied. “...tell me, how far back do you remember? Eight years old? Six years old at the VERY most?” The figure tightened her grip, and moved the sword ever closer to Milly’s chest. “With all the glamour in your life, why on earth would you bother to remember such an insignificant detail as your origin? How you’re just as much of an automaton as that virus victim you pal around with, built to exacting specification by eldritch hands for the sole purpose of stealing my-”

Lurching forward, Kallen grabbed the neck of Milly’s assailant and began to pull her back. There was a burning sensation in her hands, but it wasn’t nearly as painful as when the dagger was stuck in her shoulder. This threw the woman off balance enough that she dropped as well as her sword.

“Run!” Kallen shouted. “I’ll hold her off! Just run!”

The thing that may or may not have been Milly looked back for just a moment, her mind scrambling to come up with a logical series of events that could explain all this. But just as ordered, she immediately turned her tail and fled down the alley, zig-zagging through the darkness to elude any further pursuit.

“Idiot!” Having gotten her bearings, the woman with the iron mask threw Kallen back onto the ground. “Do you have ANY idea what you’ve just done?” Facing away from Kallen, the woman removed her mask, revealing luxurious locks of glowing hair that literally shimmered as if they were on fire. She then turned to face Kallen, giving the young woman her first good look at the assassin’s face.

And the thing was, aside from the glowing skin, her face looked exactly like Milly Ashford’s.

Kallen stared at the attacker with confusion. “What... the hell?”

“My thoughts exactly...” the other Milly scowled as she picked the dagger back up off the floor.
and removed a small crucifix from her sleeve. “Well, since you seem to be somewhat used to your new powers, perhaps we could take a walk? Maybe have a little heart-to-heart conversation? Bonding, perhaps?”

Kallen clenched her teeth as she tried to resist the crucifix, which even now was sapping her strength for reasons she still didn’t understand. “I have… nothing… to say… to you.” Kallen reached into her back pocket for her phone, and covertly dialed Zero’s phone number.

“Now we can do this the easy way or the hard way. The easy way involves you coming with me so we can get this mess sorted out. The hard way is exactly the same, save that I stab you several times first.”

“…you have my attention,” said Kallen.

“Good.” the woman who looked like Milly Ashford put the crucifix back in her sleeve. “Now we just need to find an antique store…”

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Mami Tomoe was having a nice, relaxing evening to herself after a long night of Witch-hunting. Her uncle was out of the apartment, but then again he always was; his job involved a lot of travel, and even when he had time off he spent his days catching up on lost sleep. Which was fine by Mami, as she was responsible enough to balance chores, cooking, homework, and her duties as a magical girl.

At the moment, the blonde-haired, gold-eyed 15-year-old girl was lying on her couch in a snug nightgown, having let her pigtails down to read a copy of “Lord of the Flies” for her english class. She was just admiring the tenacity of the children in the book organizing themselves so quickly when her cell phone started ringing. She picked it up, looked at the caller I.D. and saw that it was Sayaka that was calling. She pressed the button to answer, and suddenly heard the sound of pouring rain in the backgrounds.

“Hello? Sayaka?” Mami said. “It’s a bit late to be calling, is there something wrong?”

At first there was no answer, just the sound of raindrops and heavy breathing on the other end of the line. But then she heard Sayaka’s voice, cold and sullen, say “it… didn’t work.”

Mami paused as she considered what this could possibly mean. “What didn’t work?” she asked.

“The concert… it didn’t… I didn’t… Kyosuke… the math man… I wasn’t cool enough…”

“Calm down, Sayaka.” Mami said, trying to hide her worry. “You’ll never be able to figure this out when you’re this agitated. Now, start from the top; what just happened?”

Sayaka took a deep breath. Shen then began to explain everything, starting from the wish she made to fix Kyosuke’s arm, to the concert, to Hitomi, leaving out only the gory details about the villain she fought.

“I see,” said Mami. “So… you’re worried that you wasted your wish?”

“Mmm hmmm,” Sayaka mumbled. “I mean, Kyosuke wasn’t the only reason I became a magical girl, but…”

Mami nibbled on her thumb as Sayaka struggled to convince herself that things weren’t so bad. Mami wasn’t convinced. She had seen this happen before; a wish being negated by ill fortune. It’s
possible that she’ll be fine for a while, but soon Sayaka would fall into a rut as killing Witches and collecting Grief Seeds would become increasingly strenuous. Then, her Soul Gem would start to grow dark faster than Sayaka could cleanse it. And then…

...Mami didn’t actually know what happens when a Puella Magi’s soul gem turns completely black. All she knew was that the magical girl in question was never heard from again.

It was times like this when Mami was almost glad that her wish was basically just to save her own life, because the only way that wish could be reversed is if she died, and then being a magical girl wouldn’t matter anyway.

“Sayaka? How is your soul gem looking?” asked Mami.

“Uh… not great,” said Sayaka. “It’s mostly black now, though I think I can see a few specks of blue in there…”

Mami immediately got up, and headed to her closet in order to put on clothes. “Change out of your costume immediately and find somewhere safe, like your team’s headquarters. I’m going to bring you some Grief Seeds.”

“But I already owe you-”

“Consider this a gift,” said Mami. “I know you’d do the same thing for me.” She picked the first T-shirt and matching pair of pants she could find, and started putting them on. “I’ll be there in a couple hours. Just don’t get into trouble and everything will be fine.”

Sayaka hung up her phone. “Everything will be fine…” she thought. “Yeah, right. A girl like Mami’s just happy to be alive. So where does that leave me?”

Having dismissed her costume, Sayaka was now wandering the empty streets of Ikebukuro in her civilian clothes.

“My life is over,” she thought. “Kyosuke hates me because I’m weird, Mami hates me because I’m needy… even Kyubey probably hates me, ‘cuz I haven’t found a single grief seed on my own…” She kicked an empty soda can into the street, where it got run over by red SUV. “All that’s left is superheroing, but I can’t even take down one villain by myself. I’m a failure on all counts.”

She looked at her reflection in a nearby department store window, trying to imagine how pathetic she must have looked in that magical girl costume. “Guess there’s nothing to do now but turn in my Soul Gem. Maybe I can give it to someone else. Like Madoka. She’d probably be better at this than I am…”

Just then, a reflection ran straight past Sayaka, heels clicking on the ground. Sayaka turned instantly and saw Milly Ashford, running as if being chased. “Milly!” she called out. “What’s going on?”

The blonde stopped in her tracks, and turned around to approach Sayaka. “Oh Sayaka, thank god you’re here,” she said. “I’m being chased by someone who looks just like me and I don’t know why except that she’s angry enough to want me dead.” she gasped for breath. “I think she might be my evil twin sister.”

In spite of her mood, Sayaka had just enough sarcasm left to raise an eyebrow. “You have an evil twin sister.”
“Apparently,” Milly said. She pointed in the direction she just came. “Kallen tried to stop her, but… I don’t know if she made it.”

Sayaka looked in Milly’s eyes. She seemed genuinely frightened for once, and this was the person who barely batted an eyebrow when Deathstroke showed up to their recruitment drive.

It dawned on Sayaka that Milly might have been frightened for the same reasons as Sayaka; she had been treating running a superhero team as a sort of a game. A game with winners and losers, but one where everyone just goes home laughing at the end.

Sayaka reached into her pocket, and pulled out her Soul Gem. It might have just been her imagination, but it was looking a little more clear than she remembered it. Perhaps it had just enough juice left to save Milly…

“Don’t worry, Milly.” Sayaka said. “I’ll protect you.”

She focused on the gem, summoning up the power to will her costume back into being. And in a flash of light, she was once again wearing her magical outfit, which now lacked any of the damage it sustained during her previous fight.

She drew her sword and shouted “Alright, whoever you are! Are you gonna come out and face me, or are you just going to hide like a little scaredy-cat?”

There was no response.

“Yeah! That’s what I thought!” Sayaka waved her sword around dramatically. “Go run home to you mommy! I bet she’s waiting at home for you, with a big baby bottle full of loser—”

Suddenly, a dozen-odd figures in jagged, soot-colored armor dropped down from the nearby building, surrounding Milly and Sayaka in a semi-circular fashion.

“-juice.” Sayaka’s head turned every which way as she tried to get a sense of their strength. None of them were very tall; they were all about Sayaka’s height at the very most. But then again, they didn’t appear to be human either. Instead of wearing helmets, their heads seemed to be smooth, granite orbs that floated above the stump where their neck should have been. In their hands they had cutlasses, the same type of sword that Sayaka herself had, thought of a much more crude make.

“Ah. I get it. These things are like Familiars.” Sayaka grinned. “Numerous, but not very strong. In that case, taking them out should be no problem at—”

All at once, the creatures leapt at Sayaka and Milly, piling upon the two girls like an avalanche of steel. Sayaka tried her best to stab them, but even when she could free her arm enough to move, she found that their armor was too thick to pierce.

As Milly continued to scream, one of the creatures pulled out a handkerchief, and pressed it against Sayaka’s mouth.

“No… no… not again,” she thought as her eyelids began to drop. “I can’t fail Milly…” she thought. “I have to… I have to save her…” she tried reaching out to to Kyubey, to try and send him one last message of desperation.

“Someone… anyone… help…”

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“I’m afraid there is nothing I can report,” said Kyubey. “I wouldn’t worry too much, though. If I were Sayaka, I would go Witch-hunting for more grief seeds.”

“I hope so…” Madoka took a break from looking out the window of the train home to give a quick glance at her friends, and found Kyosuke playing Angry Birds on his phone while Hitomi gazed at him longingly. Neither of them showed any concern for Sayaka, though Madoka hoped this was because she had convinced them both that Sayaka had gone home before them. Kyubey, meanwhile, was lying atop Madoka’s backpack, snuggled up as if he were about to fall asleep.

“This never would have happened if you thought to call either of us,” Lightning said. “What were you thinking, sending a rookie into a situation like that?”

“Well how was I supposed to know that there was a murderer in there?” Shulk replied. “Are We Cool Yet cells aren’t usually this extreme. Besides, she could regenerate. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I can think of a lot of things that can happen to a thirteen year old in a form-fitting outfit,” said Lightning. “Especially in Japan.”

“Yeah, dude. Not cool,” said Simon.

“Yeah! I mean, haven’t you seen ‘Special Victims Unit’?” said Hon’kale.

“Kyubey, please stop translating for Hon’kale. We’re trying to have an adult conversation here,” said Lightning.

“Aww come on! I’m old enough!” Hon’kale protested. “I’m almost eleven, and that’s like, practically-” and then suddenly her voice stopped.

“…Sorry about that,” Simon murmured. “So you were saying?”

There was a moment of silence as Shulk presumably thought of what to say. “…Okay, in retrospect I probably should have taken all of this into account. I just didn’t think I had enough time…”

“We’re not saying you should have done nothing,” said Simon. “We’re just saying that you could have asked Lightning or I to go after the A/V room.”

“And leave the rookies to fight on their own?” said Lightning. “Sending either Shirley or Shinji as backup would have been better.”

“And leave you fighting someone possessing the girl that’s you only weakness?”

“I’d be fine as long as I kept my distance. And even if he managed to possess me, Ino could take me out in one hit.”

“People, please.” Lelouch interrupted. “It’s clear that there was no right answer to this. Everyone did what they thought was best, and the only tactical error we made was not covering the A/V room in the first place, and that was only because we expected a very different threat than the one we got.”

“That’s right!” said Shirou. “Even though Shulk’s vision wasn’t right, we still prevented what was essentially a paranormal terrorist attack. That has to count for something!”

“Well, you guys did, at least,” remarked Rivalz. “Shirou and I just ended up getting arrested for my stupid idea. Speaking of which, can you guys give us a hand?”
“That depends,” said Lightning. “Are you two going to stick to the plan from now on?”

“...maybe?” said Rivalz.

“I’ll talk to the chief about letting you guys off. Just promise me you’ll leave the superhero stuff to superheroes. Okay?”

“Okay…” Rivalz moaned.

“Well, I suppose this means we’re all done here,” said Simon. “I’ll send my crew over to do repairs (at a huge discount, of course), but beyond that there are absolutely no loose ends to tie up.”

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“What happened to the perpetrators?” said Police Chief Sonoda.

“Um… what?” Shirley said.

“The suspects, the criminals, the bad guys. You said they were right here.” he gestured towards an empty spot on the floor. “I don’t see them anywhere, do you?”

“Uhhhhhh…” Shirley stammered. She barely had time to process how quickly things had been going since the concert ended. When the cops showed up, it took mere minutes for them to rope off the crime scene investigation and start looking for evidence.

“Look, I’m not saying they weren’t there or you didn't catch them,” the chief said. “We’ve got hundreds of eyewitnesses and we’ll probably find more than a few fingerprints. What we’re looking for is insight into how they, as well as all of their DNA evidence, suddenly disappeared without a trace at the stroke of midnight.” He handed Shirley a tablet computer with a security video of a couple officers carrying Mr. Nobody and Crazy Quilt away, only for them to vanish at the exact moment the time readout on the video feed went from 11:59 PM to 12:00 AM.

“Maybe they were ghosts?” suggested Shirley, struggling not to accidentally peak at any of the more disturbing photos of the crime scene contained within the device.

“The sad thing is we exactly can’t rule that out just yet.” Sonoda took back his tablet. “Especially since all three of them are supposed to be dead to begin with.”

Shirley looked puzzled. “They were?”

“Yeah.” said the chef. “I don’t know the details, but boys at the office tell me that Paul Dekker the amazing technicolor wierdo got killed by his successor, while the other guy… I dunno, they think he died, came back, possessed the guy funding the Doom Patrol at the time, and then died again.”

“You don’t sound very surprised,” said Shirley.

Sonoda gave Shirley an annoyed look. “If I had 50 yen for every time a dead meta came back to life, I would have retired ages ago.” He adjusted his glasses. “In any case, we’ll handle the investigation from here. Rest assured that our team’s going to figure out whatever the hell happened, no matter how needlessly complicated it is.”

“And you’re going to find Saya- I mean, our missing teammate?”

“If this turns into a missing persons case, we’re going to tryto find her,” Sonoda said. “Though I
can’t say luck would be on our side. It seems like every other week we get a missing children’s case where the kid turns out to be a magical girl, or at least she claims to be one in her diary.” He shook his head. “It astounds me to think that some inscrutable magic things believes that children would be the best candidates for saving the world.”

“So, Magical Girls die a lot?”

“Well, there’s a bunch of different kinds of Magical Girls. It’s not like they all come from one source.” Sonoda closed his eyes and scratched his head. “But yes, there are a few types that are particularly prone to mortality.” He looked up at Shirley, who didn’t seem any more reassured. “But I’m sure there’s probably nothing to worry about,” he said.

“Yeah…” Shirley replied. “I’m sure she’s on her way home as we speak…”

DIETHARD RIED: Good evening, and welcome to Channel 66, the Supervillain News Network, bringing you fair and balanced coverage of *SNIRK* Ha ha, sorry, I couldn’t hold it in. I’m Diethard Ried.

ARGH! YLE!: And I am Argh! Yle!, the Living Sock, the eternal nemesis of the accursed Ambush Bug!

DIETHARD RIED: Our top story tonight; thanks to a new breed of moths that shoot acid out of their eyes. Killer Moth has managed to kidnapp the chairman of the Homeless Kittens Shelter of Gotham, and is now holding him ransom for, and I quote; “all the money in the world”. We now go to a live teleconference with Killer Moth in his secret “Moth Cave” in hopes of clarifying this economically impossible demand. Killer Moth? Are you there?

KILLER MOTH: {{being beaten up offscreen by Batman}} AAAAH! AAARRGH! OOOF! OWW! OH GOD NO, NOT THE BAT-TASER! ANYTHING BUT THE BAT-TAZZZZZZZZT-

DIETHARD RIED: Our apologies; we seem to be having technical difficulties at the moment. In the meantime, here’s Yle! with our Falling Star of the Week; a new, up-and-coming supervillain that we think has a shot of making it to the big time.

ARGH! YLE!: Thank you, foolish fleshbag! This week’s master of miserable malice is none other than The Demon General, Darkdeath Evilman. No doubt following the steps of Lord Death Man, this unapologetically named upstart hail from Japan, the homeland of samurai and giant monsters. Despite having butted heads with everyone from the Teen Titans to Super Young Team, only one thing has become clear; he seems to have no prerogative other than to cause as much mayhem and destruction as possible and only escaping due to his inordinate number of robot doppelgangers. Building robot dopplegangers is something I once dabbled in, only to realize that it was silly and foolish-

{{The real Argh! Yle! comes in from offscreen and smashes the fake Argh! Yle! with a wrench}}

ARGH! YLE!: I’m sorry you had to see that. You see, that doppelganger of mine was malfunctioning ever since it was injured in a battle with my accursed arch-nemisis, Ambush Bug. It’s damaged processor and faulty subroutine somehow convinced the robot that it was in fact the real-

{{The real Argh! Yle! comes in from offscreen and smashes the fake Argh! Yle! with a wrench}}

ARGH! YLE!: I’m sorry you had to see that. As you may have already guessed, this robot was
convinced that it was the real Argh! Yle!, when in fact there is only one, single, solitary, true-

{{The real Argh! Yle! comes in from offscreen and smashes the fake Argh! Yle! with a wrench}}

ARGH! YLE!: Um. What he said. CURSE YOU, AMBUSH BUG! {{Gets smashed by another “real” Argh! Yle!}}

DIETHARD RIED: *sigh* I don’t suppose our field agent has anything to report?

MR. JOHN TOTALLY-NOT-A-DALEK: THE WEATHER FORECAST FOR TODAY IN SIDNEY IS CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF EXTERMINATION! {{Starts firing lasers indiscriminately}}

DIETHARD RIED: *facepalms into both hands* ...I want my old job back.

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Omake: JUSTICE SUBSTITUTE OF JAPAN: PART 3

NARRATOR: When we last left our heroes, they were off doing important things for important reasons, and now Teddy Bomber and T.K. are in the shopping district fighting bad guys.

TEDDY BOMBER: Yeah, thanks for being specific.

T.K.: <Don’t stop me now!>

DESTRUCTION: FOOLISH MORTALS! I’ve caught you red-handed, you no-good do-gooders!

TEDDY BOMBER: ...excuse me?

GARUNGUN: Ah, let me handle this; you're evil banter needs some work.

DESTRUCTION: Oh. Sorry, boss.

GARUNGUN: Ahem… FOOLISH MORTALS!

TEDDY BOMBER: (this really isn’t much better)

GARUNGUN: I am Garungun, the demon known far and wide as the Obsidian Winged Destroyer! Cower in fear of my Evil Eye, and the almighty power of the Majin sealed within my hand!

TEDDY BOMBER: Obsidian Winged Destroyer? You don’t have any wings.

GARUNGUN: My wings are only visible to those who possess the Evil Eye!

TEDDY BOMBER: Oh yes, how silly of me.

GARUNGUN: But enough about me; my Evil Eye senses that you are not, in fact, the Justice Society of Japan. If that be the case, who are you, then?

T.K.: <We’re the Princes of the Universe!>

GARUNGUN: Ah, of course! The Princes of the Universe! I haven’t heard that name in over six hundred and sixty six thousand years!

TEDDY BOMBER: (More like six seconds if you ask me…)
GARUNGUN: It is written in the Dark Prognosticus, that to do battle with the Princes of the Universe is to risk unleashing the evil power of the Majin sealed with my hand! What do you say to that, oh blindfolded one?

T.K.: <Drop it like it’s hot!>

GARUNGUN: Very well then! I can feel the evil power inside of me, raging like a hurricane! HWOOOOooooooWAAAAAAAAAAAANAAA!

TEDDY BOMBER: ...

T.K.: …

DESTRUCTION: …

TEDDY BOMBER: …yeah, I’m not seeing anything.

GARUNGUN: Uh… of course you don’t see anything, you fool! The time clearly isn’t right for me to release my almighty power, for fear of shattering the very foundations of the universe!

TEDDY BOMBER: Riiiiight…

T.K.: <You’re as cold as ice.>

GARUNGUN: GAH! Um… Well-

DESTRUCTION: Hey boss, do you think I could have a turn? I think I have a good idea of what to say.


DESTRUCTION: Okay then. Ahem… FOOLISH MORTALS!

TEDDY BOMBER: (Here we go again.)

DESTRUCTION: I am Destruction of the Endless! I am the very personification of my namesake, bringing ruin to all those who stand before me! Who are you, to challenge one of the very aspects of the cosmos itself?

TEDDY BOMBER: ...

T.K.: …

GARUNGUN: ...

TEDDY BOMBER: …that’s not much better.

GARUNGUN: That was the worst evil speech I have ever seen! You sounded completely ridiculous! Delusional, even!

DESTRUCTION: But-

GARUNGUN: And what’s with that tile of yours; “Of the Endless”? It’s so unimaginative and uninspired, I daresay it makes a mockery of my profession!

DESTRUCTION: But-
GARUNGUN: Not one more word from you! I hereby declare your apprenticeship to be cancelled from here on in. Find another teacher if you must, but know this; you will NEVER be a supervillain if that’s the best you can come up with.

DESTRUCTION: *Sigh* Maybe I’ll try taking up gardening again. {{SLINKS AWAY}}

GARUNGUN: Now, where were we? Oh yes; THE MAJIN SEALED WITHIN MY HAND-

T.K.: {{SHOOTS GARUNGUN}}

GARUNGUN: Nooo! Bullets from a gun! My only weakness! You win this round, Princes of the Universe, but I’ll be back! I swear upon the evil power with my-

T.K.: {{SHOOTS GARUNGUN}}

GARUNGUN: Uh, well, you know the rest. Chao! {{FLEES}}

TEDDY BOMBER: ...why am I here again?

T.K.: Because every comedic duo needs a straight man.

TEDDY BOMBER: Wait, did you just say something coherent?

T.K.: <Where did you come from, Cotton-eye Joe?>

TEDDY BOMBER: Never mind…

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AUTHOR’S NOTES:

One of the difficult things about this story is that I’ve had to do a lot of research in order to make this story reasonably accurate to canon. I’ve gone back and forth over how much this setting adopts from the new-52 and post-crisis continuity. The very nature of the story demands that some things (such as the JSA having existed) still need to stay, but other changes (such as the revised mythology of Wonder Woman, the revised version of Captain Marvel/Shazam, and the three different Justice Leagues), are things that I either find interesting or at the very worst am indifferent to.

But as I’ve said, I’ve also left marks of my own. Just look at any of the Channel 52 segments and you can easily see how many things I’ve changed to either show off a favorite character or to make a statement of some sort.

And if you’re a sticker for continuity who’s wondering how Killer Moth somehow turned back into a bumbling crook after turning into a demon and being killed in canon (and if you don’t know what I’m talking about, let me assure you that it’s a very long story). Here’s my contrived explanation: He got revived by some sort of human sacrifice ritual or something for the sole purpose of having his evil bug demon powers stolen by a wicked sorcerer. (Un)fortunately the sorcerer who tried this messed something up, and the bug-demon powers ended up transferring to Killer Moth’s daughter, Kitten (who, by the way, was originally from the Teen Titans animated series. And probably the only reference to that series), who of course blames him for everything. And so Killer Moth decided that he would dedicate his life to freeing her from the demon curse of whatever. But to do that he needed money. And so he put on his old costume, and Killer Moth was reborn!
(...Okay, I need to write a parallel works about this)

You know, one really has to question the logic of basing villainous identity around something that gets eaten by bats. It's like an a Green Arrow villain calling himself "Captain Target" or "The Human Pincushion".
Detective Keiichi Ikari stared at the newspaper clipping with a blank expression. From his desk chair, he looked up at this partner. “Why are you showing me this?”

“I’ve got a hunch about what happened to our missing person,” Detective Maniwa said. “So listen; that girl we’re trying to find said that she wants to be a superhero, and has shapeshifting powers. And she escaped on the same day that the Justice Society was doing tryouts.” He raised one of his hands, as if he were going to tell his partner the most amazing thing he had ever heard. “Okay here me out; what if she escaped by taking on a new identity and joining the new Justice Society?”

Detective Ikari rubbed his chin. “Sounds like something out of a comic book.”

“Well she did have a bit of an imagination,” Maniwa said.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t possible, I just said it was silly.” Ikari turned back to his computer, and began searching for what info they had on the JSJ’s members. “Then again, we’re not exactly dealing with the Napoleon of crime.”

“I think it’s the elf girl,” said Maniwa. “She has a similar personality, the same height, and reportedly has some of the same powers.”

“...and she only speaks English, and Nia Teppelin, girlfriend of the JSJ’s chairman, just filed for adoption,” Ikari read from the department profile on Hon’kale. “All we need now is some sort of conclusive evidence linking the two together, and we can get a warrant.”

“Like what?”

“Well that’s the hard part.” Detective Ikari crossed his arms. “We don’t exactly know what the limits of her powers are. We’re just assuming that she has limits because this other girl showing up is too much of a coincidence. Plus, I highly doubt the U.S. government would keep a perfect shape-changing metahuman under such lax security unless they had some way of identifying her.”

“Well… how about the tattoo?”

Ikari thought back to the blood-red ouroboros tattoo that was on Hope’s forehead. “Yeah… I could see that working.” He looked back at the picture of Hon’kale. “And those thick, white bangs do look like they could cover it up.” He leaned back in his chair. “In that case, all we need to do is get video of a fight. If the tattoo’s underneath, it should be easy to spot with all the jumping going around.”
“Ha! Looks like this case is in the bag!” Maniwa bragged as he sat into his own office chair.

“I wouldn’t celebrate just yet,” said Ikari. “We still need that footage, and who knows how long that’s going to take,” he sighed. “It’s not like we can just follow them around until they start fighting.”

“That’s not going to be too much of a problem.” Maniwa pulled up a video of the last night’s incident on his computer. “Superhero fights are always big hits on Youtube.”

“Given what people are willing to do for a few minutes of internet fame, I’m not surprised.” Ikari watched the video of Hexagon finishing off Mr. Nobody. “Is our mystery girl in this one?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Maniwa. “But as I said, it’s only a matter of time before the right footage shows up. And given the adoption papers, the girl is probably going to be around for a while.”

Just then, another police officer poked his head in the door. “Maniwa, Ikari; we just got word of an assault and abduction down by the Dragon Couture down in Ikebukuro. It looks like metas were involved.”

Detective Maniwa sighed. “On it.” He got up from his seat, and gestured to his partner. “Come on; if that tattoo’s even there, it’ll still be there tomorrow.”

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Tracking Sayaka’s path through the city didn’t prove to be all that difficult. Starting with the direction that Sayaka left the stage, Lightning assumed that she headed out of the nearest exit and continued on one of two paths; the route to the Ikebukuro Station, or in a meandering, semi-random path that would nevertheless keep her within Ikebukuro due to the possibility of it being familiar to her. From there it was only a matter of finding witnesses; people who had seen Sayaka in either her civilian or magical girl forms.

There were plenty of false leads, to be sure. While blue was hardly the most common hair color in Japan, it was common enough that four separate people mistook Sayaka’s description for that of one of their friends, all of whom turned out to be different people. And while landmarks were easy to look up on Lightning’s phone, most people’s sense of direction was less than impeccable (in fact, one teenager wearing a leopard skin-headband thought he was in a completely different district at the time).

But Lightning had a lucky break when she found a local pizza delivery company whose employees were chronic shutterbugs. They had mistaken Sayaka’s outfit for cosplay, and were astute enough to recognize her after she changed out of her costume. Lightning guessed that their photographs were what caused Sayaka to want to change back to normal in the first place, and was glad that they assumed it was merely a costume.

It was this stroke of luck that led her to the Dragon Couture in Ikebukuro, where some of the most overpriced clothing in the world could be bought. But no selling was going on today, as the store had been closed to make room for the police investigation.

“*It seems I’m on the right track...*” Lightning mused. She then approached one of the officers, and pulled out her badge. “Inspector Farron, Cataclysm Division; which one of you is in charge here?”

“That would be me, Inspector!” Lightning turned and saw a stocky man with a large nose, and pronounced creases between his cheeks and upper lip. “Chief Masami Hirukawa, of Ikebukuro!” He said in a bit of a huff, as if Lightning was intruding on his personal property. “I’ll have you
know that I have PERSONALLY talked with my good friend Sonoda, and he said that you are in no way allowed anywhere near this case!”

Lightning closed her eyes and sighed. Hirukawa was one of the most corrupt cops she had ever met. Extortion, falsification of evidence, purposeful obstruction of due process… this guy knew every dirty trick Lightning could think of. And he wasn’t even very good at it: during the short period of her career that Lightning worked in Ikebukuro, Lightning found some of the most obviously doctored evidence she had ever seen. And when she tried to report it, Hirukawa immediately assigned her to speeding ticket duty. Which still backfired, given that Lightning discovered that all of his yakuza buddies were being given generous breaks on their tickets.

The only reason Hirukawa was still in charge at all was because he knew how to play department politics. Well, that, and he paid off the yakuza out of his own pocket. And even then there was the question of where he got all that money, given that he was supposedly building his own ‘dream house’. Lightning figured that he was either doing more illegal stuff, or that he had a large inheritance that somehow he was able to keep quiet about.

But regardless of his illicit dealings (perceived or otherwise), Hirukawa was a man with a chip on his shoulder. Every time a case brought Lightning to Ikebukuro, Lightning would end up “blundering” her way though something that Hirukawa had supposedly been working on for months. Never mind that he had nothing to show for his efforts in all that time; the fact that Hirukawa was aware of the problem was surely enough to keep anyone else from interfering.

“...of course not,” Lightning thought about how to approach this guy. “Hirukawa. Chief. There are lives on the line here. I don’t have time for you to puff out your chest and put on a show while this turns into a cold case.”

“And that is EXACTLY the sort of disrespect for authority I would expect to hear from a Meta!” Hirukawa said very loudly. “Why, I had you pegged down as a loose cannon from the moment you first walked into the station!” He closed his eyes as he continued, as if this was all from a script he had memorized. “And after that whole L’cie incident you should have never been let back onto the force! And furthermore…”

“And now he’s grandstanding.” She looked around. Most of the officers present were doing their best not to look the chief, seemingly embarrassed by his antics. “Well the good news is that the feeling doesn’t appear to be mutual. I could ask any one of these guys for info.” She looked back at Hirukawa, whose rant had now taken a very sexist turn. “And even if something did trickle back up, there’s no way that Sonoda would believe a slimeball like Hirukawa.”

“Alright, you made your point… sir,” Lightning said. “I just have a message to deliver to…” her eyes sought out a recognizable face, before landing on Detective Keiichi Ikari, who was busy questioning a bespectacled man in a turtleneck. “...Ikari. He left his cellphone at home, and his wife dropped it off for him.”

Hirukawa rubbed his chin, and made a show of looking at Lightning suspiciously. “Very well,” he said. “But I have my eye on you… meta.”

“I’m sure you do, sir,” Lightning said. “That’s why they call you ‘Eagle-Eye Hirukawa’.”

“They do? Ah-ha! Yes, of course they do!” he laughed. “Yes, they call me that because I have eyes like an eagle.” He then began to walk away. “Yessir, that’s why they call me that…”

Lightning rolled her eyes. The man was probably going to be fixated on that made-up nickname for the better part of a week. More than enough time to get some actual work done.
She approached Ikari, and patiently waited for him to finish speaking with the witness; a nervous, bespectacled man in a purple sweater.

“And are you sure you didn’t find anything else?” the detective asked.

“N-no sir!” the witness. “I swear, I’ve told you everything I can remember…”

“In that case, you’re free to go.” Ikari turned off his tape recorder. “We’ll contact you if we need anything else.”

The witness hurriedly nodded as he left.

“I can see that someone’s been busy,” Lightning said. “Was the witness worth anything?”

“ Barely,” Keichi sighed. “He fled the scene and called the police as soon as things began to look serious. He could only I.D. the victims insofar as being blonde and blue-haired, the latter of which was significantly shorter than the former.” He gave Lightning a suspicious look. “This is all in an unofficial capacity, of course… Why do you ask?”

“Let’s just say that I’ve taken an unofficial interest in this case,” Lightning replied.

Ikari raised an eyebrow. “You know something, don’t you?”

“You could say that,” said Lightning.

Keichi shook his head. “Let’s not play games here, Farron. What do you want?”

“One of my teammates went missing, and I think she got caught up in this,” Lightning said. “I need access to the crime scene, and to do that I need you to take me on as a consultant.”

Keiichi paused to think about this. Lightning didn’t blame him. While superheroes doing detective work was nothing new, listing them in any official capacity was often seen as a mark of shame. It meant that the officer wasn’t competent enough to get the job done on his own.

But then again, missing person cases rarely stay warm for long…

“One condition,” said Ikari. “Once the case is done, you have to help with an investigation of my own.”

“That depends,” said Lightning. “What kind of case?”

“It’s about the girl who fell from the sky,” Ikari said. “‘Hope’, in case you didn’t get the memo.”

Lightning throught back to the file she read at the hospital room. “I lost track of that case after being demoted, but I remember the basics,” said Lightning. “What’s changed?”

“We have reason to believe that she used her shape-shifting powers to infiltrate your team.” He flipped open his notebook to the pages he made about Hope, and handed it to Lightning. “It’s not hard to guess which one. She’s under the custody of a C.I.A. agent, but she isn’t working for them. As far as we know she’s acting on her own.”

Lightning poured over the notes. Aside from the physical description, they all matched Hon’Kale to a T. “Makes sense. And I bet you think the tattoo on her forehead holds the key.”

“That’s our working theory,” Ikari replied. “I don’t suppose you could shed some light on the matter?”
Now it was Lightning’s turn to pause. It shouldn’t have been a hard decision to make. She knew the tattoo was there, she had seen it; the only question was whether or not she should reveal it.

On one hand, assuming this was all true “Hope” (whoever she may be) was clearly breaking the law. She had run away from home, possibly ran from the U.S. government, and was lying about her identity.

On the other hand, Lightning also wanted to give the kid the benefit of the doubt. She didn’t know anything about the girl’s home life, nor how the U.S. government was involved.

But then there was the matter of practicality. She could certainly lie about Hope’s tattoo, but what would that prove? The only method she could think of to hide it would be to cover it with stage makeup, but given the girl’s recklessness she doubted it would hold up for long.

“Sure, I’ll help,” said Lightning. “Can’t say I’ve gotten a good look until now, but I doubt finding out will be too hard.”

“Pleased to hear that,” said the detective. He then pulled out a pen. “Now before we get started, who do you want to be listed as?”

“...I beg your pardon?” said Lightning.

“Your superhero name,” said Ikari. “I mean, I can’t just list your real name.”

“...you’re joking,” said Lightning.

“I wish I was,” said Ikari. “But Hirukawa is one one of those moods where he’ll meticulously read every single report just to make it look like he’s actually doing something. If your real name showed up on it, he’d raise a fuss even if nothing was actually wrong.”

Lightning racked her brain, trying to come up with a solution. “...give me a half-hour.” She then took the pen from Ikari’s hand, and turned to a new page on the notepad. “Until then, I need you to do a few things…”

Detective Maniwa tilted his head. “So… where did you get this again?”

Lightning sighed. “My sister’s studio isn’t too far from here. I grabbed the nearest thing that didn’t look completely ridiculous, and left an apology note. Knowing her, she probably would have made me wear it anyway.”

Maniwa nodded slowly. Compared to the purple robe she’d been wearing earlier, her current outfit did seem much more practical. Sure, a bright red jacket/vest combo with a leather half-cape that just barely went below the shoulders wasn’t the most subtle of garments, but the white pants and normal-looking boots did provide a greater range of movement. It looked regal, almost. “I dunno, it’s really not that bad.”

“The hat is a bit much, though,” Ikari said, referring to the red, wide-brimmed “swashbuckler” cap with a feather in it. “Can’t imagine it’s all that useful, since it doesn’t hide your face or anything.”

“Actually, having a prop or logo keeps people’s eyes drawn away from the face,” Maniwa said. “It’s called ‘The Clark Kent Effect’. Most people wouldn’t have recognized her on the street unless we deliberately pointed her out.”
“Who’s Clark Kent?” asked Ikari.

“Just some journalist.” Maniwa shrugged. “He’s written some great stuff about Superman, but I don’t really follow him.” He looked back at Lightning. “Still, you look the part. You came up with a name yet?”

“Red Mage,” Lightning replied. “It’s descriptive enough to fit the costume, but vague enough to fit anyone specific.” She put her hand to her face. “Now can we please get on with the investigation?”

“Right!” Maniwa handed Lightning a stack of papers. “We only found one set of DNA, and it doesn’t belong to anyone in the criminal database.”

“That’s strange…” Lightning said. “The witness said there were two victims…”

“Well that’s the other thing,” said Ikari. “We found some waxy residue over by where the assault happened. And then we found this…” he held up a plastic bag containing a few strands of hair.

Lightning took the bag, and examined it. “What am I looking at?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Ikari. “We keep getting contradictory results from our scanners. There’s no DNA, but most other tests say that this is genuine human hair.” Ikari watched as Lightning skimmed through the report. “Now is the part where you’re supposed to say something along the lines of ‘that can’t be right’.”

“I’ve been having a lot of bad luck with that sort of thing,” said Lightning. “Not to mention that there are a few ways this could have come about. Copy-protected, self-terminating DNA, artificial hair built out of all the same components, aliens that don’t have DNA at all…”

“But what’s most likely?” asked Ikari.

Lightning closed her eyes and envisioned the scene. “Well, from what I can see so far there was a wax statue standing in the middle of the road, then the victim showed up, then she got attacked, and then the attackers took both the girl and the statue.” she then shook her head. “Which of course makes no goddamn sense. Who leaves a statue out in the middle of a sidewalk?”

“It could have been Are We Cool Yet,” said Maniwa. “They were active last night, weren’t they?”

“If it was the art freaks, they would have left a calling card,” said Ikari. “Besides, nobody in their right mind would steal one of their works, and kidnapping doesn’t fit their M.O.”

“I agree. We’re missing something.” Lightning tapped her chin. “Perhaps the wax figure was actually a meta. Someone with wax powers…”

“An attacker?” said Maniwa.

“Could be, but I doubt it…” Lightning looked over at a nearby alley that hadn’t been roped off. “Hold up. I’ve got an idea.”

 Gesturing to them, Lightning led the detectives down the dark, dank alley, which was illuminated by an orb of light that the inspector had summoned. “I’m guessing that ‘Eagle-Eye’ Hirukawa didn’t think this was part of the crime scene.”

“To be fair, the witness says that the attackers lept from a nearby roof,” said Maniwa. “We even found footprints, though we didn’t find anything we could use to identify them.” The detective
glanced behind his back. “Why are we checking back here?”

“Just a hunch,” Lightning said. “My missing teammate loved playing hero. I think she might have been trying to protect someone…” She waved her hand over the orb, and suddenly it changed color from white to a deep blue. Maniwa nearly jumped out of his skin as his body suddenly became alight with a pattern of red, crisscrossing veins that appeared to be on fire. “Relax,” said Lightning. “It’s a simple bloodseeker spell. It’s just telling us where we can find any nearby blood, spilled or otherwise.”

“At least give us some warning next time.” Ikari gazed at the veins inside his own hand with slight revulsion.

“Will do.” Lightning then turned towards a red spot on the ground. Even though the blood was dry, the bloodseeker spell was lighting it up like a firework.

She switched back to the regular light, and handed the orb to Maniwa. “Hold this for me,” she said. “Do either of you have a scanner?”

Maniwa held the orb under his arm as he fished through his coat pockets. “Right here,” he said, handing Lightning a small T-Bone shaped device with a small scoop at the end.

Lightning held the device carefully. The WayneTech Portable DNA Scanner was a miracle of modern science, turning what might have been weeks of testing into only a few seconds. But it wasn’t without faults; despite the simple-looking interface the scanner had a high learning curve. You couldn’t just plop in a tuft of hair and learn ten seconds later learn that it was the butler in the billiards room with the candlestick. You had to know what you were looking for, and what method to use.

Being careful not to tamper with any of the evidence, Lightning bent down and scooped a flake of dried blood into the machine, and set it to start running a PCR analysis on the sample...

...and then about ten seconds later the scanner exploded in her hand.

“...huh.” Lightning stared at the broken scanner for a few moments. “That’s weird.”

“You can say that again.” Maniwa wiped the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. “You have an explanation for this, right?”

“Sort of.” Lightning handed the broken scanner back to Maniwa. “Certain types of magical, non-human entities have the ability to take the appearance of humans, but the resemblance is only skin-deep. If you look close enough you’ll be able to see the spot where physics ends and magic begins.”

“And sometimes the magic reacts violently when it finds out you’ve been snooping around.” Ikari stared at the broken scanner. “I take it that this blood isn’t from our DNA-less metahuman.”

“Lucky guess,” said Lightning. “It’s either from our magical girl or a third party, someone who was trying to get in the way.” She snapped her finger, and the orb changed color from blue to amber, illuminating everyone’s hair in outlines of various colors; Red for Lightning, Blue for Maniwa, Green for Ikari, and Purple, Orange and Indigo for three previously-unnoticed specks of hair that were on the ground.

“You have a spell for everything, don’t you?” Detective Ikari remarked.

“Not really,” said Lightning. “Aside from the stuff that was hard-coded into me when I was turned
into a L’cie, I’ve only bothered to memorize stuff that would help me do my job.”

Maniwa frowned. “What, are you saying you learned all this from a book?”

“More or less.” Lightning took the proper-colored hairs and put them into a pair of plastic bags. “There was a notepad in an evidence locker that belonged to some sort of magus assassin. It was a cold case, so I was allowed to study it. It took me two whole years to get any of the spells to work.”

“That seems like a long time…” said Maniwa.

“For someone with no formal training? I’m surprised it didn’t take her longer,” said Ikari. “In all my time on the force, I’ve only heard of two types of magic; the easy kind and the hard kind.” He took a photograph of the bags as Lightning changed the orb back to emitting normal light. “The hard kind is the kind of stuff you’d go to Hogwarts for, if it was real; boring stuff that only becomes interesting once you get really good at it.” Ikari then wrote something in his notebook. “The easy kind is the stuff that always comes with a catch, like selling your soul to the devil.”

“So what’s a magical girl, then?” said Maniwa. “They don’t need to sell their souls for power.”

“Yeah, but keeping that power means putting their lives and the lives of their friends families in danger,” said Ikari. “Just think of all the monsters that Sailor Moon and the rest of her team have to fight, and just imagine what would happen if one of those freaks found out their secret identities. Who knows if they get anything out of it, aside from the chance to dance around in frilly costumes.”

“Well maybe being a superhero is its own reward,” Mainwa pointed out. “I mean I know for a fact that you didn’t join the force for the money.”

“You can say that again,” Ikari sighed.

“And you’re on a superhero team!” Maniwa pointed at Lightning. “I mean you care about saving—”

“Can we stay on track here?” said Lightning. She held up the bags. “Look at these hair samples; they don’t match either of the ones we found at the crime scene.”

Ikari looked at them carefully; one was a deep red, one was blonde, and the third seemed to shimmer in the light, flickering between golden blonde and a deep orange-red.

“Looks like we missed a spot,” Maniwa said, joining his partner in looking at the samples. “Too bad we don’t have a working scanner.”

“Not sure it would help, given how useless it’s been so far,” said Ikari. “Still, if the blonde sample is from our mystery victim, we could be on the right track.”

Lightning looked back to the alley’s entrance. “If she came out of this alley, that means she could have been escaping from someone in this alley.”

Manwa thought about this. “But who’d be stupid enough to take a shortcut through an alley in the middle of the night?” he asked.

“A moron,” Ikari said bluntly. “Or someone who was being chased.”

“Right…” Lightning looked back at the bloodstain. “So blondie gets chased down the alley, gets in a fight involving red and fire-hair and somehow escapes, only to be caught by the armored
assailants, who capture blue-hair as well,” she then looked back up. “Now the only question is; who are these people, and what do they have in common?”

“Well you said you think you knew who blue-hair was.” Ikari turned to another page of his notes. “Though if you’re right, her identity won’t be much help, since she’d pretty much protect everyone.”

“True,” agreed Lightning. “But we don’t even have a hint as to who the other victim is…”

Suddenly Lightning’s cell phone started to ring. “Hold that thought.” She looked at the screen, and saw that the call was coming from Rivalz Cardemonde, the purple-haired member of the support team who she had to talk Sonoda out of arresting just earlier that night. Reluctantly, Lightning picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Lightning? It’s Rivalz!” the young man said, his voice reeking with desperation. “Listen; Milly left earlier tonight for some reason, but it’s 2 A.M. and she’s still not back yet! And she’s not answering her cell phone!”

Lightning did nothing to mask her lack of enthusiasm. “Oh, gee,” she said, “It’s almost as if irresponsible teenagers do stupid things like stay out past midnight.”

“I’m serious!” shouted Rivalz. “I mean yeah, maybe she is a bit of a night owl and does tend to leave her cell phone off... But she might also be in GRAVE DANGER!”

Lightning sighed. “Listen. If there’s some kind of problem I’ll deal with it in the morning. But right now I’m trying to find our missing teammate and I would really appreciate it if you got some sleep. Okay?”

“Uh, Okay.”

“Good night.” Lightning slammed her finger onto the “end call” button. She then looked at Ikari. “Quick question,” she said. “Did the witness describe our mystery victim described as being particularly tall?”

“I believe so…” Detective Ikari examined the page where he had written his notes on the interview down. “Yeah, he said she was pretty tall. He even remarked that she might have been an American...” He then gave Lightning an odd look. “You thinking of anyone in particular?”

Lightning clutched her forehead. “Please be a coincidence…” she thought. “It’s nothing. At least I hope it is.” She then started walking to the other end of the alley. “Come on, let’s seal off the area. Maniwa; go back and get the police tape. Ikari, you come with me.”

Obediently, Detective Maniwa hurried off to extend the crime scene, while Ikari followed after Lightning. “And what exactly am I supposed to do?”

“Provide backup,” said Lightning. “I remember coming by here once; there was some sort of fortune teller who bragged about being open all night.”

“I’ll get the tea leaves and the Ouija board,” Ikari snarked. “But all joking aside, do you really think she’d be a reliable witness?”

“Psychics both real and fake tend to notice things. Either you really do have a sixth sense or you’re good enough at reading people that you can fake it.” Lightning looked up at the neon sign reading “MOYA GREENLIEF: PSYCHIC”. “My guess is that the only reason she didn’t report anything to the police was because she wanted to expand her private pool of knowledge.”
“So what, we’re gonna pull the good cop/bad cop routine?” Maniwa glanced behind his back into the dark, dank alley behind him, resisting the temptation to pull out his gun.

“We’d need a good cop for that.” Lightning reached for the door. “More likely she’ll fold like a house of cards the moment we-”

But just as Lightning reached for the handle, a huge green fireball burst from the doorway, which Lightning only avoided by bending over backwards the very split-second she saw it coming.

The streets echoed with a deep, raspy voice that Lightning swore she recognized. “So we meet again, L’cie,” it said. “Once again, you have proven to be a thorn in my side.”

A mass of thick, green vines covered in thorns erupted from the ground, spraying concrete everywhere as they tried to snatch the pair of cops by the legs. Already alerted by the fireball, Ikari was able to leap out of the way in time. Lightning wasn’t so lucky, but a quick fire spell proved more than enough to burn straight through the prickly vines.

“Your diligence, however, is commendable.” From the shadows of the shop, a masked figure draped in a red kimono emerged. “For that, you at deserve at least some credit.” She waved her hand to dismiss the illusion; revealing Morgaine Le Fey in her full armor-clad glory.

Lightning kicked away the burnt residue of summoned foliage. “Morgaine,” she said. “What have you done with Sayaka?”

Ikari began to back away from the sorceress at a snail’s pace, only for Morgaine to stretch out her hand and summon a wall of flames to impede the detective.

“Typical hero.” Morgaine shook her head slightly. “It may surprise you to learn that the last person to give you grief is not always the cause of all your troubles. I haven’t laid a finger on the poor girl. In fact, if anything I know something that you might find interesting...”

Lightning reached for her blade, only to remember that it wasn’t there. “Such as...?”

“Such as the fate Milly Ashford, one of your associates’ friends,” Morgaine said calmly as she began to walk closer to Lightning. “Not to mention the identity of her kidnappers, the countless souls trapped in their clutches, and the mad plans that they have for this world.” She extended her hand towards Lightning. “And all I would require from you is-”

“...My soul?” Lightning moved her arm away from Morgaine’s “No thanks.”

“I was going to say ‘my son’, but I would be willing to accept that if you put it on the table.” Morgaine snapped her fingers, and the wall of flame disappeared. “I have no further business here, and after that whole misunderstanding about Avalon...”

“Misunderstanding?” Lightning raised an eyebrow.

Morgaine waved her hand in dismissal. “I suppose that is poor choice of words. Perhaps ‘Fiasco’ would be more accurate,” she said.

Lightning remained unamused.

“Regardless, I am the only person who knows what happened to your allies.” She drew a deck of tarot cards from her sleeve, casually examining the top few cards as she did so. “And more importantly, I am the only person who can guide you to your destination, let alone bring you back.”
“The only person?” asked Lightning. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe what you will, but I assure you, ‘Le Fey’ is more than just a superfluous title,” she deposited the cards back into her sleeve. “There are seventeen varieties of fey that inhabit The Ways Between. Most of them have been known to kidnap mortals for one reason or another, and none of them take kindly to intruders. If you wish to risk your soul searching their domains, be my guest.”

Lightning remained silent as she pondered this new information. Could Sayaka and Milly have been kidnapped by fairies?

“But if you are not yet convinced, how about we propose a deal?” With a flick of the wrist, Morgaine conjured a roll of parchment and a quill pen, dripping with ink. “A magically binding contract, the sort Magi use to ensure cooperation. If either of us fail to uphold our end of the bargain, the transgressor loses their magic forever.” She raised a finger to her chin. “Which, if I’m not mistaken, would be fatal for either of us...”

Lightning thought about this for a moment. “Would you mind if I got some help?”

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“...in exchange for the services provided in Section B, the party of the second part (hereby referred to as “Morgaine Le Fey” regardless of her true name) will be provided with the following goods and/or services: 1. The party of the second part will be provided with 500,000 yen in cash. 2. The party of the second part will be granted immunity to prosecution for the crimes committed during her attack on Tokyo National Museum, outlined in Section C.”

Roger Smith, professional negotiator, looked up from the stack of paper he was carrying. It was early in the morning, and he and his clients were all seated around a table at a sleepy, all-night diner. They were an odd bunch, to be sure. Seated to the left was Detective Lightning Farron of the Tokyo Police, accompanied by her superior; Chief Sonoda of the Cataclysm department, who was cradling a cup of mediocre coffee, silently resenting Lightning for having to wake him up so early. To the right was Morgaine Le Fey, allegedly a sorceress from Arthurian myth, though Roger was never all that keen on those kind of tales. And at the table across the way, Detectives Maniwa and Ikari were doing their best not to boggle vacantly as the negotiations dragged on. Occasionally one of them murmured something, likely pertaining to another case they were working on, though Roger tried his best not to listen.

He had just been reading from the contract that he had spent the last few hours debating. In many ways, Morgaine was more than a match for him. She spoke slowly and methodically, giving time to let every word sink in before moving on to the next one, all in a calm and collected manner that betrayed no emotion. Yet she was almost too fast, as every time he posed a question she began her answer at the moment that Roger stopped speaking, denying him time to ponder his options any further.

And for this reason, Morgaine’s sudden silence was extremely unnerving.

“Please,” Morgaine said. “Do continue.”

Roger took a deep breath. With the lives of not one, but two teenage girls on the line, Roger couldn’t afford to waste one precious moment.

“3. As outlined in Section D, prisoner #M-2023 of the Japanese penitentiary system (hereby referred to as “Mordred”) will be released and will also be granted immunity to the charges
outlined in Section C. 4. Prisoner #M-0604 of the Japanese penitentiary system (hereby referred to as “Kanjar Ro”) will be released into custody of Morgaine Le Fey, though he will not be granted immunity, and will be re-captured if located outside of Morgaine’s custody.”

“Should Morgaine Le Fey attempt to destroy, enslave, threaten, or harass the city of Tokyo, the citizens of Tokyo, the atmosphere of Tokyo, the oceans surrounding Tokyo, the wildlife of Tokyo (beyond the allotment granted by a legally-obtained hunting permit), the spirits of Tokyo, the history of Tokyo, or the metaphysical nature of Tokyo, this contract will be rendered null and void and the party of the second part shall lose their magic as outlined in Section A-2. This contract shall also be rendered void if one party attempts to: Force or trick the other party into breaking the contract, force or trick the other party into forcing or tricking the original party into breaking the contract, forcing or tricking the other party into forcing or tricking the original party into forcing or tricking the other party into breaking the contract, ad infinitum. Miscellaneous trickery involving the signing of the contract or the services provided (including but not limited to: having a clone sign the contract, mind controlling the negotiator, retroactively changing the contract’s text via time travel, signing with your non-dominant hand, or citing archaic or obscure definitions of words to re-interpret the contract) will also constitute a contract violation.”

Roger wiped the sweat off his brow as reached the final lines of the contract. “Invalidity or unenforceability of one or more provisions of this agreement shall not affect any other provision of this agreement. This agreement is subject to the ineffable laws of magic, as well as the laws and regulations of the nation of Japan.”

Roger looked up from the paper. “Claire Farron. On behalf of the Tokyo Municipal Police Department, do you agree to these terms?”

Lightning turned her gaze away from Morgaine, and looked back at Roger. “Yes,” she said.

“Morgaine Le Fey. Do you agree to these terms?”

“Indeed.”

Roger removed a pen from his front pocket, and passed around a clipboard with the final pages of the contract for Lightning and Morgaine to sign in triplicate.

“Well played, L’cie,” Morgaine said as she inscribed her name in illegible script. “This ‘negotiator’ you found was quite... interesting.” She handed the clipboard to Lightning. “Though I do wonder. If I had refused to allow you outside help, would you have consigned those poor girls to their fate?”

Lightning said nothing, carefully examining each page she was given before finally signing on the dotted line. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“If you insist.” Morgaine made a gesture that was too fast for Roger to see, and suddenly two weapons lay across the table; a curved, bronze dagger with a red gemstone attached to the hilt, and a large, midnight-black pistol that was polished to a shine, with bright runes etched into the side.

“I heard about your weapon, by the way. I thought that, since fulfillment of the contract depends just as much on your success as mine, that it would be only fair if I provided you with a replacement...”

Lightning held up a metallic survival knife. “Thanks. But I’m good for now,” she then looked at Roger. “Are you sure this is a real way to do a magic contract?”

“Well there are less dramatic ways,” Roger said. “But I can assure you, I’ve settled these kinds of
matters before. You should have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll bet...” Lightning mumbled. Using her knife, she carefully carved an “X” shaped incision on the palm of her hand. She seemed to have a bit of trouble at first, which wasn’t surprising to Roger given that Lightning was supposed to have super-tough skin. But eventually she finished making the mark, leaving a trickle of blood oozing across her hand.

Roger then turned to Morgaine, and watched the sorceress finish the same task on her own palm. “No turning back at this point. For either of us.” she said.

Keeping a careful eye on the two contract-signers, he fished through his briefcase for a large piece of parchment that was folded carefully into quarters, and spread it out on the table, revealing a thin circle carefully painted onto the paper with gold leaf, on which he placed the stack of papers. The pentagram then began to glow, as the stack of papers sunk into the parchment, the text from the document spilling into the circle in a jumbled heap. Roger’s held his breath as the words on the parchment then began rearrange themselves into a series of complex shapes before finally settling on a shifting star pattern formed out of microscopic text.

Lightning stared at the symbol for a moment, and then looked at Roger. “I’m guessing you’ve done this before.”

“Oh yeah,” said Roger. “You’d be surprised how often I get called in to settle some sort of dispute between magi. I got to use one of these once, and I found it so helpful that I took a whole stack as payment, just in case I had to deal with wizards again.”

Lightning gave a noncommittal nod, not bothering to correct him. “...and you’re sure this actually does what you think it does? It’s not some kind of trap...”

“If I had a trap prepared, I would have sprung it already,” said Morgaine. “I suggest that you calm down. Paranoia is not a particularly healthy habit to get into.”

“It’s kept me alive so far.” Lightning looked back at her bloodied palm. “I just need to press against the paper, right?”

“More or less.” Roger took a long-overdue sip of water from his glass.

“Right...” Lightning took a deep breath. Roger noticed that Lightning’s hand shook a little as she reached out for the parchment. He found this to be a uncharacteristic of the stoic, tough-as-nails officer that Miss Farron was supposed to be, but then he remembered what Sonoda told him on the phone; how Lightning didn’t like making deals unless she was absolutely sure about the terms. It apparently had something to do with the whole Fal’cie crisis, but those weeks were such a blur that he barely remembered the details.

The pentagram began to make a soft crackling sound as Lightning removed her still-bleeding hand from the parchment. Those seated watched in morbid fascination as the shifted into japanese kana that represented Lightning’s name.

With Lightning’s contribution out of the way, all eyes turned to Morgaine, who wordlessly placed her own bloodied palm onto the parchment. Once again, the pentagram crackled with mystic energies, and the bloodstains rearranged themselves, first into some sort of ancient, archaic script, but the text shifted into plain english, where the words “Morgaine Le Fey” were clearly visible. “I presume that things are now settled?”

“Looks like it.” Roger reached over to the parchment, and began to fold it back into quarters. “I’ll
be taking this back home for my records. If something should happen that causes this contract to be nullified, I’ll let the both of you know...”

Sonoda spoke up was just about to slip the parchment into his briefcase. “Actually, I’d prefer that we hold it,” he said. “No offense, Smith, but I think we’re better prepared to protect it from damage.”

“Well, I guess you do have more of a right than I do.” Roger reluctantly handed the manilla envelope to the police chief. “Just keep in mind; destroying that won’t nullify the contract; it’ll just make it harder to track what’s happened.”

“I’ll keep that in mind…” Sonoda adjusted his glasses as he carefully lowered the envelope into his own briefcase. “In any case, I’d like to thank you for taking time to fly all the way out to help us with this...”

“It’s no problem,” said Roger. “Magic users are always tricky to deal with, especially when they’ve lived long enough to learn all the loopholes.”

The hairs on Roger’s neck began to prickle Morgaine shot him a steely-eyed glare.

“...and even if there weren’t a couple of kids in danger, I probably still would have helped seeing as you’re friends of Simon.”

“Wait, you know Simon?” asked Lightning.

Roger nodded. “You could say we’re both mecha enthusiasts. And seeing how Japan is the giant robot capital of the world, I try to reach out to fellow pilots when I’m here on business.”

Lightning said nothing for a moment. “You. Have a giant robot.”

“Yes,” said Roger.

“And you actually use it?” asked Lightning. “This isn’t just part some mid-life crisis you’re working through, is it?”

“Hah, well, I’m not quite old enough for that yet…” Roger laughed. “But in all seriousness, mecha attacks are kinda common back where I live. And there aren't any superheroes either, just me and Big O.”

Lightning raised an eyebrow.

“...that’s the robot’s name,” said Roger, trying not to become too flustered. “And before you ask, I didn’t name it.”

“Just… please tell me it isn’t as silly looking as it sounds.”

“Actually, it’s a good deal sillier.” The room went silent. “…can we change the subject?”

“Absolutely,” said Sonoda. He reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope. “Here’s your payment, have a safe flight back.”

“Are you sure I can’t help?” asked Roger. “I might not know much about folklore, but I do that fairies are famous making all kinds of strange deals. A negotiator could be helpful...”

“Sadly, this particular brand of fey is more interested in making mortals into playthings than striking bargains,” Morgaine said. “Even if they did, I doubt you’d be able to form any kind of
compromise with a true immortal. And while I would be more than happy to arrange such an opportunity, I suspect such an act could be seen as a contract violation.”

“...uh right.” Roger felt a twinge of anxiety as he thought back to the contract Morgaine and Farron had just signed. Was this Morgain’s way of saying that she found a loophole that Roger had forgotten to close? Or did she just think she had…?

“Let’s skip straight to business,” Lightning said, looking directly at the sorceress. “Morgaine, what do you know about the kidnappers?”

“Less than you might expect, but more than enough to rescue your friends.” Morgaine steepled her armor-clad fingers. “First, we’ll need to make a few preparations…”

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Kyoko Sakura awoke with a throbbing headache, staring at at the floor of an empty cubicle cell, whose walls were black but covered in white outlines that Kyoko thought were painted to resemble brickwork. However, upon feeling it she discovered that they were actually real bricks.

Thinking back, the last thing she remembered with any kind of clarity was being stabbed in the back by Electra Pendragon, that traitorous bitch she was supposed to be bringing to the police.

Beyond that it was kind of a dazed blur. She remembered something about being chained up and brought before someone, and then she was carried down here and…

She turned around. “Oh no,” she thought. “Oh hell no.”

Directly opposite from Kyoko was Electra Pendragon, lying on the floor unconscious but still breathing. Her armor, weapons, and even earrings had been stripped from her, and exchanged for brown burlap rags that made her look neither attractive nor regal. Without her armor, the alleged princess looked like a ditzy high-school student sleeping through her alarm clock.

Kyoko looked down at herself. While her own clothes had also been seized, she noticed that they let her keep her Soul Gem, an oval-shaped ruby which was now hung around her neck by a length of white yarn. Kyoko puzzled over this. Could it be that whoever trapped her here knew about Puella Magi? But if that was the case, did it not also mean that they knew she was armed? True, she was missing her weapon while still technically “transformed”, but that could be fixed by transforming back to normal and summoning her costume again.

“No, they’re probably prepared for this…” she thought as she peered out of the bars of her cell door. “The question is, how?”

Through the door, Kyoko could see a vast, circular chasm of black rocks with stark-white outlines, with a walkway that spiraled deep into the abyss. But no matter how deep the pathway went, a walk around the full length seemed to be the same all the way around, in defiance of euclidian geometry. Kyoko found her headache getting worse and worse as she continued to stare at it.

Above the chasm she saw an inverted tower sticking down from the ceiling, with a gaping maw that suggested that it was an passageway of some kind.

As she leaned over to try and get a better view, the door swung open with a deafening creek.

“I see they’re not to concerned about escape attempts…” Kyoko stumbled back to her feet as she continued to look at the upside-down tower. “I should probably ask around before I do anything rash...”
“Oh, yeah. This place? It’s called ‘The Mines,’” the snakeman said as he swallowed an agitated creature that looked like a striped rodent in a nurse’s cap. “It’s this big underground thingy underneath ‘The Castle’, which is part of ‘The Kingdom’. There’s a lot of ‘the’ thrown around in this place.” The snakeman grunted as he swallowed another one without even bothering to chew. “You’re new here, I take it? You look too human to be a vet.”

“...yeah, I guess you could say that.” Kyoko’s eyes darted around the room as she struggled to focus on the snakeman. Everywhere she turned there was some sort of strange creature lurking around, from gossamer-winged pixies struggling to carry pickaxes to mighty ogres lugging minecarts to elemental humanoids that defied any sort of simple classification, there was just so much weirdness to take it was impossible not to find something to be distracted by.

She eventually found refuge in a room carved into one of the tunnels, which appeared to be cafe of some sort, tended by a fat, pink man with a pig-like snout. “Appeared to” being the key word here, as the writing above the door and on the signs inside was written in some sort of strange, blobby runes that Kyoko swore she had seen before...

“So how'd you get here?” the snakeman asked, his eyes still focused on his live, squirming meal. “Were you snatched up? Invited? Did you stumble in here by accident?”

“Probably that last one.” Kyoko eyed the snakeman carefully. He didn’t have a Soul Gem, but then again she didn’t expect him to. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember much about before. I think I hit my head on my way over.”

A striped rodent flew out of the Snakeman’s mouth as he howled with laughter. “Well then you’re fucked, kid,” he said. “In this world, memories are the only thing you start with.”

Kyoko frowned. “...this world?”

“Well yeah, you didn’t think this was Earth, did you?” The snakeman crawled along the floor, and grabbed the slippery rodent before it scurried off. “Believe it or not, nearly everyone here used to be human. But staying too long... changes you.” the Snakeman wolfed down the striped rat. “Don’t bother trying to escape, by the way. It’s no better on the surface. It may be bleak down here, but at least it’s simple; fill your quota, and you don’t get tortured.” He then licked his lips with his forked tongue, and sat back down in front of Kyoko. “Up there’s it’s like a Charles Dickens novel on acid. Unwashed masses, fruitless struggles for class mobility, overbearing foremen, yadda yadda yadda.” The snakeman began to lick the pewter bowl he was eating out of. “And even if you somehow make it back to Earth, you might find yourself replaced by a Fetch.”

“A what?” asked Kyoko.

“A Fetch. It’s a...” His eyes darted around the room. “Well, I wouldn’t be able to explain it very well. Let’s just say you should consign yourself to living here for the rest of your life.” He then began to look at his hand despondently. “And believe me, once you finish changing you’re going to have a looooooong life.”

“...how long, exactly?” Kyoko raised an eyebrow.

The lizardman pointed to a young woman with a stony expression, not to mention skin with the color and texture of sandstone. “You see that waitress over there?”

“Yeah,” Kyoko nodded.
“She speaks nothing but Ancient Sumerian, and claims to be a handmaiden of Gilgamesh,” said the Snakeman. “As in the Sumerian guy.”

Kyoko glared at the snakeman. “...You’re pulling my leg.”

“Hey, you don’t have to believe me, but we Changelings live for a long time.” The Snakeman raised his arms in exasperation. “I’ve been here long enough to see people have families for Christ’s sake. Hell, there are even people who have been here before Christ was even a thing!”

“Okay, fine, I get it…” Sakura shook her head. “Just one last thing. I think I’ve seen someone carrying around a colored gem of some sort. How long do those people last?”

The snakeman froze. He then bent close to Kyoko’s ear and whispered; “Between you and me; not very long. Those girls are ticking time bombs, and if you know what’s good for you you’d better stay out of the blast radius.”

“Why’s that?” Kyoko asked.

The snake man looked to make sure no one else was watching “Whatever else those girls are, they’re a cruel joke that The Witch Queen plays on us to keep us on edge. They don’t change like the rest of us, and sometimes they lash out with some kinda freaky powers. But the moment those gems of theirs turn black—”

“-Wait,” Kyoko interrupted. “Did you say... The Witch Queen?”

“Yeah. The Witch Queen. That’s the name of the bitch in charge of this god-forsaken world. Why do you ask?”

Kyoko Sakura felt a chill run down her spine. She turned to the illegible signs in the cafe. She realized where she had seen that script; it was the same sort of script that had appeared in every Barrier she could recall entering.

It didn’t matter where she was anymore. All that mattered is that she had to get out.

Without even bothering to say goodbye, Kyoko ran out the door and summoned her magical girl ensemble, much to the shock of the gathered crowds. She escalated the chasm in a series of mighty bounds, each step bringing her closer and closer to the top of the inverted spire that loomed over the prison.

However, just as she was nearly there, Kyoko found that a certain someone had already beaten her to the punch.

“PLEBEIANS!” Kyoko heard a familiar voice yell. “You think mere bars are enough to contain a falsely-imprisoned member of royalty? Well think again!” From three stories below, Kyoko could spot Electra standing on the edge of the uppermost walkway, brandishing what appeared to be a golden rope tied around the head of a golden pickaxe. From her precarious position, Electra leapt towards the back of the tower, throwing the head just as she was about to pass under it. The head lodged itself into the tower’s back with a mighty crash, as the rest of Electra’s momentum swung her and her rope in sort of an arcing motion, landing her right inside the entrance. “Let the world know that today is the day that I, Electra Pendragon, begin my glorious campaign to dethrone this petty monarch, and conquer this land in my father’s name!” From there, she charged up the stairs, brandishing her rope/pickaxe combination, ready to face the challenges ahead.

All of fifteen seconds passed before a tremendous figure with a cylindrical helmet emerged from the tower entrance, carrying Electra’s unconscious body in one of it’s massive hands.
her down the chasm like a limp ragdoll.

Given how unhelpful Electra had been up until that point, Kyoko was tempted to just let the blond girl fall to her death. But instead, she found herself rushing towards the falling girl, spear held high and ready to vault off the edge of the chasm.

“I must be crazy,” Kyoko thought. “Trying to save the idiot girl who got me in here in first place.” She then conjured up a set of cards, and arranged them to form a checkerboard-pattern platform suspended in mid-air from which she could catch Electra.

But the very moment Electra fell into Kyoko’s arms, the magical girl felt a surge of energy ripple through her body, breaking her concentration and sending the pair of them tumbling through a rain of cards down the endless chasm. The sensation reminded Kyoko about the time a Witch made out of old televisions and extension cords managed to score a lucky hit; Sayaka’s heart stopped for a moment, but then whatever the hell it was that made Puella Magi so tough kicked in and she was right back in the swing of things moments later.

This time, however, was different. Instead of feeling weakened, she felt empowered, like if her heart beat any faster that it would explode. Having experienced all three at one point or another Kyoko knew that this wasn’t fear, adrenaline, or even arousal (not that she was ashamed of her sexual orientation; she had come to terms with that years ago), but rather some sort of raw, vaguely magical energy that Electra was most likely the source of.

Of course Kyoko didn’t have too much time to think about this, nor about the numerous obscenities that Electra was hollering. Instead, she used her newfound vigor to summon a few more sets of cards, which she coaxed into a slide that steered them towards a nearby walkway at a much less catastrophically painful angle. Her feet galloped across the ground as she tried to slow down, before she tripped on a rock and fell flat on her face, with Electra rolling to a stop a few meters further.

Having let go of Electra, Kyoko found that whatever strength she had been given had just been taken back with interest. Even though she had suffered falls much worse than that and was still able to walk away unscathed, right now Kyoko felt so weak that she couldn’t even pull herself up off the floor.

She looked at the Soul Gem around her neck. It was nearly black.

“God damn it…” she thought. “Well, I guess no good deed goes unpunished.” She felt her breathing start to go shallow as a crowd gathered around. “I always figured… one of Mami’s side jobs… would be the death of me…”

Having finally lost the energy to even keep her head upright, Kyoko planted her face in the dusty path in front of her. Here, she stared at the ground and silently prayed that someone would come along to give her a quick and merciful death.

Instead, Kyoko felt someone pick her up to begin carrying her away.

As this happened, Kyoko heard an vaguely familiar voice jabbering at her ear. It wasn’t Electra’s voice, that was for sure. But at the same time she swore that she had heard it before...

But Kyoko didn’t really want to think about that. No, all she really wanted was just a bit more sleep...
Sayaka Miki came to with a head full of cotton. She was wide awake and dog tired, drugged out and on edge. Her vision blurry, and could only make out indistinct shapes. Hallucinatory sounds haunted the edge of her hearing. Or at least Sayaka hoped they were hallucinatory, as she wasn’t eager to discover what kind of creature sounded like a fleshy, slobbery tape measure winding itself back up. Her arms felt heavy and sore, as if there were chained down by some massive weight. Which, in fact, they were, but Sayaka gave up far too early to discover this.

Instead, she sat there with a blank, lifeless expression, as disjointed thoughts raced through her subconscious mind like frightened animals, scrambling to relive Sayaka’s memories. Memories of her 6th birthday, when her family went out and rented *The Little Mermaid*, back when you still had to rent movies at a store. The last Christmas, when she got a pair of earrings when she asked for a Playstation. The homework assignment she should have finished by now, if not for her superhero duties. Her first kiss, when-

No, wait, that last thing never actually happened. To think she went through all this trouble for Kyosuke and she never even got to kiss him… no, if anyone was going to kiss Kyosuke it was Hitomi...


Even these pointless hypotheticals proved to be too taxing on the poor girl. All Sayaka wanted was to sleep. Maybe after a good night’s rest she could find the strength to save herself, and save Milly. Maybe they could work together to find a way to win Kyosuke’s heart. Maybe…

Sayaka’s imagination continued to play with this scenario, imagining a world straight out of a goofy teen movie where all it took was a makeover and a pep talk about self-confidence and everything would magically be better. Kyosuke would fall in love with beauty that was inside Sayaka all along. Hitomi would lash out in jealous rage, revealing herself as the vile skank she truly was. The weird artist guy would turn himself in, groveling for forgiveness. And Sayaka would also somehow have bigger boobs than Mami because it’s her own self-indulgent fantasy so why the heck not?

But had she been a bit more lucid, Sayaka might have noticed the man walking into her cell. Against the black-and-white backdrop, she wouldn’t have been able to make much out aside from a few blurry, purple specks. She might have noticed that he never actually opened the door. She might have also noticed when the man removed Sayaka’s soul gem from her belt, only to give it back a few moments later.

It wasn’t until long after the man left that Sayaka, having lived through her imaginary twilight years touring the Caribbean with Kyosuke, realized that her soul gem looked worse than ever. The darkness that had once clouded the gem was now to the point of overflowing, with wispy tendrils of black smoke rising from out of the gem.

And the funny thing was, for all the worry, panic, and strife Sayaka had been through the past through days, all she could think about how she cried when she learned how “*The Little Mermaid*” really ended. Oh sure, she thought it was tragic at the time; the mermaid who sacrificed everything for the prince dies without the prince so much as acknowledging her existence.

But now that she was older, it seemed obvious to Sayaka that the Mermaid could have done something else. Maybe she could have negotiated a better deal with the sea witch. After all, she was already going to die if she didn’t woo the prince in time; would it really be that big of a deal if
she got to keep her voice? But if that wasn’t an option, learning to write would probably help.

It was this thought, this faint spark of grim humor, that consumed what little remained of Sayaka Miki’s mind as something began to gnaw away at her soul...

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Mr. Bones was the sort of person who’s name conjured up a very specific image; that of a animated skeleton, perhaps doing a merry jig at a halloween party. But while he indeed had a skeletal appearance (not to mention a snappy grey suit and tie), Mr. Bones was far from jolly. His invisible, cyanide-touch inducing skin might have been part of it. Or perhaps it was his long history of being manipulated. From being kidnapped as a baby by the insane Dr. Benjamin Love to the time he was tricked into killing Skyman during his time at Infinity Inc, Mr. Bones didn’t remember a time where he wasn’t being manipulated.

At least, up until he joined the Department of Extranormal Operations, the U.S. government’s premier agency for the study and monitoring of metahumans. Ascending to the rank of Director in almost no time at all, it seemed almost like poetic justice that he’d end up becoming a chessmaster in his own right, playing with people’s fates like one of the reality warpers they kept locked up on Level 3.

Of course, he’d be a pretty poor chessmaster without subordinates.

Sitting across from him was one such agent; a man in his early to mid twenties. His hair was a bright orange-red, carefully gelled into a series of spikes in a way that was probably intended to evoke the image of an open flame (Director Bones thought it looked more like a mutant porcupine trying to devour someone’s head).

Bones didn’t even need to look at the the man’s file to know who he was. The recruitment standards of the D.E.O. were always stringent, but defectors and turncoats got the most scrutiny. Especially when they were from a group like Organization XIII.

The director clasped his hands together, and looked right into the other man’s eyes. “So. Axel...” he began.

“Actually, the name’s Lea,” the red-haired man said. “‘Axel’ was just a code name; the old boss was big on anagrams. Hell if I know why.” He tapped his forehead in a slightly cocky manner. “Oh, and even though it’s pronounced ‘Lee’ it’s spelled ‘Lea’, got it?”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Director bones waited a few moments to let his complete indifference sink in. “Now that introductions are out of the way, would you care to explain why on earth I should let you join our... ‘Organization’, let’s call it?”

Axel slumped back in his chair. “Hey, if you guys are even half as good as you think you are, you should have a pretty good idea.”

Mr. Bones nodded slightly. An amateur would have tried to explain how freshly-made Nobodies start off without any memories, making them easily manipulated. But before he could do that, he’d have to explain what a Nobody was. And to do that, he’d have to explain what a Heartless was. And if Bones didn’t know about this already, Lea would either be leaking valuable information or he’d come across as a raving lunatic.

And if some reason if he didn’t actually know, and was just trying to bluff... well, Bones had to admit it would have been a damn good bluff.
“Fair enough,” the Director said. “And you came to us specifically because…”

“-because you guys seem to have pretty good intel.” Reaching into his jacket, Lea pulled out a handful of photographs, and tossed them on Director Bones’ desk. They depicted a number of different people in wildly different locations, and they each had a timestamp indicating the date the photos were taken. “Admittedly, your stealth could use some work, but you guys seemed to hit the mark more often than not.”

Bones made a mental note to examine the photos more carefully at a later date, but just at a glance he could recognize a number of his field operatives, some of which were still in active duty.

If he had eyebrows, Mr. Bones would have raised one of them. “Am I to take this a threat?”

“Nah, you got it all wrong,” Lea said. “Think of it as more of a bargain; you guys put me on the payroll, and I help you take down whatever’s left of Organization XIII.”

Bones pondered over Lea’s words; his ‘deal’ seemed a bit too good to be true. “And afterwards…?”

Lea threw up his arms. “You can do whatever the hell you want with me after that. I spent God knows how long working towards the destruction of the multiverse. Compared to that, sending me out to kill the president of a third-world country just to replace him with a puppet dictator is a drop in the ol’ karma bucket.” He then pointed at Mr. Bones. “Though personally, I’d be much better suited to fighting nutjob supervillains. Easier to get my head in the game, ya know?”

With a sigh, the director reached into his desk, and pulled out a manilla envelope. “At this point, I suppose giving you a trial run couldn’t make things any worse…”

Lea took the envelope, and immediately found the the contents; a series of photographs printed on glossy paper. “So, what do we have here? Someone you want bumped off?”

“Not unless you think suicide would make things any easier,” Bones said. “These were taken last year, on Earth-5, over the course of several weeks. You visited a place called Twilight Town quite a lot, it seems.”

“Yeah, funny story about that. I’ll have to tell it you you sometime.” Lea examined looked at photo of himself, and blonde young man sitting on the edge of a clock tower, apparently enjoying ice cream together. “Heh, It’s a pretty good angle.” Lea stood up to hold the photo, as well as another, similar photo, up to the light. “You know, whoever made these is seriously wasting his talent. The guy was born to be a photographer, not a spy.”

Bones noted that he made no mention of the kid. Not that it mattered, given how Bones had a pretty good idea of who he was. “When you’re done admiring yourself, do me a favor and look photo number eight.”

Rolling his eyes, Lea reluctantly complied with Bones’ order. But when he looked a the photo, a puzzled expression swept across his face. While the previous photos only showed him and the boy, this one added a third figure; a teenage girl with short, black hair, wearing an Organization XIII jacket.

Lea’s mouth hung open, as if the right words were on the tip of his tongue, but just wouldn’t come out. “I… ah…” he jabbed the paper a couple times. “Who’s the girl?”

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” The director held up another photo. “We have other photos of the girl. She’s usually seen with the boy; Roxas, I believe his name was...” he steepled
his fingers. “Based on the notes we recovered, we believe that this girl is a replica; a bundle of forcefully extracted memories given physical form and bound to a self-terminating meme.”

Lea nodded. “I have no idea what any of that means, but it does sound like the sort of nonsensical, overly-complicated plan that the Organization would come up with.” He snapped his fingers. “And let me guess: you want me to figure out what the girl’s deal is.”

“...In a manner of speaking,” Bones said.

“Great!” Lea clapped his hands. “Where do I start?”

“Well, for one thing you could try asking her yourself.” Bones reached down, and pressed a button hidden on the underside of his desk. “Bring it in,” he said.

Hearing this, Lea looked behind his shoulder just in time to see a woman in a grey suit enter the room, leading a girl with black hair and an Organization XIII jacket in by the hand.

Lea looked back at Bones. Then at the picture. Then at the girl. Then the picture again. Then Bones once more.

“Go on,” said Bones. “Say something.”

Bones watched as Lea examined the girl. He got the sense that Lea thought something was off, but couldn’t quite put it to words.

“Yo,” he said, raising his hand in what Bones could only assume was supposed to be a friendly gesture, complete with a smarmy grin. “The ‘name’s Axel. Got it memorized?”

The girl, in turn, raised her hand, though she didn’t say anything. She simply stared at Lee with a completely blank expression.

Puzzled. Lea then waved his hand in front of the girl’s face. “You… don’t happen to know anyone named Roxas, do you?”

The girl continued to ignore Lea’s question, instead opting to wave her own hand in front of Lea’s face.

“Huh.” Lea was now leaning forward to get a better look at the girl, who likewise leaned in to get a better look at Lea. “Where’d you get this girl?”

“Brazil,” said Bones. “She was caught trying to steal a shipment of iron using some sort of levitation magic. She put up quite a fight on first contact, but she’s been like this ever since.”

“Does she talk?”

“Not as far as we can tell. And psychic probes turned up nothing.”

“Maybe she’s just a hard nut to crack.” Lea tilted his head, and the girl continued to mimic him.

“I meant literally nothing. As far as they could tell, her mind is a blank slate. Not only that, but the parts of her brain responsible for creating memories seem to be non-functional.”

“Yet you said she had a plan before,” said Lea.

“Supposedly,” said Bones. “A colony of ants can build complicated networks of tunnels, yet a even pocket calculator is smarter than they are. As far as we can tell, this girl is like an ant; running
entirely on instinct with no higher-order reasoning. Her behavior in combat has proven that beyond a doubt.”

“Combat, eh?” Lea began waving his left hand around to keep the girl’s eyes occupied, while he slowly reached into his jacket with his right pocket…

...Whereupon he whipped out a large, spike-covered chakram, and swung it at the girl experimentally. But rather than copy his movements once more, she summoned a large metal key into her left hand to block Lea’s attack. She then leapt a few feet back, and continued to hold her weapon in a defensive posture.

Lea’s smile faded as the magnitude of the situation struck him. “So... she’s got a Keyblade.”

Bones said nothing, preferring to let the situation speak for itself.

“...Yeah, this has the Organization’s fingerprints all over it.” Motionless as a pair of statues, Lea and the girl were locked in an unusually calm standoff.

“Well?” said Bones. “Get on with it.”

“Excuse me?” Lea said, resisting the urge to glare at the Director.

“The replica is pointing a weapon at not only you, but also a prospective future employer. Killing it would be a smart thing to do right now.” Bones steepled his glove-covered fingers. “Consider this your entrance exam…”

“Woah, hey now!” Lea said, his facade of confidence all but shattered, “I might have come to sign up for some shady business, but I draw the line at murdering kids.”

“That didn’t stop you from trying a couple years ago.”

“Look, I was a different person then. Literally.” Lea’s grip on his weapon tightened. “Besides, isn’t this girl an important witness or clue or something?”

“We’ve actually found dozens of these replicas.” Bones calmly reached under his desk, and flipped a switch. The holographic projector hidden on the ceiling sputtered to life, which began to display a series of photographs, all depicting the girl that was even now standing in front of Lea.

Some photos showed her in cities, towns and villages. In others, she was in jungles, plains, and even mountains. One photo showed her on a desert island, emaciated from hunger and beet-red from sunburn. Another showed her in an orphanage, looking like an ordinary girl in every respect save for the way she stared at an empty spot on the wall.

But not all of the photos were of mundane subjects. Autopsies, security footage, and crime scene photos where now what the holographic monitors displayed, each of which depicting an identical-looking girl as either the victim or perpetrator of a wanton act of violence. Bones was especially proud of the photo they took in Brazil, which showed the girl standing motionlessly around the pile of corpses that she had eviscerated only moments before.

Through an app on his phone that was linked to a security camera hidden on the far side of his office, Director Bones could see Lea’s finely-tuned instincts at work. Zooming in his the would-be operative’s face, Bones could see that Lea’s eyes were twitching rapidly, absorbing a flood of new information and filtering out the everything that wasn’t immediately relevant.

“Identical in every way, these replicas have appeared all over the world, committing crimes with
neither rhyme nor reason,” Bones said. “And when they’ve finished whatever arbitrary task they were assigned, they gravitate towards the nearest ley line, and just stand there, as if waiting to be captured.” Bones glanced at the camera to see if Lea changed his expression. “Whatever these things are, they’re not human. And even if they once were… you’d be doing them a favor, putting them out of their misery.”

Lea clenched his teeth. No doubt he had caught on to the mindgames Bones was playing.

Now all the director had to do was watch. Lea’s next action, whether it be inspired by sentimentality or cold professionalism, would determine whether Bones would give the former Organization member a trial run or whether he instead turns on the electrified floor and calls in lab boys to prepare Lea for the mind probe.

“My move,” said Bones. “And if I were you, I’d decide on doing something within the next five-”

Lea hurled one of chakrams at the girl, who casually deflected with a leftward swipe. But just as the ‘clang’ of steel began echoing through the room, Lea dashed to the left, throwing his bladed weapon in such a way that the air currents carried it in a rightward arc.

And as girl moved the block the second chakram, she lost track of the first one, and Lea caught it in mid-air. He immediately hurled it back towards the girl where it landed in the base her spine, right below the neck, at the exact moment that the other chakram made contact with the keyblade.

Her spinal cord severed, the girl’s keyblade clattered on the ground with her mouth agape, wordlessly expressing surprise at her sudden paralysis.

“Alright…” Lea took a deep breath, and then leapt down to the injured girl’s side, removing the bladed weapon that was sticking out of her spinal column.

“May I ask…?” Bones began to say, before Lea interrupted him.

“Just tryin’ to do a little first aid, here,” Lea said as he pulled the gloves off his hands, which he then rubbed together until they began to glow green with magical energies. “It’s really basic magic, but if you get it to someone early enough you can fix all kinds of-”

But just as Lea began laying his hands on the injured girl’s neck, he suddenly pulled them back as a pulse of black light erupted from the point of contact.

“…the hell?” Lea said.

Carefully, the man reached for the wound once more, his hands still glowing with enchantment, only to be rebuffed by another surge of black light.

Bones could practically hear Lea’s heart skip a beat as the man’s gambit fell apart at the seams. In desperation, Lea tore off his own gloves and dug his fingernails into the carpet, and tore off a patch to use as an improvised bandage. Lea then patted down his own jacket, looking for the vial of disinfectant spray that Bones saw Lea drop while he was attacking the girl, only to give up and snatch a little bottle of hand sanitizer off the director’s desk.

He grabbed the girl’s hand and whispered, “come on… stay with me…” But as he sat there taking the girl’s pulse, Lea’s own breathing became deeper and deeper.

Until finally, Lea was left holding on to a lifeless corpse.
Silent words hung in the air, like an overcast sky threatening rain that never comes. Until finally, Lea turned to the director and said. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

Bones steepled his fingers. “What? You mean that my deliberate avoidance of gendered pronouns when describing the girl and her ilk, coupled with unusual appearance and overly dramatic narration would cause you to reflexively assume that I was wrong about the subject not being sentient, thus inspiring you to come up with a gambit that would prove to me that you were both ruthless and moral, in case you thought I would only hire someone who fell under those two extremes?”

Lea continued to stare at the director unflinchingly. Bones took this as a good sign; firebrands usually freeze up when they realize they’ve been out-gambited. Bones figured that Lea was already replaying events in his mind, trying to nail down the point where he fell into the director’s trap. Hell, Lea had probably figured out the Director was just trying to psyche him out with a cold read. Bones practically built his career out of taking credit for events he had no influence over. It would probably take a few more months for Lea to piece together the whys and hows, but in the interim Bones would have the perfect opportunity to see what this man was capable of.

True, Lea was perhaps a bit too… obtrusive to be trusted with anything sensitive. But given how Lea knew the multiversal underground like the back of his hand, Bones figured he’d seen enough weirdness to be prepared for damn near anything.

“You’ll be happy to know that your final test will allow you some sort of closure on this incident.” He lowered his fingers, quietly slipping them into his desk to retrieve a manilla envelope. “Of all of the… beings that we’ve located, one in particular is worth investigating.” Bones handed the file to Lea. “First sighted near the Tokyo Tower ley-line, this one not only appears to be capable of speech, but even has a name.”

“...really?” his eyes turned away from the director, Lea opened the envelope and emptied its contents. A number of papers fell out, including newspaper clippings, and several pages printed from various internet sources. ‘‘JSJ Clashes at Tokyo Tower’, ‘JSJ Saves Concert’, ‘JSJ Chairman Announces Adoption of Super-powered Teen’...” Lea pointed to the English acronym that stuck out in the midst of the Japanese text. “Who are these guys, anyway?”

“The ‘Justice Society of Japan,’” Bones said, trying to hide his disgust. “The Japanese prime minister’s pet project, a superhero team basically made to give his son something to do with his newfound superpowers...” The director threw up his hand, “...which of course is supposed to be a secret, but given how politicians and their families have zero private life, the sudden absence of Mr. Ikari’s son from the tabloids is bound to raise a few eyebrows.”

Lea placed the photos on Bones’ desk as he put his gloves back on. “Hey, I’ve heard of a few of these guys,” He pointed to the blonde kid standing on a concert stage in the news clipping. “That’s Dicksons’ apprentice… you know Dickson, right?”

“You mean the rough-spoken, seemingly-immortal professor of cryptoarchaeology at the Atlas Academy?” Bones said sarcastically. “I’d be a fool if I didn’t.”

“And this guy...” Lea pointed to the blue-haired man in goggles, “He’s pretty well known among mech-heads. Maybe I should get his autograph...” he then looked at the woman with pink hair, wearing the purple wizard outfit. “...and this is... Lightning, right? She was in the news a few years back, during that whole Fal’cie thing.” Lea scratched his head. “Kinda drawing a blank on these other guys, though.”

“Not surprising, given how they’re newcomers.” Bones said. “The magical girl doesn’t have a
superhero name, but is apparently good with swords. The pointy-eared kid is called ‘Hon’kale’, and has a number of superpowers, most of which are pitifully weak and none of which make any thematic sense. The redhead is called ‘Amazingly Powerful Girlborg’. She’s American, and she’s a technopath. This is literally all we know about her, because every time we try to run a facial analysis program our computer explodes.”

Lea raised an eyebrow, unsure of whether Bones was joking.

“And this girl,” Lea tapped the image of the girl who resembled the corpse that still lay on the office floor. “You said she had a name?”

“Yes,” said Bones. “Ino Atom Nix. I don’t suppose that name means anything to you?”

Lea mouthed something to himself. “I am…” he began to say, only to stop mid-sentence.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Bones.

“Sorry, force of habit,” said Lea. “For some reason, old man Xemnas was obsessed with anagrams. After a while you start tearing apart every name you see.” Lee grinned. “Though you’d think a guy who likes anagrams that much would pick a name that can’t be rearrange into something silly, like ‘Mansex’…”

“Juvenile remarks aside, do you have any other insights?”

“Not unless ‘On Toxin’ has some sort of deep, cosmic significance,” Lea sighed. “Seriously, that’s the closest I could come up with, and I have a hard time picturing Xemnas snorting arsenic.”

“Obviously…” Bones said, noting how quickly Lea was able to snap back to his more easygoing persona. He then handed Lea a piece of paper, with an image from Google maps printed on it. “I’d suggest you start your search in the vicinity of the Ogon Cafe. My informants tell me that Roger Smith, one of our persons of interest, was negotiating a contract between Ms. Farron and an unspecified third party.”

“Got it,” Lea said, shoving the envelope’s contents into one of his jacket’s innumerable pockets. He then snapped his gloved fingers (or at least tried to, the resulting sound was less like a snap and more like a soggy baseball hitting a carpet), and a swirling portal of darkness appeared in the middle of the office.

“…You might want to get a change of clothes first,” said Bones. “Call it a hunch, but Organization XIII or not, most heroes tend to be suspicious of men in black cloaks who appear out of swirling portals of darkness.”

“Well… you kinda need protection when you travel through the Corridors of Darkness…” said Lea, “But yeah, I’m not an idiot. I’m gonna hop back to my place and get my spare clothes before I zip off to Tokyo.”

“Fair enough. But don’t the Corridors tend to be rather… inaccurate?”

“Well, sometimes…” Lea said. “But don’t worry, I plan on giving myself a wide berth; I’m actually going to be aiming for a store a few blocks down. Then, after I change into some regular clothes, I’m going to go up to the girl, flash some credentials, ask her a few questions, and leave.”

“And if things turn violent?”

“It won’t,” Lea assured Bones. “But even if it does, I’m going to be questioning her in a public
space surrounded by a bunch of heroes. D.E.O. or not, as long as I don’t strike first they’d probably take my side if she attacks unprovoked...”

The director took a moment to consider Lea’s plan. In the worst case scenario, Lea would make such a mess that it attracted the attention of a more experienced super-team that could solve Bones’ problem at no addition. And if it came to that, he supposed he could always disavow Lea’s association with D.E.O. and have a sleeper agent murder Lea in prison before he tried to defect.

“So be it,” Bones said. “You can leave now.”

Taking one last look at the corpse that was still left on the floor, Lea stepped into the portal, which immediately vanished behind him.

Once he was certain that Lea had left, Bones opened the wooden box on his desk, and removed a cuban cigar. In a few minutes he’d have to call the custodial staff to bring up a body bag, as well as a bleach-soaked mop to clean the blood off the floor. But for now, he simply wanted a moment of silence.

BIZZARO AMBUSH BUG: Good-by, and go away from Channel 25. Me am Bizzaro Ambush Bug, there to take you the olds.

BIZZARO BETHANY SNOW: Our bottom story today, Bizzaro Bruce Wane am now unoffically poorest man in Bizzaro Gotham. Police think Bruce am cheating because Bizzaro Batman am breaking into banks to give away money. Here am police chief Bizzaro Two Face with statement.

BIZZARO TWO FACE: Releasing Bizzaro Batman am bottom priority! He am friend to society, and deserves to be unlocked own and given cake as reward for his crimes.

BIZZARO AMBUSH BUG: No thank you, Two Face. In other news Bizzaro Dio Brando am now worstest criminal in history. His stand power known as “Bizzaro The World” stops space so he can’t do anything, and is now statue in Bizzaro Egypt. Bizzaro #1 have this to not say.

BIZZARO #1: Me am really impressed. Most super-villains earn years to unlearn how to not do nothing, but bizzaro dio sucks them into the lava. Me can only dispair that one night me will not be able to do even less nothing.

BIZZARO AMBUSH BUG: Coming down before, the Bizzaro NSA am secretly waring blindfolds to not spy on anyone. None of this and less, there on channel 25!

Omake: Justice Substitutes of Japan, Part Whatever

NARRATOR: When we last left our Majestic Men of Might, MYSTERIOUR, the master of mystery, had managed to amass menagerie of mightily mean men, mutants, and monsters to menace the metropolis of Tokyo, and not Milwaukee, Minneapolis or Madrid.

TEDDY BOMBER: That’s it, we’re taking away your alliteration license.

NARRATOR: But while the others are locked in a battle of undoubtedly epic proportions, Commander Beef had retreated to the BEEFCAVE, to ferret out the mastermind behind this plot with the help of Sharkman, his NetNavi.
COMMANDER BEEF: Sharkman, ah need you search the Beefotron 9000’s database for any information about our masked mystery menace.

SHARKMAN: ...Uh, kind of a problem here, boss. It looks like someone deleted it.

COMMANDER BEEF: What? That’s impossible! Do we at least have the backup database?

SHARKMAN: Yeah, but the only thing we had backed up was the stuff about fish and calcium.

COMMANDER BEEF: We have to leave no stone unturned! Do a scan anyway!

SHARKMAN: Oookay then.

*TEN MINUTES LATER*

SHARKMAN: Well, based on my research, I’m pretty sure he has a skeleton, and I’m also pretty sure he’s not a fish.

COMMANDER BEEF: Blast! That means he could be anyone! Looks like this guy has thought of everything!

???: You can say that again.

COMMANDER BEEF: *GASP* You!

???: Yes, Commander Beef, or should I say Mesa the Fish-Peddler… it is I, Samuel McGoober!

COMMANDER BEEF: ...who?

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: I am the son of the cousin of the butler of the boss of the guy who does the laundry for the best friend of Dio Brando!

COMMANDER BEEF: ...never heard of ya.

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: I have been hired by Mysteriour to destroy you, Mesa, with the help of a mysterious power that takes the form of a spirit that stands by me, which we call a… um…

COMMANDER BEEF: ...go on…

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: That’s funny, I seem to have forgotten my power’s name. I know it’s called something because it stands by you…

COMMANDER BEEF: You mean… like a best friend? A bodyguard? A telephone pole?

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: No, no, something else… something that will stand by you no matter what. Stand by you… stand by you...

COMMANDER BEEF: I dunno… maybe a concierge?

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: Yes, that’s right! With the power of my Concierge, “Achy Breaky Heart”, I will destroy you once and for-

COMMANDER BEEF: Wait, your power is named after a terrible country song?

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: S-shut up! The name doesn’t matter, It’s really strong!

COMMANDER BEEF: Ooooooh reeeeally…
SAMUEL MCGOOBER: Yes, really! The way it works is that if I touch someone on the forehead, they’ll be frozen in space and time FOR ALL ETERNITY!

COMMANDER BEEF: So… your power only works if you touch ‘em where?

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: Right he- waaait a second, you were trying to trick me, weren’t you? Trying to hoist me by my own petard! But I’m no saturday morning cartoon villain, I’m a hardcore badass with an awesome power!

COMMANDER BEEF: Yeah, you got me their, chief. By the by, there’s a big ‘ol zit on yer temple.

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: EEK! Really?! Where?!

COMMANDER BEEF: Right there, see? Here, why doncha borrow this here zit cream from mah utility belt.

SAMUEL MCGOOBER: Oh, thanks. You’re a real lifesav- *FROZEN IN TIME SOUND EFFECT!* 

COMMANDER BEEF: Ha, what an idiot. Now all I gotta do is rummage through his wallet, seein’ how he ain’t gonna be needin’ it no more.

SHARKMAN: Commander, I just hacked into Samuel’s phone. It says here Mysterior, the so-called “mastermind of malice” is hiding in the abandoned skyscraper district.

COMMANDER BEEF: Whut, you mean the one that giant monsters always stomp over?

SHARKMAN: Yep. Apparently the rent is cheap there.

COMMANDER BEEF: Good work, Sharkman! You call the others while I max out these here credit cards. Oh, and call the sushi place while yer at it. We got a final battle to get to, and I’ll be damned if we get there without enough calcium to go around!

*LAUGH TRACK*

NARRATOR: Justice Substitutes of Japan was filmed in front of a live studio audience. This program is brought to you in part by Mann Co. “Mann Co. We produce terrible superhero-themed sitcoms and get into fights.”

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AUTHOR’S NOTES:

The average height for women in the U.S. is 5'4"

The average height for women in Japan is 5'2"

According to the Code Geass wiki, Milly is 5'9"

The same wiki says that Shirley is also listed as 5'9"

According to the Final Fantasy wiki, Lightning's height is listed as 5'7"

After checking a population distribution chart, I learned that 94.1% of the female population in the U.S. is under 5'9". And while I don’t have the data for Japan, since about 88% of U.S. females are
under 5’7’’ and japanese people tend to be shorter than americans (thanks, wikipedia’s page on human height), I assume Lightning would also be quite tall for a Japanese woman.

I guess it comes down to the differing art styles of the series. Code Geass’s characters tend to have long limbs (as is the norm for CLAMP, who designed the characters), while Final Fantasy XIII’s characters are more realistically proportioned (with a few the odd exceptions such as Snow, who stands at 6’7’, and Caius Ballad, who is even taller than that).

I don’t really have a point to this. I just find it a little weird to think of those teenage girls being taller than Lightning, an adult who isn’t exactly “short” to begin with.

Now for the pointless stuff. If this fanfic was a video game, these are what everyone’s DLC costumes would be.

Simon:

Gurren Lantern: A green lantern costume, with green “Kamina” shades in place of a mask.

I should point out there’s already a Green Lantern named Simon.

Cutie Simon: A bring pink variation of Simon’s usual outfit, with a big red heart on the back.

Nia got this for you as a gift. It’s comfy, to be sure. But unless you plan to take a trip to Equestria anytime soon it doesn’t really fit in.

Hero Jacket: A white trenchcoat based on Snow’s appearance in Final Fantasy XIII.

Wonder Drill: A blue, heavily armored sentai costume with a drill motif. Inspired by The Wonderful 101.

In another world, Simon never found the Lagann. Instead, he avenges his tragically fallen bro by fighting G.E.A.T.H.J.E.R.K. alongside the Wonderful 100.

Shulk:

Cosmic Couture: A costume based on former Starman Jack Knight. Gives the Monado a gold sheen, like the Cosmic Staff.

Shulk bought this getup at a pawn shop in San Francisco. He got it at a good price because the guy said he “didn’t need it anymore”.

Shinigami Threads: A black kimono based on Ichigo’s outfit in Bleach.

Someone in the Soul Society must have gotten their laundry mixed up.

Wonder Monado: A red sentai costume with a pattern based on the Monado. Inspired by The Wonderful 101.

In another world, Shulk Lowsley uses the power of the Monado to fight against G.E.A.T.H.J.E.R.K. as a member of the Wonderful 100.

Basch Lives!: A costume based on Basch’s outfit from Final Fantasy XII. Comes with an additional cosmetic item that resembles a Guy Fawks mask.

A traditional costume worn during Basch Day, a Dalmascan holiday similar to Guy Fawkes Day that mockingly celebrates the infamous traitor Basch Fon Ronsenburg. Festivities including
running around and shouting “I'M BASCH FON RONSENBURG OF DALMASCA!” at random people.

**Lightning:**

Slayer’s Garb: A costume based on Lina Inverse, from The Slayers.

Serah was commissioned to make this, but the first time around she accidently used the measurements for someone much taller and bustier than her client.

Japanese Amazon: A costume based on Wonder Woman’s New 52 costume, with the colors and symbols changed to reflect Japan rather than the U.S.

“I’m sure I had a good reason for making this,” Serah said. “I’ll tell you if I remember what it was.”

Wonder L’Cie: A pink-and-black Sentai costume that’s basically a shinier version of Lightning’s iconic jacket, as well as a mask. Inspired by The Wonderful 101.

In another world, Claire “Lightning” Farron became a L’Cie with the focus “Destroy G.E.A.T.H.I.E.R.K.” Which was fine, because she was going to do that anyway as a member of the Wonderful 100.

Stormy Weather: A costume based on Squall Leonheart from Final Fantasy 8. Changes Lightning’s weapon to look more like Squall’s gunblade.

*The Cloud costume needed to be washed.*

**Shirou:**

Eternally Cool: A costume based on the 90’s version of Kid Eternity, featuring a leather jacket and round, opaque sunglasses.

*Don’t switch the blade on the guy in shades (oh no).*

Jack of All Blades: A costume based on Gilgamesh from the Final Fantasy series, with a red sash, polka-dotted leggings and mismatching, vaguely samurai-ish armor.

*Perfect for fighting like men. Or ladies. Or ladies dressed like men.*

Wonder Tryhard: A sentai costume cobbled together from a bunch of things Shirou found at a costume store, including a Superman cape, a “Batman muscles” chestpiece, a (fake) Green Lantern ring, and a pair of red tights from a Flash costume. Inspired by The Wonderful 101.

In another world, Shirou Emiya flew out to Blossom City every year to try and join the Wonderful 100. Even though he failed the written test year after year, his perseverance was such that he was allowed onto the team anyway.

Trueshot Tunic: Costume based on the Teen Titans Animated Series version of Speedy.

*Winners don’t do drugs.*

**Shirley:**

FINAL Finery: A costume based on Renais Cardiff Shishioh from GaoGaiGar FINAL, complete with white jacket and a pair of pince-nez.
Those glasses are too small to see out of. What’s the point?

The ‘Merica Suit: A costume based on Courtney Whitmore, better known as Stargirl.

You feel like a cheerleader wearing this. An ass-kicking cheerleader made out of metal with technopathic powers, but a cheerleader nonetheless.

Wonder Schoolgirl: A sentai costume that’s really just Shirley’s school uniform, a fancy mask, and an overly-long scarf. Inspired by The Wonderful 101.

In another world, Shirley Fenette went to the wrong building, entering the Wonderful 100 tryouts when she was supposed to be at a swim meet. Surprisingly, she passed with flying colors, and assumed the role of Wonder Schoolgirl in the fight against G.E.A.T.H.J.E.R.K.

Outer Space Style: Costume based on the Teen Titans Animated Series version of Starfire.

This is that thing earthlings call “cosplay”, yes?

Shinji:

Pupil’s Paraphernalia: A costume based on pre-timeskip Simon.

Who the hell do you think you’re going to be?

Chaos Costume: A suit of armor based on the Thousand Sons from Warhammer 40K. Inspired by the fanfic Thousand Shinji.

A gift, courtesy of a nine-fingered version of Shinji from an alternate universe.

Boss Berserker: A rough costume made of rusty, mismatching parts, meant to resemble an Ork Warboss. Inspired by the fanfic Shinji and Warhammer 40K.

Found in a mysterious box that washed up on the beach for no reason. There were also a bunch of overpriced plastic figures, but Shinji didn’t see the appeal so he gave them to Rivalz.

The World Ends With Shinji: A costume based on Neku, from The World Ends With You.

FOREVER ALONE.

Boy Wonder: Costume based on the Teen Titans Animated Series version of Robin.

When there’s trouble, you know who to call.

Hope (as herself):

Atomic Kitten: A costume based on Wild Tiger’s outfit, colored black and red instead of white and green.

Not a dream! Not an imaginary story!

Little Miss Marvelous: Hope’s skin, hair, and costume are changed to make her look like Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel.

You got the idea from this costume when gazing into Dr. Insano’s parallel universe viewer. Your goal is to someday travel to that dimension and team up with that girl to fight a giant robot gorilla or something.
Feeling Beastly: Costume based on the Teen Titans Animated Series version of Beast Boy.

*Dude! This is the best costume ever!*

**Ino:**

A Fleeting Memory: A costume based on Sora’s Kingdom Hearts 1 outfit.

_You feel very comfortable in these clothes._

A Familiar Memory: A costume based on Roxas’ Kingdom Hearts 2 outfit.

_You feel like you’ve seen this before, though it might just be your imagination._

An Unfamiliar Memory: A costume based on Yuffie, from Final Fantasy VII.

_Nia bought this outfit from a resort town when she was much younger._

Metrion Zinthos: Costume based on the Teen Titans Animated Series version of Raven.

_Demonic possession not included._

Another Organization: Costume based on the Akatsuki robes from Naruto.

_Why is it that only evil organizations get to have cool dress codes?_

**Sayaka:**

Songstress Dressphere: A costume resembling Yuna’s “Songstress” costume from Final Fantasy X-2

_You never know when a sudden karaoke contest could happen._

Mercury Dressphere: A costume resembling Sailor Mercury, from Sailor Moon.

_Fighting evil by moonlight is easy. Winning love by daylight? Not so much._

Flower Power Dressphere: A costume based on Aerith from Final Fantasy VII.

_Just try to stay away from nine-foot-long nodachis, mm’kay?_

Mascot Dressphere: A Kyubey mascot costume.

_/人◕‿◕人 \_

**Hope (as Hon’Kale):**

Wonder Drow: A sentai costume with Hon’Kale’s long, white hair braided into a ponytail.

_On another world, Hon’Kale D’Orden left the hollow earth in order to fight G.E.A.T.H.J.E.R.K. alongside the humans._

**Electra Pendragon:**

Marvelous Ensemble: An outfit based on the Marvel character Elektra Natchios.

_A costume belonging to someone whose name actually reflects their heritage._
Royal Regalia: A regal outfit based on Red Saber’s costume in the original Fate/Extra.

An outfit belonging to one of Electra’s many private tutors, specifically the one that was supposed to teach her courtly manners, but instead spent her time using Electra as a captive audience for her violin recitals.

Ruffian Rigging: A steampunk costume consisting of black suspenders, a white shirt, a white trenchcoat, and a white newsboy cap.

The clothes belong to the devilishly handsome son of a blacksmith who was smitten with Electra, but died after tripping down a flight of stairs without even getting a chance to talk to her. His final wish was that Electra would wear his clothes as part of a DLC pack.

I’ve got a few others in mind, but they might spoil the story so I’ll reveal them later.
It’s been a year since I posted a chapter, but my life has been kinda crazy. Since I started writing JSJ, I graduated from college, got a job, lost a job, moved across the country, grappled with depression, and ran a weekly RPG campaign with some online friends. In the meantime, the DCU has had one of its most turbulent periods in history. I lost track of how things were going around the time of Multiversity. I don’t know what happened during Convergence, and while I someday plan to catch up on all that, I don’t know whether to be happy that they didn’t completely abandon the original DCU, or annoyed that they couldn’t truly commit to the New 52.

That being said, this story hasn’t left my mind; not for a moment. There’s so much I want to get to writing about, and I live in the fear that I’ll leave this project behind like so many others, or die before I give the story any kind of conclusion. Because writing about all these characters is my dream project.

I know I’ll never see my story brought to life in a movie, video game or comic. I know I’ll never see a dime for my work. I’m content at knowing that I’ve touched the lives of every last person who reads it, even in a tiny way.

And I’ll make mistakes, I’m sure of it. No one is perfect, and I don’t claim to be the exception. All I ask is that you kind folks out there continue to read my story, and give honest feedback. I made the decision to start this story, and I swear that I will see it through to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[COVER: The cover is a parody of 90’s comics, specifically the work of Rob Liefeld. It’s a very cluttered group shot of Zero (Lelouch Lamperouge), Red X (Jason Todd), Sayoko, and original character Crimson Wing scowling at the reader with pupil-less eyes (even Lelouch gets in on it, since his eyes and grimace are visible behind his mask on this cover). The men are wearing lots of bandoliers and carrying ridiculous looking guns, while the women have oddly-shaped breasts and are twisting their torsos in a way that is allegedly meant to be “sexy”. The words “1st Collectors Issue!” are printed on the front, followed by “They’re not in it for money… they’re in it for REVENGE!!!!!!!” and “NOT A DREAM!!!! NOT AN IMAGINARY STORY!!!”. Of course, the cover betrays the parody angle with a little cut-in of Rivalz showing off something he’s drawn to Lelouch, who is saying “no” flatly, implying that Rivalz drew the cover. ]

[There is also a variant cover inspired by comics of the silver age. Drawn in a four-color, Jack Kirby-esq style, the cover depicts Kanjar Ro watching a computer monitor that is showing Zero, Jason and Sayoko running down a hallway. Zero is saying “Look alive, Knights! Kanjar Ro should be just around the corner!” while Kanjar Ro says “Those foolish Black Knights have fallen right into my trap! Now that I have the Metal Gear, no one will be able to stop me!”. Further expository text is littered around the page, saying things like “Because you asked for it, here comes Zero and The Black Knights!”, “Guest-starring Red X and Sayoko the Ninja Maid!” and “Not a dream! Not an imaginary story!”]. A blurb at the bottom says “Who is the mysterious Crimson Wing?”, and is paired with a stylized silhouette of Crimson Wing. Of course, the cover betrays the
Lelouch Lamperouge let go of the ladder, and dropped to his feet. Wearing his full “Zero” ensemble, he swiftly turned around and stepped through the archway, into the steel-plated corridor. Waiting for him was a serious looking man wearing a black jacket with a grey shoulder-pad on his left side, the uniform of the Black Knights. He had a long face with hawk-like eyes, and straight brown hair that was done into a thin ponytail.

“Sir,” the man said, saluting. “The prisoners are ready for transport, just as you ordered.”

“I assume there was no trouble?” Lelouch asked.

“Mordred has too little mana to pose much of a threat at this point, but he’s been cooperative. The alien, on the other hand...”

Lelouch nodded; Kanjar Ro was one of the slipperiest toads in the galaxy. Getting him in the first place was enough of a trial. But even under sedation, keeping him there was another matter entirely. Had anyone other than Rossiu Adai been in charge of the place, Lelouch would have had Kanjar Ro killed, setting things up to look like it was hit by one of Kanjar’s many, many enemies rather than try to deal with his machinations.

“Just be glad we’re handing Kanjar over to one of the few people in the universe that hate him even more than we do.” Lelouch glanced at the ladder behind him. “What’s the security detail?”

“All newcomers randomly-selected from other divisions, drawn from a pool of applicants who scored a negative eight or less on the Tweed Scale of Corruptibility. He’s not going to be able to talk his way out of this one.” Rossiu snapped with an air of authority.

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” said Lelouch. “Double the security, just in case.”

Rossiu nodded, before turning to the side to bark orders into the radio on his belt pocket. “Delta Bravo, four-eight-six in sigma prime...”

Lelouch wasn’t listening to Rossiu’s radio orders, however. He was more focused on the sharp swears that echoed through the entranceway as a figure wearing a black jumpsuit, a grey cape, and a skull-shaped mask descended down the ladder with a pair of submachine guns strapped to his sides.

“God, I fucking hate submarines...” he muttered. “What kinda asshole decides to put a private prison on a submarine, anyway? Hell, who even builds private prisons anymore? Even if I were a rich snob with more money than sense, I’d never invest in a place that gets broken out of every two weeks...”

A second voice then spoke up: “If you had actually done your research instead of making ‘clever’ statements, you would know that the Corbenic Mobile Penitentiary Facility has never been escaped.” Following the mask-wearing fiend was a woman dressed in what could be mistaken for a french maid outfit, were it not for the knee-length dress, the bright-red coloring on the sides, and the large, orange scarf around her neck. She even had a nurse’s cap, though it was decorated with a large metal plate depicting a stylized leaf. “Furthermore, you’d do best not to insult your new boss while he’s in earshot,” the maid finished.

“Oh, yeah, like he really cares what I think,” the skull-faced man retorted. “I mean, what’s he gonna do, torture me with some sort of psychic powers? Been there, done that.”
Lelouch noted a quiet irony in this. Jason Todd, alias “Red X” (formerly “The Red Hood”, and a Robin before that), only came to Lelouch in the first place because he was trying to kill Zero. It was a close call, but nothing a bit of Geass couldn’t fix.

“I just got word that the prisoners are ready transport,” said Rossiu. “Ready to depart on your command.”

“Excellent,” said Lelouch. “All we need to do is wait for the most recent addition to our organization...”

Suddenly, Lelouch heard sharp, metallic noise behind him. He turned his head towards the entrance, and saw a woman wearing an elaborate cloak covered in feathers. Meant to invoke the image of a Japanese sparrowhawk (which Lelouch had seen plenty of back when he had time for the occasional birdwatching trip), it had alternating white and bluish-grey stripes of plumage, and a pointed hood with two soulless eyes stitched upon it. It gave the impression that the wearer had slain a monstrous bird, skinned it alive, and fashioned it into a sort of garb.

“Forgive me, sir, for questioning your hiring practices...” Rossiu said. “But isn’t that...”

“...Crimson Wing, yes.”

Lelouch took a moment to let the name sink in, as the woman in the cloak slowly stood up.

“Magic is one of our weak points, and we can’t afford to hire Lina Inverse or John Constantine every time a wizard throws a hissy-fit,” he said, glancing back to Rossiu. “And with over three hundred years of experience, I can’t imagine anyone better-suited for the job.”

“Yes, but...” Rossiu’s calm, unshakable demeanor fell, if only for the slightest instant. “...well, she’s a demon. Deceit is in their their very nature.”

“No need to fear, human,” Crimson Wing walked past Zero, and circled around Rossiu, like a hawk circling its prey. “Coin and blood are all that I desire; so long as your coffers are endless and your enemies are innumerable, I shall remain loyal.” her voice was deep, cavernous, somehow hollow, yet tinged with a strong japanese accent.

Jason sighed. “So, a demon, a ninja, a trigger-happy merc walk into a submarine. It’s like the start of a bad joke.” There was a ‘click’ as he flipped the safety off one of his handguns. “Only good things can come of this!”

Lelouch ignored Jason’s childish snark. “Lead the way, Adai.”

Rossiu bowed slightly, and then lead Lelouch and his companions through a series of twisting hallways of dark-red steel, with a network of tangled pipes hanging above, and the ocean’s roar below. It wasn’t long before they came to an unmarked pair of solid metal doors, with an onyx security pad to the right.

Rossiu slid his ID card across the interface, causing it to say “Rossiu Adai: Accepted.” The doorways then slid open, revealing a large, cylindrical room where dozens, if not hundreds of figures were sealed within glowing glass tubes, cryogenically frozen in perfect stasis.

“Huh.” Jason scratched his helmet. “So that’s why they call this place ‘The Popsicle Stand’.”

Sayoko shook her head. “You know for someone trained by Batman, you’re not all that observant,” she said.
“I’m just saying… I always thought it was just a pointless nickname, like ‘The Slab’ or ‘The Rock’. I didn’t think they’d literally freeze people down here.”

“Actually, they’re suspended in a state of extreme time dilation,” corrected Rossiu. “But the net effect is still the same; criminals too vicious for any hope of reformation are stored indefinitely, keeping them away from society.”

“And we don’t kill them because…?”

“…because not every country supports the death penalty,” Rossiu continued. “And even when they do, the process is lengthy, prone to legal quandaries, can be prohibitively expensive, and is sometimes flat-out impossible. Not to mention that metahuman prisoners require specific accommodations that can raise the price even further.”

“Oh yeah, because a giant freakin’ submarine is so much more economical,” Jason deadpanned.

“The prison is not the only facility on this sub,” said Sayoko. “It’s simply the most well-known. However, at your current clearance level-”

“Yeah yeah, I’m not authorized to see the top-secret black-hat Illuminati project blah blah blah.” Jason crossed his arms like a pouting child as he and the rest of Zero’s crew marched towards the central platform. “Give it a rest, sister; I know how this stuff works.”

Lelouch glanced at Crimson Wing. Though her face was obscured by her mask, Lelouch could tell by her body language that something else was on her mind. The way she was hunched over indicated that she was more focused on the task at hand, but a slight tremble in her step gave away that she was worried about something.

But Lelouch didn’t have time to dwell on this, for at that moment they reached the area where the two prisoners were being held.

Overhead were the pods that they had previously been stored in, suspended in mid-air by spindly metal claws, each with a pair of hatches that hung open. Below the pods were the criminals in question, surrounded on all sides by dozens of men armed with assault rifles.

Mordred stood on the left, still dressed in the armor he had worn upon his capture. He was reluctant to take it off, but was allowed to keep it on so long as he remained cooperative. It was only now that Zero realized that he was a bit on the short side, barely standing five feet, not including his hemet. It was almost comical to see the fearsome knight dwarfed by the alien standing next to him.

Kanjar Ro, was standing on the right, scowling at anyone nearby with his pointed nose and segmented insect-eyes. Occasionally he tried to intimidate his captors with a growl despite being handcuffed and having about the same muscle mass of your average computer programmer. Unlike Mordred, Kanjar Ro had been stripped of the space-age garb he usually wore, and instead had to make do with boxer shorts and an undershirt.

Spotting Zero, Kanjar Ro’s face softened. “Ah, good! Just the person I was hoping to see.” Ro grinned nervously, extraterrestrial sweat dripping down his forehead. “You know… you seem like a pretty ambitious fellow. I mean, you have private prison, a private army… I used to have one of those myself, believe it or not.”

Lelouch stepped in front of Ro, watching him carefully.

“And… wouldn’t you know it? I’ve got a planet over by Alpha Centauri that, when you get down
to it, I simply don’t need anymore.” Ro’s breathing deepened as his smile grew desperate. “So, how about you just remove these shackles and you can have that planet of mine. I mean you can always just put on a show and make up some story about how I got away. And if it’s witnesses you’re worried about, I’ve got this nice memory-remover kit that was, ah, only used by a little old lady on weekends…”

Lelouch turned to one of the guards. “Get this man a gag. I don’t want to hear another word from him.”

“See the fruit of thy silver tongue, cur…” Mordred mumbled.

“Oh shut up…” Kanjar Ro replied. “At least I don’t have to have my mommy bail me out.”

“If thine hope is to enrage me to such a state that you could escape, thou wilt be disappointed.” Mordred continued to look straight ahead. “For every stone thou slingst be but another ounce of the gravy of anticipation, but for the feast of pain that awaits when Mother finally gets her clutches on you.”

“O-oh, really?” Kanjar’s eye twitched slightly.

“Quite. I believe she devised an instrument called ‘The Wheel of Perpetual Daggers’, which was built to very… exacting specifications.”

“Ah. I see then,” Kanjar Ro gulped. He then turned to the particularly heavy-set guard with unruly hair that was carrying the gag Zero requested.

“HEY! YOU! FATSO!” the alien shouted. “EAT ANY GOOD LIVESTOCK LATELY? OH WAIT YOU CAN’T BECAUSE YOU ATE THEM ALL! BECAUSE YOU’RE FAT!”

Lelouch watched and the guard displayed a look more of annoyance than of blind range.

“FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY FATTY…” But before Ro could get any further, the guard’s fist collided Kanjar Ro’s cheek, leaving a dark-green bruise and sending a tooth flying out of his mouth, which landed next to one of the other guards.

“Well… that’s out of the way,” said Lelouch. “X, you take Ro. Crimson, take Mordred. Sayoko stays with me.”

“Whatever.” Jason grabbed Ro by his wrists, and started pushing him along the walkway.

Mordred followed on his own, though Crimson Wing stood behind him, meticulously watching the back of his neck.

But just when it looked like things were going off without a hitch, there was a hissing sound coming in the direction of the main platform.

“Sir?” said one of the guards. “I don’t really know what’s going on here… I looks like the tooth is evaporating into some sort of… blue… gooey thing.”

But before Lelouch could react, the gooey blob that was once Ro’s tooth lept onto the leg of the guard, and shimmied its way into his boots.

“Everyone, stand back!” Lelouch shouted. “Fire at my command!”

“Yeah, forget that.” Jason raised one of his many firearms and took aim at the poor guard,
decorating his skull with a series of gaping holes. “Best to put the bastard out of his-”

Jason’s one-liner was then interrupted by an elbow to the face, as Kanjar Ro slipped out of his handcuff and fled the scene.

Several of the guards turned to aim at the escaping alien. “There he goes!” one of them shouted. “Get him!”

“No, wait!” said Lelouch. But it was too late; with the soldiers distracted, they didn’t have time to notice that the corpse of their fallen comrade was quickly evaporating into a bright blue paste, which then divided itself into over a dozen separate blobs, each of which each leapt onto the nearest soldier.

By this point, panic set in. Some of the soldiers fled in terror, while others fired ineffectually on the dividing blobs, only to get consumed themselves. But the unlucky soldiers were the ones that just stood there, mouths agape, as the blobs completed the transfiguration of their victims. Where men once stood, there were now only beings that could only be described as “humanoid”. Tall, blue and muscular, with fin-like protrusions sprouting out of their heads, they floated off the ground, staring at the remaining humans with glowing, monocular eyes.

“Fuck! O.M.A.Cs!” Jason was about to pull the pin off of an EMP grenade, only for Sayoko to snatch it away.

“Are you insane?” said Sayoko. “We’re in a submarine! If you damage any of the electronics, we’re all going to drown!”

“Well excuse me for trying to avert another grey goo apocalypse!” Jason ineffectually fired off a few rounds to distract the monsters as the rest of the group made their way for the exit. “God! Why won’t these guys just die-”

Just as Jason was about to start firing a new clip, Crimson Wing leapt in front of his view. Carrying a glass jar in one hand and a turkey baster in the other, she sprayed each of the infected soldiers with the solution contained within the jar. And one by one, the O.M.A.C.S. either turned back into humans, or collapsed into a pile of murky sludge. Crimson Wing then stood silently, watching the O.M.A.C.S. for signs of life, before slipping the turkey baster back behind her robes.

“...okay. I admit I’ve seem weird-ass stuff in my life. But I did not see that coming.” Jason put down his weapons. “Seriously, can someone explain what just happened? Or did I just imagine the demon lady leaping around shooting nanomachine zombies with a kitchen utensil?”

Crimson Wing walked right past Jason, ignoring him completely.

“Oh yeah, just keep walking why don’t you!” Jason shouted after her. “Geeze… why do these brooding, lone-wolf types always gotta be such assholes?”

Once again, Lelouch noted the irony. He then turned to Rossiu, who was just getting off the radio. “The ship is on high alert, the hatch has been sealed, a cleanup crew has come to make sure the area is clear of O.M.A.C. nanomachines, a backup squad is coming to watch over Mordred, and we’ve already begun our descent,” said Rossiu. “Kanjar Ro is as good as trapped.”

“Great,” said Jason. “We can corner him at the entrance way. Let’s bag that sucker and be done with it.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” said Lelouch. “Rossiu, check your pockets.”
“Sir, I’m not exactly sure what this will…” Roussiu then froze in terror. “My I.D.! It’s gone!”

Zero nodded. “I saw him grab it off of you in the confusion. You’d do well to watch out for pickpockets in the future.”

“I’ll cover the engine room!” announced Sayoko.

“No need,” Lelouch said. “I have a good idea where he’s going…”

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Leaving Roussiu behind to look after Mordred with the remaining guards, Lelouch and his squad caught up with Crimson Wing to trek through the maze-like corridors of the sub, which was now illuminated in an eerie red glow. Every so often they would pass a uniformed corpse belonging to someone that was evidently less clever than Kanjar Ro.

The causes of death were quite varied, and taken together they told a morbid, yet curiously fascinating story. The first guard died of blunt trauma to the head (caused by a segment of missing pipe). The next one was strangled by the first man’s jacket. The one after that was shot by the second man’s gun, and his corpse was left as bait for the fourth and fifth guards, who discovered too late that Ro had tied the man’s dogtags to the pin of a grenade, and so on and so forth.

“You know if it weren’t for the whole ‘evil alien warlord bent on galactic domination’ thing, I’d be admiring this guy’s work,” Jason said. “Still, give me a good old-fashioned pair of firearms any day. Am I right?”

The rest of the team remained silent.

After what seemed like an eternity, the squad came to a large circular room. At first glance it seemed to be devoid of features, save for an enormous hatch on the ceiling and an ominous, vaulted door on the other side of the room. An astute observer might even notice the tiny gap in the circular floor, outlined by alternating black-and-yellow stripes.

Shortly after reaching the center of the room, Lelouch raised his hand, and the team came to a stop.

“...before we continue, I would like to bring our newest members up to speed about this place.”

“What’s there to tell?” said Jason. “It’s a big spooky vault of mystery. You’ve probably got doomsday weapons up the wazoo, ready to rattle just in case some country suddenly decides they don’t like the idea of an non-governmental superpower operating within their borders.”

“You’re half right,” said Zero. “But The Siege Perilous is no armory. It is a research area for potent magical and technological artifacts.” He turned his head towards Jason, to make a point of addressing him specifically. “We don’t make weapons. We figure out how to stop them.”

“Oh yeah, I totally believe the guy who dresses like a gothic supervillain when he says he has ‘no plans’ to use his doomsday arsenal.”

“Your words would hold more merit if you didn’t have a big skull plastered on your helmet,” said Sayoko.

Jason got angry for a moment, but stopped before he actually said anything. “...okay, you got me there.”

“In any case…” Lelouch continued. “History has shown that Kanjar Ro has an affinity for
anomalous weapons and artifacts. From the Gamma Gong which he used to enslave the Justice League to the O.M.A.C. nanomachines that you just witnessed, his modus operandi is to seek out unique devices that he can use to get an edge on his opponents.” Lelouch adjusted the collar of his jacket. “In fact, he may have allowed himself to get captured in hopes of infiltrating the vault.”

“So what’s our plan of attack?” said Sayoko.

“Before we do anything else, we’ll need to figure out how to get inside.” Lelouch stared at the vaulted door, and then looked at the console used to open it. “The vault is on a closed system, and Rossiu is the only one who has permission to open it. If Ro got in there with Rossiu’s ID, our best bet is to set up an ambush, unless we can find a way in…”

Crimson Wing stepped forward. “I believe I have a solution…” she said. Then proceeded towards the vault’s console. Along the way she produced from her robes a rod of blackened metal, with a crude handle on one end and a warped appendage covered in jagged teeth on the other.

When she arrived at the console, she took a moment to stare at the words “SWIPE CARD TO ENTER”, which were written across the screen, with an arrow pointing to a little black box that sat underneath. Carefully, Crimson Wing tapped the box a few times with the metal object, making a hollow noise as the iron collided with the plastic. The screen then glitched out, sputtering some incomprehensible static before saying “…Accepted.”

Crimson Wing then stepped back, as the vault slowly sputtered to life. There was a roar of steel scraping against steel, as the mechanisms that controlled the vault rearranged themselves at the beckoning of their new master. The, just as the grinding noise had came to a halt, the vault door slowly rolled away to the side, and the team stepped into what might as well have been another world entirely.

An asphalt roadway stretched out past the gate, winding through grassy plains, until it reached a country club situated on top of a hill. The club was flanked on all sides, with a tennis court to the left, a tallish hotel to the right, and what appeared to be a large castle looming behind. Back down the hill was a patch of colorful foliage, no doubt some sort of garden, which formed a trail leading to what appeared to be a lakeside beach. And all the while, spherical robots the size of soccer balls wore bright neon smiles as they zipped through the air, carrying any manner of strange and wonderful objects in spindly yet deceptively strong arms that protruded from their sides.

“Huh,” Jason said as he scanned the horizon. “This is not what I expected.” he looked up into the sky, which was bright blue despite the fact they were hundreds, if not thousands of feet below sea level. “…I’ve seen a lot of top-secret research labs in my time, but never one so… friendly.”

“The only way to make sure our research remains absolutely secret is to limit contact with the outside world,” said Zero. “Thus, any researchers who sign on to work in Siege Perilous are required to stay within the compound for a minimum of one month.” He then begin to wave at one of the smiling robots in order to catch its attention.

“Hence why nobody has a backup key…” Jason nodded. “And I’m guessing the whole resort setup is to keep researchers from catching cabin fever and going all Dr. Sivana on us?”

“You learn quickly,” Zero replied as the robot flew towards him. “Excuse me for a moment…”


“OF COURSE MASS-TER ZEE-ROH,” the robot said in a cheery monotone, it’s pixelated “lips”
flapping roughly in time with it’s synthetic speech. “PRIS-ON-ERR KAHN-JAR-ROH LAST SPOT-TED IN SEC-TOUR SIG-MAH KAH-PAH THREE.”

“I want all non-critical deliveries retracted immediately,” Zero added. “In addition, we’ll need an armored transport for four-

“Hey, I can do fine on my own,” Jason said. “Why don’t you just give me a motorcycle, let me go on ahead, and I’ll scout things out.” He flicked on the safety of one of his pistols, and twirled it around his finger. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll save the rest of you some work and bag the sucker myself!”

Zero glared at Jason from underneath his mask.

“MASS-TER?” said the robot.

“Give the man what he wants,” said Zero. “If you’re so eager to prove yourself, I won’t stop you, as long as you bring Crimson Wing along as backup.”

“Yeah, whatever…” Jason shrugged. “Honestly, you sound just like my dad.”

The next few minutes were spent in awkward silence until two more robots showed up, clutching a sleek, purple motorcycle emblazoned with the symbol of a trident-shaped star; the logo of the Black Knights.

Jason poured over every detail as he approached the bike, from the metallic finish to the leather seating, even crouching down to get a better look at the gold-colored rims.”Looks like someone in procurement is a motorhead,” he said. “I’m more of a Harley man myself, but I gotta admit; Kawasaki makes one hell of a bike.”

He leapt into the seat, turned the key and revved the engine, before turning around to face Crimson. “Well? What are you waiting for?” Jason, patting the space behind his seat, as if to invite his new partner aboard. “If we don’t hustle, we’re never going to catch that slimy-

There was a rush of wind as Crimson Wing darted straight upwards, climbing dozens, if not hundreds of feet, until she was little more than a blurry speck against an artificial sky. Then, just as she reached the peak of her jump, the demoness unveiled a pair of magnificent wings that glowed a bloody crimson as her name suggested.

An instant later she shot off towards the resort in a burst of infernal light, leaving a blood-red afterimage burned in everyone’s eyes.

Jason was silent for a moment. “Showoff…” he growled, before spitefully driving off after Crimson.

This left Zero alone with Sayoko. “Zero…” she said. “I know I shouldn’t be asking, but do you really think it’s a good idea to send two newcomers off like that?” she watched as Jason sped down the twisting road. “Especially given how he originally intended to kill you…”

Lelouch looked at Sayoko. She was one of the few people that Lelouch trusted with his identity, if only for the iron-clad contract Lelouch had made with her clan. She’d be put to death by her own family if she spoke a word out of place, so Lelouch knew she was speaking not as an attempt to undermine his authority, nor as attempt to manipulate him emotionally, but as a genuine concern for his safety.

It also helped that she was fond of Nunnally, whom she took care of when Milly and the others
weren’t available. Even though she was trained to accept death as a natural part of life, Lelouch suspected that bringing Nunnally news of her brother’s death would be too much to bear...

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” said Zero. “My Geass negated his plan to destroy me, and if Crimson Wing was after my life she had more than enough chances to take it.”

“What if she’s after an artifact?”

“We both saw that she could open the gate to Siege Perilous anytime she wanted. If I were in her shoes I would have sunk the vessel and taken what I wanted while everyone else was trying to evacuate.” Lelouch shook his head. “And even if Crimson Wing does try to pull something, I wouldn’t be shocked if Jason carried a cross and some holy water, just in case he had to fight a demon.”

“More likely he just has bullets with little crosses carved onto them,” replied Sayoko.

Lelouch looked back towards the country club. “Let’s hope he’s not that short-sighted…”

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As he sped past the hotel, Jason Todd thought about the many names he had taken over the years. “Robin”, “Red Hood”, “Wingman”; Jason had even pretended to be Hush for a while, as much as he now wished he hadn’t.

But those were names all belonged to other people. Better people. People who could make a name for themselves without playing second fiddle for a man dressed like a bat. Jason didn’t have a name to call his own, unless you count the one his two-bit deadbeat of a dad shackled him with.

Which is why having his identity stolen was the best thing that ever happened. It gave him a fresh start. A chance to be a new man. A blank slate. Tabula rasa.

And for once, he had a plan. A plan whose elegance was in its simplicity.

First, he was going to join up with a morally ambiguous group of mercenaries that are teetering on the brink of supervillainy.

Next, using reverse psychology, he would get into his boss’s good graces before they went onto actual supervillainy.

Then, when things went horribly wrong (as they so often do), he would kill his boss and take over the organization.

Finally, having firmly established that he is a force to be reckoned with, Jason would invite hundreds of supervillains onto a deserted island with the promise of a plan to kill the justice league, take of the world and become gods or whatever. And once everyone was there, all he had to do was blow the place up, and the world would be a better place.

“That mask-wearing bozo probably thinks he has me under his thumb,” Jason thought with a slight chuckle. “He thinks I’m just another pawn in his game. Well, I wonder what he’s gonna think with a bullet in his-”

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw a suspicious figure dart into a nearby building. He glanced at the sign overhead, which was helpfully labeled “Mecha Research Hangar 1” in four different languages.
“So that’s what he’s after…” Jason thought. “...the bastard thinks he can break out of here with a giant robot. I’ll give him points for thinking on his feet, but… wait.” The motorcycle drifted to a stop, as Jason took a look at his surroundings. The hotel he had remembered passing just moments ago was now a tiny speck way off in the distance, separated from Jason by a long, empty road flanked by dozens of buildings that he didn’t recognize.

Jason gritted his teeth. If there was one lesson Bruce taught Jason that wasn’t completely useless, it was to how to observe. Any fool can look over a crime scene to piece together evidence; it was quite another thing to be on the lookout 24/7. It doesn’t matter if you’re matching wits with The Riddler or outwitting Jihadists in Qurac, even the most insignificant detail could mean the difference between life or death.

“Either I’ve been slipping, or someone’s been messing with my mind…” He made a note to start keeping a journal, so he can catch further gaps in his memory. “But I can worry about that later.”

Jason leapt off his motorcycle, and reached for one of his guns. A semi-automatic shotgun, to be precise. Not only did it look threatening, but this particular model had enough stopping power to tear a hole in an SUV, and enough range to get some breathing room should Ro try to get all confrontational. From its weight, he already knew it was loaded, but based on his recent lapse in memory he couldn’t be too careful.

Jason approached the door, careful not to make his footsteps too loud. He then grabbed the handle and carefully attempted to turn it, only to be met with failure.

“Well, I can’t say this is going to be the most graceful of entrances…” He took a breath to steady his hand, and carefully took aim...

But just when Jason was about to pull the trigger, he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. Jason immediately spun around to meet the newcomer, and soon found himself staring down what looked like an enormous bird, glaring at him with large, unforgiving eyes. It took him a moment to realize he was pointing his gun at Crimson Wing.

“I can see that this mission is off to a brilliant start.” The demoness raised her hood slightly, so that Jason could see her lips. She put her hand on the nozzle of Jason’s gun, and pointed it away from her face. “For the record, if you were to fire that at point-blank range, all that would happen is that I’d get a nasty headache, and you’d be a smear on the wall.”

“Well believe me. If I wanted you dead, that wasn’t the gun I’d use.” Jason freed one his hands, and immediately whipped out another firearm, a six-chambered revolver with a pearl handle.

Crimson Wing bent forward to get a better look at the gun, even peering down the barrel without so much as flinching. “Hm. Doesn’t smell like magic to me.”

Moving quicker than Jason thought possible, she snatched the gun right out of his hand, and emptied the barrel’s contents into her palm, all in one quick motion. She then examined one of the unused bullets by holding it up to the artificial sun, where she could make out a faint image of a cross scratched scratched into the bullet’s surface.
“Amusing,” she stared at the cross for a few more seconds. “I assume you made these yourself?”

“Well, yes but-” Jason stammered.

“That explains things; you don’t seem like the faithful sort.” she shook her head. “The very least you could have done was find a priest to carve the bullets for you. I’m sure one eccentric enough wouldn’t be too hard to find.”

Jason decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to mention the vial of holy water he brought with him, just in case.

“Let’s just focus on the mission, shall we?” Crimson Wing handed the weapon and ammunition back to Jason. “Time is of the essence after all.”

“Says the bitch who just spent a solid minute explaining why I suck at demon hunting,” he snarled.

“You pointed a gun at my face and threatened to kill me,” Crimson said. “You’re lucky to be alive at this point. Now stand aside.”

The demoness reached into her cloak, and pulled out the strange metal rod that she used earlier. She tapped the doorframe a couple times, and a “click” was heard.

“What is that thing, anyway?” Jason asked. “It looks like some kind of-”

“It’s an ancient roman key, built to open one the first locking mechanisms in all of history,” Crimson answered. “Yes, it’s magic, no, I’m not going to tell you how it works. Now stop asking questions; If he hears us coming, he’ll flee the area and we’ll be right back to square one.”

Jason sighed one last time, and reluctantly followed Crimson into the hangar.

Now that they were inside the building, Jason realized that a head start probably wouldn’t have helped. Rows upon rows of mecha were stretched out before Jason, standing ready, like a platoon of tin soldiers in formation. They were all in various states of repair, from fully operational units that could power on at any time to things that looked more like piles of scrap metal. And while there were Knightmare Frames, Arm Slaves, Zaku units, and even a Gundam or two, most of the mechs had no official classifications, and no two designs were completely alike.

But the most ominous mechs were the ones that were on lockdown.

One was locked in faraday cage. Another chained up like a wild beast. One was even held in place by dozens of pointy metal needles. At a glance, their methods of containment seemed as varied as the mechs themselves.

“Tell me, does that mask of yours have night-vision?” asked Crimson.

“Hell yeah.” Jason tapped a button on the side of his mask to switch it to infrared mode. The dark, dusty room suddenly lit up like the Fourth of July, letting Jason see every little detail.

“Good.” Crimson slowly closed the door, and slipped the hood back over her face. “We might be able to take him by surprise.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Jason said as he scanned the area. “I’m not getting a heat signature...”

Jason felt a faint breeze. He then turned to where Crimson was standing moments ago, only to find that she had disappeared. “On second thought, maybe we do have a chance,” he mused.
Jason raised his gun, and took a deep breath. There was nothing to worry about. He was a natural born predator, teamed up with an invincible demon woman. He was in his element. And he was up against what? A scrawny little guy who liked to play armchair general?

Lost in thought, Jason bumped into what he thought was a pile of scrap metal. He mentally kicked himself at causing the noise. Even worse, the pile of scrap came to life an instant later, a dumb neon smile flickering on. It was one of those weird robot servants they’d had floating around out there, and it immediately levitated to face level and started talking at him in it's “no inside voice” way.

“HELLO, MAS-TER,” said the annoying robot. “AND WELCOME TO MECH RESEARCH HANGER 02. WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO DO ON THIS FINE DAY?”

“Nothing!” Jason whispered. “Just, be quiet- I mean…” Jason looked behind his shoulder to see if anything had moved before speaking. “Override 78439. Directive… um, volume off.”

The robot blinked.


Jason facepalmed. “Arg… just… turn off! Deactivate! Self destruct! I don’t care what you do, just shut up already!”

“CER-TAIN-LY, MAS-TER,” the robot said. “TOUR MODE AC-TI-VATE-ED.” It then turned to face the nearest mech, the one that was held up by the robotic needle arms. “THIS UN-IT IS KNOWN AS VALVE-RAVE. WHILE IT’S FULL CAP-A-BIL-IT-IES ARE UN-KNOWN, IT IS FIT-TED WITH AN AD-VANCED HOL-O-GRAPH-IC WEA-PON SYSTEM, GEN-E-TIC RE-CON-FIG-UR-A-TION HARD-WARE, AS WELL AS AN EN-GINE WHOSE POWER SOURCE HAS YET TO BE DET-ER-MINED. IT WAS RE-COV-ERED FROM-”

Jason shot the annoying robot a few times, and to his horror discovered that it was no worse for wear.

“WAR-NING!” it said. “PLEASE DO NOT ROUGH-HOUSE U-TILL-IT-Y BOTS. RE-SU-MING TOUR MODE.”

Jason re-activated infrared vision, and looked overhead. Crimson was nowhere to be found. “So much for being a creature of the night…” Jason thought. “On the plus side, I’m now such an obvious target that maybe Kanjar Ro will do something stupid.”

Gloomily, Jason trudged down the hallway, trying to stay focused while his robotic tour guide continued to rattle off useless factoids.

“-THE TERM “ARM SLAVE” IS SHORT FOR “ARM-ORED MO-BILE MASS-TER SLAVE SYS-TEM”, AND IS ONE OF THE MORE COMMON MECHAS USED IN-”

“THE GURR-REN MARK II IS CURR-RENT-LY UN-DER RE-PAIRS. IT WAS IN-VENT-ED BY-”

“-ALL THAT IS LEFT OF GN-001, BET-TER KNOWN AS GUN-DAM EX-IA. GN-001 WAS USED BY THE TER-ROR-RIST GROUP CEL-EST-I-AL BE-ING-”

“-DUBBED ‘MISTER ATOM’, THIS ROBOT IS SOME-HOW POW-WARD BY RAD-I-O-AC-TIVE-”
“IN A GARAGE WITH A BOX OF SCRAPS. IT’S POW-ER LEV-EL IS EST-I-MAT-ED TO BE OV-ER-


Just as he was passing by a particularly knock-kneed mech, Jason paused. Something wasn’t right. He turned to the ceiling just in time to see a flash out of the corner of his eye.


Jason’s palms began to tremble; he didn’t know what to expect at this point. Maybe this was the part where Crimson was going to betray him to steal some kind of doodad. Maybe this was the part that Zero would have Crimson prove her loyalty by executing him. Or maybe this entire mission was just an elaborate ruse to assassinate Jason.


Whatever the case, if he was going to stay calm, he would have to think things through. He had to put himself in the mind of his enemy, the way Bruce had taught him.


Jason turned away from the mech, and pointed his gun at the particularly dense patch of darkness, trying to act as if he had found his enemy’s hiding place in order to goad him into attacking. “After all,” he thought, “There’s only two places people can hide; hidden away where no one can see you, or lying in ambush, right… in… plain…”

Jason’s thoughts were suddenly interrupted when he noticed that the floor was being illuminated by an orange glow right behind Jason’s back. And as his carefully trained ears listed up the sound of a futuristic engine charging up, Jason’s mind was occupied by one single thought.

“I am such an idiot.”

Jason dropped to the floor just as a citrine pillar of energy engulfed the spot his head was only moments before. He then rolled onto his back and pointed his shotgun at the knock-kneed mech, and fired off a couple rounds at a protrusion that Jason could only assume was it’s head. But he was only able to put a couple dents in the nose before the mech tried to swipe at him with its large, unwieldy arms.

Jason was able to get out the way in time by rolling to the side a split-second before the blow connected, but his shotgun wasn’t so lucky; The swipe had torn the barrel clean off, as well as a good chunk of the loading mechanism. And somehow, Jason didn’t think his pistol was going to cut it.
As he lept to his feet and ran for cover back the way he came, he reevaluated the situation. “Okay, so now someone is trying to kill me. It’s probably not the demon girl, but I don’t know if this is the work of Zero, Kanjar Ro, or a union of the two.”

And then, as if to answer his question, the true villain began monologuing.

“So, we meet again… whoever you are!” Kanjar Ro’s voice boomed from a speaker inside the Metal Gear. “You probably thought you were the hunted, but now, you are the HUNTER!” The villain then paused. “No, wait, I got that backwards. Well, you know what I mean!”

Jason sighed. Kanjar was ad-libbing, which meant he was probably acting alone. Either that, or Zero had some seriously low standards.

Jason then watched as the tour guide robot then flew up to Kanjar, and attempted to educate him about the wonders of modern robotics.

“-DUBBED ‘MISTER ATOM’, THIS ROBOT IS SOME-HOW POW-WARD BY RAD-I-O-AC-TIVE RAYS IN A WAY THAT DE-FIES-”

The mech’s head turned to face the annoying guide, and it’s jaw flipped open to reveal an enormous cannon, which began to emit an orange glow from inside the barrel.

“SIR, THIS A NO SMO-KING AR-E-A. YOU MAY PAR-TAKE IN TO-BACC-O PRO-DUCTS IN DES-IG-NAT-ED AR-E-AS CLEAR-LY MAR-KED ON YOUR-”

The Metal Gear unleashed another blast of energy, instantly frying the guide-bot. The shattered remains of the bot fell to the floor, as what little remained of it’s audio systems made one last attempt to pathetically justify its existence.

“PLEASE DO NOT ROUGH-HOUSE U-TILL-TILL-TILL-TILL-FLRFDMxXZZzzztt.”

From his hiding place a few aisles down. Jason couldn’t help but grin at the thought of that robot’s last words. But as amusing as that was, the fact remained that a moron who is in a mech still has a huge advantage over any person who is not.

“Still, all I need to do is trip up that walking disaster and…” Jason instinctively reached for the collapsible bat-rope dispenser on his utility belt, only to grasp at empty air. “...I just remembered that I got rid of that rope years ago.”

Jason looked at aisle right behind him. Hanging there were the remains of a Knightmare Frame, the Gurren Mk. II, if he wasn’t mistaken. The legs, one of the arms, the head, and even scraps of the cockpit were arranged in front of a workbench, suspended in mid-air by a series of chains and pulleys.

Jason dashed over to one of the workbenches, and felt around in the darkness until he found a piece of metal attached to a long, industrial-strength hose.

“A cutting torch…” Jason thought. He turned the infrared vision back on, and spied the fuel tank that the hose was connected to. “Well, any plan at all is better than standing around waiting to be killed.” He turned around just in time to see the RAY march into view. “Let’s do this.”

“Ah, so nice of you to come out where I can-” Kanjar began to say, but Jason was having none of that. He lunged at the Metal Gear before Ro could finish his sentence.
Ro tried to fire another laser at Jason, but once again he aimed too high, and Jason was able to duck to avoid the blast. He then wrapped the cutting torch’s hose around the mech’s leg, turned on the torch itself, and leapt away before Ro had realized what had happened.

Kanjar Ro turned to pursue Jason. But in doing so, he tore open the hose, releasing a high-pressure mixture of liquid fuel and pure oxygen into the air. This mixture immediately ignited, creating an explosion that tore the Metal Gear RAY’s leg off, and the robot subsequently tumbled over.

“Uh- a minor setback!” Ro feverishly exclaimed as the RAY’s remaining limbs flailed helplessly in a vain attempt to right itself. “Little do you realize that I am merely TOYING with you!” There was a metallic *snap* as the other leg went limp, no longer able to support the Ray’s weight on its own, toppling the robot onto its front.

“Lower body articulation means nothing to me!” shouted the alien. “Quake in fear, mortal, for I, Kanjar Ro, will be the one to end your pathetic existence, mwa ha ha ha! Ha ha! Ha-” there was a brief pause. “...any minute now. Just have to find that death ray button again...”

Jason shook his head. The battle was pretty much over at this point. All that remained was to get Kanjar Ro out of that robot and back into a pair of handcuffs. He looked around for another cutting torch, and spotted one attached to a fuel tank, resting at the foot of a moderately-damaged Arm Slave.

“Thank god for lazy engineers...” Jason grumbled as he bent over to pick up the nozzle. “Alright, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way.” Jason twisted the knob on the cutting torch, causing the nozzle to emit a faint orange ember. “Either you can come out of there and surrender quietly, or I can cut you out so you can surrender very loudly. As people usually do when they get too close to one of these babies.”

Jason looked back at the RAY, whose remaining limbs were flailing uselessly in the air, like a praying mantis trying to do the breaststroke on dry land. He then twisted the knob further, turning the ember into a brilliant blue jet. “People go blind staring at these things, you know. On account of the UV radiation,” Jason said. “And I’m sure you of all people value your eyesight. After all, you can’t con little old ladies out of their life savings if you can’t-”

But before Jason could finish his wisecrack, there was a loud “crunch”, and Jason suddenly felt himself falling forward, his visor filled with static, before crashing on an unseen floor. Jason tried to make sense of what had just happened, but his head was throbbing with such intensity that Jason felt like he’d been hit with a ton of bricks.

Then again, Jason might not have been too far off. As he clutched the back of his head, he felt bits of his helmet jutting out from a place where it had been cracked. An impressive feat, given that it was designed to withstand everything from bullets and missiles to a rampaging Solomon Grundy. Whatever it was, it was a miracle that Jason he was still conscious at this point.

Jason then felt something clutching. Something cold and metallic, constricting his arms, and hoisting his body into the air like a giant metal hand.

It took Jason a moment to remember that the Metal Gear Ray did not, in fact, have hands.

“I’m an idiot.” Jason lowered his head, allowing his broken mask to slip off, where it made a “thunk” sound as it bounced off the ground. When he raised it again, Jason found that he was being held by at a large, grey robot with a bulky shoulder-pads, a blocky, minimalistic body, and a protruding forehead. Jason recognized it as an M9E Gernsback Arm Slave, and was briefly astounded that he could recall the fact that this model’s grip is exactly enough to cause a man’s
head to pop off just by squeezing his body.

“First rule of galactic conquest.” Kanjar’s voice blared from the robot’s speakers. “Always go for the sneak attack!”

Jason’s breath grew shallow as the robot’s grip began to tighten. “You… got me there,” he gasped. “But what… about… my backup plan?” Not that he actually had one; he was bluffing through his teeth and praying that it would work.

“Oh I’m not too worried about that,” Kanjar said, no doubt pleased with himself. “I’ve been watching this whole time, you see. You didn’t think that tourbot turned itself on, did you?” he made a nervous chuckle, “And even if you could reach one of your many, many, weapons, at this range anything strong enough to free you from my clutches would no doubt destroy you utterly.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Jason looked to the ceiling for any signs of his partner. “Just keep on talking, you damn chatterbox…”

Kanjar then made the robot raise its arm to tap its forehead. “You see, my mind works on a very different level than yours,” he said. “You might think yourself a quick thinker, but I came up with this master plan of mine in but a FRACTION of the time it would take even the smartest earth-man!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason spotted a point of red light, hidden in the darkness of the ceiling. Jason turned to stare at it, just in time to see it blink.

“I’ve prepared for every eventuality! And once this entire arsenal is under my command! Not even the Justice League will be able to-” Kanjar paused, picking up on the fact that Jason was no longer listening to him. The head of the robot swiveled around to see what Jason was so interested in, when a red blur suddenly exploded from the ceiling, before coming to a sudden stop as the talons of a monstrous bird of prey latched onto robot’s head, and begun trying to tear it off.

Jason could hear his ribs snap as Kanjar tightened his grip, but he was too transfixed on the creature that had apparently come to his aid. It was an unholy fusion of man and beast, as if someone was trying to build a falcon, but replaced half the pieces with human bits and hoped no one would notice. It’s hindquarters were certainly bird-like, but it had a human torso from the waist up, save for a pair of large, outstretched wings, whose every last feather glowed a bright, infernal shade of red, making both it and its prey look like a pair of giant, skinned cadavers. And its face… its face looked like a falcon head whose eyes have been plucked out, and replaced with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

The monster bird scraped and pecked at the robot, but no matter what it did, it didn’t cause anything more than a few dents. The beast then bent over, and opened it’s mouth to unleash a blood-curdling cry that sounded like nails on a chalkboard, revealing a large human eyeball right inside it’s mouth, mere feet away from the robot’s head.

Panicked, Kanjar Ro dropped Jason onto the ground (inadvertently breaking a couple more bones in the process), and Jason began his crawl to safety. The battle continued to rage behind his back, as the air filled with the sounds of gunfire, and frightened blubbering, pierced only by the tearing of metal and the occasional shriek from the bird-monster.

Once the noise finally died down, Jason turned looked back at the monster to find it looming over a limbless arm slave, from which Kanjar Ro was inelegantly pleading for his life.

“OKAY! OKAY! YOU GOT ME!” he whimpered. “I SWEAR ON MY MOTHER’S GRAVE THAT
The bird-monster ruffled its feathers. It then began to melt into a more compact form, until beast had changed into something closer to human.

It then turned to Jason, and said, “You’re welcome, by the way,” revealing that its form was no long that of a monster, but of a woman wearing a feathered cloak, which still shown as bright as ever.

It took Jason a moment the realize who the person talking to him was, but it soon hit him like a ton of bricks. “Yeah, well, my fault for not watching my back,” Jason coughed. “I’m guessing the whole gloowy feather shtick is why they call you ‘Crimson Wing’.”

“It’s really more of a description, when you get down to it.” Crimson Wing picked up the remains of Jason’s mask, and began examining it. “And I suppose you call yourself ‘Red X’ because of your fondness for treasure hunts.”

“Oh, you got me there,” Jason said, as he pulled himself up. “My secret’s totally out and stuff.” He began to recline against the foot of a nearby mech. “Now are we done here? Missions tend to go downhill once you get kicked in the head by a robot.”

“Indeed,” said Crimson Wing. She then turned towards a hissing sound, as the door to Kanjar Ro’s cockpit slid open.

The alien then sprang out of the mech, holding a long-white tube that looked like a potato cannon welded to a scuba tank, with a mad grin spread across his face. “Foolish demon!” he shouted, “Your idle banter has given me enough time to use the supplies I scavenged to assemble my ULTIMATE COUNTERMEASURE!”

“Oh for the love of-” Crimson Wing facepalmed. “Look, I’m running out of patience here. If you don’t surrender in the next three seconds I’m going to stop going easy on you. Prisoner exchange or not, I am getting sick of-”

Kanjar Ro twisted a knob on the scuba tank, and a split-second later a fist-sized metal rocketed out of the tube with a loud “thump”, before striking Crimson Wing in the cheek. The demoness wailed in pain as the metal sphere left a large, red welt at the point of impact, before falling onto the floor. “As I said, I’ve prepared for EVERY eventuality!” Kanjar laughed. “You see, when I saw you in action, I instantly recognized you as Crimson Wing, the infamous demon mercenary! And, being as smart as I am, I not only knew that you, like all demons, would be weak to silver, but I also had the foresight to also learn how to assemble-”

Crimson turned to flee, her features stretching as she tried to assume her more monstrous visage. But Kanjar, learning from his mistakes, fired off another round, this time striking the half-formed demoness just as she had begun to take flight.

Shifting back into human form in an attempt to minimize the impact of the fall, Crimson spiraled towards the remains of the Gurren Mk. II. She crashed into the mech’s severed claw, causing it to sway along the chain it was suspended from.

“As I was saying...” Kanjar began, “...I had the foresight to assemble this little beauty, a demon-killing weapon made out of little more than a tank of hydrogen, some spare pipes, and a lighter, firing spheres of silver crafted from confiscated jewelry,” the alien chuckled. “But I think I’ve revealed in my own brilliance enough for one day, wouldn’t you agree?”
Slinging the weapon over his shoulder, Kanjar began to approach the injured demoness.

Jason, meanwhile, considered his options. A fair number of his bones were broken, and if here were to try and stand his injuries would only get worse.

If Bruce were in this kind of situation, he would have just thrown some kind of electroshock batarang at the guy and be done with it. A pity, then, that Jason didn’t have much in the way of non-lethal weaponry.

Dick, meanwhile, would have thrown his broken, bleeding body at alien in the hopes of buying time for his partner to do something clever that they had planned out ahead of time.

And Tim would have… well, actually Jason had no idea what Tim Drake would have done, except maybe be smart enough to avoid getting in this kind of situation in the first place, that fucking know-it-all.

“Okay, think Jason: If you do nothing, you’re dead. If you do something, you’re dead.” Jason gnashed his teeth. “I mean, I might as well just lie here and throw insults and the guy,” Jason chuckled. “Yeah. Like that would ever work…”

“Hey! Bug-eyes!” Jason shouted. “Before you kill her, you’ve got to know something!” he said.

“Nice try,” said Kanjar. “But she has nothing that I am particularly interested in.”

“Not even the secret to the greatest weapon in the universe?”

“Bah. If she had such a device she would have used it by now.”

“Well of course she can’t. You already have it.”

Kanjar Ro glanced towards Jason, raising an eyebrow. “Really?” he said.

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. “You’ve had it for a quite a while, actually. I’m surprised you never tried using it the first time you fought the Justice League.”

“What is this weapon?” Ro snapped. “Tell me and I’ll spare you, or something.”

“It’s…” Jason said. “Nope, changed my mind. Not telling.”

“TELL ME THIS INSTANT, YOU INSOLENT WORM!” Kanjar Ro lifted Jason up by the neck. “TELL ME NOW, OR I’LL END YOUR MISERABLE LITTLE LIFE!”

“All right…” Jason gagged. “It’s… your… mom.”

Kanjar’s face went blank for a moment. “…my mom?”

“Yes… your…. mom,” said Jason. “She’s… so fat, she causes an earthquake every time she sits down…”

Kanjar scowled at Jason. “That doesn’t make any sense!” he said. “My species doesn’t grow large enough cause seismic events! Anyone who tried that would be dead long before getting anywhere close to the required mass!” he shook his head. “And even if that could happen, she’d make a terribly inefficient earthquake machine. You wouldn’t be able to relocate it, you can’t sell the blueprints, a clone would take years to prepare… at that point it would just be easier to kill her and sell her biomass on the black market. Which I already did, by the way. It was for a fairly good price I might add-”
Crimson Wing, meanwhile, had been performing some kind of ritual near the remains of the Gurren Mark II. Just when Ro had started rambling about his mother for reasons Jason was sure were quite Freudian, she finished it, unleashing a burst of blood-red light from herself and from the Gurren.

When the light dispersed, the disembodied arm of the Gurren Mk. II was no longer present. Instead, Jason saw Crimson Wing clutching a chrome gauntlet with long, pointed fingers. It looked like a miniaturized version of the Guren Mk. II’s arm, though it was still much larger than it had any right to be.

“Oh, so you have a fancy new toy now, do you?” Kanjar Ro cackled as Crimson Wing slipped the gauntlet around her free arm. “When this is over, I’ll be sure to add it to my collection!”

Ro fired another round at Crimson Wing. But rather than try to dodge out the way, she demoness simply snatched the sphere out of mid-air with her gauntleted hand. She held it up by the very tips of her new claws for Kanjar Ro to see, before tossing it over her shoulder.

Kanjar Ro spent the next few seconds wasting his ammunition in the vain hope of hurting Crimson Wing, who proceeded to block each and every shot using the oversized gauntlet with inhuman grace, all while casually striding towards her prey. The alien’s hands began to shake as the demoness drew closer and closer, causing his shots to become more and more wild, until he finally ran out of ammo. The conqueror of worlds then screamed like a little girl as he fled to the nearest mech he could reach; an old Zaku II that was kept around mostly as a curiosity. Sweat dripped from his forehead as Kanjar Ro scrambled around trying to find the switch to open the cockpit, looking back every so often to see how much farther she had to go.

But then there was a clicking sound, and the robot’s chestplate swung open. Kanjar Ro sighed in relief, and then disappeared into the mech, leaving Crimson Wing outside, at least for the time being.

But as Crimson Wing looked at the palm of her gauntlet, Jason could tell that she was through with chasing Kanjar Ro like some frightened rodent. She thrust the claw straight into the robot’s chest, and bolts of electricity crackled down the gauntlet. Then, the spot she had seized began to glow red hot, and bulges began to appear along the robot’s limbs. Even from this distance, Jason could hear the pops and hisses of circuitry being fried, to say nothing of the creaking metal. And then, just when it seemed like the mech was about to melt into a pile of slag, it suddenly exploded, sending twisted scraps of shrapnel flying in every direction.

And when it was all over, all that remained was Kanjar Ro himself, his charred skin now covered in blisters, giving it the consistency of a burnt marshmallow. Miraculously he was still alive, though given how he was moaning he probably wished he wasn’t.

“Ah… good save,” Jason said, pulling himself up to his feet. “I don’t suppose you could explain whatever the hell you just did back there?”

“Yes,” intoned Crimson.

“...are you going to?”

“No.”

“Fine by me.” Jason leaned against a wall, trying to hide his injuries. “I never sat well with magic anyway.”
Crimson nodded. “Few people do.” She then reached inside of her cloak, and pulled out a communicator device. “Target secure,” she said. “Requesting urgent medical treatment; target has sustained 3rd degree burns on most of his body, and is in critical condition.” She then looked at Jason. “Oh yes, and prepare a stretcher for Mr. X. He’s sustained more than a few injuries himself.”

Jason sighed. He’d been beaten within an inch of his life, strangled by a space alien, discovered that someone might be messing with his mind, and to top it all off that bitch was probably going to get most of the credit while he was busy getting his bones set, no doubt with the aid of some kind of crazy science ray that would be incredibly painful.

“I mean, I did most of the work,” Jason thought. “All she did was finish him off… and save my life… and didn’t waltz into an obvious trap like a freakin’ idiot-” he growled. “Okay you know what I’m just gonna stop thinking.”

He stared at the ceiling, faintly illuminated by glow of the demoness’ cloak, as he slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

“Could be worse,” he thought. “At least I’m not back in Gotham.”

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Ambush Bug: This is Channel 52, the network that isn’t afraid to ask the tough questions!

{{cut to Ambush Bug interviewing a fisherman}}

Ambush Bug: What is the cube root of 187!?

{{cut to Ambush Bug interviewing the Pope}}

Ambush Bug: Could God make a sandwich so big that he couldn’t eat it?

{{cut to Ambush Bug interviewing a scientist}}

Ambush Bug: How many jellybeans are in this jar? TELL ME, MISTER SCIENCE MAN!

{{cut to Ambush Bug interviewing Lex Luthor}}

Ambush Bug: What number am I thinking of?!

Lex Luthor: Thirty-seven.

Ambush Bug: MY GOD, HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT!?

{{cut to the Channel 52 logo}}

Ambush Bug: Channel 52! Tomorrow’s news, today!

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OMAKE: Justice Substitutes of Japan, The Final Chapter

Narrator: Last time, on Justice Substitutes of Japan.

Dan Hibiki: I have an announcement to make. I am… PREGNANT!
Teddy Bomber: No you’re not.
Dan Hibiki: Okay yeah, I was just kidding.
Narrator: And now, back to our regularly scheduled program.
Fubuki: Wow, that sure was a lot of ninjas we had to fight.
Teddie Bomber: If another zombie squid shows up, someone please kill me.
Dan Hibiki: I’m just wondering where T.K. learned to shoot like that.
T.K.: It’s the safety dance!
Commander Beef: Quiet! This here is the mastermind’s top secret base. He could be in any one of these rooms. He could be in the basement, the roof, the swimming pool...
?????: Or he could be RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU!
Commander Beef: Yeah, that’s a distinct possibility.
Fubuki: Ooh! I know! He could be behind that pile of crates!
Dan Hibiki: Maybe he’s hiding behind a cardboard box.
Commander Beef: Nah, that’s just silly. He’d be hiding inside a cardboard box.
?????: *Ahem*
Commander Beef: Oh, wait, nevermind. The mastermind is right over there.
?????: Indeed I am! But I am no mere supervillain to be the subject of ridicule and disgust. For you see, I am none other than Cowboy Bebop. AND I AM AT MY COMPUTER!
Edrobot: Welp, finally finished setting that joke up. Now to disappear from the internet and never write fanfiction ever again.
Cowboy Bebop: And from my computer, I will upload a virus onto the internet, that will cause every cell phone in the world to emit Epsilon Radiation, which will kill half the human population, sterilize a third of the remains, give a quarter of those people fantastic superpowers, and give everyone else REALLY BAD ACNE! MWA HA HA HA HA HA!
Teddie Bomber: But why?
Cowboy Bebop: ...what do you mean “why”?
Teddie Bomber: What are you getting out of this? Do you just want attention? Is someone paying you? Is it some kind of weird fetish?
Cowboy Bebop: I dunno. I guess I’m just evil or something. In fact, I even have a song about how evil I am. Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-

[THREE MINUTES OF TERRIBLE PUNS SUNG TO FRANK SINATRA MUSIC LATER]

....Myyyyyyyyyyyy waaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!
Fubuki: 1/10, would not buy the album.
Cowboy Bebop: Shut up. And now, the only way to deactivate my virus is to do a bunch of
different things that require specializations that are very unlikely for you to have.

First, you must beat my manservant, Torgo, in a game of *Super Duper Kombat Fighter Infinite
Turbo HD Championship Remix+!*

Second, you must arrange these fish in the order of how much calcium they have!

After that, you must do a spinning headstand to unscrew an important thingy... somehow.

Then, you must beat up a sack of potatoes with your bare hands.

And finally, you have to place a bunch of bombs at key points around the area, while not being
spotted by my incredibly lazy guards! But there’s no way you’ll be able to do all that in just five
minutes!

Commander Beef: Well we won’t know until we try! Howling Dynamite Commandos, move out!

Narrator: And so our heroes leapt into action as the clock ticked ever closer to doomsday. But
Cowboy Bebop’s traps were simply too fiendish for the Beef Howler Commando Guys.

Dan Hibiki: I’ve evaded all the guards so far. Just need to plant this bomb, and I’ll be home free.

Guard: Hey, is that Dan Hibiki? I’m your number one fan! Can you sign this huge pile of glossy
photographs for me?

Dan Hibiki: Must... resist... urge... to... be... popular...

Fubuki: Okay, I just need to beat up these potatoes... how hard can it be? *pulls out a big joystick*
Quarter circle... PUNCH! Damn it. Quarter circle... PUNCH! ARGH! What was it again? Back...
forward... heavy kick? No- Back, forward, light kick! Still nothing!

Commander Beef: *TAP* *TAP* *TAP* *TAP* *TAP* Come on, come on! Ah didn’t eat twice
the recommended daily dose of calcium just to lose after coming this far!

Torgo: WeLL, yOu MIght bE a BIt moRE EffEctIVE if You SToppED attaCKing the TITle
ScreEEN.

Commander Beef: Hey, TK, how’s the fish sortin’ thing going.

T.K.: It’ll still be two days till I say I’m sorry!

Commander Beef: Just keep at it, son. And hows the screw coming?

Teddy Bomber: …

Commander Beef: Teddie? You still with us?

Teddy Bomber: HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO SPIN ON MY HEAD?! I CAN’T EVEN DO A
HEADSTAND! HOW DID I EVEN GET HERE?! I WAS TRYING TO BLOW UP BUILDINGS
TO SHOW THAT THEY WERE SHODDILY MADE! WHAT LOGICAL TRAIN OF EVENTS
COULD POSSIBLY LEAD TO MY BREAKDANCING ABILITY BEING THE KEY TO
SAVING THE WHOLE GODDAMN WORLD?!

Commander Beef: Son, there comes a time in every man’s life where he goes up against the
impossible. An ordinary person would just let himself fall, complacent with his place in the world.
But a hero never gives up. A hero gets back up no matter what. Not even if he’s been injured. Not even he’s been kicked in the face. Nor if he’s had his flesh torn off, his eyelids slit, his feet impaled, his eyebrows-

Teddy Bomber: Okay I really don’t what to know where you were going to go with that speech but I’ve got a solution. How about instead of doing the things we’re bad at, we do the things we’re good at instead?

Dan Hibiki: My god, that’s just crazy enough to work! But do we even have enough time?

Fubuki: Hey, don’t worry. The virus is on one of those timers that only ticks down while you’re looking at it. We got time.

T.K.: Eight days a week!

Narrator: And so our heros substituted their stupid plan for a significantly less stupid plan.

Fubuki: Hey, do you mind if play while doing a handstand?

Torgo: I DonT seE hOW thAt wOUld HELp but GO aHead.

Fubuki: MAGICAL PASSION PANTIES OF VIDEO GAMENESS, ACTIVATE!

(Stock video game sound effects while Fubuki plays video games upside-down while sparks are flying from her panties for some reason.)

Torgo: NooOoo! The coMBOs! THeY are SimplY toO MUcH! I Am DeFEAtED!

Dan Hibiki: Okay, potatoes! Prepare to be MASHED! *PUNCH PUNCH PUNCH* Huh. that was disappointingly easy.

T.K.: *Does an epic headspin* You spin me right ‘round baby right ‘round like a record baby right around now!

Commander Beef: ...and that’s the last fish! Calcium ho!

Teddy Bomber: Well, at least I finally get to do something.

Guard: Hey, are you Dan Hibiki?

Teddy Bomber: Uh… no. I’m Teddy Bomber.

Guard: Oh. Never mind, you can pass.

Teddy Bomber: *sigh*

*KA-BOOM*

Cowboy Bebop: NOOOO! THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE OR AT LEAST VERY UNLIKELY! HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?!

Teddy Bomber: Bad planning.

Fubuki: Too much gloating.

Commander Beef: Not enough calcium.
Cowboy Bebop: FOOLS! You haven’t heard the last of me, Princes of the Universe! I’ll be back someday when you least expect it, and then I’ll- *GETS SHOT IN THE HEAD*

*everyone looks at T.K. *

T.K.: I shot the sheriff, but I didn’t shoot the deputy.

*Spike Spiegel steps out of the shadows, holding a smoking gun.*

Spike Spiegel: *looks at Cowboy Bebop's corpse* Friend of yours?

Dan Hibiki: If by “friend” you mean “mortal enemy”.

Spike Spiegel: Got it. Anyone here got a problem if I collect the bounty on this guy?

Commander Beef: Well Justice is being done one way or another; I guess I don’t see no problem with that.

*Spike departs, carrying Cowboy Bebop away*

Fubuki: Well you know what they say. All’s well that ends well!

Teddy Bomber: A bounty hunter just shot someone in the head and dragged his body away. How is that ending well?

Dan Hibiki: It wasn’t any of us, for starters.

Commander Beef: Not to mention that we still technically saved the world, and that’s something to celebrate!

TK: Here we are! Born to be kings!

Commander Beef: All together now: We’re the princes of the univeeeerssse...

Narrator: And so our heroes pigged out on sushi, and then sang karaoke until they got really drunk and passed out, except for Fubuki, who wasn’t old enough to drink and instead went home and fell asleep watching Tower Of Druaga. But all was not right in the world. For in the shadows, a new mastermind had risen.

Okabe Rintarou: Now that Cowboy Bebop is out of the way, there is no one to stop me, Okabe Rintarou, from mastering the secrets of time travel and taking over the world!

Shiina Mayuri: Yaaay! I’ll arrange the catering for our “Took Over the World” party!

Okabe Rintarou: Not yet! We can’t do anything that will alert the world to our plans... The first thing on our agenda is to assassinate Hitler!

DUN DUN DUUUUUUUN!

(An alternate version of Rintarou steps out of a time portal wearing a S.S. uniform, a Nazi armband, and sporting a black eye and a gunshot wound)

Alternate Rintarou: Hey you know that whole “Kill Hitler” thing? Yeah, that didn’t really work out so well. *Dies of gunshot wounds.*

Okabe Rintarou: Well that’s disappointing. Okay, plan B. We’ll assassinate someone less
important… like Archduke Ferdinand!

DUN DUN DUUUUUUUN!

Shiina Mayuri: I thought he was already assassinated.

Okabe Rintarou: Damn, you’re right. We’ll move on to plan C, where we’ll… I dunno, rob a bank or something.

> TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

And welcome back to Justice Society of Japan, or as it’s now called, “Crimson Blood: The Crimson Wing Saga”. Yes, that’s right, I decided to bring this story back for the sole purpose of promoting my new OC, who is perhaps the greatest OC of all time forever.

Forget about Shirley, Simon and the rest, their story arcs will be resolved in like a spin-off book or something, assuming I get around to writing it. And that goes double for Electra Pendragon; She might have been hot stuff when she first debuted, but now she’s just yesterday’s news. Instead, the next 27 chapters will focus on Crimson Wing, as she angsts about living forever and being a demon and stuff, and then becomes orange-kun’s girlfriend and sloppy makeouts ensue. And because of all the subliminal mind-control messages I put in this chapter, you’ll have no choice but to read every page of this inane romance, and it will consume the entirety of your being until you come to love EVERY. SINGLE. LINE.

MWA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA-

Okay for reals though:

My goal was to write primarily from the point of view of a character that I don’t really like, because I never want to be the kind of author who turns people he hates into 2-D strawmen. So of course after spending a year writing and rewriting it, I ended up with a chapter where Jason gets beaten up by a silver age villain and gets saved by my super special awesome mysterious OC with special powerz. Go figure.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!