



Ouroboros

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Monday: One Week's Time

Crimson Claw continued to crawl away as their battle carried on. Smoke clogged his lungs causing each motion to require more exertion. The ash on the ground filled his chest with each breath. Blood spewed out from his mouth and splattered across the daisies surrounding him. His internal fluids quickly mixed with the debris forming a scarlet paste.

He remembered just yesterday thinking that with all ten of them, there was no way they could lose. *What a fool I was. To think we were anywhere close to the strength of the Alpha Squadron. The Nexus Magistrate is an insult to the very premise of heroics, and I am a stain on a history of leaders.*

Daisies fell out of the air. He had kicked them up when he was originally knocked backward. Through the shower of flowers around him, he could make out their hulking outlines. Daisies stuck to the blood coagulating on his face. A few peppered off, delicately falling back to the ground.

How could this have happened? This wasn't S-Day. This wasn't the Reckoning. This was just a Saturday.

The assault rifle in Charles Claus' arms rocked back and forth as he fired at his adversary. Bullets stopped midair as they collided with an orange energy field surrounding Mr. Perplexus.

His arms grew sweaty as the heat from the gun spread to his body. He wore a cream undershirt with a Kevlar vest over it. A strand of hair slipped out from its gelled comrade's grasp. It fell over his eyelashes covered in mascara and eyes lined in black ink.

"I expect more from you than basic metal, Crimson Claw!" Mr. Perplexus said as his facial hair and orange robe blew in the wind created by his projections.

"Then taste some steel!" Bliant shouted as she flew down from the air and thrust her rapier into the orange bubble. Energy crackled through the air at the point of contact, and for a brief moment, her crimson armor appeared orange before she was knocked back. She used her wings to catch herself midair and she darted to the side as hazardous energy projectiles flew at her.

A blast of red flew past Bliant and fizzled against the orange bubble.

A hooded figure prepared to cast another spell. Beneath the cloak, instead of legs, countless tentacles formed her lower body. She floated in the air as the tendrils spun around summoning energy for another blast.

Before casting the blast, Etheria noted, "Bliant, your rapier is still metal."

"Indeed, Etheria, but it is far more than basic. It is enchanted!" Bliant shouted triumphantly as she flew through the air continuing to evade energy blasts from Mr. Perplexus. One clipped her wings, and a burst of feathers flew into the air as she tumbled to the ground.

"GLEAMING STRIKE!" a gravelly voice shouted.

A towering, stone beast charged forward, shaking the Earth as he ran. Nearly twice as tall as Crimson Claw and infinitely heavier, this humongous humanoid cracked his fists as he ran. Vines coated his sediment skin hiding the intricacies of his chiseling. He charged forward and uppercut the energy bubble knocking Mr. Perplexus back into the wall but still not breaking his forcefield.

“I was charging an energy blast, Golem! I was about to get him,” Etheria said.

“Last blast. Not effective,” the large figure noted.

“He makes a good point,” Bliant added.

“It doesn’t matter. His shield is still up, and the spell is almost done!” Crimson Claw shouted.

“It is done, you fools!” Mr. Perplexus shouted as a large glowing circle formed above them. Red lightning erupted out of it and struck the ground causing the tiling to spit up.

“What the hell have you done?” Etheria asked.

“More like who in Hell,” Mr. Perplexus said.

“You did what with who?” Bliant asked.

As the circle grew larger, a hoof began to protrude from it.

“Look at that. Something is coming through!” Etheria shouted over the storm of energy around them. Dust spun in circles and Golem bent over them to protect his friends from debris.

“What are you setting loose?” Crimson Claw shouted.

Bliant had only seen a hoof like that once before.

“Tell me you didn’t. That beast will ravage the Earth!” Bliant shouted.

“Charles, we’re going to need more than your gun to fight this!” Etheria said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You know what I mean.”

“I—We can win this without me doing that,” he said.

Two legs stuck out from the portal as the lower torso slowly came into view. The beast’s skin was a dark red with black ink scratched into its skin painting countless pictures.

“If that’s a demon, we can hold nothing back!” Bliant said.

“... fine. CLAWS OUT!” Crimson Claw shouted. He adjusted his strap, so his gun laid on his back. He collapsed to the ground and began to writhe. His skin cracked as blue hair pushed up from under it. His nose grew longer, and the rounded edges of his teeth grew sharp. His nails popped off as pointed keratin took its place. He hunched over the ground and howled before standing back up.

His eyes were large and yellow. While he was now much taller, his hunched posture kept him at his original height.

“Show your ugly side if you want. It does not matter. Ruination awaits!” Mr. Perplexus said as the monster fell from the portal. With a loud crash, it collided against the ground leaving a crater.

Curled up and apparently asleep, they analyzed him. He had to have been at least seven feet tall. His mouth and chin were covered in a black mask, and smoke slipped out from the sides of the cloth with each breath he took. Orange light seeped out of his closed eyes illuminating the cavity they sat in. His fingers scraped the concrete as they idly twitched. Two small horns protruded from his head, and he had legs that resembled a goat’s. His upper body looked like a human’s, but his muscles were so large they nearly tore through his skin.

“Does this look like the ones you fought back in the day?” Etheria asked.

“I—I don’t remember. I don’t think they were this big,” Bliant said.

“Smash?” Golem asked.

Crimson Claw howled and ran forward using his arms and legs to move faster and faster. He leapt into the air and pulled his arm back preparing to slash forward. The demon woke up and looked toward Crimson Claw. He slowly began to get up as Crimson Claw struck downward. His claws slid against the monster’s body but appeared to do nothing. Crimson Claw tumbled past him.

“GALAVANT CLOBBER!” Golem shouted. He charged forward. The demon’s eyes opened wide, and he held his hand out.

“WAIT! We can talk about this!” the beast shouted.

Golem paused mid-charge.

“Beast. Talks?” he asked.

“Beast!? I have a name, Orobas. What is your name, kind creature?”

“Golem.”

“Why are you talking? Kill them!” Mr. Perplexus shouted.

“Why would I do that? They seem nice,” Orobas noted. Smoke continued to hiss out of his mask with each breath. His English seemed flawless, and he somehow had a British accent.

“The werewolf one just attacked you! They drew first blood!” Mr. Perplexus said.

“That happens a lot to me. I do look pretty scary,” Orobas said with a shrug.

Crimson Claw walked toward the demon, now a human again. Bliant stood quietly with her rapier still drawn. Her brain pounded at the sight of the demon. Every atom in her body told her to charge forward and strike him. The smell that wafted off him stung her nose sending her back to the past.

Visions from the Reckoning crashed through her mind. Blood splashed through the air as angels plunged their rapiers into demons. Their claws tore off angel wings and white feathers floated around her. The ones stained with blood sunk quickly to the ground. Screams of agony echoed around her as heroes fought to their last breath. Spirit Rider rode her spectral horse down past the demons and swung her glowing blue scythe against their bodies. Hellraiser stood strong and took advantage of his bulky form to grab demons by the head and throw them into one another. His magma skin seared any monster's flesh that was foolish enough to touch him.

All manners of the supernatural battled around them. Who was friend and foe was unknown as vampires, werewolves, demons, angels, and anything in between fought tooth and nail for control over the Nexus Point.

She watched the battle for what felt like minutes before realizing none of this was the present. Knowing she was stuck in a torrent of memories she closed her eyes.

Grounding techniques. What did he tell me? Five things I can see.

She opened her eyes and looked around her. She saw the concrete below her feet in the building they had fought in. She looked to her left and saw the tentacles quietly wiggling in the air underneath Etheria's cloak. She looked to her right and saw Charles talking to Orobas. She looked off in the distance to see Mr. Perplexus still stunned by what was occurring. Finally, she looked back at her feet, both on the ground.

Four things I can touch.

She took off her glove then felt the hilt of her rapier, the smoothness of her armor, the softness of her feathers, and the warmth of her skin. Etheria looked over to Bliant and noticed the blank stare on her face.

"You all good, Bliant?" Etheria asked.

“Yes. I’m back.”

“I’m proud of you for that,” Etheria said.

“Thank you.”

Decades of instinct told her to eliminate Orobas from the face of the Earth, but she remained steady.

“So, would you be interested in coming back with us? I’m not sure someone like you can just walk around outside,” Crimson Claw said.

“If you would be so kind to have me, then I would be delighted to join you and your companions,” Orobas said.

“You blasted beast! Alas, you have not heard the last from me, Nexus Magistrate!” Mr. Perplexus shouted as he blinked away.

“Friend?” Golem asked as he extended his hand outward.

By midnight, they had made their way back to the north-west point from the north-east point where the office building was located. Charles spun a large spindle to a vault door embedded in the side of a cave. It was located a few miles out of Moroseville, far from any normal humans. He swung the door open to reveal a dark passageway. He stepped in and flipped a switch. The ceiling lights flickered briefly before remaining turned off. A weak wind blew out of the hallway.

“Sorry, this place is a bit old. Been around since just after the first Reckoning,” Charles said.

“What was that?” Orobas asked.

“You do not know? Your kind was there,” Bliant noted as Charles continued to flip the switch to no avail.

“My kind has a propensity for attacking others. To memorize them all would be impossible,” Orobas said.

“I know of every instance when demons, or really anything, have sieged Earth. The Reckoning was the greatest battle to ever happen on the face of this Earth. About forty years ago, the forces of evil decided to strike Moroseville to gain control of the Nexus Point,” Etheria said.

“What is the Nexus Point?” Orobas asked.

“Damn this. Aristotle! Can you lend a hand?” Charles shouted into the abyss.

“It’s what Moroseville was built over. All magic used on Earth comes from the energy surrounding us. It’s no different than how when we breathe, we consume oxygen. The Nexus Point is where the highest spike in energy exists.

“Luckily, some heroes were able to rally together all that time ago and hold off the forces of evil thanks to an army of angels that descended to help,” Etheria said as she nodded over to Bliant.

“What happened to all the angels?” Orobas asked.

“Killed by demons. I’m the last left. Afterward, I helped in the formation of the Nexus Magistrate. We built this base with the help of a very financially generous founding member. This organization sits ready if the Reckoning were to happen again,” Bliant said.

“They will come back again. They said so,” Charles noted while still staring into the passageway.

“Maybe,” Bliant said.

“I apologize for what my species did to yours,” Orobas said.

Before Bliant could respond, a woman stepped out of the darkness. She had a flashlight and wore a long khaki colored trench coat. Underneath the trench coat, she donned a red sweater and black pants. Black bangs covered her forehead. She adjusted the glasses on her nose then said, “What is it, Charles?”

“The lights aren’t working.”

Aristotle reached over and flipped the switch. The lights turned on.

“Wha—” Charles said.

“Is that so? Looks fine to me. Nice to meet you, Orobas! Why don’t we show you around?” Aristotle asked as she turned and started to walk into the passage.

They followed her down a long path until they reached a large, furnished room. The walls were concrete, and an enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling illuminating everything. This circular room was equally split into a kitchen, lounge, and dining area. An elevator door sat on the other side of the room with the entry to a staircase next to it. Below them, was a layer of barracks. Beneath that, the base was filled with utilities such as a gym, archive, and farm.

“Welcome home!” Charles said.

“Are you not afraid I may break something here?” Orobas asked.

“Built for Golem. Not break,” Golem said as he plopped down on the green, velvet couch in the lounge. It creaked slightly as his weight and rough skin exerted against the padding.

“I paged for everyone to come up so the others should be here shortly,” Aristotle said.

As if on cue, the light above the elevator door lit up followed by a short ding. The door slid open, and an empty suit of armor hustled out of it. The suit ran toward the group and stopped a few feet away before saluting even though there was not a head nor helmet on the armor. Cyan goo oozed out of the creases of the armor and a sword was sheathed on the armor’s belt.

“This is Slime Knight. Slime Knight, this is Orobas. He is going to be joining us here,” Charles said.

Slime Knight gave a quick thumbs up then extended his arm forward and waited for Orobas to shake it. His armor clinked as he moved.

“Where are Zombie and Swamp Gut?” Bliant asked.

Slime Knight held his hand up and pretended to stroke a missing chin. After doing this for a moment, he shrugged then ran over to a chair in the lounge area. He pulled out a large sheet of plastic cling wrap from a box sitting underneath it. Slime Knight tore it off then threw the plastic over the chair before sitting down on the leather.

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Minutes before, a figure sat hunched over in a large field. He quietly sifted through the dirt with his gloved hands. He worked to mix a sludge of internal fluids into the dirt. While technically dead, his body still seemed to continuously produce organs and blood which could ooze out of his stomach as a sludge. Zombie was well aware that this was gross. Although, it made a good fertilizer.

Rays of artificial sunlight shined down from the blue painted ceiling. The heat waves pattered off his back and the moist, crimson soil. He wore a loosely buttoned Hawaiian shirt, large cargo shorts, close-toed sandals, and a large sun hat. His pale, teal skin could not absorb any of the vitamins this sunlight exuded.

“WOULD ALL NEXUS MAGISTRATE MEMBERS REPORT TO THE FIRST FLOOR? WE ARE WELCOMING A GUEST!” a voice on the speaker above shouted.

Zombie perked his head up slightly. His hearing was not what it once was, but he caught enough of the announcement. He stood up slowly then hobbled over to the elevator. He looked

out to the field. It appeared to sprawl forever, but he knew if the mirrors were brought down then in reality the garden was no more than twenty-five feet long and maybe twenty wide.

He stepped into the elevator and decided to stop by the gym. He had no doubt that Swamp Gut had not heard the announcement. The doors reopened and he shambled into a room full of weights. The walls were a bright white and countless workout machines lined the periphery.

Swamp Gut laid on a bench working out. They wore spandex pants and a cut off shirt. The clothes were made of a black material that stuck to their body but had the ability to stretch out if Swamp Gut's body was to increase in size. Swamp Gut's skin was the same hue of green as a murky marsh. Soft stripes of lagoon blue covered small portions of their body. Instead of ears, there appeared to be two dorsal fins attached to the side of their head. Useless gills lined their neck.

"Hungry Like the Wolf" by Duran Duran loudly played on the speakers. Charles hated this song.

"Swamp! Come on! They need us on the first floor," Zombie shouted over the music. His low voice was drowned out by the song. He dragged his feet over to the bench where Swamp Gut was quietly lifting weights. Swamp Gut sat the bar back in its hook and quietly exhaled as they laid on the bench. Zombie patted Swamp Gut on the shoulder and they shrieked.

Swamp Gut turned around to see Zombie. They continued screaming before realizing this was Zombie, not a zombie. Zombie clicked a remote and the music turned off.

"Zombie, you can't just tap on people's shoulders like that."

"I think that is a you thing," Zombie muttered.

"No, it's a YOU thing. What's up?" they asked.

“There is a guest on the first floor. We are going to meet them.”

“Carp! Why did no one tell me?” Swamp Gut asked.

“They did . . .” Zombie said.

Swamp Gut hopped up and clapped their hands.

“Come on, move that raggedy skin of yours and let’s get up there.”

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Back upstairs, the elevator buzzed. Swamp Gut and Zombie stepped out.

“Woah,” Swamp Gut said as they looked Orobas up and down.

“Impressive pectorals,” Zombie said as he gazed at Orobas’ chiseled chest.

“I don’t remember humans looking so raggedy,” Orobas said.

“He’s a zombie. It’s a movie thing,” Swamp Gut said.

“I’m Zombie,” Zombie corrected.

“Hello, Zombie. I’ll have to learn more about this zombie phenomena,” Orobas said.

“I know some good movies to teach you,” Etheria said.

“They like bite people and turn them into monsters,” Swamp Gut said.

“Sounds like that would be a biohazard. Would it not?” Orobas asked.

“Are you not a normal hazard?” Bliant asked.

“Do not worry. No biting. I am a vegetarian. Love me a good tomato. The flesh is so porous and when the juices squelch out . . .” he said before trailing off. He licked his lips thinking about tomatoes. His mouth had a faded red stain around it. One could only hope it was tomato juice.

“Would a bite infect me?” Orobas asked.

“Unlikely, as your biology differs. I would assume it’d just kill you,” Zombie said with a sly smile. No one could see Orobas’ concerned grimace beneath his mask.

“Alright, try not to creep the new guy out,” a man said as he wandered by carrying a few large bottles of soda in a cardboard box. He wore a white, leather coat. For the most part, the coat ended at his waist, but two strands of cloth trailed down and ended in a point on the ground. They dragged across the floor behind him. His brown hair was slicked back, and he wore a white glove on his right arm. His right arm had an aura of bright magenta produced by cracks spread across it. His right eye had a similar tint and various etches of purple-pink were spread across his body.

“Nice to see you, Durus! With that, you’ve met everyone,” Charles said as he lifted his arms into the air motioning to the nine people surrounding Orobas.

“Pleasure to meet you all. I suppose I should address the elephant in the room. Yes, I am a demon—” Orobas said.

“Cool,” Swamp Gut whispered as they stared at Orobas’ spiked tail.

“—and I was summoned to this world to fight, but I am no fighter. In fact, I spent much of my time before as an outcast. This was a blessing to be sent to Earth. I hope I can prove useful to you all,” Orobas said.

“We are all part of the team here and we are going to need all the help we can get to bring down Mr. Perplexus. He has a few sources of power scattered around the world feeding him all that energy and I have a lead on one we are going to send a team to tomorrow. Until then, let’s take it easy tonight!” Charles said.

“I say we play a board game! I know just the one!” Etheria said as she reached into her cloak.

“Please don’t be Zombicide,” Zombie said.

Later, Zombie, Durus, Aristotle, Etheria, Orobas, and Golem sat around a table. Swamp Gut and Slime Knight sat at a smaller table off to the side picking the characters they would use in *Unmatched*.

Bliant and Charles stood next to the table as they talked to each other.

“Wait, we have everyone here!” Swamp Gut said as they reached into their pockets for their phone. They held it up and shouted, “Quick, everyone. Group photo to celebrate our first night with Orobas!”

Each of the Nexus Magistrate members turned to the camera. Some of them like Aristotle and Golem effortlessly posed for the picture, while Durus and Zombie appeared startled in the final photo.

“Awesome. I’ll send that around,” Swamp Gut said as they tapped the screen on their phone.

Bliant walked to the exit with Charles by her side. She stood with one foot on the stairs.

“Are you sure we can trust him, Charles?” she asked.

“I understand your hesitancy. He seems like a good person. Each person here was someone untrustworthy before we brought them in. The fact is, I’d rather have us influence him and introduce him to Earth instead of some villain. Besides, if he would be playing us, I want him constantly surrounded by heroes,” he said.

“You better be right about this.”

“There’s a lot of things I better be right about. Who knows? A lot can change in one week’s time.”

Bliant stared briefly at Charles before continuing up the stairs.

“You all have a nice night,” she said.

“Same to you. Tell Abraham we say hi,” Charles said as he turned around and walked to the table. “Call Me” by Blondie played in the background.

Bliant stepped out through the vault door. She stared up past the trees and into the sky. A spiral of crows caught her eye. Their black, feathered wings flapped in the air. They could see everything from up there. That must be nice.

“Gnawing. GNAWING. It pushes against the walls. Your stomach groans as you shrivel in the corner of your safehouse. It’s been weeks since you’ve consumed your last morsel of food and you need sustenance. Unfortunately, the streets are covered in lifeless corpses shambling back and forth brushing meaninglessly against each other. It’s time to gather the last of your energy and push outside to obtain some food. You’re willing to sacrifice everything if even only for scraps!” Etheria said. She slammed the rulebook closed after finishing the prompt for the night’s mission.

“You know, I find this game incredibly problematic,” Zombie said as he stared at the countless plastic figures of zombies on the table that waited to be cut down.

“Why’s that?” Durus asked.

“First off, it is insulting. I do not shamble like this,” he said.

“You do too,” Swamp Gut shouted over.

“Big talk from the kid’s table!” Durus said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Not a kid. At least I’m not trapped in a mid-life crisis,” Swamp Gut said.

Before Durus could respond, Etheria asked, “Slime Knight, you’re wearing gloves, right? Card sleeves only do so much.”

Slime Knight’s armor clinked quietly as he walked off to find a pair of gloves. He was ashamed he was the only one that had to wear gloves when they played games. All humans have oils on their hands. Was his slime so different?

“Seven people. Six players max,” Golem said, referencing the game’s rules as he hunched over in his chair. He delicately picked up one of the character pieces and analyzed it.

“You and I will team up,” Charles said as he pulled up a chair next to him.

Slime Knight returned to the smaller table with a pair of medical gloves on and picked up a set of velociraptors out of the box.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Those guys are cheap. The bonus damage they gain by surrounding an opponent is busted,” Swamp Gut said.

Slime Knight grabbed a pad next to him and wrote down the word “theming”.

“Whatever, I’m going to pick the Invisible Man then.”

As the night carried on, zombies were slayed through the rolling of dice as Orobas slowly picked up on the rules of the game.

As he waited for his next turn, Orobas asked, “If you do not mind, I was wondering if you all could tell me a bit about yourselves.”

“Of course. We never really did proper introductions. My name is Charles Claus, but on the field, I go by Crimson Claw. I am the leader of the Nexus Magistrate, and I am a lycanthrope,” Charles said.

“I don’t get why you won’t call it what it is,” Durus said as he aimlessly pulled at the glove on his right hand. All four legs of his chairs came back down to the ground.

“Lycanthrope is technically the same word as werewolf,” Etheria said as she moved her character piece two spaces down the street. Charles cringed at the sound of the word.

“Golem big. Protects Charles,” Golem said.

“He used to be Spirit Rider’s guardian and moved over to me after her passing,” Charles said.

“You could consider me patient zero for a mutagenic outbreak only contagious through saliva. Luckily, the Nexus Magistrate swooped me up before I could get to work and talked some sense back into me. Not quite sure how I got sick in the first place. Last I remember, I went swimming in this one lake . . .” Zombie slowly said. Aristotle noticed Durus had started to quietly scroll on his phone.

Etheria spoke next as she moved a character across the board with her tentacle, “I’m a creature from the Absence. It explains my . . . unique form. What’s cool is I can live a nearly endless life, so I have seen almost every movie and TV show in existence. I still keep a small connection to the Absence which allows me to pull out energy from it and it lets me store a variety of things there such as these board games.”

Charles prepared to roll four dice and paused to see that Golem was longingly staring at the plastic cubes in his hand. He passed two of them to Golem. They rolled the dice together then took the appropriate number of zombies off the board.

In the background, Swamp Gut shouted out as Sime Knight surrounded the Invisible Man with raptors. To keep themselves from saying something they’d regret, Swamp Gut filled their mouth with unsalted pretzels.

“You’re missing out over here,” Etheria said.

“No. I don’t think I am. We can play this about four times before you play that once,” Swamp Gut said as they spit out pieces of chewed pretzel.

“What is the amphibious one’s powers?” Orobas asked.

“I’m not amphibious,” Swamp Gut said after swallowing their food.

“You are, by definition,” Etheria said.

“Well, I don’t feel amphibious. I’m some experiment gone wrong. They wanted to mix my genes with a fish or something and somehow, I came out of it. My skin is incredibly absorbent and if it touches water my body bulks up,” Swamp Gut said before flexing their green arms.

Slime Knight pointed at himself.

“Oh, for sure. I’ll tell them about you.

“Slime Knight is a sentient slime that lives in a hollow suit of armor. He can’t talk, but that doesn’t keep him from swinging a sword. We actually were a part of the same experimental project and found each other when we both got dumped on the same road,” Swamp Gut said.

Slime Knight and Swamp Gut high-fived.

“Experiment buddies!” Swamp Gut shouted.

Charles looked over to Orobas to prompt him to give some information about his own past.

“I appreciate such comprehensive summaries. There is not much to tell. I grew up surrounded by monsters, but it never took to me. I got whisked away a few hours ago and I plan to make the most of it. I question if I can help you all though as I am inclined to avoid fights,” Orobas said.

“He’s like you, Aristotle! He doesn’t fight,” Durus said playfully, looking for a rise.

Aristotle considered whether to call him out for what he was scrolling through on his phone. He had an impressive ability to lose himself in the past. Perhaps there was a way to still get back at him while avoiding a shaming for his current actions.

“I fight sometimes,” she said quietly.

“If you do not mind my prodding, why do you not partake? I avoid it because it makes me think about my past,” Orobas said.

“It’s a little more complicated for me. In order for me to cast spells my body needs to burn off alcohol in my blood. I need to be under the influence to fight. It got a little messy,” Aristotle said.

“Come on. All you ever did was try and help people,” Charles said.

“Even so, I’ve had the thought. That’s more than enough,” Aristotle said.

“Nobody’s perfect!” Swamp Gut shouted over.

“Except Pat Benatar. Nothing bad happens when her music is on,” Etheria said.

“I hope to learn much from you, Aristotle,” Orobas said.

He looked over to Durus and noticed the pink-purple energy flowing out from his arm.

“What happened to you?” Orobas asked.

“The Eel Clan,” Durus said. He looked away.

“The Eel Clan didn’t do that to you. You did that to yourself because of the Eel Clan,” Aristotle said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Durus said.

“I agree. It’s your turn, Durus, so spend more time making moves and less yapping,” Etheria said.

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At the same time the others were playing games, Bliant turned off the faucet once her bathtub was full of warm water. She let the heat coat her and wash away today's battle. Her husband, Abraham, sat in a chair right next to the tub. He calmly moved his hand across each feather in her wings making sure they were clean. If blood covered his hands, he would dip them in the water and slowly brush them clean before continuing.

“So, a demon you say? I thought you encountered one before,” he said. His short, black hair had no product in it. Etches of white lined the edges of his hair.

“The last one I saw since the Reckoning was that green runt I pulled out from the plains. He barely counts. This is one of the real ones. Orobas is enormous and could easily squash any of us without a second thought,” she said.

“How did you feel when you first saw him?” he asked. His glasses kept slowly slipping down his forehead, so he set them on the sink. They were the only things that let him see as age took away eyesight.

“I think I almost had an anxiety attack,” she said.

“Did you use the techniques we’ve practiced?”

“I did.”

“Did it work?”

“It did.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m proud of you. That had to have been really scary to see him at first,” he said.

The wing closest to him had been sufficiently cleaned, “Can you flip around so I can get the other?”

“How was your day at work?” Bliant asked as she shifted herself.

“Not as exciting as yours, but I like it that way. I like knowing who I am assigned to meet with each day. I don’t do well with surprise guests or really surprises as a whole.”

“I know, and I think that is very cute,” Bliant said. She quickly ducked her head under the water then looked over to him. The room was quiet except for the sound of water dripping from her hair and his hands moving through her feathers. She had lived many years on this world. People had come and gone, but none had ever caught her interest like Abraham had. He was so simple. All he wanted to do was help people. That’s what they both were sent here to do.

“I’m glad you do. I think the rapier is pretty cool too,” he said.

“It is at your command. Point it at anything and I’ll start swinging. I’ll do it any time and any day.”

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Back at the base, Charles stepped out of the shower. He wiped away the fog from the mirror and stared at his body. Slim patches of blue hair were scattered across his skin like sores finally surfacing from a disease. He grimaced before reaching into the drawer for a hair trimmer. Each one was decisively buzzed off, cleaning the stains from his body. All he left behind was a tiny blue stubble. It would only be visible if someone looked at his face from a specific angle and with perfect lighting.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, Golem was quietly asleep on his oversized bed. Charles delicately stepped across the room to his own bed and pulled his covers over himself. He closed his eyes and reopened them to see Golem standing by his bed and staring at him.

“Sleep. Protect.” Golem said quietly.

“Can’t you protect me from your bed?”



“Little time for reaction.”

“Alright then. You can move your bed over,” Charles said.

Golem picked up his bed by one end and scraped it against the ground as he dragged it across the room. He set it down so it laid right next to Charles’ bed with no room in between them. Golem’s bed creaked as he slowly put his entire weight on it.

“You better not roll over onto me,” Charles said.

“Will try best,” Golem said.

“Goodnight, Buddy,” Charles said as he flipped off the light.

“Sleep well. Bugs can’t bite.”

~~~

Swamp Gut followed Slime Knight into his room. His wall was lined with hollow suits of armor. Each of them had a unique crest on the center. Some were marked by a golden lion, a hawk, or even a snake. Most of the armors were formed from black metal, but a few were silver, and one was even gold.

A selection of medieval weapons leaned up against the wall. There was a mace, broad sword, axe, lance, and a piece of a trebuchet.

“I still don’t know how you get all of these items,” Swamp Gut said.

Slime Knight held his pointer finger up above where his mouth would be to indicate his unwillingness to disclose the origin of his collection. He walked to the corner of the room and grabbed a cooler. Slime Knight put it down in the center of the room as Swamp Gut reached for a selection of stuffed animals set on a shelf.

Swamp Gut grabbed a lobster and a penguin then walked over to the microwave. They took the gel packs out of their plush casing and set them on the plate. As the microwave

hummed, Slime Knight took two other stuffed animals that were covered in dried cyan goo out of the cooler. He threw them into a dirty laundry pile.

“I’ve been doing some testing and I realized my body can only get so big from absorbing water. I know roughly how much water I can absorb, and that means that I could bring that much water to missions so even if it isn’t by a water source, I can still use my powers. The question is how to bring that much water.”

Slime Knight shrugged his arms. The microwave beeped. Swamp Gut grabbed the two heating packs from the microwave then slipped them back into the lobster and penguin. They set the two stuffed animals into the cooler. Slime Knight stood next to the cooler and finally loosened his hold around the armor.

The metal plating collapsed to the ground and a puddle of goo slipped out from the opening where a head would go. Swamp Gut picked up the blue blob and gently set him down into the cooler. To maintain control over the armor, Slime Knight had to extend his form, so it pushed against each joint in the metal. It was as if he was tensing his muscles for every waking moment in the day. Slime Knight curled up around the lobster and penguin. He could finally relax.

“Maybe a big jug of water that I could dump on myself or a bunch of smaller water bottles. I could get one of those hydration backpacks runners use, but those are expensive,” Swamp Gut said as they looked down on Slime Knight in his cooler.

“I’ll work it out. Good night, Slime. I’ll be pack for you in the morning,” Swamp Gut said.

As they closed the lid, a small tendril stuck out from the goo. Slime Knight appeared to wave goodbye as the lid shut over him.

~~~

Orobas washed his hands in the sink. The cold water rolled over his skin, cleaning it of perceived sins. The faucet began to sputter viciously. The metal shook violently, berating him for his past. Blue turned brown as the water caressing his hands grew thick. He stumbled backward and held his hands up to his face. Thick droplets of blood rolled down his fingers and coated the tile floor. His stomach turned in on itself as voices began echoing in his head.

*“You were there.” “Why didn’t you help us.” “You watched as we suffered.”*

“I—I didn’t do anything. I never hurt anyone,” he let out with a whimper.

*“You did. Our blood is on your hands.”*

“No! I’m not like them!” he said.

~~~

Durus quietly sat in his bed staring at his phone as he continued to scroll through his old text messages to Carina. He read them back to himself.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“May our paths cross again.”

He wondered if there was something else he could have said to change the tides of fate.

“If I knew it would bring you back, I would tear the stars from the sky. Ask for the moon and I would rip it out from its crevice in our sky. I’d let the waves crash against our world without a second thought because we could spend at least one more moment together,” he muttered.

“The hell is that even supposed to mean? QUIT MONOLOGUING AND GO TO BED!”

Swamp Gut yelled from their room, just on the other side of the wall. Swamp Gut had been hearing Durus’ mumblings through the vents for minutes.

Aristotle collapsed at his feet. Tears poured down her face as he towered over her.

“Please. You’re my everything. I love loving you. I want to worship you,” she said, desperate to keep hanging on. She was willing to give up anything to keep him here just one more day.

The man stood quiet. Shadows covered his eyes, preventing her from understanding his facial expressions. Gray clouds swirled in the sky above him as thunder boomed with no lightning to justify its existence.

“Just tell me what to change. I’ll do it. I’ll change anything,” she said

“Is that so?” he asked.

She awoke in her bed. Her damp shirt clung to her body. Her room was covered in a dark blue hue and the only light came from the glow of the bulbs in the hallway that sneaked in through her door crack. The quilt flew off her body as she swung her legs off the side of the bed.

She walked into the kitchen and filled a cup with water as her heart slowed its pace back to its normal interval.

“You’re up late,” a voice slowly stated. Aristotle jumped and turned around to see Zombie behind her. The night light plugged into the wall dimly reflected off his white eyes. He wore long flannel sweatpants and a loose cotton shirt.

“You can’t just say things out of the blue to people. It’s scary,” she said, before taking a sip of water.

Zombie carefully panned his eyes up and down her body, “Sorry . . . just coming up for something to eat. I don’t sleep, so I get hungry at night.”

“Not hungry for me, right?” she asked.

“I do crave flesh, but of the sun-grown variety,” he said as he shambled past her and flung open the refrigerator door. He pulled out a tomato then shut the door.

“Nice. You enjoy that,” Aristotle said. Faint sweat dewed on her forehead.

“Never don’t,” he said before hobbling off.

Aristotle finished her water and walked back to her room. She flicked off her desk lamp, then returned to bed.

~~~

In the office building, a janitor quietly swept up debris from a battle that had occurred earlier in the day. Large footprints and burn marks etched the flooring. *What had happened here?* “Treat Me Right” by Pat Benatar played on the speaker resting in his cart.

A glowing, orange dot formed in the sky and unzipped into a line that tore open to form a hole. Gusts of heat burst out pushing him backward. The janitor rolled across the ground, then ran out of the back door.

A green figure fell through the hole and crashed into the ground. Her body stood over seven feet tall. Her putrid skin sunk around her bones making her appear lean even with her massive form. Her lips had been cut off and the entirety of her teeth were constantly visible.

A yellow monster followed her, colliding into the ground. This one was much larger than her with an enormous belly and gargantuan feet keeping him upright. Claws stuck out from his toes and fingers.

A blue entity scampered across the yellow monster and climbed up his back to perch on the yellow monster's shoulder. The blue demon was much smaller at only three feet tall, and his head resembled that of a pig.

Finally, a mass of purple burst out of the hole. At nearly nine feet tall, this creature's massive body was covered in black tattoos. A large tongue protruded from his mouth waving through the air as if he was tasting his surroundings.

"This is the Hunters reporting in. We crossed over to the Neutral. Begin recovery mission of Orobas. I swear to Satan, demons get summoned by these damn humans at least once a week," the purple demon said as he brushed off his pants.

The green demon clicked her teeth.

"I know there isn't anyone listening, but since no one on my team can talk, I have to do something to keep it interesting, Seir. You just focus on assassinating someone if we need it, and I'll keep being the one making the calls," the purple demon said.

The yellow demon bent over and rubbed the floor with his hand. The blue demon on his shoulder scampered across the ground. The yellow demon grumbled.

"You're saying you can't detect any hexes or traces of magic besides the initial portal? That means we can't track Orobas or the person who summoned him! Let me remind you, it is your job to track magic, Forneus," the purple demon said.

Forneus shrugged his arms. The blue demon scampered back onto his shoulders with a feather in his hand.

"This is our big break! If we retrieve the royalty, we can finally get some recognition. I'm gonna need you to dig a little deeper," the purple demon said.

The blue demon snarled as he sniffed the feather in his hand.

“An angel you say?”

The blue demon growled.

“AND we can track their scent? You are wonderful, Paimon. Maybe the angel may know what happened and then we can get to kill them. This is the stuff dreams are made of. At least someone is useful here,” the purple demon said.

The four of them followed Paimon’s directions as they walked out from the building.

## Tuesday: Balsa Origami

Swamp Gut dragged themselves across the ground leaving a trail of bare concrete in the bed of daisies. *I need more power. I need to be stronger.* Their bruised body scraped against the ground as they continued to inch closer to their destination. *If he wants to fight dirty, I can do that too. Just a little more and I can turn this around.* They could taste what they were dragging themselves to in the air. *Power.*

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Crimson Claw, Bliant, Durus, Golem, Swamp Gut, and Slime Knight circled around a small glass orb. It sat atop a granite pedestal. Pink light pulsed intermittently from the sphere.

Silk lined the walls and draped from the ceiling of the cave. A half dozen cocoons hung above them. The floor felt spongy underneath the soles of their shoes. Durus held a crowbar in his right hand. Magenta energy cracked across it, illuminating a small circumference around him. The air was thick and reeked of mothballs. A pool of mysterious white liquid sat to their right. It was presumed to be made of dissolved organs sitting stagnant before a later consumption.

“I would feel a lot less scared right now if someone hadn’t knocked over my jug of water when they were getting out of the car,” Swamp Gut said.

“It was an honest mistake. I don’t know why you didn’t strap it in better,” Durus said.

“I don’t know how you didn’t see it. Maybe that curse is finally affecting your eyesight,” Swamp Gut said.

“I appreciate your ingenuity, Swamp Gut. Although, we can all agree that a giant jug of water is a bit cumbersome. Is it not?” Crimson Claw asked.

Swamp Gut grumbled.

“Where the hell is the spider?” Durus asked as he panned the surroundings.

“Does it matter? Let’s just break this anchor point for Mr. Perplexus and get out of here,” Swamp Gut said.

Eight beady, dark eyes surfaced from the pooled liquid. Each eye was larger than an average human’s fist. They calmly watched the Nexus Magistrate’s motions.

“As soon as we make a move on the anchor point, whatever is defending it will attack. So, we only do this when we are ready,” Crimson Claw said.

“I’ll grab the anchor point and fly into the air then break it safely away from anything,” Bliant said.

“You know, some spiders eat birds,” Durus said.

“Golem guards,” Golem said. He attempted to scrape off the webbing stuck to his stone body. Under the surface of the viscous fluid, the spider rubbed its front two legs together in anticipation of its next meal.

“We’ll have your back,” Crimson Claw said as he raised the scope of his rifle up to his eye. Bliant nodded and reached for the ball on the pedestal. The monster burst out from the pool and scampered forward. Crimson Claw fired at it to no avail. Before anyone else could respond, it crashed against Bliant and knocked her into the wall. Her wings stuck to the gooey webbing and the spider disappeared off into the shadows.

The dull thumps of its eight legs pattering against the walls echoed through the cave.

“Slime Knight, cut her out of the webbing! Golem and Durus, focus on the legs. Swamp Gut, we need you to get big!” Crimson Claw commanded.

“How?” Swamp Gut asked, seeing no source of water. Crimson Claw looked over to the pool of dissolved organs.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Swamp Gut said.

“It’s being controlled by the anchor point. You’re not saying we have to kill it, right?” Durus asked Crimson Claw.

“That may be necessary,” Crimson Claw said as Slime Knight and Golem worked to enact their orders.

“It’s not an inherently violent creature. Mr. Perplexus is affecting its mind. We just have to free the spider and this fight is over,” Durus said.

As they spoke, Swamp Gut continued to assess if they were willing to dive into the pool of unknown fluids.

“We don’t know if that will work,” Crimson Claw said.

“But it’s the moral thing to do. The spider didn’t choose—” Durus began to say.

He was cut short as the spider rapidly descended from the ceiling and picked him up in its arms before ascending. Durus shrieked as his purple aura dimmed in the distance. Swamp Gut immediately dove into the mysterious liquid. Their body absorbed the water contents of it, and they multiplied in size as their muscles tensed.

Slime Knight continued to rapidly cut at the webbing around Bliant’s wings and once enough were sliced, she burst into the air and flew to where Durus disappeared. She needed to confirm he was alive, then she could break the anchor point. Thumping echoed through the cave as the spider reappeared, charging forward on the ground. It leapt at Crimson Claw, knocking the gun from his hand, and pinning him down. Webbing shot out from behind the spider, covering the anchor point in a thick casing.

They were finally able to get a good look at their arachnid adversary. It was larger than at least three cars piled on top of one another and likely weighed just as much. Its eyes spun wildly, assessing everything occurring around it. The ends of its legs were pointed and dug into the soft flooring. Large, glistening hairs covered its body.

The spider squealed as it swung its fangs down. Golem appeared at Crimson Claw’s side and pushed back up against the monster. Its fangs shook as the monster tried to push them into its prey. Webbing shot out from behind the monster and flung into the air covering everyone. Slime Knight cut his way over as Swamp Gut erupted from the pond. As Slime Knight slashed at one of the spider’s legs, Swamp Gut began to pull on another one of its legs.

~~~

Meanwhile, Aristotle sat across from Abraham in his living room. They were in matching chairs that had been moved out from the nearby table so they could sit facing each other in the center of the room. He quietly folded an orange piece of paper. A yellow notepad rested in his lap and a pen was nestled above his ear. A pair of circle lensed glasses sat on his forehead.

“How are things going for you, Stotle?” he asked as he stretched his arms up into the air. She was a bonus visit before his normal scheduled ones every Tuesday. He was willing to do anything to help one of his wife’s coworkers. Images from last night’s dream filled Aristotle’s mind as she questioned how many of her thoughts she wished to expose in the limelight of analysis. A clock ticked in the background.

“Not bad.”

“What emotions do you feel right now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What’s your best guess?” he asked.

Aristotle closed her eyes and thought about what she was feeling. There was something pent up inside. “Anger.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Does it have to do with Rory?” he asked.

“I think. But that doesn’t make sense because I haven’t talked to him in months.”

Abraham paused and pushed his glasses down over his eyes. He continued to fold the orange paper in on itself.

“What are you mad about in relation to Rory?”

“Things he did. As time goes on, I just realize more and more how poorly he treated me, but I shouldn’t be mad. Those things all happened forever ago,” Aristotle said as she shuffled in her red, leather chair.

“Why do you think you carry that burden?”

“I don’t know. I should be able to just forgive him.”

“Here’s what I think, speaking to you as a friend rather than a therapist for a second. You’ve said you always felt like you were walking on glass around Rory. I know you are stuck on past mistakes he made. I know you are mad. Putting that all together, I wonder if what he did sticks with you so much because you never got to tell him how much he hurt you.”

Aristotle paused.

“Do you want to yell at him?” he asked.

She briefly opened her mouth before closing it again.

“Yes . . . I want to shout in his face and for once I want to not sugarcoat it. I want him to say sorry. I want to see that he isn’t perfect.”

Her voice grew louder and louder as she spoke.

“I want his next partner to break up with him for the same reasons I did so he can stop thinking that it’s just me that’s messed up. Then, I want him to come back to me so we can be together again because I was right . . . I WAS RIGHT!”

She paused.

“I was right,” she whispered.

Abraham breathed in as he adjusted his cardigan.

“Right about what?” he asked.

“That Rory should have done more for me,” she said.

Abraham nodded his head.

“Why do you think he believes you are ‘messed up’?” Abraham asked. The orange paper continued to be bent under the pressure of his hands.

“I just know he does.”

“Okay.”

“Does that make me a bad person?” Aristotle asked. Her cheeks flushed red.

“Those are reasonable gut reactions. It’s also normal to carry the issues of a past relationship into the future. Here’s what you need to know. He will never apologize. He will never see how he wronged you. He doesn’t owe you that either. You can’t rely on someone else to heal yourself.”

“How do I heal?” Aristotle asked.

“You forgive him for his mistakes and move on. I’m not saying you forget, but you can choose to let go of this anchor wrapping around your heart. Only then, will this all finally leave you alone.”

“Okay,” she replied, unsure of how to even go about that.

“We spoke a bit last week about your codependency. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about it that you wanted to share today?” Abraham asked before sipping from his mug filled with orange spice tea.

“Is codependency a problem?” Aristotle asked.

“I would classify it as such. I actually have a theory as to why you are placing so much weight on a relationship. I think it might be possible that because you have stepped back from the team when you decided to stop using your powers, that connection in your life doesn’t feel as

strong anymore. Perhaps, you are looking to fill the part of your life the Nexus Magistrate used to occupy with a new partner?”

“Is that so? Interesting theory,” she said with a slight smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

Abraham chuckled.

“Whether it be Nexus Magistrate or a partner, the hope would be that you can be happy on your own. Last week you said something about how you are happy, but there is only a certain level of happiness you can reach alone. Why is that?” he asked.

“... All of the good things feel wasted if I don’t share them with my partner. It doesn’t feel like enough for good things to happen to just me alone. I want to share it with someone else.”

At this moment, Aristotle decided it would not be wise to disclose that tomorrow she would be going on a date with someone new.

“Why can you only find validation from someone else that you are romantically involved with? I know you and Durus are good friends. Why aren’t the moments you two share together valuable?”

“I don’t know,” Aristotle said. *Why aren’t those moments valuable?*

“That’s okay. You don’t need all the answers at once. We covered a lot of good stuff this morning. We can always get it next time. Something to think about between now and then.”

He finished folding the paper and passed her something resembling a cat's head. Its head was an octagon and some of the paper was folded at the bottom to resemble a nose. Behind the head, the paper had been bent so two pointed ears stuck up. She stared at the folded paper in her cupped hands.

“In times of life like this, people may feel as if their life is folding in on itself. Things keep bending and cascading. Before long, you’re unrecognizable. Some people view this as destructive, but I raise you this. I would view it like origami. You can be whoever you want when this is over, such as a powerful tiger. Focus less on the fold and more on the origami.

Even balsa paper, made from the weakest wood, becomes strong if folded enough times.”

He passed the origami tiger over to her.

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you! Keep my wife alive and I’ll keep working with you here,” Abraham said before laughing slightly.

~~~

“MOMENTOUS SHIFT!” Golem shouted as he pushed the front end of the spider up into the air. Swamp Gut took advantage of their adversary’s unfavorable position and flung the monster against the wall. Slime Knight swung his sword at the silk covering the anchor point. Crimson Claw picked himself back up and scrambled for his gun. It was caught in the silk, and he was unable to tear it free.

Above, Bliant flapped her wings in brief intervals. She struggled to stay afloat because of the remaining webbing sticking to her body. She spiraled past cocoons looking for any glowing pink as she tried to avoid thinking about who else had been brought up here in the past. She passed a pink aura and saw that this cocoon was wiggling in the air. She slashed it open, and Durus gasped for air.

“Did it bite you?” Bliant asked.

“What? Why? I don’t know!”

“I guess not. Your internal organs would have started liquifying already.”



“Just get me down there and I’ll finish this off,” Durus said as he hopped into Bliant’s arms. They descended back to the battlefield.

Crimson Claw continued to scrape away at the threading around his gun with his bare hands. The only one who could cut his gun free, Slime Knight, was focused on getting to the center of the anchor point. Golem and Swamp Gut stood at Slime Knight’s side, guarding him from the routine assault of the spider.

“Claw, we need another person cutting away at this anchor point! We could use some claws!” Swamp Gut shouted.

The spider darted out from the darkness and approached Slime Knight who still swung his sword at the thread blocking them from breaking the anchor point.

“UNYIELDING UPPERCUT!” Golem said as his fist rocketed into the spider, knocking it backward.

“I—”

Crimson Claw began to talk but stopped to stare at his hands. His nails were bitten down and the skin around them were scabbed from being picked at.

*You’re a freak. No one will ever trust you. I will never support you.*

His father’s words resurfaced in his mind, cementing him in inaction.

“Slime Knight needs help!” Swamp Gut shouted as they ripped up a chunk of the flooring and threw it into the darkness.

“Did you call for another blade?” Bliant asked as she appeared in the sky.

~~~

Orobas sat across the table from Etheria. She quietly read the rulebook to the board game she planned to bring out tonight. He was reading an almanac trying to catch up on everything that had happened in the world.

“What’s it like being so interesting?” Etheria asked. Orobas jumped in his chair when he looked up and noticed the rulebook was face down on the table. Her empty hood was staring directly at him.

“I don’t feel particularly interesting,” Orobas said.

“How couldn’t you? You are a demon sent to Earth. You are incredibly fascinating,” she said.

“You are fascinating as well,” he said.

“Really?”

“Why would you not be? You are a green mollusk monster. I have never met one of those before,” he said. Etheria blushed beneath her hood. No one had ever thought she was interesting before. She wondered if he actually meant it when he said she was interesting. Perhaps he was just being nice.

“What was it like down there?” Etheria asked.

“It was . . . not good. A lot of murder. A lot of torture,” he said. A red liquid dripped down from the ceiling onto Etheria. Orobas’ eyes panned up to see a mangled body tied by his intestines to the ceiling light above her. The skin on the man’s face was grated off and hung in pieces. His throat was ripped out and dangled in the air. Blood slipped down the pink flesh and fell onto Etheria. She seemed unphased by it as she asked her next question.

“I’m confused on the role a supposed Hell serves. I read all the books in our archive a few years ago and there is almost nothing about it. According to Christian mythology, everyone

who sins would be sent there, but I've never found anything to officially confirm that there is a God, Jesus, or Satan.

"I now know Hell actually exists, but I can't confirm how congruent it is with the Christian view. Do you know if every evil human ends up there? Perhaps there are multiple realms that people can go to when they die and your 'Hell' is just one of them," Etheria said.

"I don't really know the specifics. I just know some humans get sent there and demons are welcome to torture them for all eternity," Orobas said.

"Do all demons speak English as well as you?" she asked.

"You pick it up easily when you spend your entire life listening to people beg for mercy."

"Have you ever swum in lava?"

Orobas closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with his hand. He reopened them and the body was gone. He looked over to the sink in the kitchen. Water dripped from the faucet against the dirty plates.

"A number of times."

"Did it hurt?"

"No. It feels warm."

"How fascinating," she said.

Desiring to leave this conversation in the past, Orobas stood up and said, "I think I'm going to bring down a glass of water for Zombie. He's been working in the fields for a bit."

~~~

The elevator buzzed and Orobas stepped out to see Zombie hunched over in the field. He was wearing his large sun hat with his traditional ill-fitting clothes. Orobas put his hand over his eyes to block out the artificial sun as he approached Zombie.

“Mind the plants,” Zombie said without looking over.

“I brought you some water,” Orobas said.

“I don’t drink it. Just give it to the plants. Make sure to dump it on the roots and not the leaves,” Zombie said, continuing to run his hands through the soil. Orobas bent over and poured out the water on the roots of the nearest tomato plant.

“I heard you screaming last night,” Zombie said.

“When?” Orobas asked as he shook the last drops from the cup.

“Forget. Time sort of blends together for me at night.”

“What did you hear me say?”

“Something about how you didn’t do anything.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“I believe you. Help me out down here. Pull off any gray leaves you see,” Zombie said.

Orobas walked over and nestled himself between a row of plants. He began analyzing each vine for anything that didn’t belong. He stuck his tail straight up in the air, so it didn’t brush against any of the crops.

“Do you have any guilt? Do humans usually struggle with that?” Orobas asked.

“More than you could imagine. It changes someone when you nearly start a pandemic by accident.”

“How do they usually deal with it?”

“To start, I would do the opposite of whatever Durus is doing. That man is ridden with it. Personally, I think time is what helps. Eventually the ringing stops and you can see what’s still standing when the dust clears,” Zombie said. He ripped a weed out of the ground and threw it onto the pathway.

“Why do you feel guilty if you didn’t do anything wrong?” Zombie asked.

“I just feel like I could have done more. I just stood by and watched while people were brutalized. I never said anything.”

“You can’t hold that against yourself. They would have killed you or worse. There’s no end to the suffering if you always consider what-ifs.”

Orobas nodded his head as he tore a graying leaf off the stem.

~~~

Bliant and Slime Knight danced around the anchor point, slashing at the covering. Bliant swung with such force that even though she used a rapier, it was able to cut through threads. Swamp Gut and Golem held the monster back by its front two legs. The spider pushed forward as its back six legs scurried across the ground.

“INFLEXIBLE GUARD!” Golem shouted.

“Inflexible? You’re lucky this thing can’t speak English, or it would start making fun of us,” Swamp Gut said as they pushed together against the beast.

“Golem thinks push more.”

“Dude, you are not! We are equally pushing back right now!” Swamp Gut shouted.

Crimson Claw finally pried his gun from the ground and Durus ran over to him.

“Give me it,” Durus said. Crimson Claw passed the gun over and as soon as Durus touched it with his right arm, pink energy etched across it. He lined the sights on the anchor point.

“Alright, you cleared it enough! Get out of my way!” Durus yelled. As soon as Bliant and Slime Knight ducked to the side, he fired the assault rifle. It rocked in his hands as the bullet

burst from the barrel. Energy pulsed off it as it crunched into the webbing that covered the anchor point. A pink explosion knocked everyone back and rocked the cave.

The spider immediately stopped attacking and stared at them briefly. It calmly analyzed them with its eight eyes before turning around and walking back into the cave.

Crimson Claw hopped back up.

“Great work here, team! That’s one more anchor point down! We are one step closer to finally defeating Mr. Perplexus.”

Aristotle and Etheria talked at a table in the underground base. Aristotle’s phone buzzed briefly.

“He just texted me. How long do I wait to respond?” Aristotle asked. She smiled, wondering what Craig had to say.

“Just text him back now,” Etheria said.

“Is that so? Are you insane? I don’t want to look desperate. I have to let the cookies cool a bit.”

“Let the cookies cool?” Etheria asked.

“Yeah. I wait to respond as long as it takes cookies to cool. I thought you watched all the romance movies so you would know about this stuff.”

“I’ve watched so much TV and yet these courting rituals still elude me. My species just touches tentacles, and your minds are immediately shared with one another providing a perfect bond. It’s like when static shock builds up and you touch someone else, except in this case you get married to the person you touch. Every single person in my species is compatible with every other person.”

“I think I’d rather text,” Aristotle said.

The creaking of the door to the base echoed through the staircase leading to the outside.

Durus’ voice could just barely be heard, “We are filthy. This is going to do a number on the washing machine. My clothes can’t ever stay nice.”

“Woe is me. I weep hearing your soliloquy,” Swamp Gut said.

“You barely wear any clothes. You couldn’t comprehend this,” Durus said.

The six of them appeared in the lobby.

“Oh! What did you guys fight today?” Etheria asked.

“Big spider,” Charles said as he swung his bag over his head and set it down on the table.

“How intriguing! A shame I missed it,” she said.

“Are you insane? It was nightmarish,” Durus said as he and the others entered the elevator.

“Back up at eight for a game?” Etheria asked.

“Always,” Charles said.

“I’ll be in the gym. Could someone please grab me before we start?” Swamp Gut asked.

Slime Knight gave a thumbs up.

As the Nexus Magistrate members slowly gathered upstairs to play a board game, Charles spoke with Bliant before she had to head home. They both stared at a whiteboard. Over two dozen magnets were stuck to the whiteboard. Only nine of them weren’t pushed off to the side. Charles and Bliant stared at the nine magnets with the current team members’ names on it.

“I’m still getting used to picking teams for missions,” Charles said.

“Even though I stepped down, that doesn’t mean I won’t help you learn how to lead,” Bliant said.

She moved Zombie and Charles’ name off to the side of the board.

“You’ll probably want about six people there. You could bring more, but most missions don’t need more than that. We know Zombie can’t fight and that you’re going to be busy.”

“So, I just need to cut one person?” Charles asked.

“Yeah. I have someone in mind, but I want to see what you think,” Bliant said.

“We want to keep Swamp Gut, Etheria, and Slime Knight. All three of them are very capable. Hmm. We can bring Durus too. So, that leaves either Aristotle or Golem,” Charles said as he rearranged the magnets.

“Which one do you think we should let stay home? Team synergy is a factor to keep in mind,” Bliant said.

“We should bring Aristotle. She may not be the best fighter right now, but her and Durus work well together. Golem works best when I’m on the team too,” Charles said. He finished arranging the magnets so only six of them remained at the center of the board.

Bliant nodded her head.

“Good work. See, you’ll get the hang of this. I appreciate you taking over as leader. Abraham is getting older, and I really needed to have more time with him,” Bliant said.

“Well, I was technically supposed to be doing it this whole time, so it is about time I shoulder the burden. You’ve done more than your fair share for this team,” Charles said.

Bliant patted Charles on the back and began walking to the exit.

“See you tomorrow before the mission?” she asked.

“You bet,” Charles said.

Etheria pulled out the board game *Just One* and opened the box. Everyone except for Bliant, who had already returned home, received a little whiteboard and marker. “Say It Isn’t So” by The Outfield played in the background. Aristotle’s hair was wrapped up as she waited for it to dry. Charles’ hair had been combed back so it could dry just the way he liked it to sit.

“In this one, we are all working together. One person gets a word they must guess and everyone else gives one word as a clue to help them guess it. The catch is if any of us use the same word as a clue it gets erased and the guesser doesn’t get to see it,” Etheria said.

“Simple enough. I’ll be the first guesser,” Orobas said. He pulled a card out and “apple” was his word.

Everyone quietly wrote down their words. Golem held the small marker delicately in his large hands. The Nexus Magistrate flipped over their boards to see if anyone used the same word before showing Orobas their clues. Red, Red, Round, Stem, Sin, Eat, Rot, and Granny.

“Golem, did you copy my word?” Charles asked.

“No.”

“That’s definitely your handwriting. It’s okay, but remember, we want to say different words,” Charles said looking at the etched “red” on the white board. He erased their duplicate clues and showed Orobas the words.

“Wait, who said sin?” Aristotle asked.

“I bet it was Durus,” Swamp Gut said.

“Well, I bet you said granny,” Durus said.

“Better clue than yours,” Swamp Gut said.

“Is it an apple?” Orobas asked. He was lucky that the almanac had a page discussing how many apples were grown in America during the past year that included all sorts of trivia about the fruit.

“Correct!” Etheria said.

Durus got up and went to the cupboards. He grabbed a large bowl and poured out some pretzels. He returned with the bowl, took a handful, then passed it down. Each person took a few then passed it to the next person. Slime Knight reached in with his gloved hands and tossed a handful into the abyss of his armor. He would spit the food out later as he could not digest it, but he enjoyed acting like everyone else. The bowl made it around the table and Aristotle passed it to Swamp Gut.

“Nah, I’m good,” Swamp Gut said as they passed it down.

“They’re unsalted,” Charles said.

Orobas looked to see that Charles was eating some of the pretzels before eating some himself. They crunched in his mouth and dried his tongue. It tasted as if he had eaten sand.

“I know. I think I am going to start intermittent fasting,” Swamp Gut said.

“What’s that?” Durus asked.

“It’s when you only eat for eight hours a day, usually from twelve to eight in the evening.”

“That’s stupid,” Durus said.

“It’s supposed to help with metabolism and stuff. It’ll allow me to get in better shape,” Swamp Gut said.

“Climbing” by Silver came on the radio.

It was now Aristotle's turn to guess. She pulled the word "home". They all wrote down their clues.

"You're already in incredible shape, Swamp Gut. You go to the gym every day and eat really healthy," Charles said.

"Am I actually? If I didn't have my powers, I'd be too scrawny to be able to help. I'm only strong enough to protect people because I can cheat when I touch water."

"That isn't cheating. Your powers are part of who you are," Charles said. The irony of him saying this was not lost to the others.

They finished writing down their clues and shared them with each other to check for duplicates. Living, Here, Family, Bed, Rot, Temporary, Mortgage, and Suburbia. Charles noticed that "family" was etched in Golem's handwriting. Once they confirmed there were no duplicates, they showed Aristotle her clues.

"That stuff is a slippery slope, Swamp Gut," Charles said.

"Why can't any of you trust me to know what's best for my body?" Swamp Gut asked. Swamp Gut knew that none of the others could even begin to understand the biology of their body. Charles looked away.

"Is it house?" Aristotle questioned, hoping to guess the word.

"Close enough!" Durus said, as he leaned back in his chair.

"Who keeps using rot as their clue?" Etheria asked.

"My bad," Zombie said.

It was Durus' turn to guess. He pulled the word "gum".

“I looked through the almanac, but I couldn’t find anything about the Eel Clan. I know we talked about them yesterday. Who are they?” Orobas asked the others as they wrote down their clues

Durus’ chair slammed back to the ground. His hand felt slimy hearing that name. Needles of remorse pricked against his skin and color seeped out of his face as his mouth dried.

“Even though we fight them every so often, Durus knows the most about them from all his research. He could tell you about them,” Charles said.

“Yeah, I can talk a bit about them. They’re an eco-terrorist group. They do the usual stuff like blowing up factories or assassinating corrupt CEOs. I know they are led by the Eel, and I briefly met the other officers at a cookout, but I can’t remember their names. There was this one that was super buff, one with these crazy long fingers, and one with hair past her shoulders,” Durus said.

“That’s all you can remember?” Swamp Gut asked.

“They were very forgettable people. They could have all merged into one giant person and I still couldn’t tell you anything about them.”

“Like a Megazord?” Etheria asked.

“Yeah, like a Megazord of Mediocrity,” Durus said.

“You said you met them at a cookout? Why was that the setting of acquaintanceship?” Orobas asked.

“Because they recruited my wife to their cult,” Durus said. His mind ached remembering the landslide of events pushing him to this moment now. He remembered the night he made his only immoral decision ever.

Aristotle considered speaking up, but decided she first wanted to see how Durus described the situation.

They checked for similar clues. Pink was used twice so it was erased. They shared the clues with Durus. Chewy, Sticky, Stale, Wrapper, Bubble, Sweet.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Orobas said.

“Bubblegum,” Durus said.

“Correct!” Etheria said.

“It’s all good. I did everything I could to save her, but the Eel Clan is persuasive. Once they get their hooks in you, few people get out. I messed up my arm trying to save her,” Durus said.

“What happened, if you don’t mind sharing?” Orobas asked.

Durus was instantly brought back to that day. A retelling was second nature.

Elias Abate sat at a desk in the local library surrounded by stacks of books. As the night dragged on, he soon became the only person left in the building with the librarian.

The librarian walked up to him then asked, “How did the research go today?”

Elias closed his book then rubbed his hands down his face.

“Still nothing. I’ve never seen any of this magic stuff before and there isn’t much about it online, but I know what I’m looking for must be here somewhere,” Elias said.

The librarian looked to the crowbar sticking out of Elias’ backpack and the dust on his boots.

“You really should be resting after spending all day with your demolition crew,” he said.

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. What I am curious about is if there’s anything else you think I should look at here that I haven’t seen yet. I’ve read about brain washing, hexes, enchantments, and so much more. None of them match any symptoms Carina had,” Elias said.

“There isn’t much left here. I can reach out to the other libraries across the points, but it’ll take a few days for those to get in here. Maybe you should rest until then,” the librarian said.

“I can always count on you. I’ll check back in a few days, but tonight I need a drink,” Elias said.

He stood up, put on his backpack, lifted his stack of books onto the return cart, then patted the librarian on the back as he walked by.

“Have a nice night!” Elias said.

“You too, Elias,” the librarian said.

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“. . . and so, Carina goes and joins some cult. Imagine that! They must have cast some spell on her, but I can’t seem to find out what they did,” Elias finished telling the bartender as she served him another drink.

“In Between Days” by The Cure played over the bar’s speakers.

“You know, you overshare,” the woman sitting next to him said.

“I think you can just mind your own business,” Elias said as he turned to his right. He looked at a woman wearing a khaki-colored trench coat. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail.

“You said some sort of spell?” the woman asked.

The men watching the football game behind them cheered as their team scored a touchdown.

“What’s it to you?” Elias asked.

“Answer my question,” she said.

“What even is your name?” he asked.

“Aristotle.”

“That’s a stupid name.”

“Is that so? Answer my question. You mentioned a spell, correct?” Aristotle asked.

“Yeah, I think the Eel Clan cast some spell on my wife to make her join them,” he said.

Aristotle snickered to herself.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you that I have fought the Eel Clan many times before. Those people wouldn’t touch magic with a ten-foot pole. Here’s what I think happened. I think you just were a bad husband that didn’t know his wife as well as he thought he did.”

“You’re bullshitting me. Why would you fight them?” he asked.

Behind them, a woman lined up a shot on the pool table. Two balls cracked into each other before rolling across the green felt.

“Because I have magical powers,” she said.

“Prove it,” he said.

Aristotle snapped her fingers and everything in the room stopped moving. The balls on the table instantly became motionless, the TV froze, and the liquid being poured by the bartender remained stagnant midair. No one moved except for the two of them.

“Woah. I must not have been counting my drinks right,” he said as stood up.

“You’ve spent so much time looking for magic. You finally found it,” Aristotle said as Elias walked around the room confirming that nothing was moving.

“Are these people going to be okay?” he asked.

“Of course they will. I have a proposition. Wanna make a bet that there was no magic that influenced your wife to join the Eel Clan?”

“Obviously I would. But we have no way to verify that,” he said.

“I’ll cast a spell right now that will check your wife’s mind for any obstructions. If it detects anything, her mind will be cleared.”

“You can do that?”

“Not much I can’t do. It will come at a cost. First, I want you to cover my tab for tonight. Second, messing with people’s minds is pretty nasty magic and it can get volatile if you aren’t careful. I’ll set you as the target if anything were to blast back at us.”

“What are the chances something comes back to me?” he asked.

“I’m sending a magical parasite into your wife’s mind. If it can’t find any magic to eat in there, it will come back and feast on your soul.”

“How much of it?” he asked.

“Not a very self-assured question. I’m not sure. A bit. Not all of it. Probably less than half. You shouldn’t be concerned about that though. The problem is that curses are always around, like viruses, just floating in the air. Just one person in a city puts everyone else who lives there at risk. Your soul fights off curses like white blood cells fight off viruses. If we erase some of your soul, you’ll be susceptible to curses in the air.”

“Would that mean I could infect people if I were to get infected myself?” Elias asked.

“Not a lot of people walking around missing a part of their soul. I wouldn’t lose sleep over it,” she said.

“Do it.”



“Right now?” she asked.

“Now.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

Aristotle cracked her knuckles then pulled at the air as if she was tearing a loose string off a shirt. After doing that briefly, she cupped her hands and blew into them.

“Done,” she said.

“That’s it? How long do we wait?” he asked.

“Probably a little bit. I’m only working off a name here. Will take the little rascal some time to find her.”

“Are we talking minutes? Hours?” he asked.

“Not sure.”

They stood quietly.

“I should mention, my tab is extremely large tonight. One could consider it exorbitant—”

As she spoke, Elias grabbed at his chest. He fell to his knees, then rolled over onto the ground. His breaths grew rapid as the coloring slipped out from his face. Aristotle ran over and knelt next to him.

“Woah. Woah. This isn’t supposed to kill you. Don’t look so pale,” she said.

She could see the outlines of his veins as he clenched his jaw. His right arm swung upward, and his hand began rapidly opening and closing. His fingers writhed in the air.

After that, the screaming started. Elias wailed in agony. It felt like his body was being torn apart on the inside. It was as if maggots had infested his heart and were eating away at each valve and ventricle.

Aristotle watched as smoke began to slip off his right hand. It started as a slow stream upward, but soon it grew into a plume rising through the air. The grey cloud turned a magenta hue.

“WHAT . . . HAVE . . . YOU . . . DONE TO ME!” Durus shouted before falling unconscious as the pain overwhelmed him.

She stepped back and watched in horror. Durus rocked on the ground, crashing against the floorboards. For the first time in her life, her powers had hurt someone.

The smoke dissipated and Durus’ right hand fell back to the ground as his body stopped shaking. It was now covered in pink cracks that slipped down his arm. His ring finger was missing. It appeared to have burnt off in the smoke.

Aristotle rubbed her eyes and looked back to see Durus still lying on the ground. It was silent in the room. Not a single particle moved through the air except for the wisps of smoke slipping off his hand. The room smelled like burnt skin and hair. She turned over to the counter and vomited, spewing a chunky, brown liquid across the counter.

She dry heaved, but when nothing came back up, she adjusted her trench coat collar.

“Alright. It’s okay. Just grab him, take him to Nexus Magistrate, then unfreeze the room. It will all be okay. It’s going to be okay, Stotle,” she muttered to herself before throwing Durus over her back.

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“Love that story,” Swamp Gut said once Durus finished recounting that night.

“I knew what she needed. It should have worked. Something must have gone wrong with the spell,” Durus said as he stared at his right arm. The cracks in his skin constantly reminded him of his poisonous hubris.

“I will always repeat this, I didn’t mess the spell up. Although, I can’t believe I cast that spell for you in the first place. That was so manipulative. Not a proud moment for me,” Aristotle said.

“It wasn’t manipulation. It was salvation,” Durus said.

“Sounds a wee bit manipulative to me,” Swamp Gut said.

“No, I knew her. I knew what was best,” he said.

“I think it’s irritating when others think they know what’s best for you,” Swamp Gut said.

“Sometimes others are too lost to know what they need. That’s when a friend needs to step in,” Durus said.

In hopes of cutting off a potential argument, Charles flipped a card over to reveal what word he had to guess and without looking showed it to the others.

“We still have like ten rounds left. Can you all give me some clues?” Charles asked.

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Meanwhile, Bliant sat in the bathtub as Abraham combed through her wings. He delicately pulled out the webbing, careful not to dislodge a single feather. Steam filled the air and fogged the mirror.

“Wow, that spider really did a number on your wings.”

“It was a smart bugger. How was work for you?” she asked.

“Not bad. Spoke with Stotle earlier today.”

“Did she tell you she’s going on a date tomorrow?”

Abraham let loose a slight gasp, before regaining composure and saying, “I can’t tell you what she did or didn’t tell me.”

Bliant smiled to herself. She ducked under the water and ran her hands through her hair hoping to dissolve some more of the webbing.

She popped back over the water. As suds dripped down her face, she said, “Seeing Orobas gets me wondering if God exists. I’ve always wondered who sent me down here to protect Moroseville that day. Maybe if some form of Hell exists, that would mean a form of Heaven exists too?”

“Hard to tell. One does not necessarily mandate the other. I don’t mind too much whether or not Heaven exists,” he said as his hands continued to search her wings for any foreign materials.

“I do,” she said.

“Why’s that?”

Bliant looked into Abraham’s eyes as she said, “Because I need to know that when everything is said and done, I get to spend eternity with you.”

“I’m honored. Although, getting to spend time right now with you is more than I could ever ask for. I don’t really care what comes after because I got to spend now with you.”

The tub began to drain, and Abraham stood up.

“By the way, Swamp Gut dropped off a gift for you. They mentioned there was no way you’d be able to figure out how to print it. I’ll wait in the living room for you to dry off. I picked out a movie to watch,” he said.

He walked out of the room and a sound caught Bliant’s attention. She looked through the window to see a crow resting outside it. A singular beady eye stared at her, or at least she felt it was. The crow opened its mouth and let loose another cry before flying off.

After they wrapped up the board game, Durus caught Charles in the hallway.

“Why didn’t you use your lycanthrope powers earlier and just cut through the webbing? That spider could have killed the others in the time wasted waiting for Bliant to come back,” Durus said.

“I assessed the situation and determined it wasn’t necessary.”

“If you insist, Boss,” Durus said before walking off into his room.

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Orobas knocked on the door to Aristotle’s room. She opened her door slightly, and upon noticing it was him, she opened it wider.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I think we share something in common. We both hide from something we fear. I fear violence and you fear alcohol. I understand you’ve been abstaining from alcohol for quite a while now and I was wondering why you do that. Maybe it could help me understand my own inhibitions,” he said as he stood in the doorway.

“I imagine we do it for the same reasons. I’m scared of what I’d do if I was under the influence again. You’re scared that you wouldn’t be able to stop if you started,” she said.

“But neither of us have ever done something wrong so we should have no reason to believe we would act out,” he said.

“I did,” she said.

“That doesn’t count. You didn’t know what would happen,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter. That was just one time, but it made me realize there were other times I’ve had the thought. Thoughts are incredibly dangerous for people like us,” she said.

Orobas paused, assessing his past as he stood hunched over in her doorway. Had he ever wanted to hurt someone else? What if seeing it happen so often had normalized it in his head?

“Why do you ask this all anyway? Are you considering being violent?” she asked.

“No. I just—I want to understand myself better,” he said.

“Don’t we all,” she said as she started to slowly close her door.

“Have a nice night,” he said.

“You as well.”

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Later that night, Bliant walked through the living room to turn off all the lights since Abraham had fallen asleep on the couch. She noticed the rectangular box wrapped in paper with pictures of green fish on them. Bliant delicately tore the paper open to find a framed picture of them together last night. While she was taken aback by the lukewarm expression on her face in the picture, it did bring her joy to see everyone together. She smiled, then set it on Abraham’s work desk.

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Later that night, Etheria was in the living room listening to “El Muchacho de los Ojos Tristes” by Jeanette as she browsed board game forums on her phone. A single lamp was on. It illuminated the room in a warm yellow. The elevator bell buzzed, and Swamp Gut stepped out of it.

“Funny seeing you up this late,” Swamp Gut said.

“Could say the same to you. What brings you up here?” she asked.

“I got a little hungry, so I wanted to get something to eat. I figured I’d grab some ice chips to eat,” they said.

“I thought those had no caloric content in them,” she said.

“That’s kinda the point,” they said.

Swamp Gut grabbed a plastic cup out of the cabinet and held it up to the water dispenser on the refrigerator. Gears grinded as chunks of ice spit out into their cup.

“They say most of the time when you’re hungry you’re actually just thirsty,” Swamp Gut said.

“Interesting. Care to sit with me for a bit?” Etheria asked.

“It looks like I have the time,” Swamp Gut said as they plopped down on the couch.

Etheria put her phone down.

“Wait. This song isn’t in English,” Swamp Gut said.

“I suppose. All songs sound foreign to me anyway,” Etheria said.

“It sounds kind of sad. Is it sad?” Swamp Gut asked.

“It is,” she said.

“I don’t think these people get me. They’re nice, but I don’t think they truly understand me,” Swamp Gut said.

“Unfortunately, that’s life as a being that doesn’t look human,” she said.

“No, not like that. You heard how they talked to me tonight. They think the fasting is dumb. They’ll let me do it and won’t say anything unless I bring it up, but I know they think I’m stupid for it.

“They don’t know what it’s like to look into the mirror and hate what you see. To hate your true self. I don’t mean like Charles where he hates the fur. He still turns into a human at the end of the day. No matter what happens, when I go to bed at night it’s as my pathetic, normal self.”

Swamp Gut slid some ice chunks down their throat. Since the ice was frozen, their body did not absorb any of the water.

“I understand you,” she said.

Etheria faced Swamp Gut and they stared into the dark abyss of her hood. Swamp Gut bit the corner of their cheek before looking down at the cup in their hand.

“Thank you for saying that. It’s so nice to have someone not tell me what to do for once.”

“I’ve noticed it’s easy for humans to pretend to understand humans different from themselves. I doubt any of them could truly know what it feels like to be someone else. Not to mention if that else was a creature from the Absence or amphibious,” Etheria said.

“Why did you leave the Absence?” Swamp Gut asked.

“Everyone in the Absence looked exactly the same and for the most part acted the same. I wanted to be someone, not another. This place lets me be Etheria.”

“Did they play board games in the Absence?” Swamp Gut asked.

“No, we did not possess a single non-moving, solid surface.”

“So, no Monopoly?” Swamp Gut asked.

“I think the game is more in line with where Orobas comes from,” Etheria said. A slight giggle escaped from under her hood. Swamp Gut smiled too.

Swamp Gut finished the last of their ice chips and stood up.

“It was nice talking to you. I think I’ll head to bed now,” Swamp Gut said.

“Good night, Swamp Gut.”

“Night, Etheria.”

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Charles sat at the desk in his room quietly writing in his journal. Golem watched a nature documentary on TV. This one was about ants, and he was learning of the intricacies in their ant hills. The events of their last two fights were stuck in Charles' head. For two days in a row his team had been in danger because he was holding back. He stood up and walked over to Golem so he could watch the documentary. Charles watched an ant carry a blueberry across the screen.

"Golem, you know, sometimes I don't feel so strong."

Golem turned from the TV and looked at him.

"I don't think I can be the leader for these people. I think Dad was right when he told me I could never be a real man. I'm not strong enough. These people deserve more than me," Charles said. He stared at the ground, avoiding eye contact as he spoke.

Golem stood up and slowly turned around to face him. He extended his granite arms out and wrapped them around Charles' body.

"Charles strong always."

To Golem, Charles was an inevitable force of truth and justice giving it his all every single day. Golem would follow Charles and any decision he made no matter what.

"Thanks, Buddy," he said as he reached his arms as far as they could around Golem's stone body.

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Durus sat in his bed staring at a picture of himself from over a year ago. Carina and Elias stood smiling in front of their house. It was the first day they had started moving in. The summer air was warm that day as boxes were heaved in. Everyone from the family came to help them unpack and they talked over iced cans of soda.

He hated the past version of himself. The ignorant fool. Elias had no idea how much worse life would get. He didn't know Carina would change so much.

The halfwit got to enjoy Carina and the relationship while Durus was forced to deal with what came after. It wasn't fair. Would this mindless man even recognize his modern self?

"I hate you. I hate you for getting to love life. You didn't know what was coming."

"Durus, it's your future self speaking. Go to sleep so you can have a fruitful day tomorrow," Swamp Gut muttered from the other side of the wall.

"Do you think you would ever get bangs?"

"Maybe. Why?" Aristotle asked as she looked over at Rory. He rubbed his hand through his bowl cut, blonde hair. She lifted her hand to feel her bare forehead.

"I just think you would look cuter. Not that you don't look cute now, but you could look even cuter," he said without looking up from his phone. They both sat on a corduroy couch under a wool, brown blanket. *Supernatural* reruns played on the TV.

Aristotle knew it wasn't true, but she couldn't help but wonder if he had seen a picture of some girl with bangs and that prompted this conversation. Those people were her enemies. She knew they functioned the same as her and they weren't technically better than her, but those types of girls always had an air about them. They carried themselves differently. There was more confidence in every breath they took as if every motion was premeditated and calculated for maximum appeal.

"What if you let me pick out an outfit for you? I think that would be a lot of fun," Rory said.

“Why would you need to do that?” she asked. Was this just a ploy so he could build his perfect girlfriend but disguise it as a cute date?

“I don’t know. I just think it would be fun to do! Don’t couples do that?” he asked.

He had always thought girls who wore sweaters were cute. Aristotle was one for the athleisure.

“I’m not sure. I just kind of have my own style and I figure that should be enough for you,” she said.

“Is that so?” he asked.

Aristotle’s eyes ripped open. She looked at the clothes she had set out for tomorrow’s date. A long, blue sweater hung over the table with a pair of black pants. She felt the bangs resting on her forehead.

“This time I’ll be a better partner. This time it is going to work,” she said before resting her head back on the pillow.

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“Mission Log: Day 2

“We spent the entire day walking. Supposedly, Paimon’s nose is trustworthy. Before the sun rises tomorrow, we will cross the bridge to the north-west point of this area. Our journey will pick back up as soon as my weaker teammates finish resting their legs.”

Paimon, Forneus, and Seir were laying in the grass as the purple demon talked over them.

Paimon grabbed a rock off the ground. His hands glowed blue. The rock reformed as an apple, and he crunched down on it.

“Alright, it has been six hundred sixty-six seconds. Time to get up and moving again,” the purple demon said.

The other three grumbled as they slowly stood back up and continued following the angel's trail.

## Wednesday: What-Ifs

Durus looked at the two of them. To kill someone. Perhaps he would not only learn to accept this, but would enjoy it in this specific instance. He had to channel more energy forward than ever before. Routinely, he tried to hide this part of himself, the mistakes. Right now, he needed to let it loose.

He grabbed a flower off the ground with his right hand and watched it disintegrate to ash after burning a pink flame. Cursed energy spread through him. Lilac colored sparks popped off his skin and fell across the daisies.

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Charles finished covering the plan of attack for their next mission with Bliant.

“You sure you’re okay to handle this one?” Charles asked as he searched through his closet for something to wear today.

“It’ll be just like old times. You enjoy your family time,” Bliant said.

“You know I always do,” Charles said. He pulled out a button-up shirt.

“I don’t think that is the right pick for an arcade,” she said.

“Hmph. I think you’re right,” Charles said as he went back into the closet.

“He’s probably going to ask about the Reckoning again and I’ll have to tell him again that it hasn’t happened yet,” Charles said.

“Do you still believe that it’s going to happen?” Bliant asked.

Charles pulled out a crème-colored shirt that opened up toward the top. Bliant nodded in approval.

“It’s my job to,” Charles said.

“But do *you* actually believe it is going to happen again?”

“Spirit Rider wouldn’t have lied to me.”

“She may have told you the truth as far as she knew, but that isn’t the same thing as the actual truth,” Bliant said.

“Does it matter if I still believe it will happen again?”

“It’s just that believing in the Reckoning keeps you tied back here. I know you want to do this for Spirit Rider, but ever since she died what have you done? You haven’t had another partner since, and you barely see your family. You were so focused on serving the team and now you’re focused on leading them,” Bliant said.

“Spirit Rider told me to wait and that’s what I’m going to do,” Charles said.

“You can’t wait for someone who is already gone.”

As far as Charles was concerned, it was his life, and he could spend it in whatever way he wanted to. He was willing to spend every day of his eternal life to make sure he could fulfill Spirit Rider’s final wish.

Bliant knew deep down the Reckoning would never return. She would have found some evidence of it in her near twenty years of leading the team if it was to return. All she wanted was for her friend to return. When he spoke to her, she could see how his eyes looked past as if he was always watching for something else. It was the pauses before he spoke as if he was waiting for something to happen first. He was always waiting for it to return.

“I appreciate your concern, but you have nothing to worry about,” Charles said.

“I’m always here for you,” she said.

“There’s no one else I’d want to have my back.”

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Bliant, Etheria, Swamp Gut, Slime Knight, Durus, and Aristotle stood around another anchor point that sat in a graveyard. It was early morning and before the dew could even evaporate off the grass, the heroes were ready to wrap up their mission.

“Great, this gives me time to take a nap before my date,” Aristotle said.

“Why did you even come along?” Durus asked as he tossed his crowbar up and down.

“Because I’m helpful. I contribute to the fights,” she said. In her hands, she held one of Slime Knight’s spare swords. The metal was heavy, and she wasn’t quite sure how to effectively swing it.

“Lucky for you, I don’t think we have to fight today,” Durus said.

“Lucky for me too. Someone forgot to pack my water bottles,” Swamp Gut said as they looked toward Slime Knight.

Slime Knight held his hands up into the air to demonstrate his confusion.

“I told you to pack it when you were moving your weapons into the car. Don’t you remember?” Swamp Gut asked.

Slime Knight shrugged.

“Gah. I forgive you. I could never stay made my best buddy,” Swamp Gut said.

Slime Knight gave a thumbs up.

“These things are usually booby-trapped. There is no telling what happens after we break it. There may still be a fight,” Bliant said.

“I love a good mystery!” Etheria said as she picked up the orb from its obsidian pedestal with one of her tentacles. She slammed it into the grass and the glass shattered to pieces as a wisp of smoke rose. Immediately, the ground around them began to shake. Decrepit hands popped out from the earth and began viciously scraping at the ground to dig the rest of their body out.

As the ground vibrated from the numerous fingers scratching against soil, countless dark blue bodies began to surround them. All of the creatures’ were missing legs. Beneath their torso, torn cloth flapped in the air. A dull glow arose off the monsters. Their eyes were sunken in, leaving only a black abyss.

Swamp Gut dove to the ground and began aggressively rolling against the grass hoping to collect as much of the morning dew as possible. Their body grew slightly, and they stood back up. A loud moan rose out from around them, similar to the hum of cicadas.



“Get back-to-back! We form a circle right here and cut them down!” Bliant commanded as they all moved to stand shoulder to shoulder.

Aristotle and Slime Knight raised their swords to be ready to strike. Durus gripped his crowbar as energy pulsed across it. Swamp Gut cracked their knuckles in anticipation. Etheria began to channel an orb of energy and Bliant raised the tip of her rapier toward the swarm.

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At the base, Golem anxiously paced as Orobas read from a book detailing the history of heroes in this world.

“Is something the matter, Golem?” Orobas asked.

“Charles alone. Must protect,” Golem said.

“He’s seeing his brother today. I hardly think that calls for protection,” Orobas said.

“Surprise attack?” Golem suggested.

“I know it’s scary having someone you care so much about out there alone in the world, but Charles seems to be a strong man. He can take care of himself if there was to be a surprise attack.”

“Possibilities scary.”

“They are, especially when someone is so important to you. Why don’t we take your mind off it? I had some questions about history I’d like to ask you. You okay if I poke your mind?”

“Where’s chisel?” Golem asked.

To Orobas, the floor had been covered with blood and Golem was trudging through it. Random organs floated at the fluid’s surface this entire time. As Golem moved through the room to get to his chair, he walked across Orobas’ line of sight. The flooring behind Golem appeared

clean as he walked across the room. Golem sat down and Orobas adjusted to face him. As soon as Golem sat down, the blood covering the floor completely disappeared from Orobas' vision. Orobas smiled as he prepared to ask his first question.

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Each ghoul disappeared in a flash of dust once a lethal blow was dealt. Slashing, bashing, and blasting for over thirty minutes at this point, each attack grew slower as breaths became heavier. Swamp Gut grabbed one of the ghouls by the head and threw it back into the horde. It crashed into two more and they erupted in an explosion of particles.

From above, the battlefield resembled that of a human eye. The black pedestal sat at the center and a mass of blue surrounded it on all sides. White gravestones covered the ground for miles. They continued to hold off the ghouls, but the waves had not appeared to thin. Grime covered their clothes and filth soaked into their skin as they continued to fend off the opposing army.

Swamp Gut's knees buckled, and they collapsed to the ground, gasping for air. They had not eaten since midday yesterday and was running on fumes. Slime Knight widened the range in which he attacked to cover the drop.

"Keep going, Swamp Gut! We can't let the line break!" Bliant shouted.

As they adjusted to compensate for Swamp Gut's absence, the ghouls reached forward at Aristotle, who attacked the slowest. They grabbed her faster than she could slash them away and countless hands began dragging her backward into the waves of rotten bodies.

"Aristotle!" Durus shouted as she disappeared in the mass.

"We can't break this formation. We will get her after!" Bliant shouted over the dull moan of the ghouls.

Durus paused, considering what to do. He had never broken off from formation or disobeyed a direct order before. The weight of possibility crashed down upon him. This was the sort of thing Carina had left him over. Tension seeped across his body, coating his soul in self-doubt. He never took risks. He never did anything upon his own intuition. He never made his own decisions. So, for the second time ever in his life, Durus made what he considered an immoral decision.

“No way in hell am I letting them just drag her away,” Durus said as he grabbed her sword off the ground. Pink energy crackled from his right hand across the blade. He slid his crowbar into his back pocket. Durus lifted the sword into the air and crashed it through the monsters. They exploded in a flash of purple dust. He burst through the cloud with the sword pointed forward, impaling anything that stood in his way.

Small bursts of pink marked his path as he cut through the endless waves. As decrepit hands began to cover him, he summoned all the strength he could muster and spun his sword around his entire body clearing everything around him. With the clean space around him, he was able to briefly make out Aristotle in the distance. He dropped the sword to the ground and pulled out his crowbar, desiring something that allowed him to move quicker.

~~~

Etheria, Bliant, and Slime Knight stood back-to-back on a mountain of remains. Swamp Gut laid passed out in the safe area the others had created by interlocking their bodies. Sweat beaded on Bliant’s head as she continued to jab at the monsters. The orbs of energy Etheria produced grew smaller by the minute. Slime Knight continued to attack the monsters relentlessly. The squeaking of the plates on his armor rubbing against each other slipped from audible perception after hearing it for so long.

Bliant could feel that it was going to happen. She was going to be the last one standing. *Not again. I can't always be the last one.* Etheria screamed out as hands grabbed at her cloak.

“Help!” Etheria shouted. Slime Knight turned around to help but was yanked back by clawing arms from within the swarm. As they lost their positioning, ghouls snuck in and began to tug at Swamp Gut. *It's only ghouls, nothing more. There will never be another day like the Reckoning again.*

“You will take no one else!” Bliant shouted. Determination coursed through her body. A burst of wind crashed across the ground as she took into the air. She rapidly descended and flew through the waves of ghouls stabbing them with her rapier. Bliant prioritized the ones reaching at her allies and managed to keep them from being dragged away through precise attacks from her.

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Durus threw his crowbar forward and it impaled the head of the ghoul dragging Aristotle across the ground.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I'm saving you! Get up!”

“No, they were taking me somewhere. I bet they have a secret base. Maybe we can cut them off at the source. Get down here and get dragged away,” she said.

Durus looked around to see the ghouls surrounding them. He saw no way out.

“Fine, but you better be right.”

They let the cold, blue hands grab hold of their bodies and drag them away.

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As this occurred, Bliant continued to swing at the monsters. Her arms felt tense as she questioned how much longer she could keep this going for.

~~~

Durus and Aristotle were taken into a cave. As soon as they reached the epicenter of the cave, the ghouls let go of them and floated back out the entrance. A small, glass orb sat on a pedestal at the center of the cavern.

“I thought we destroyed the anchor point,” Durus said.

“I bet it was a fake. This is the real one,” Aristotle said.

“Why would the monsters just lead us to the real one?” Durus asked.

“You had said the spider was being controlled, right? I bet the ghouls were trying to bring us here so we could break this, and they could finally rest.”

Durus sprinted to the center of the room, directly to the anchor point.

~~~

Above, Bliant dropped her rapier to the ground below her. She couldn't bear to attack with it anymore. Her gloves had been torn to shreds by the friction of the hilt and blood coated her fingers. Bliant dove into the innumerable ghouls that surrounded her allies and crashed against the ground. She raised her fists up into the air and began punching the ghouls backward. Her wings thrashed up and down, but she had no intention of taking flight.

“You want someone? I'M RIGHT HERE!” Bliant shouted as she continued to push back ghouls while making as much noise as possible. Hands began to grab her armor and her wings. They slowly dragged her backward. A small circle rested above her. It was no halo, but crows circling one another in the sky. Their shadow cast down on her and she closed her eyes as the ghouls took her away.

Suddenly, she fell to the ground. The thick layer of dust covering the grass softened Bliant's fall.

Durus and Aristotle found her unconscious. They were unable to wake her, but she breathed peacefully. As Slime Knight, Etheria, and Swamp Gut cleaned themselves off, Durus and Aristotle sat next to Bliant.

“You know, chasing after you was the second immoral decision I’ve ever made,” Durus said.

“What was the first? Oh. Well, I wouldn’t consider what you just did immoral. You tried to save my life.”

“But I disobeyed an order,” he said. Even knowing his decision had helped lead them to victory, he felt dirty. His hands were filthy from fighting. He could feel the plaque stuck to his back teeth. His tongue coiled in, embarrassed by what it had pronounced.

“I’m grateful you did,” she said.

“Do you think I’m too moral?” he asked.

“You’re definitely moral, but I don’t think it’s a bad thing.”

“You don’t? I sometimes feel as if I’m suffocating everyone around me. Like yesterday with the spider, I put people in danger by not wanting to kill it, or Carina . . .”

“Did she ever say something to you?”

“Nothing direct. It’s just you hear about these things people dream of. They want to sneak in somewhere and make out or they like guys who don’t hold the steering wheel at ten and two. I’ve never, ever wanted to sneak anywhere in my entire life, and I *always* hold the steering wheel properly. I won’t ever be able to give that to someone.”

“I think the right people in your life won’t mind the fact you don’t like sneaking or that you drive with two hands on the wheel,” Aristotle said with a smile.

“I just feel I bored Carina sometimes or like maybe she felt constricted by my presence. Like I kept her from being who she really wanted to be,” Durus said as he stared at the ashes of the ghouls. They reminded him of his relationship, but even he knew this comparison was a bit excessive.

“Maybe you did bore her, but that’s not your fault. You aren’t a boring person, Durus,” she said.

“Thanks, Aristotle.”

Bliant slowly began to stir. When she reopened her eyes, Durus and Aristotle stood above her.

“You okay, Captain?” Durus asked as he reached his arm out.

“Are the others safe?” Bliant asked as she was pulled up.

“Yeah, you kept them safe. They’re all okay,” Aristotle said. Bliant looked over to see Slime Knight, Etheria, and Swamp Gut conversing off in the distance.

Much later in the day, Daniel rolled the textureless ball up the ramp. It flew up, landed, then rolled into a hole. Ten Points. After fifty years, his hands were not as precise as they once were.

“Ten points. Going to have to do better than that if you’re looking to usurp me,” Charles said as he looked around. Countless children sprinted across the arcade as their parents trailed after them. Disco lights spun on the ceiling spraying colored lights across the floor. Each color shined in Daniel’s hair, overtaking the silver. “Caught Up In You” by 38 Special played over the speakers.

“Who says I want to do that?” Daniel asked as he picked up another ball.

“How are the kids doing?” Charles asked.

Twenty points.

“Fine enough. Oldest just started college. Youngest is just starting high school. It scares me sometimes to know they will all be out of the home soon enough.”

“Must be crazy. I couldn’t even imagine,” Charles said. He stared blankly at the balls rolling into the hole. Twenty. Thirty. The small talk bored him, but he knew it was a part of the package deal that was meeting with his brother. Ten. Ten.

“How about you? Job going well enough?” Daniel asked. Twenty.

“Yep.” Ten.

“No mobs of monsters sieging Moroseville yet?” Fifty.

“Not since the last one,” Charles said.

Charles put in two quarters and nine balls rolled out. He rolled them up and each landed in the fifty hole.

“Wow, you’re lucky your hands don’t age. You’re still as good as when you first took me here,” Daniel said.

Charles nodded as he continued to roll each ball into the fifty hole. This is how conversations would go with Daniel. He would butter you up with compliments and small talk before asking what he really wanted to.

“You think you’ll make it out for my barbeque in August?” Daniel asked. *That’s what he was waiting for.*

“Hard to say,” Charles said as he rolled his last ball. It bounced backward and rolled down the track back to him.

“We don’t always get second chances in life,” Daniel said, looking at the ball.

Charles avoided eye contact as he stared at the scoreboard.

“Eventually, you’re going to outlive everyone you know in the family,” Daniel said.

“Good.”

Charles left the ball at the bottom of the ramp and started walking away. Daniel followed after him.

“My children will still be here. I want you to be a part of their lives, but you barely keep in touch with me,” he said. Upon seeing no response from Charles, he continued to talk.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I told mom and dad you were going out with that boy. I didn’t know they’d react how they did. How could I have? I was only nine. I feel horrible about it and what you had to endure, but the fact is, they are gone now. I’ve always loved you for who you are and all I want is to have you back.”

Charles paused. To his left, children lobbed basketballs into hoops. To his right, a father and daughter danced in front of a machine stomping their feet on the colored arrows. A pesky voice in the back of his head told him Daniel didn’t do this because he truly cared about his brother’s feelings, but because he actually just needed to clear this off his own conscience.

“I don’t know how much longer I will be able to wait for you to come around,” Daniel said.

Charles turned around and faced Daniel.

“If you’re a good brother, you’ll wait as long as I need. Our father was a piece of shit. All he did was work, drive home, drink a beer, then eat the food mom made. He was so busy eating mom’s food, but he still found a way to fill himself with hatred. Who does that?” he asked as he pointed his finger at Daniel.

“Not all of us are immortal, Charles,” Daniel said. Charles looked at his younger brother and suddenly realized the reality of how he looked. The aging had happened so slowly over time, but this old man standing next to him was not the boy he used to take to the arcade. Daniel’s legs shook slightly under the weight of his own body and deep wrinkles were etched across his face.

“I know he was a monster, but I’m not him. Dad was horrible and Mom wasn’t much better, but we broke free. We can be better for those that come after,” Daniel said. Charles retracted his finger.

“So, will you consider the barbeque?” Daniel asked.

“Maybe.”

“Good enough for me. Now would you care to join me for some dinner?” Daniel asked.

~~~

Aristotle ran up to Tom’s Diner and ripped the door open. It was a quarter after seven in the evening which was exactly fifteen minutes before she was scheduled to meet Craig. The rush of warm air from the heater hit her as she walked up to the person at the front desk. “Eyes Without A Face” by Billy Idol played over the speakers.

“Table for two!” she said. Her hair was still wet from the shower, although she had managed to fit in a nap after this morning’s excursion. She wore her blue sweater and had even depilled it for tonight.

Aristotle was aware she arrived excessively early, but she wanted to present herself as on top of things to Craig. Plus, this gave her time to maybe use the restroom, scan the menu, and get herself situated before he arrived.

~~~

Etheria, Orobas, Durus, and Golem sat around the dining room table in the base. A game entitled *Survive* was set up on the table. A small island comprised of tiles sat on top of a blue board. Four different colored player pieces were spread across the island. A number of boats sat where the blue met the terrain.

“In this game, we each pick a color then try and get that color off the island as it crumbles around us,” Etheria said.

“Simple enough,” Durus said.

Etheria knew not what she had unleashed. Throughout the night, Durus played like a madman. He would crash a boat with two of his people and one of another player’s into deadly monsters and call it a “calculated sacrifice”. He would pull land out from beneath other people’s miniatures then immediately send sharks their way to gobble them up. He did not seem to care who died as long as this game was filled with sufficient carnage to satiate his desires.

Orobas, Golem, and Etheria were shocked by his masochistic way of playing this board game.

~~~

As it became time for her date, Aristotle watched out the window. A server came up to her table and asked if she wanted anything to eat, but Aristotle said no because she was waiting for someone else. She watched each car that pulled into the parking lot quietly wondering if it would be him. She would let loose a sigh of relief when a truck pulled into the parking lot and Craig did not step out of it.

~~~

Meanwhile, Slime Knight stared into a hole that was six feet deep. A mahogany coffin sat buried in the dirt. The name “Lucas Rodríguez” was etched into the tombstone and moss seeped up from the ground covering the concrete.

“What have we helped you dig up?” Zombie asked.

“This isn’t right. I trust you, Slime, but digging up random coffins is a little much,” Swamp Gut said as they stared at Slime Knight.

Slime Knight hopped into the hole and threw open the lid to the coffin. A decaying body laid cross armed in its resting place. The corpse was a man in his thirties with no hair on his head. His skin, once a beautiful caramel, was now dried, tearing itself apart as it shrunk around bone.

“What the hell? That reeks,” Swamp Gut said as the scent of rot and formaldehyde invaded their nose. Zombie could only smell the formaldehyde. Slime Knight grabbed the corpse and threw it out of the hole. It tumbled across the grass until it rolled to a stop. Lucas’ blank eyes stared at Swamp Gut.

Slime Knight climbed out of the hole and kicked the corpse, knocking it farther down the graveyard. He picked the limp body up off the ground and held it with his hand. The shriveled flesh spun slowly in the air as Slime Knight stared at the skull covered in sunken skin. Zombie and Swamp Gut watched, stunned in horror, as Slime Knight pummeled the helpless body. He could not produce a single sound except for the clinking of armor, so Slime Knight silently attacked his past.

Slime Knight was tired of acting like his current state of life was okay. He wanted to eat food like the others. He wanted to not have to wear gloves when playing games. He wanted to be

normal. Slime Knight came to the grave tonight because he needed to remember what it was like to be human. He raged against his former body for the decisions it had made.

It's your fault we're here. We should have just died but you were too scared. You coward. Your life was meaningless. No one cared if you left. No one visits the grave, no one brings flowers, and no one keeps the stone clean. I can't talk anymore because of you! I have no voice, but I want to scream. You were too scared of feeling pain and now we feel nothing!

“Slime, what are you doing? Who is this?” Swamp Gut asked as Zombie walked over to inspect the name on the tombstone.

Slime Knight swung the body against another tombstone and the brittle bones shattered with a quiet crack. He stared at his mangled corpse and finally paused.

“Oh my god,” Zombie said as he read the name and remembered where he had last heard it.

Slime Knight collapsed to the ground. *We should have just died of cancer. I don't want to be here anymore.*

Zombie had known that Lucas was buried somewhere but couldn't have fathomed that his body was what Slime Knight had intended to dig up. This corpse must have been left here ever since Lucas was offered a chance to transfer his mind to another body with an experimental procedure. His new body hadn't been able to maintain its form.

Upon realizing the origin of the corpse, Swamp Gut walked over to Slime Knight and put their hand on his shoulder.

“Lucas made a decision, but we are here now. Slime Knight has a life to live,” Swamp Gut said.

A light rainfall began speckling them with water that glimmered under the moonlight. Slime Knight remained collapsed on the ground staring at his past self. Water slipped down his armor onto the ground, soaking into the grass. Zombie began to refill the hole as his skin was pelted with droplets. Swamp Gut grew larger as their skin absorbed the rainfall bit by bit. In a short time, they had grown over twice their previous size as their muscles bulged. Swamp Gut stood so they could block the rain from hitting Slime Knight. For tonight, the paladin needed a guardian.

Zombie meticulously gathered each part of Lucas' corpse. He searched for any pieces of wood still untouched by rain and gathered them under the shade of a tree. Zombie piled the wood and put the corpse over it. He then covered the corpse in leaves. Swamp Gut carried Slime Knight over to the tree.

~~~

It was now a quarter until nine and Aristotle still sat alone in her booth. She had stopped watching the parking lot for him. Now, she anxiously checked her phone every time it lit up, wondering if it was him. Rain tinted pink from the neon sign pattered against the window. The sound was complimented by the clatter of plates and hustle of people around her.

"Is your friend ever going to show up?" the waitress asked. She stopped by Aristotle's table once during each of her rounds.

"I sure hope so."

"Can I get you something to drink to pass the time at least?"

"I suppose. Could I get a vanilla milkshake?" Aristotle asked.

"Can do!" the waitress said as she walked off.

~~~

Bliant sat in the bath. She had to drain the water and refill the tub as the water had been saturated with filth.

“Is it possible you could go one day of fighting without getting completely filthy?” Abraham asked sarcastically. This ritual of cleaning her wings every night was his favorite part of the day. It was a time they could be alone to talk.

“Depends. Do you think all injustices will stop?” she asked.

“Hardly seems plausible. How was work today?”

“We destroyed another anchor point, but it was looking bad for a bit,” she said.

“How bad, if you are okay sharing?”

“I thought I was going to lose everyone again. I’m always scared every fight is going to be a repeat of the Reckoning. I can’t be the last one again. I can’t be alone,” she said.

“But you didn’t lose anyone today, right?”

“Yeah,” Bliant said. Abraham could tell by her affect that she wanted to say more but needed to be prompted to feel it was okay to share her true thoughts.

“Did something happen today?” Abraham asked as he cleaned each of her feathers.

“Just before the ghouls disappeared, I threw myself into them. I was willing to sacrifice myself, but I didn’t do it to keep the others safe. I did it because I couldn’t be the only survivor. It was so selfish. I was willing to leave you behind,” she said, avoiding eye contact.

“Bliant, you will never be alone again. I am always going to be here no matter what happens out there,” Abraham said. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she said.

“Why don’t you take tomorrow off? Let’s go walk around Moroseville a bit. It could be healthy for you to remember what you’re working to protect,” he said.

“I’d like that. I’d like that a lot. I’ll make sure Charles doesn’t schedule me for tomorrow,” she said.

“Great! I was going to attend a conference, but I’ll just go to the next one.”

~~~

At the diner, Aristotle played with her straw. She spun it around the empty cup as the clock struck nine. Her phone lit up and she saw there was a new alert from Craig. She read the text quietly to herself.

“Hey, you’re going to hate me for this, but I don’t think I can make it tonight. I recently reconnected with someone else, and I don’t think this is going to work out for us. I’m so sorry, but I hope you still have a nice night!”

*It’s okay. You barely knew this guy. It doesn’t matter that he didn’t come tonight. There’s someone else out there.* Aristotle worked to erase the potential futures she had created out of her mind. The museum in her brain full of pictures fabricated around prospective dates was once a fun place to walk through unintentionally. Now, she had to work to tear down each painting to leave blank slates for the next person. She dared not peek at what hid behind the canvases hanging on the wall.

Aristotle threw a ten down on the table and hurried out of the diner. *Don’t cry. It shouldn’t matter that much. He was just some random guy. He isn’t worth crying over.* Lit by a singular streetlamp, she sat in her car. It rested in the parking lot as thick rain drops drummed on the roof.



Her hands struggled to push the key into the ignition as they quietly shook. Her sniffing was muffled out by the inclement weather surrounding her. The steering wheel mocked her. Its circular form implied some sort of control. Turning left or right didn't change her momentum. She couldn't decide when to stop or when it was time for her to go. Aristotle was at the mercy of the traffic lights mindlessly commanding her down the road.

There was no beauty to be seen tonight.

~~~

Slime Knight, Swamp Gut, and Zombie watched as the fire crackled beneath the tree. The rainfall had not been more than a light sprinkle. The orange aura of the flames lit the front of their bodies.

"Our past doesn't have to stay with us or define us, but it's important to accept it," Zombie said.

"I'm sorry, Slime. You're a human to me, Buddy. If I can count as a swamp creature, then you most definitely can count too," Swamp Gut said as they put their arm over Slime Knight's shoulders.

"Being an alive human is overrated anyway," Zombie said.

Slime Knight silently stared at the burning mass in front of him. For once, Lucas was finally out of the picture. Regardless of if he regretted the decisions or not, Lucas was dead. Slime Knight now had to live.

Charles drove down the poorly kept dirt road that led to the hideout as "Bad Moon Rising" by Creedence Clearwater Revival played over the truck's stereo.

He parked his truck within walking distance to the entrance of the base and made his way through the forest until the vault door came within view. The grass was wet and the mud slippery from the rainfall he witnessed on his way home. Now that the clouds had cleared, he could see the full moon resting above him, weighing heavy.

He briefly looked up and stared at it. Charles realized the moon was so meaningless. It was just a circle in the sky, yet it scared him so much. From thousands of miles away the moon could do nothing to him. It was valueless. It couldn't even produce its own light. The moon was a fraud presenting the sun's work as its own.

Charles walked down the stairs into the base to find it empty except for Golem asleep in one of the chairs in the living room. The stone creature snored peacefully, waiting for his best friend's return. He walked over and tapped Golem on the shoulder. Golem jumped slightly before seeing that Charles stood before him.

"You're safe!" Golem shouted.

"I am," Charles whispered with a smile.

Golem stood up.

"Thank you for waiting for me to return. If you want to head to the room, I'll be there shortly," Charles said.

Golem nodded and walked into the elevator. The doors closed behind him as Charles walked into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. In this brief moment of silence, he realized how lucky he was to have someone like Golem. He was grateful to be valued above all else, to be someone's number one priority, to have someone always by his side. He was fortunate to have Golem in his life.

~~~

As Charles walked down the barracks and toward his room, he noticed the door to Aristotle's room was ajar. The pungent scent of whisky drifted down the hallway. He pushed the door open to see Aristotle sitting at her desk. Light from the lamp on her desk illuminated her and cast a heavy shadow on the ground.

Hearing the door open, but not turning around, she said, "It isn't fair."

On the way home, Aristotle had lifted those blank canvases from the wall in her mind. Beneath them, memories of Rory were painted onto the walls. The wonders of their love and joys of their partnership were etched into the marble walls. There was no way to remove them except by covering the memories.

She had thought she was moving on. The house she had built around herself brick by brick was smashed in one night. When the first winter storm hit, she realized the stones had never set and as the cold air pushed against her there was no desire to build once more.

He walked in and sat down on the bed, so he faced her. Charles noticed the open whisky bottle sitting on her desk. A small glass was filled with the bitter liquid.

"Have you had any yet?"

Her hands twitched, extended toward the glass on the table.

"What happened tonight?" Charles asked.

"He didn't show."

"I'm sorry," he said.

Aristotle's shoulder shook slightly. Uncertainty weaseled through her body.

"Would you like me to hang around a bit or would you prefer to be alone? Self-loathing is always better with two."

Aristotle slowly turned around and stared into Charles' eyes. The light from the lamp only revealed half her face. The one eye he could see clearly was stained red from tears. Dried mascara cascaded over her cheek. Her mouth opened as she thought of what to say. Spit stuck between the top and bottom of her mouth. The strands of saliva slowly broke as she prepared to speak.

"I. Hate. Myself," she quietly said. The vitriolic words stung as they lingered in the air.

Charles frowned as he nodded his head.

"Who doesn't sometimes."

"I have ever since I cut things off with Rory," she said.

"I know."

"I did it all how I was supposed to when we were together. I watched videos on how to bring up problems. I didn't say things like 'all the time'. I used 'I' statements. I didn't raise my voice. I told him how things made me feel.

"I did everything that Abraham suggested and none of it worked. Rory never listened to any of it. Every single thing was always my fault. Always. Do you know what that does to someone?"

"Some people will just never care like you want them to," Charles said.

Tears welled in both of their eyes.

"He taught me that love was accepting the subpar because that's, 'What it means to be in a relationship.' He taught me to hate myself, and tonight with Craig, it seems he was right."

"We like you," Charles said.

These platonic relationships meant nothing to Aristotle.

“How long have you had that under your bed?” he asked as he pointed over toward the bottle on her desk.

“It’s never not been there. Don’t know if I put it there in case of another Reckoning or for some other reason.”

Charles nodded his head in understanding.

“You know, I think we’re kinda the same,” Aristotle said.

“Why’s that?” Charles asked.

“We both will always believe in the impossible. I will never give up on Rory. You’re always going to think there will be another Reckoning,” she said as she poured the filled glass into the garbage next to her desk.

“But you aren’t with him anymore. You did give up on him,” he said.

“Is that so? He haunts my dreams. New people I meet reaffirm what he taught me. My mind won’t let him or what he showed me go,” she said.

Charles looked into her eyes. They were tired, so tired. Flames of passion so long extinguished not even the soot smoked anymore. Seeing into her soul, he understood a chain yanked her constantly backward, keeping her in place.

“I still hear what my parents said sometimes . . . when things get quiet. I hear the names, the mocking, the disbelief that their perfect son was destined to go to Hell.”

“How do you stop it?” Aristotle asked.

“I drown it out with the people I care about.”

Aristotle sat quiet.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” Charles asked.

“Yeah. You will.”

“Good. Please sleep well tonight, Aristotle,” Charles said as he walked out of her room.

He walked into his own room and without brushing his teeth, rolled into bed. Golem was waiting, awake in his own bed that sat right up against Charles’.

“Good night, Golem. I love you.”

“Love. You. Too.” Golem said.

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Once he knew everyone was asleep, Zombie shambled out of his room. He walked outside and under the moonlight he returned to the hideout with a black bag in his hand. He silently snuck this bag back to his room.

As soon as Zombie confirmed he was alone, he opened the bag. An entire arm from Lucas’ mangled corpse sat inside it. He pulled it out and lifted it up to his face. Zombie smelled the dry flesh. He did not care if it reeked of chemicals or if the texture was going to be like jerky. Zombie opened his mouth and slowly bit down on the arm, delicately tearing off a piece of flesh.

He quietly chewed the skin. It felt tacky in his mouth and the taste was masked in chemicals, but he recognized the flavor. It was real, human flesh. Zombie continued to methodically move across the arm bite by bite, robbing it of anything except the bone which he would hide in the garden once he was done.

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“Mission Log: Day 3

“We are closing in on a Moroseville. The walk has been treacherous and painful as this town is located at the top of a mountain, but it is nothing I haven’t been able to overcome. By tomorrow, we should reach the location of the angel. I have developed thousands of plans, but I know exactly which one I will use to extract the information I need from them.

“My apologies if I forget to update you tomorrow. Things are about to get exciting,” the purple demon finished saying. He stood at the top of a cliffside the other three demons were currently climbing.

Seir chattered her teeth.

“Stop whining. We need to stick off to the side unless you want to be spotted. I, for one, don’t want to have to deal with anymore superheroes than we already are going to be fighting. The Nexus Magistrate lives in Moroseville, so I’d bet they’re playing a role in this. This climbing is some good training to get your muscles in tone for killing,” the purple demon said.

Seir clicked her tongue.

“Whatever. How about you all get up here and we’ll make some progress on this mission?”

Thursday: Anglerfish

Bliant stared at the mangled wings on her back. They were contorted after being crushed in his hands. She pushed herself up to her knees. Her disfigured wings slowly began to retake their normal shape, excruciatingly untangling every knot. Daisies were now stuck in between the layers of feathers.

I still have work to do. He is still standing.

She unclipped her armor and it clanged against the ground. With only the spandex under suit on, she could now move faster. Bliant spit blood out from her mouth and picked back up her rapier.

He's not dead yet.

Thursdays were Durus' day to cook breakfast and on this fine morning he was planning to serve lavender flavored pancakes.

"Once I had a love and it was divine. Soon found out I was losin' my mind . . ." Durus hummed "Heart Of Glass" by Blondie as he ladled more pancake mix into the pan.

Swamp Gut, Golem, Etheria, Charles, Zombie, and Slime Knight sat at the island near the stove. Golem stared at the Sudoku puzzle in the morning paper. Swamp Gut browsed their phone. Zombie had a mug full of V8 in front of him while Charles had his mug filled with coffee. Etheria quietly browsed a manual for a new board game she had picked up last week. Slime Knight sat patiently awaiting his pancakes.

Orobas walked in to discover the scent of flowers and batter. Durus craned his neck to face him.

"How many pancakes does a guy like you eat?" Durus asked.

"How big are these *pancakes*?" Orobas asked.

"About this big," Swamp Gut said as they held their hands around their head.

"Maybe only one head for breakfast," Orobas said as he sat down next to them.

"They aren't thick like a head though. Pancakes are only a few centimeters thick," Etheria said. She was the first to realize Orobas truly didn't know what pancakes were.

"What are centimeters?" Orobas asked.

"You don't use those in the underworld?" Etheria asked.

"We use inches," Orobas said.

"It truly is Hell then," Etheria said.

Durus plated three pancakes and set them in front of Etheria. The manual she was holding disappeared in her cloak and two tentacles hovered over the steaming breakfast. She floated a

few inches into the air and chanted something quietly to herself as a red aura shined down on the pancakes. In front of everyone's eyes, the spongy food turned brittle as the color was drained out of it. Orobas was the only one surprised by this. Etheria sat back down.

"That tasted good. I like them more than the mint flavored ones. Nice work, Durus," she said.

"Thanks," Durus said.

"Why number in Tic-tac-toe?" Golem asked as he set the newspaper down on the table.

"What? Let me see that," Charles said.

Charles looked at the newspaper and confirmed that Golem was in fact looking at the Sudoku puzzle. A few numbers were printed in the eighty-one boxes, but in the top-left patch of boxes crosses and circles surrounded a printed eight.

"Who played this with you?" Charles asked.

"That was me. I thought it was Super Tic-tac-toe where you get a box by winning the game within it," Swamp Gut said.

"No, it's a Sudoku puzzle," Charles said.

"That has been made apparent now," Swamp Gut said.

Golem began to erase the crosses and circles from the Sudoku puzzle.

"You sure you don't want pancakes, Swamp?" Durus asked.

"I'm good. It's too early to eat still," Swamp Gut said.

"You might want to eat. It's going to be a busy day," Charles said.

"I can handle myself," Swamp Gut said. The pan hissed as Durus poured batter onto it.

"What's on the agenda for today, Boss?" Durus asked as he set a plate of pancakes down in front of Charles.

“You’ll see. Let’s wait to discuss it until the team meeting in the living room,” Charles said as he cut his pancake into little segments.

“Zombie, you want one? I have a special tomato mix I can do for you!” Durus asked.

“I think . . . I will pass. Thank you though. You know what we should do? We should make tomato pie some night. That would be good,” Zombie said.

“Maybe next week when I am on duty for dinner,” Durus said.

“It could perhaps be a breakfast,” Zombie said.

“Anything could be breakfast if you really want it to,” Etheria added.

“You think I should make some pancakes for Aristotle? I haven’t seen her since her date last night,” Durus said.

“It must have gone really well if she was too busy to even text you about it,” Swamp Gut said.

“Did she come home last night?” Durus asked.

“If not, I am glad to hear it went well! It must have been because I helped her text him,” Etheria said.

“Maybe you could get some advice on how to date from her, Durus,” Swamp Gut said.

“Whatever happened last night would not qualify her to give me advice on dating. That was one date, not dating. There’s a difference,” Durus said.

“Not for you. No matter how you cut it, I see nothing going on in Durus Town,” Swamp Gut said.

Durus set down a plate of pancakes in front of Slime Knight. Instead of using silverware, Slime Knight cut the pancakes in half with his sword then plunged his blade into them. The pancakes slipped off his blade and into the suit, leaving syrup stained on the metal.

“At least I’m not fifty percent fish,” Durus said.

“At least I can pick up things with both my hands,” Swamp Gut said before sticking out their blue tongue at Durus.

“Aristotle did come home last night. I think it would be best for you to check in with her after the meeting, Durus,” Charles said. He finished his coffee and stood up. He noticed that the newspaper Golem had been looking at was set down on the table and the Sudoku puzzle was completed.

“I’ll meet you all in the living room. Meet me there in ten!” Charles said. Golem followed him into the elevator.

“Uh oh. I guess it didn’t go well,” Swamp Gut said.

“That’s regretful to hear,” Orobas said.

“I didn’t like Craig anyway,” Etheria said.

Slime Knight dragged his finger across where his throat would be to indicate his disdain for Craig.

“What graveyard were Craig’s parents buried in?” Zombie asked.

“WHAT? WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?” Swamp Gut asked.

“Just kidding . . . It appears that we don’t know anyway,” Zombie muttered.

Charles clicked on the TV in the living room as everyone except Bliant stood watching him. An image was brought up showing a drawing of the Earth with an eel wrapped around it eating its own tail. The levity of the morning evaporated from Durus. He tugged at his shirt with his left hand. Aristotle looked over to Durus from her chair. She could see that his right hand was clenched.

“Why are we meeting in the living room? Don’t we have like a meeting room?” Swamp Gut asked. They had not eaten anything yet today. They hoped this would not be a repeat of yesterday where the mission started before they could eat a meal. At the least, perhaps they could bring an energy bar.

“This is the only room big enough for us all that also has a TV. We got a call from Eugene Earle,” Charles said.

“Eugene?” Etheria asked.

“Who’s Eugene?” Orobas asked.

“He used to work with us until he left to join the Eel Clan on . . . mostly amicable terms,” Charles said.

“Thought. Was yelling,” Golem said.

“Okay, maybe not so amicable,” Charles said.

“I can’t believe someone would want to stop being a hero so they could become a faceless grunt,” Etheria said.

“He would have rather served a small part in something than a large part in nothing, according to him,” Charles said.

“So, why are we suddenly hearing from him?” Swamp Gut asked.

“While we primarily focus on supernatural threats as any could be related to a Reckoning, it’s no secret we have the occasional scramble with the Eel Clan. Usually, they stick to blowing up dumping sites or aggressive protesting. Eugene called in a tip because word is that the Eel Clan is planning an assassination of a prominent CEO,” Charles said.

“They’ve never done something like that before,” Etheria said.

“I know. So, we must step in today to make sure they stay in line. Thanks to this tip we have a chance to get ahead of their plans for once. Eugene called off work for today, so today is the day we go in,” Charles said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Swamp Gut said.

“What’s with the eel circling around the globe?” Orobas asked.

“It’s a spin on Jörmungandr who’s a Nordic entity meant to symbolize the end of days. It was said that when he let go of his tail Ragnarök would begin. In fact, he is associated with the Ouroboros which is a common symbol throughout many cultures of a serpentine-like creature consuming its own tail,” Etheria said.

“Correct. Etheria, Durus, Swamp Gut, Slime Knight, Golem, and I are going to go there and take them down. We should expect resistance. At the very least, Eel Master will be there and likely his officers will not be far behind. These people are not to be messed with. We leave in ten,” Charles said.

As everyone walked out of the room, Charles grabbed Durus by the shoulder. Durus turned around to look at him. Charles could see how tense Durus was.

“Are you okay to come today? I know this would be your first time fighting them. I don’t want to put you in an environment you’re uncomfortable with, but we could use your talents and you know the Eel Clan best from your research,” Charles said.

“Nah, I’m all good, Boss. Thanks for asking,” Durus said before walking to his room.

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As Durus walked down the barracks, he crossed Aristotle’s room and knocked on her door. She didn’t answer, so he knocked louder.

She opened the door and asked, “What is it? We were just at the meeting together.”

“How did your date go?” Durus asked.

Aristotle paused.

“He didn’t show,” she said.

“What an asshole. I’m sorry, Aristotle,” he said.

“It’s all good. We barely even knew each other so it really wasn’t that big of a deal,”

Aristotle said. Durus could see that her eyes were red.

“I was thinking. I was going to head out to see my parents tomorrow. You want to come?

I think it’d be good to get out of here,” he said.

“Sounds good to me. Not like I do much here anyway. Are you going to be okay today?”

she asked.

“You know me. I got all my ducks in a row.”

Aristotle rolled her eyes before saying, “Sure you do. Don’t get killed. I’m looking forward to tomorrow.”

“I’ll do my best,” Durus said. He continued down to his room.

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Bliant and Abraham walked down the cobblestone street of Moroseville. Her wings were tucked into a hollow backpack she carried on her. It was relieving to finally go somewhere wearing something besides armor plating.

The streets were still stained by rain from the previous night, and the brisk morning air felt wonderful. The smell of shops preparing today’s goods and wet grass mixed together. Things like those made her understand why Abraham had always wanted to stay close to home. A few people walked by, busy with their own conversation.

Abraham and Bliant held hands as they walked down the street. She stopped briefly to stare into the window of a “magic” shop called “magIc”. Tarot card packs lined the shelves and countless amulets hung from the walls.

“Want to go in?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. Bliant had no intention of buying anything, but something about being with Abraham made doing anything interesting. A bell hanging above the door buzzed when they entered.

“Hey! Welcome to magIc. Remember, *I* am your guy for all magic things!” a man said as he stood by the counter. He had a long, red beard tied together in a band and gauges in his ears. His wire frame glasses were hanging on his Metallica shirt.

The small shop smelled of paper and various spices. There was a small first level, but a narrow staircase led up to a second layer. She could hear the creaking of another customer’s footsteps above her. Abraham perused the shelves aimlessly as Bliant watched him. She loved seeing him stare at the shelves and was intrigued by what he found interesting enough to take a look at.

He pulled off a pack of tarot cards and showed them to her.

“Do you guys have some special fortune teller that gives you vague clues with these?”

“No, we go off our own intuition,” she said with a smile.

“Wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

They exited the store and carried on to the next small shop in the town.

Crimson Claw and the rest of the Nexus Magistrate stood on a metal walkway high up in the rafters. The building appeared rundown from the outside, but upon entering one could see

that the walls were meticulously painted black. The building was in the shape of a dome. In this dome, there was a large stage and an enormous area for people to stand and watch, similar to a concert. The Eel Clan's symbol had been inscribed on the wall countless times. A large, open water tank full of eels sat to the side.

They watched in the rafters as Eel Master spoke from the stage to his hundreds of followers in the crowd.

"Tomorrow, we will siege their headquarters and hold them hostage until they stop dumping their pollution in the ocean. If they don't agree, we kill them! Why are we the only ones capable of doing this?" he asked the crowd.

"Because morality is for the weak!" they shouted back.

"And what are we?"

"We are strong!" the crowd shouted back.

"Correct. We have the strength to make the decisions the heroes can't make themselves!"

Durus' hands sweated as he watched them from above. *How is this what she joined?* He scanned each member in the crowd hoping to find her, but everyone was wearing the standard Eel Recruit suit. Black armor covered them from head to toe. Their helmets were rounded at the top and white lights were placed in intervals down the middle of their body. Eel Master was dressed similarly, except a long, red cape drifted down his back. His helmet was covered in additional lights.

Durus forced himself to look away. He closed his eyes as he could not bear to watch them anymore. The symbols, the rhetoric, and even the colors on their suits were poison to his thoughts. He had done everything he could to forget this part of the world only for the stray insignia scattered across the cities to find him.

His anxiety in relation to the Eel Clan had progressed so far that anything resembling an Ouroboros froze him as uneasiness tripped down his spine. Something as mundane as the drawn path of the moon on a map to the routine like the spinning circle that indicated a video was loading caused consternation.

To be surrounded by what he pushed down overwhelmed him. *I can't be here. This place is horrifying.* He leaned over the edge and began to dry heave. Crimson Claw pulled him back.

"Woah, don't throw up. You'll give away our location," Crimson Claw said.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I know this is a lot for you. Just focus on us. We're your friends and all of us are around you right now. Come back to the present," Crimson Claw said.

Durus looked around to see Etheria, Golem, Slime Knight, Swamp Gut, and Crimson Claw around him. His friends were here for him.

"I'll punch em extra hard for you," Swamp Gut said in between bites of a granola bar.

"Just be careful with the runts. Any one of them could be Carina," Durus said.

"I'll ask them first before I punch them," Swamp Gut said.

"Here's the plan. Each of these members are armed to the teeth with trauma resistant plating and electric gauntlets, but their suits have one weakness. They are powered by an external battery glowing blue on their backs. If you break that, the suit shuts down and we harmlessly thwart them.

"That's why we are located up here. I'll start firing at the weak spots. Swamp Gut, you didn't have to try and bring water today because they have that tank full of eels," Crimson Claw said as he pointed at the open tank in the center of the room. Eels slipped through the water swimming in circles.

“That was your plan?!?! You want me to dive into that?!?” Swamp Gut asked.

“Yeah. Just take a quick dip then go crazy. Golem, you assist Swamp Gut. Durus, Etheria, and Slime Knight will take out stragglers in the chaos. This all goes to shit once the officers show up as Eel Master will then join the fight too. At that point, the officers become our top priority,” Crimson Claw said.

“Got. Back,” Golem said as he tapped Swamp Gut on their shoulder.

“On my mark, we attack,” Crimson Claw said.

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Aristotle stood in the artificial field as Orobas and Zombie raked the soil. The fake sun beat down on them. It sounded like birds were chirping and insects were drumming, but that couldn't be true here.

“So, you're saying it wouldn't be a good idea to reach out to Rory?” Aristotle asked. She had been searching for some way to fill the void Craig had reemphasized to her.

“No. Why would you do that?” Zombie asked.

“Because maybe there's something I haven't said yet that could fix everything,” Aristotle said.

“Orobas, what do I say about what-ifs?” Zombie asked as he looked over at him. Both were wearing a sun hat.

“There's no end to the suffering if you always consider what-ifs,” Orobas said as he kept raking the soil.

“Correct. I just do not see what would change. He didn't treat you well so how would you running back to him change any of that?” Zombie asked.

“I mean there were good moments too,” Aristotle said.

“Undoubtedly, but you need to trust your past self. She knew she deserved better. If anything, she understood the situation better than the current you does.”

“I just—I can’t handle the unknown.”

“I understand, but that’s where something better exists; whether it be a better Rory or someone completely new,” Zombie said.

“Fine,” Aristotle said.

“Glad I could help you. Now pick up a rake and help me out,” Zombie said.

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Bliant and Abraham sat across each other at a local pizza place. Abraham preferred all veggies on his side as he was a vegetarian. Bliant would usually put pepperoni on her side, but she knew that when they cut the pizza the blade rolled across the entire pizza so microscopic pieces of meat would contaminate his end. Because of this, she settled for olives on her side when they ate together.

Bliant would fold her piece in half to eat it while Abraham worked in bite by bite on unfolded pieces he had to prop up with his other hand. Somehow, they always would end up finishing their food at the same time.

Bliant gazed at Abraham as he ate his pizza. A bit of pizza sauce had stained his chin.

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“NOW!” Crimson Claw shouted. He began firing off, breaking the energy packs on the grunts’ backs. Etheria floated down as Durus and Slime Knight rode down on Golem’s back.

“DISRUPTIVE LANDING!” Golem shouted.

He crashed into the ground and began swatting away the minions as they scrambled to form a counterattack. Swamp Gut dove into the pool of eels and rapidly absorbed the water they needed to grow bigger. They escaped before the animals had time to react.

Chaos erupted as Swamp Gut stomped forward. Their wet feet sloshed against the ground. They approached a group of minions and asked, "Are any of you, Carina?"

The grunts reacted with a mix of shrugs and shock as this beast spoke to them. Before they could activate their electric cells, Swamp Gut smashed their arms against them, sending the grunts flying back.

"Guess not," they said before continuing through the crowd.

Eel Master could not see past the stage lights shining on him, but when he overheard this interaction, he reached for the microphone.

"Fight back, for we are under attack by the Nexus Magistrate!"

Durus evaded a punch from one of the minions. He jabbed the man in the stomach with his crowbar. The grunt hunched over in pain, revealing his glowing energy pack. Durus slammed the metal bar into the energy pack cracking it. As soon as it was cracked, the lights dimmed on the man's suit, and he toppled over.

Etheria continued firing off blasts of energy as she floated in the air out of reach from any of their attacks. Crimson energy crashed in waves against their bodies, smashing the energy packs as it crossed over. Golem reached over minions and delicately popped each of their energy cell packs between his two fingers. Their electric attacks did nothing against his granite skin.

Crimson Claw continued firing at the energy packs one by one. He watched the crowd for any of the officers. Perhaps they had gotten lucky. If only Eel Master was here today, then they stood a chance. He knew that had to be too good to be true.

Crimson Claw was yanked back by a cord wrapped around his ankle. His skin seared with pain as this translucent entrapping pulled him against the metal walkway. He turned around to see one of the officers ripping him toward her with her hair.

Jellyfish's armor was the same as the other minions, but it was tinted a light pink. A clear, gel-like substance encased the top of her head and long tendrils protruded from it. The tendrils acted like writhing, artificial hair that swung in the air as if it was sentient. Where the traditional suit of armor covered their entire face, this one had openings at her mouth and nose so her voice could be heard clearly.

"We do not take kindly to heroes here," she said as Crimson Claw was dragged helplessly toward her.

"I don't take kindly to eco-terrorism," Crimson Claw said. He aimed his gun at her and fired off shots, staggering her backward. The tendril loosened around his ankle, and he got back up. He rammed his fist toward her face, but the tendrils blocked his arm then immediately wrapped around it, yanking him toward her. He flew past her and skid to a stop against the pathway. His gun slid against the floor and fell off into the crowd.

"You do not have the ability to make the sacrifice needed to save this world," she said.

"You simpleminded fools have no grasp of the concept. Death isn't something to be dished out to progress your own agenda. You've never felt the pain of it. You have lived a sheltered life to never hold a dying person in your arms yet act as if you deserve a seat at the table of decision," Crimson Claw said as he picked himself back up.

"We were never going to earn a seat. That's why we're taking it by force," she said. Jellyfish spun her leg out toward Crimson Claw. He ducked then dove forward, tackling her to the ground.

“As the acting leader of the Nexus Magistrate, I will not allow your organization to make the call for billions of people!” he said as they rolled across the ground attempting to hit each other.

“That’s new. Maybe under your leadership the Nexus Magistrate can actually do something besides waiting around. That’s the difference between our two organizations. We actually take action!” Jellyfish shouted.

“Not worth taking action if it’s the wrong one!” he said.

“So, the Nexus Magistrate is to determine what’s right? They’ve lost the strength to do so. Spirit Rider kept our organization miniscule. We were forced to hold meetings in basements or back alleys. Once she died, look at what we have accomplished!” she said. Jellyfish kicked Crimson Claw off her.

“You don’t know anything about her,” he said.

“We know it all. She died while you were her prodigy. She slipped away from this realm in your arms on S-Day. Let us not forget that. You heroes pretend you’re better than us, but Hope City would disagree. Millions of lives lost in a day. What a shame.

“Every time you don your suit you are making decisions for billions of people. Who is to say that the public would want you to stop us?”

The fighting continued down below as explosions rocked the floor and shouts echoed upward. Crimson Claw wiped the blood from below his nose. He stood back up.

“I hope your last word to her was sorry,” she said.

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Below, Golem continued to move through the crowd, delicately bursting their energy packs like bubble wrap. A sudden force tore him backward. The floor rumbled as Golem rolled

across it. He looked over to see a man slowly walking toward him. He was in a similar outfit to the grunts, but it was much larger. Above his blue tinted armor, hydraulics covered his body. Humongous, metal shrapnel sat on his knuckles. His mouth and nose were visible. He slammed his fists together and the metal on his hands fit together like the jaws of a predator. Shark walked up to his next prey.

“Can’t say I’m a fan of what you guys are doing here,” Shark said. He laughed quietly as he pulled his arm back to ready another punch. Swamp Gut ran from the side and crashed their body into Shark, knocking him into the wall. They picked Golem up and the two of them prepared to fight their new target together.

“Birds have left the nest,” Swamp Gut said over the intercom.

“What the hell does that mean?” Durus asked.

“The officers are here! Claw, do you copy?” Swamp Gut asked.

Jellyfish and Crimson Claw toppled over the side of the railing and fell toward the ground.

“Yep, noticed—that. Catch—please,” his voice scratched out over the intercom.

“On it,” Etheria said as she moved toward him. Slime Knight and Durus ran toward where Crimson Claw was falling to assist in the fight against Jellyfish, but another officer appeared in the crowd. Like the other officers, she had a similar outfit to the other grunts, except it was tinted orange and she had a standard helmet that covered her mouth. The ends of her gloves were cut so her fingers could move freely in the air.

Anemone thrust her arms forward and the ends of her fingers extended. As they grew longer, they changed into a variety of colors from pink, to blue, to purple. They wrapped around Durus and Slime Knight. Durus screamed out in pain as a stinging sensation spread through his

body. Slime Knight's armor was unaffected by this, so he reached for his sword and cut them both free. Anemone retracted her hands and prepared to lash them out again.

Durus noticed in the distance that Eel Master was fleeing through the hallway.

"Eel Master is getting away! I'll get him!" Durus said as he ran off.

"No! Don't go alone!" Crimson Claw said over the intercom. The sound of Jellyfish throwing punches could be heard in the background.

"Will you be okay alone?" Durus asked Slime Knight.

Slime Knight shrugged, so Durus ran off after Eel Master.

"Durus! Retreat!" Crimson Claw said over the intercom.

Golem and Swamp Gut worked together to combat Shark. If one got knocked back, the other followed up. Swamp Gut began to feel the strain of maintaining their enlarged form as punches collided with their body, but Golem by their side more than compensated for any of their own shortcomings. Hydraulics were met with the force of the sea and formed sediment.

Crimson Claw struggled to pull Jellyfish's tendrils off from around his neck. Etheria continued to fire off energy blasts at grunts attempting to intervene in the fights with the officers.

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Durus ran down the dark hallway unable to see more than a few feet in front of himself. He was knocked back after bumping into something. When he stepped back, the lights covering the mask lit up. He stood in front of Eel Master whose lights were the only thing providing a source of light in the hallway. With each breath Eel Master took, a hissing noise escaped from the mask. White light radiated against Durus' face. A dim, pink glow surrounded Durus's right arm.

“It’s my lucky day,” he said as he reached for the crowbar in his coat pocket. Once his right arm touched it, colored energy spread across the cold metal.

“A crowbar hardly seems heroic,” Eel Master said as he adjusted the dial on his gauntlets. Electricity crackled across them.

“Don’t you see? It’s a magical crowbar,” Durus sneered as he swung forward. Eel Master deflected the swing with the back of his forearm. He pushed Durus back effortlessly with the palm of his hand then jabbed him. The surge of energy spread across Durus’ body and spit flew from his mouth.

Stunned by how much just one jab had hurt, he was not going to be stopped so easily. He had fantasized getting to crack through the helmet over Eel Master's head for years.

Eel Master swung his right arm forward and Durus sidestepped. While Eel Master’s arm was extended, Durus swung his crowbar down against the back of his hand. The gauntlet fizzled.

Knowing he had the upper hand, Durus swung down again. Eel Master caught his crowbar midair and held it steady. The cursed energy burned against Eel Master’s gloves, but it didn’t seem to faze him. Durus grit his teeth then slammed his head into Eel Master’s helmet. Instead of hurting Eel Master, his head throbbed with pain from slamming against the metal.

Durus grabbed his head trying to ease the soreness. As he did this, Eel Master followed up with an uppercut from his left hand.

***KRACK!***

The energy rippled through Durus’ body as he flew up into the air then landed on the ground. His crowbar slid against the tiled floor and into the dark.

“How’d you take her away from me? What kind of magic did you use?” Durus asked as he laid on the ground.

“Magic? We’ve never used magic once. Every single person who joined us did so of their own free will.”

Durus continued to ask questions so he could slowly shuffle over to his weapon, at least that was how he justified it.

“My wife wouldn’t have joined you guys on her own. You must have gotten in her head somehow,” he said as he continued to slowly move backward. He held one hand up to block the light from Eel Master’s helmet out of his eyes. It was as if searchlights shone down upon him.

“You’re not making sense. You’re suggesting our organization created to free the Earth would mentally entrap its members?”

“I would be lying if I told you I wasn’t a little biased,” he said. Durus could feel the metal of the crowbar. He made sure to grab it with his left arm so as to not give away what he was trying to do in the darkness

Eel Master stepped forward and pushed his boot against Durus’ chest.

“You’re a controlling fool,” Eel Master said as he leaned down to face him.

Durus swung his left arm forward and the crowbar collided with Eel Master’s mask. It flung off his head. As it rolled across the ground, light shined randomly across the hallway.

He quickly got up and tackled Eel Master to the ground. Durus raised his right arm into the air as the helmet stopped moving and the spotlight shined on them. He looked down to see Carina pinned to the ground. They cast a heavy shadow onto the wall behind them.

“What . . .” Durus said as he noticed the blood trickling down her nose. Her hair was longer than the last time he saw her. Slight things about her looked different like her eyebrow shape or the specific coloring of her eyes, but it was undeniably her.

She took advantage of his shock to jab him in the chest and throw him off her. They both slowly picked themselves back up.

“No. You wouldn’t do this,” he muttered.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s not who you are,” he said.

“You don’t know the first thing about who I am. You kept an idealized version of me in your mind, but that wasn’t the real me.”

Durus opened his mouth to speak but stared quietly in shock. He didn’t know what he could say.

“You always talked down to me. You always thought you were better than me,” Carina said as she wiped at the blood under her nose. Instead of removing it, all she did was smear red across her face.

“As far as I see it, I am better than you. You’re a supervillain,” Durus said.

“You’re a moron. I’m doing what needs to be done. You know what heroes get done? Nothing! All you guys do is put some villains behind bars and even then, they just get back out. What happens to the world as you all dance around with your great battle against evil? I don’t see any hero out there saving us from our inevitable doom. Someone had to get it done.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” he said. His crowbar clattered against the ground.

Carina adjusted the dial down on her left gauntlet.

Durus sighed a breath of relief. He stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’m here now. You’re safe.”

“Let go of me,” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“Let. Go. Of. Me.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“You’re not saving me. This is where I want to be,” she said.

~~~

Shark cracked his fists against Golem then dodged a punch from Swamp Gut.

“I must admit, you both fight well,” Shark said.

Swamp Gut hunched over to catch their breath. Golem did not need to catch his breath, but wanted to follow along, so he paused to talk too.

“Durus told us you guys were kinda lame. But you seem pretty cool. I like your armor,” Swamp Gut said in between breaths.

“I think you guys are cool too. I mean, you are a creature of the water. That is precisely our *modus operandi*,” Shark said.

“You have any cool hobbies? I like going to the gym,” Swamp Gut said.

“I like synchronized swimming, but not actually doing it. I couldn’t ever do it. I just like watching it,” Shark said.

“Me too,” Golem said. He had never watched synchronized swimming in his life.

“That’s cool. A shame we gotta fight,” Swamp Gut said.

“Want to just talk some more? We can pick it up again if someone looks over,” Shark said.

“Works for me,” Swamp Gut said.

Crimson Claw tore the tendrils from around his neck and faced Jellyfish.

“I thought you could turn into a werewolf,” she said.

“Yeah, I am a lycanthrope.”

“So, why don’t you?” she asked.

“I don’t need to in order to beat you.”

“Right now, it seems more like lycanthropy,” she chided.

“No need to be a smart ass,” he said. Deep down, he was charmed by her clever play on words.

Slime Knight and Anemone continued to battle. Her powers ineffective against him, she was forced to fight in hand-to-hand combat, attempting to vanquish whatever was deep within the hollow suit.

~~~

“You don’t mean that,” Durus said.

“Stop telling me what to think! You know what happened? I was tired of you acting like you were better than me. You had this idea that we would both be heroes and you never considered what I wanted. You act like I am some horrible person for not fulfilling that for you, but I never said I would. It was always this idea you projected on to me.

“It was your decision to cut it off when I decided to join them. We could have made it work. It was you and your stupid moral code! You just couldn’t be seen with a villain.”

“Obviously I had to cut it off. Did you even hear what you were saying a few minutes ago on the stage?” he asked.

The hallway was humid, presumably because they had an open tank of water. The echoes from the fight in the main room could just barely be heard as they spoke.

“I’m not a villain. The fact is the world is slipping by and if someone doesn’t take the needed actions it will be gone before we know it. You only love thinking I’m the villain because

it makes it easier to come to terms with the fact you didn't do a good job of loving me. I never stopped loving you when I joined the Eel Clan. The breakup was all you.

"Your morality was suffocating us both."

For once, Durus did not have a sly comment to make. Her words repeated in his head as she walked over and picked up Eel Master's helmet.

~~~

Crimson Claw blocked another punch from Jellyfish. He wiped sweat from his face then said, "Listen, you're right. I'm not Spirit Rider. I don't need to watch over absolutely everything. Clearly no one is winning yet and I can see that Shark, Golem, and Swamp Gut have been sitting together for the past few minutes. We only came here today because you were going to kill someone. If you promise to not kill anyone, we won't mind if you occasionally sabotage a corporate dumping site or something like that. In fact, we'll stop getting involved when you do that stuff.

"You're right that something needs to be done to help the world, but I'm also right that you don't need to kill people to do it. What do you think about that?"

". . . Considering you destroyed a significant amount of our exo-suits today, I don't think we could pull off the assassination regardless."

"Just don't kill anyone, and we won't come for you again," Crimson Claw said.

"Fine," she said.

Jellyfish lifted her finger to her ear then said, "Stop the fighting. We have made a compromise."

Crimson Claw repeated the same on his intercom.

"Thank god! This was getting tiring over here!" Swamp Gut said over the mic.

“Lots of fighting,” Golem said.

The ball of energy forming in Etheria’s tentacles dissipated as she sunk back to the ground. Anemone slowly set Slime Knight back down. She had wrapped her fingers around his armor and was holding him into the air as it was determined neutralizing him was a sufficient replacement for defeating him.

~~~

Eel Master and Durus received the message in the hallway.

“No need for us to discuss this anymore. I already came to the conclusion I needed long ago,” she said.

\*\*\*

On their way home from the day’s mission, Durus did not say a word. Swamp Gut, Etheria, and Golem discussed the excitement of the fight. Etheria drove the car with two tentacles while the others fumbled with the radio. She kept switching stations until “Something in the Night” by Bruce Springsteen came on.

Slime Knight attempted to communicate with sign language. He had started to try and learn the hand signals recently. Up to this point, writing on paper had gotten him by, but it was time to learn how to speak with no voice. The others roughly understood what he was trying to say and worked with him to understand the symbols they could not.

Charles thought about what Jellyfish had said to him.

*“I hope your last word to her was sorry.”*

He knew his last word to Spirit Rider.

\*\*\*



On that day, he and Golem had been positioned on the outskirts of Hope City. His mentor had gone in to discuss with the rest of the Alpha Squadron. She didn't want to risk bringing either of them in with her. Spirit Rider must have known how the day would likely end and saw no need to bring anyone else down with her.

When the explosion happened, it tore through the entire city. Millions of lives lost in an instant at the hands of two people. Countless families caught in the crossfire of the self-centered and desensitized. The ground beneath them shook as buildings toppled and debris blew past. They worked together to sift through the rubble to find Spirit Rider. Golem heaved large chunks into the distance as Charles searched through what remained.

When Golem had lifted the concrete covering Spirit Rider, she was resting in the debris quietly breathing in and out. Her green robe had been torn to pieces and her spectral scythe was nowhere to be seen. Golem knelt then attempted to lift her into the air.

"Please, don't move me. It hurts too much," she said. With how much destruction had just occurred, Charles expected screaming. It was quiet outside. No one begged for help. There was no one to help. No heroes were coming.

"Must fix," Golem said.

"I'm sorry, Golem. I'm a little too broken right now," she said.

Golem was confused about what to do. He needed to help her, but she couldn't be helped. He was unable to take her somewhere to be saved or to fight off something attacking her. Uncertain of what to do, he continued to clear out debris around them.

"What happened?" Charles asked. He sat next to her and held her hand.

"They turned on each other . . . We can't count on the Alpha Squadron anymore to protect Moroseville. It's up to us to stop another Reckoning."

“How will I know when the Reckoning comes back?”

“People will disappear. You’ll know when it’s happening again. You will take over for me and Golem will assist you,” she said.

“Don’t talk like that. You’re going to keep leading them. Just stay here with me,” he said.

“You know I’d like to,” she said as she put her hand on his chest.

“There was a reason I wanted a prodigy. This was inevitable,” she said.

“But I’m not ready yet,” he said.

“Ready for what? To live without me or to lead the Nexus Magistrate?” she asked with a quiet smile.

“We were supposed to live together forever . . .” he said. Tears dripped down his face onto her clothes, mixing with the blood stains.

“Find someone else to be happy with. I’m sorry that I couldn’t stay longer,” she said. Spirit Rider had been trying so hard not to cry. She didn’t want to be remembered for that. She wanted others to know her as a leader. She wanted Charles to remember her for their companionship. The pain wore down her willpower. She did not make a noise, but tears streamed down the sides of her face.

“I—” he began to say.

“I love you, Charles,” she said.

“I—” he couldn’t finish his sentence. He wasn’t strong enough to. He simply leaned over her body and embraced her during their last moments together.

How could he have not finished his sentence at that moment? He failed her. She died without closure, unsure of how he felt. He just needed to say two more words. Two more words. He was weak in that moment just like his father had always told him he would be.

After creating a circular perimeter around them, Golem walked over to see Charles holding Spirit Rider's body.

"Where is she?" Golem asked.

"Gone . . ."

Golem sat next to Charles as they wondered what to do next.

\*\*\*

"How about we go bowling tonight? bOWLing Alley should still be open," Swamp Gut said. Charles was brought back to the present.

"I'll go," he said.

"Me too," Golem said after hearing that Charles would go.

"I'm in," Etheria said.

"Yes," Slime Knight signed.

"I'm going to skip," Durus said.

"Boooooooo. Come on, man. You can brood at the bowling alley too," Swamp Gut said.

"No. I was wrong today. I thought the Eel Clan was evil," Durus said.

"Well, they're not exactly heroes," Swamp Gut said.

"But still. The spell didn't work, and I talked with Carina today. Maybe I truly was wrong?" Durus questioned.

"You're catching on, Buddy," Swamp Gut said.

Charles shot Swamp Gut a look.

"We're allowed to make the wrong call sometimes. It's what makes us human," Charles said.

"I just need some more time alone," Durus said.

“That’s not a problem. You take as much as you need,” Charles said.

~~~

Bliant returned home from her day out with Abraham.

“I’ll get the popcorn ready,” he said, ready to prepare for a movie night.

As Bliant moved to take her shoes off, her phone rang. She answered it and Charles was on the other end.

“Bowling? Where? Thirty minutes away. Can Abraham come too? Alright, I’ll talk to him then text you about it.”

Bliant hung up.

“Bowling night?” Abraham asked.

“Yeah, they invited us out. Although, we were going to watch a movie. . .”

“It’s not of concern. Why don’t you go?” he asked.

“We can both go!” she said.

“Bah, you’re probably getting tired of me by now. You haven’t seen them all day. Why don’t you bowl with them for a bit then come back and we can watch some movies?”

“Alright, I won’t be out long. Love you,” she said.

Bliant kissed Abraham then grabbed the keys to the car. She stepped out of the house and walked down her driveway. A crow rested on the fence next to their car. It quietly cleaned its wings. Each feather was the color of a night sky lacking the moon and stars. A stray feather rested on the ground. Bliant walked past it and got into the car.

At the bowling alley, “Tell It to My Heart” by Taylor Dayne loudly played as neon lights shined against the carpeted floor. Plastic sculptures of wooden branches lined the walls and the

pins at the end of each alley rested in what appeared to be tree hollows. Everyone except Durus and Aristotle had come. Swamp Gut had gotten the “Up Owl Night” smoothie and was quickly tying the knots on their bowling shoes.

“Will they not be suspicious of us because of how we look?” Orobas asked.

“These people don’t care. They see all sorts of supernatural in Moroseville,” Swamp Gut said.

“Besides, we act more as a black-ops unit. There are few people out there that are our enemies,” Charles said.

“Just keep an eye out for someone with a really ugly mustache,” Bliant said.

“No way that loser bowls. He’s probably too busy licking his wounds from us breaking his anchor points,” Swamp Gut said.

They divided into two teams. Swamp Gut, Slime Knight, and Zombie used bumpers. Everyone else bowled traditionally.

Before it was time to bowl, Swamp Gut poured a cup of water over their arms, then they rolled the ball down so it intentionally bounced off the bumpers and crashed into the pins. When Zombie took his turn, he used the ramp kids would usually use. He did not possess the muscular strength to throw the ball, so pushing his ball down the ramp would do.

Zombie looked around at the colored lights, random people bowling, and fun drinks lining the tables. He watched Bliant finish saying something, and could see Charles start to laugh.

“I missed this,” Zombie mumbled.

“Say something?” Swamp Gut shouted over the music.

Zombie shook his head left, then right.

Slime Knight rolled the ball down, not touching any of the bumpers. He rolled a strike then looked up to the screen and watched a CGI bowling pin wiggle across the screen congratulating him before a poorly modeled owl swooped down and picked it up.

“Man, go play with the good players if you’re gonna hit strikes,” Swamp Gut said. Slime Knight held up his thumb and pointer finger to make an L back at Swamp Gut.

In the other lane, Golem would throw the ball so hard it didn’t touch the floor. It would collide straight into the collection of pins, knocking them all down.

“Easy, Golem. We don’t want to break anything,” Charles said.

Orobas picked up a red, sixteen-pound ball and held it in his hand. He tried to be aware of how heavy this object was even if he did not perceive it as such. He stared at the shiny ball and saw his own reflection in the polish. A reflection tainted with red, as always.

As he stared at it, Etheria used her multitude of arms to lift up each of the bowling balls in an attempt to find the perfectly weighted one for herself.

“You find the right one yet?” Bliant asked.

“My choice in bowling ball will have an incalculable effect on my performance tonight. Most think this sport comes down to your form, but really it is preparation,” she said.

“Orobas seems to be aware of that. He’s been lining up his shot for minutes,” Charles said with a smile.

“Sorry,” Orobas said. He rolled his ball down the lane. His hair stood up upon hearing it crash against the pins. That cracking noise was familiar. He quickly grabbed another ball and rolled it down.

“My turn!” Bliant said. She grabbed Orobas’ ball once it spit back out toward them and rolled it down.

Much later in the night, Durus stepped out of the shower. He wiped the steam off his round mirror and stared at his reflection.

He had expected violence today. He was going to show up, fight off the Eel Clan, save Carina from her decisions, and go home happy. It was what he had always thought would happen when he found her again. Instead, they had just talked. She told him how she felt. How he had made her feel.

It would have been easier to be beaten over the head than to have these thoughts implanted in his own right now. He had resented the Eel Clan since he first met them. It was easier to do that than to accept the truth. It was easier to make them the enemy than to accept that he wasn't the same as his partner. He had been wrong this entire time. She wasn't changed or manipulated, there was no one to hate except himself.

He stared into the mirror. Vitriol dripped from his hair to the ground. His towel soaked up the water, slowly returning himself to his normal appearance. As the steam dissipated from the mirror, a clearer picture of himself formed.

His physical form seemed to be at a dissonance with who he believed himself to be. Durus was used to seeing his old self. His right arm shouldn't be glowing. It and his missing ring finger were a constant reminder of his shortcomings. He stared at the stub on his hand then took a deep breath. Durus inhaled, and pink energy slowly formed at the tip of his palm, creating a ring finger made of pure energy. Sweat beaded on his head as he continued to mold the cursed energy. A tear slipped out from his eye, indifferent from the shower water dripping down his face.

He let loose a gasp of air and the energy dissipated, leaving him with only four fingers on his right hand.

He punched the mirror. Glass sprayed into the air. A shard sliced his right arm, and he immediately wrapped the towel around the cut to stop the bleeding. He took pleasure in quietly picking up each piece of glass for this task had an end. There would be a moment in which the floor was clean again. It was nice to have something simple to fix.

~~~

Aristotle reached into the bag in front of Rory and pulled out a gray sweater. She smiled and assessed the material. The threading was thick and didn't feel at risk of ripping when she tugged on it. It unfolded as she held it in the air in an attempt to assess the design.

A frowning daisy covered the front of it. Its stem was cut open and a pool of blood seeped into the dirt. The petals were a dim gray instead of the expected bright hues. A number of the petals had fallen down to the ground. Three remained on the flower. "Loves You" was printed on the front of the sweater in big pastel-colored letters.

"Rory, what the hell is this? I would never like this," she said.

"Is that so?" he asked.

She woke up in her bed and stared at the ceiling. She smacked herself in the forehead as she lacked words to speak. Aristotle had to give her mind credit. Not everyone could dream up heavy-handed symbolism to express their outwardly suppressed issues. It was as if the creator of this world took solace in projecting their own issues onto her.

She flicked her desk lamp on then opened the closet and moved the hangers across looking at each of her shirts. Aristotle paused when she found the sweater in her dreams. The material was nice, but there was no printing on the front.



“That’s what I thought,” she said

~~~

Charles parked his truck within walking distance to the hideout. As Golem stepped out of the cargo bed, his phone rang. Charles answered it. Bliant was on the other end.

“Charles . . . it’s Abraham . . . something happened . . .”

Earlier, Abraham checked his phone to see a message from Bliant stating she would be heading home. “So Long” by Pat Benatar quietly played as he sat at his desk. The antique lamp shined a warm light on his paperwork.

“Sounds good. I’ll see you when you get home! Door unlocked. Drive safe. Love you,” he texted.

A few minutes passed before a knock at the door echoed through the house. *That was quick.* Abraham stood up to open the door. *Wait? Why would she be knocking?* He quietly slid the chair in on his desk and crouched down so he couldn’t be seen through the windows. Abraham snuck to the kitchen where he felt blindly under the counter until he touched what he was looking for. He pulled a wooden cross out and held it in his right hand.

Another knock eachoed through the house. *I could leave through the back. No. If this is what I think it is I can’t just leave it here. She is going to be home soon and would be ambushed by it.* He pulled his phone out of his pocket. *I can’t call her as it would make too much noise. If I text her, she may not see it until she is done driving. It’s worth a shot.*

“Something here. Going to investigate. Be careful. Love you always.”

Another knock, this time it was much louder. He stealthily approached the door and peered through the peephole. *Oh go—*

The door flung open, knocking into Abraham. He flew backward and slid to a stop against the tile floor. The cross clattered off to the right. An enormous, violet colored beast walked through the door. Abraham was in awe at the countless scars and tattoos littering the monster's body.

"Surprised to see me? I'm surprised to see you. Here I was thinking I had finally tracked down the source of that angel stench. Guess it's just an empty nest," Valac said. He wanted to scare Abraham. The fear in his prey's eyes gave meaning to the senseless violence. It reminded him that each thing he killed was sentient.

"You . . . don't scare me. I was prepared for you," Abraham said.

"Go ahead then. Do it," Valac said. He smiled, looking over at the cross.

Abraham slowly got up and sidestepped to the cross. He did not break eye contact the entire time.

"How do you plan on using it? Were you hoping it was more of an aura thing or do you have to stab me with it? The angel tell you that?"

Abraham pointed the cross at Valac.

He cackled before saying, "I guess it's more of a stabbing thing."

Abraham slowly stepped forward. His faith in this cross slowly began to wane. He had been told this would keep him safe, but it was hard to believe it would be effective if the monster seemed so unphased by it. He had no other option.

He pulled back his arm and prepared to stab the cross into Valac's chest. Valac nodded his head, waiting for Abraham to make his move. His arm remained pulled back waiting to swing.

"Come on now. Humans don't have all day," Valac said.

Sweat beaded on Abraham's head as he clenched his teeth. *If I can delay long enough, she'll come back, but I can't delay this any longer. I have to see what he has planned next.*

Abraham mustered enough courage and rammed the cross into Valac's chest. The wood splintered as it impaled the purple flesh. It did not cut in more than an inch.

"You need to push farther to do damage," Valac said. He grabbed Abraham's hand as it held the cross and pushed the wood deeper within himself. The monster's skin soaked any warmth out of Abraham's hand. His hands kept Abraham's shaking arms steady. It felt as if snake scales were rubbing against his body.

Together, they pushed the cross farther into Valac. Once it was about four inches deep, Valac let go.

"Unfortunate. Guess it is neither an aura nor a stabbing thing. Are you sure someone blessed this? Did you refresh the blessing every year?" Valac asked. Seeing that Abraham was now hopeless, Valac smacked him in the face. Abraham went flying backward and fell unconscious.

"You humans amuse me. I am still learning your limits," Valac said as he tightened the wrist straps around Abraham's arms. He sat tied up in a chair with a cloth jammed into his mouth.

Valac took out the cloth then asked, "I found the scent of an angel. Instinct tells me to torture you until they return home and to kill them instantly. Although, I have been working on a mystery and I feel this angel may be able to help me clean up some loose ends. Would they happen to know about a demon that recently showed up? He is about seven feet in height and real ugly with nasty hooves."

“That falls under patient confidentiality,” Abraham said before laughing to himself.

Valac paced around the room until he came up to Abraham’s workspace. He looked at the papers then his eyes drifted to the framed picture.

“So, the Nexus Magistrate captured him. Should have known,” Valac said.

“Wait—” before Abraham could say anything else, Valac jammed the cloth back into his mouth.

“Knowing that you must drink to continue living, this makes we wonder about a potential limit . . .” he said. The tip of his claw sliced open a vein on Abraham’s forearm. Blood began to trickle out into a cup laying on the ground. It slowly filled.

Bliant grasped Abraham’s corpse in her hands. Dried blood coated his chin. Red speckles dotted his gray cardigan. The stains around his lips were still wet. They smeared against her shirt. One of their plastic cups had been taken out of the cupboard and was filled with blood. She didn’t want to think of where it was from.

“You were supposed to be here when I got back . . .” Aristotle said as tears slipped down her face.

Her hands shook as they stroked his hair matted with dried blood. She saw that the wooden cross laid on the ground. *That should have kept him safe. YOU were supposed to keep him safe.*

Bliant squeezed her arms around Abraham. She did not plan to let go. For as long as she held him tightly like this, it was possible to pretend he was still alive, idly enjoying her embrace.

There had been many times in her life that Bliant had feared ending up alone, but tonight, she knew she would end up alone.

Friday: Folding

Slime Knight assessed the damage to his armor. Dents and scratches lined the plating. He struggled to stand once more. Kinks in the joints of the suit made it difficult to maneuver the hulking chunks of metal properly.

He dug his sword into the ground and used it to slowly push himself upward. This battle had gone on for too long. Slime oozed through the armor stretching into each cavern of metal.

It was time to strike this beast down once and for all.

When the clock strikes five, be prepared to make the dive.

Bring the boy from below. He is meant to go.

Where he first touched grass is the place we will do our final dance.

Let this serve as your last reminder

as there's no one else to die loving her.

-Valac

“What is his game?” Charles asked after reading the note left by Valac.

Everyone quietly sat around the table. Blood had dried on Bliant's clothes. Her pure wings were stained red and dark circles rested under her eyes. She rolled his wedding ring around in her hand. It was the only thing that would be left after his cremation. Bliant's instinct told her to return it to him, but there would be no one waiting for her if she went home. The emptiness that resided in her stomach thrashed, trying to crawl out of her throat.

“Why is he rhyming?” Swamp Gut asked.

“He's toying with us,” Durus said.

“How much does he know about us all?” Aristotle asked.

“Likely not much. We can smell angels and fellow demons. He must have just followed the scent of her back to her home where he also determined I had been in contact with her,” Orobas said.

“Why do they want you?” Charles asked.

“Probably to bring back their double agent,” Bliant said.

“What are you implying?” Zombie asked.

“I swear to you that I had nothing to do with this,” Orobas said.

“Then why do they want you?” Bliant asked.

“If I were to presume, I would guess it is because of my family’s standing in the underworld. If one of their children were to defect it could inspire many more, if not an entire uprising. It’s in their best interest to keep me down there,” Orobas said.

“Do you know who Valac is?” Charles asked.

“He’s one of the Hunters. They have a pack of demons designated for tracking down demons that were sent to Earth. I—I didn’t think they were real. I had only heard of this stuff in rumors. The underworld keeps the demon summoning pretty quiet. If he is here, then we could assume Forneus, Paimon, and Seir aren’t far behind. They must have followed me here.”

“Why . . . kill . . . Abraham?” Bliant asked.

“I don’t know,” Orobas said.

“How can we trust anything you say? We just met you this past Monday,” Bliant said.

As Bliant accused Orobas, Aristotle held the origami tiger in her hands. She looked at everyone around the table. At this moment, the creases from life etched across her allies were visible to her eyes. It lined their skin and soul. She could see they were beginning to cave in, if not already bent. She couldn’t let life decide what they became.

“Life is pushing us, and it wants us to bend, but we get to decide what we become. I don’t know about you all, but I am not going to turn on my friends,” Aristotle said. She looked over to Orobas.

“Aristotle is right. All of us are Nexus Magistrate members and we are all going to work together to fight these monsters tomorrow. We will do it for Abraham and to make sure this never happens to anyone else. Do what you need to do today so you can be ready for tomorrow,” Charles said. Everyone stood up and began walking off.

“Aristotle and Orobas, stay behind a second,” Charles said.

Aristotle had wanted to say something to Bliant, but she had to leave with Durus immediately after the meeting and this discussion with Charles would take up all the time she had left. Even knowing that, she waited to hear what Charles had to say.

Once it was just the three of them in the room, Charles continued speaking. He had considered suggesting these options to the two of them for a while. It was a risky gamble to upset their presumed ideals, but the risks posed otherwise were too massive.

“Orobas, I think you may want to consider fighting. I know you don’t like to be violent, but there are other ways to fight that are less aggressive, like Judo. Regardless of your decision, I want you with us tomorrow as you may be able to talk them down, but I want you to consider fighting in a responsive manner as opposed to not at all.

“Aristotle, I don’t want to force you to, but considering our circumstances we may need your powers. I will never force you to, and I don’t want you to feel any pressure to use them. I just want you to think about it. If you don’t feel up to it that is more than okay, although I will have to ask you to stay behind if that’s the case. It’s too risky,” he said.

“What are you talking about? I can fight even without powers,” she said.

“I know, but not against these foes,” Charles said.

“It is true. I could squash your head between my fingers if I really wanted to, although I don’t,” Orobas said.

“I know you’re scared of alcohol and if it wasn’t connected to your powers, you could never drink again, and I would never even ask otherwise of you. Alcohol doesn’t have to be something scary. It’s like any other drug, we can predict the effects based on the amount you consume. If there is anyone I trust to handle it, it is you,” Charles said.

“Okay. I’ll let you know if I change my mind,” Aristotle said.

“No pressure on either of you. Thank you for listening to me. You’re dismissed,” he said.

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Etheria led Bliant to an empty room in the headquarters. It had always been assigned to Bliant, but she had never done more than use it as a storage unit. The door creaked open as light touched the old furniture and boxes of papers for the first time in years. Bliant wanted to burn everything in this room. She needed it all out of her sight.

As Bliant cleared the cobwebs out of the path to the bed, Etheria noticed the dried blood clumped in her feathers. A long time ago, Bliant had told Etheria about how Abraham was the one that helped her preen her wings.

“Bliant . . . do you need help cleaning your wings?” Etheria asked.

“No,” she said without turning around.

“Why don’t I get some water and clean that up for you and then you take a nap,” Etheria said.

“I said I didn’t need help having them cleaned.”

Knowing that Abraham had been sent off to be the mortuary where he would soon be cremated, this blood would soon be the last bit of him on this world. Etheria considered how to continue her approach. Bliant’s wings couldn’t remain like that. It would affect her ability to fly, likely itch, and even lead to feather loss. Abraham wouldn’t have wanted it.

“Please let me clean them, Bliant.”

“Why does no one ever listen to me? I told Charles that we shouldn’t have trusted Orobas!”

“Orobas didn’t do this, Bliant. You know that, right?”

“ . . . ”

“Orobas was with Zombie and Aristotle all day yesterday, then with us all last night. It is logistically impossible that he played any part in this.”

Bliant knew Etheria was right. There were so many emotions rushing through her mind. She needed someone to unleash them on and she wasn't sure that they could stay bottled up until tomorrow.

“I know . . . I know who I have to kill. I'll kill all four of them tomorrow.”

“You won't be able to do that without clean wings.”

“Fine. We can clean my wings.”

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Orobas slipped into his room and slammed the door shut. He slid against his wall and collapsed onto the ground. Images of what had likely happened to Abraham flashed across his mind. He had only seen Abraham in a few pictures, but now all he could think of was the blood stained on Bliant's clothes.

He had caused this. He was summoned to Earth and the Hunters had followed him. If he hadn't come here, then Abraham would still be alive. He couldn't stop the death even when he completely abstained. Behind him, the entrails of countless bodies dragged. Their lifeless hands were clasped around his ankles. A crimson path marked each step he had taken to this moment.

Because of him, Bliant would be stuck with this forever. It was because of him that she would never be happy again.

A dull knock echoed through his room.

“Who is it?” Orobas asked.

“Couldn't tell by the knock?” a quiet voice asked.

“Come in, Zombie.”

Zombie shambled into Orobas' room and sat down next to him. He took off his sun hat and slowly sighed.

"Thinking about what-ifs?" Zombie asked.

"My parents told me I could be more. They knew that demons weren't destined to torture and kill for all eternity. They both worked to sneak information to me as I grew up. I was taught about how a demon's raw strength and biological fitness could be used to help humanity instead of torment it.

"I watched everyone around me slip down the path of destruction for years. They mocked me for being too soft or for fighting the inevitable. They were right about one thing. I was too soft. I never helped anyone when I was in the underworld. I was always working on myself so one day I could make my move."

"You need to stop holding that against yourself. You didn't help at that time because it wouldn't have accomplished anything of value if you turned the entire underworld against you and you couldn't have left because it would have exposed your parents for what they taught you," Zombie said.

"Now that I'm here, where I was trained to help, people are still dying."

"But you didn't kill him, Orobas."

"I let him die, same as I did in the underworld," Orobas said.

Zombie slowly played with his sun hat in his hands. The inner rim of it was stained a dark blue from the perpetual leaking of his internal fluids.

"I lied when I said I was picked up by the Nexus Magistrate before I could infect anyone. I had a family; a wife and two wonderful girls. They both thought their Daddy had a cold and he

would get better after some soup from their Mommy. I . . . I didn't know that it was not a normal cold . . ." Zombie trailed off.

He took a second as he collected his words. He had never told this story to anyone before. This was another secret he had wanted to leave buried in his garden. Only three other people knew what happened that night.

"You . . . You couldn't have known," Orobas said.

"I should have. I remember exactly how the night went. I know when the Nexus Magistrate got involved and exactly how many people I killed."

Zombie's faded brain had one section that never decayed. The memory was visited so often, the neuron connections were as strong as a normal human's brain. He began to tell Orobas everything that happened that night.

Rodney snapped back to consciousness. As his vision slowly became less blurry, he noticed he was standing in the bedroom he shared with his wife. *How did I get up here?* He had fallen asleep on the couch downstairs.

The sound of munching rose into this perception. He looked across the bed to see both of his daughters quietly eating something. The moonlight shining through the windows only illuminated their backs.

"What are you two eating? Remember, we don't snack past nine!"

He walked toward them and extended his hand, but noticed his fingers were coated in what appeared to be blood. It slipped down his nails and dripped onto the carpet which he now saw was sprayed with red. There appeared to be some sort of porous pieces of . . . skin on the ground.

Rodney wiped his hands on his pants, but they were already saturated.

“What is—”

Before Rodney could finish his sentence, a piece of food that had been stuck behind his molars spit out from his mouth. A chunk of hairy flesh flopped onto the ground. Seeing this, he began to dry heave. His daughters continued to eat on the other side of the room. Now hunched over, Rodney could see that the sheets to their bed were also stained.

“Girls, get out of here. Something’s happened.”

They did not move, but something under the sheets stirred.

“Jennifer? Is that you?” he asked.

He could hear a slight moaning from beneath the sheets. *What is going on?*

“Jen, something isn’t right here. There’s blood all over the place. Are you okay?”

The mass beneath the sheets began to viciously shake. Rodney knew something must have happened to her and that’s where all this blood had come from. He tore the sheet off the bed to see his wife’s mangled corpse.

The right side of his wife’s face was missing. It appeared to have been torn right off. Her chest had been ripped open as if it was a backpack unzipped to reveal her heart, lungs, and stomach. She turned her head toward him.

Rodney leapt back and screamed. At the exact moment he screamed, his wife’s jaw opened, and she let out a roar. His two daughters shouted in sync with their parents. He could see that they both had been biting into a trail of intestines.

“No. No. No. This can’t be happening.”

He reached for his phone to call an ambulance or maybe the police. He wasn’t sure who to call. His reflection was visible in his phone’s screen. Blood coated his chin.

Rodney looked across the room to see his family's pale bodies mimic his every move. The three of them held their right hand in the air as if they were holding a phone. They stood motionless, waiting for his next move.

The front door downstairs burst open.

"RODNEY! ARE YOU OKAY? I HEARD SCREAMING FROM NEXT DOOR?" a man shouted out.

"I'm all good. Thanks for checking in," Rodney said.

The neighbor could see a dribble of blood slipping down the staircase.

"I think maybe I should give it a look. I'm going to come upstairs, alright?" the man asked.

"NO! DON'T COME UP HERE!" Rodney shouted. His hands shook in the air as he stared at the reflection in his phone. His family's arms shook in the air with the same rhythm his arm did.

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An hour later, a man in a white jumpsuit walked down the neighborhood with his broomstick held at the ready. He spoke out loud.

"Blant, this is Demon Duster speaking. I was making my rounds at the hospital tonight when I heard them sending out an ambulance to this neighborhood. It never came back. I'm taking a look."

"Do you need support? We could have someone to the north-east point in ten minutes," Blant asked back through his earpiece.

"No, I've checked almost every house here and they're all empty. Something is wrong here, but I don't know what yet. I'll report back when I know something," he said.

“Remain on comms,” Bliant said.

Crickets quietly chirped in the background. This wasn't right. He should have seen a cat walk by or hear a dog barking. The entire neighborhood was silent. Demon Duster walked up to the last house he hadn't visited. He saw that tire tracks were cut into the lawn leading to a section where the fencing to the backyard was missing.

Demon Duster walked up the steps to the porch and rang the doorbell.

“Room service!” he shouted.

No one answered.

“What the hell have I gotten myself into . . .” he muttered.

Demon Duster swept the ground in front of the door. A gust of wind blew past him, and the door flung open. Someone shambled out of it. They groaned as they slowly stumbled toward Demon Duster who started stepping backward.

“Sir? Are you okay?”

The man's skin was a deep blue and gashes the size of a fist covered his body. A dozen more husks followed the first out of the door.

“I'll be damned. It's a zombie outbreak. I knew this was going to happen someday,” Demon Duster said as he readied his broomstick.

“Zombies? That's not right. There's no such thing. There weren't any at the Reckoning,” Bliant said over the intercom.

“Well, I'm looking at a dozen or so right now that are walking toward me,” he said.

“I'm on my way. Don't get bit, at least I think that's how they work. Are these the slow kind?” Bliant asked.

“Look slow to me unless they’re bluffin’. I can clean this up here on my own. You need to take Aristotle and have her cast some fancy spells to make sure none of them broke out of the neighborhood. I’m fairly confident they are all at this epicenter, but we need to be absolutely sure this epidemic stays an epidemic.”

“On it. Aristotle and I will be out there as soon as possible. Stay safe,” Bliant said.

“See what she’s saying? Always blabbing about that Reckoning. Reckoning this, Reckoning that. We need to recognize what’s right in front of us a little more often,” he said to the zombies before jabbing one of them in the head with the back of his broomstick. It stumbled backward, before continuing its approach.

Demon Duster swiped the ground and a burst of wind knocked back a group of zombies. He spun in circles brushing the ground, meticulously keeping the zombies away from himself as more poured out from the house. The wind spinning around him tickled his white handlebar mustache.

“You’re all too good of listeners to be killed. We got to learn if this is reversable before I do you in,” he said.

Something groaned directly into his ear, and he turn around to see that a zombie had snuck up right behind him. He instantly held his stick up to catch the monster’s open jaw before it could latch onto him. The zombie pushed forward, and Demon Duster fell to the ground with both of his hands holding onto opposite ends of his broomstick. He stared directly into the zombie’s eyes, or more appropriately its eye sockets. He shook his broom in the air, and a gust of wind pushed Demon Duster off to the side. He rolled across the ground and back onto his feet.

The zombies had gotten the chance to pick themselves back up. Demon Duster realized he couldn’t brush them back forever.



“Sorry, everyone. I didn’t want to do this ‘cause it might hurt, but quite frankly, you’re all starting to scare me.”

Demon Duster lifted his broomstick into the air. Teal energy formed around the bristle. He slammed the head of the broomstick onto the street and painted a triangle in the ground with the teal energy.

“I call upon the three power points of patient care to give me strength. Listening. Supporting. Assisting. Keep me safe from these monsters!” Demon Duster shouted.

The triangle lit up a bright white before a burst of energy spread out around Demon Duster knocking the zombies into nearby houses and trees. He looked to see that most of them were now stuck in broken windows, bushes, or tree branches.

“That should buy me some time.”

Demon Duster walked back up to the house. He cautiously stepped through the living room and into the kitchen. It appeared to be empty.

“Why did they all congregate here?”

He could hear something from the backyard. It sounded like someone was crying. Demon Duster looked through the sliding glass door into the backyard and could see a circle of over twenty zombies huddled together. They didn’t move.

Demon Duster slid open the door and the zombies did not turn to look at him. They sat in masses hunched over crying. Demon Duster could see that a man at the center stood above the sitting zombies. The man seemed to be staring at three of the other zombies. One of them was a woman and the other two looked to be young girls.

The man wiped at his eyes, and all the zombies wiped at their eyes. Their wailing echoed out in varying tones. Some of the zombies’ jaws had been torn off and instead of crying, a

guttural noise escaped from their throat. None of them seemed to notice, or care, that Demon Duster continued his approach.

“You the leader of these monsters?” Demon Duster asked. He held his broomstick so the bristle pointed toward the zombies.

The man in the center turned to look at Demon Duster and all the zombies turned their heads with him.

“I—I don’t know. I don’t want to be. I don’t know how any of this happened,” the man said. The zombies echoed every word he said.

“You have a name?” Demon Duster asked.

The man sniffled, then said, “Rodney. This was—is my house.” A chorus of decaying voices mumbled the same words.

Demon Duster looked to his right. An ambulance was turned over on its side in the grass. Red stains covered the white cross on its side.

“Please. Please help me. Something happened to my kids—”

Rodney stopped talking and looked down at his kids. Their pupils were missing and white completely covered their eyes. Bite marks lined their arms and his youngest was missing one of her fingers.

“This—This is all some bad dream. Yeah. This is just some nightmare. What a funny imagination I have,” Rodney said. He collapsed onto the ground and began laughing. The zombies cackled with him.

Demon Duster watched as the mass of bodies rolled on the ground, smearing blood into the grass as they laughed. Bliant landed next to Demon Duster and set Aristotle on the ground.

“What the Hell am I looking at?” Bliant asked. The sound of their cackling dug into her ears.

“Can you fix this, Aristotle?” Demon Duster asked.

“I—I don’t think so.”

Aristotle waved her hand in the air.

“Only the one in the center has any brain activity. The rest are empty husks,” Aristotle said.

“Aristotle, I need you to cast a spell so the whole world forgets this town ever existed. The three of us will never tell anyone about this,” Bliant said.

“What do we do with Rodney?” Demon Duster asked.

“Who?” Bliant asked.

“The one with sentience,” Aristotle said.

“We kill him,” Bliant said.

The zombies continued howling with laughter.

“Aristotle just said he had brain activity still. That’s a living human,” Demon Duster said.

“Then what do you suggest I do? He can’t just roam this world,” Bliant said.

“It’s done. Everyone forgets this town ever existed. As far as anyone knows, this is a newly developed neighborhood. A few more spells from me and it’ll look that way too. I’ll cast another spell to erase all zombies within a five-mile radius,” Aristotle said.

“WAIT!” Demon Duster said.

Aristotle rubbed her hands together then held them out.

“It’s ready to cast whenever. Give the word, Bliant,” she said.

“Take Rodney with you. You are plenty equipped to deal with him,” Demon Duster said.

“No. He’s a hazard,” Bliant said.

“You said he wasn’t at the last Reckoning, right? Maybe this could be your trump card if it ever came back. He can be a valuable member of the team. I’ll watch after him and make sure he gets settled in. Just don’t kill him,” Demon Duster said.

Aristotle looked toward Bliant.

“What’s the call?” Aristotle asked.

“Finish cleaning up and kill every zombie except him. Sedate Rodney and we’ll take him back to the base,” Bliant said.

“Got it,” Aristotle said. She clapped her hands and the buildings around them returned to normal as Demon Duster witnessed time reverse. Glass melded back to other pieces of glass before flying back into its original position as a window. The zombies disintegrated to dust one by one until it was just Rodney and his family. Then, it was just Rodney. He fell unconscious as the last specks of dust that were his family sunk into the grass.

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“That was over a decade ago. They keep me here as a prisoner or maybe a weapon if they’re lucky. It’s not all bad though. They’re pretty nice to me, all things considered. Although, most of them don’t actually know what happened. I don’t think they’d like me if they actually knew,” Zombie said.

“What happened to Demon Duster?” Orobas asked.

“Got bored of waiting for another Reckoning. That’s how most people leave. It’s either that or in a body bag,” Zombie said.

Orobas looked over at Zombie. He still fiddled with his sun hat, pulling at the loose threads.

“They trusted me. They trusted I would never hurt any of them. That’s the only promise you make as a parent. I often wonder what would have changed if they had decided to chain me down that night, but what’s the point of wondering that? No one would have thought to do that.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.” Orobas said.

“I wish I was a mindless husk shambling endlessly forward like the plastic pieces in that board game. I can’t handle the thought. I ate my daughters . . . Their blank eyes and their tiny fingers . . . I’m a monster. I will never be a hero or anything close to it,” Zombie said as the memories from that night cascaded down his mind. Orobas sat silent.

“That’s why you need to stop worrying if you killed those people. I know what a murderer looks like, and you don’t look it,” Zombie said.

Zombie stood back up and shuffled over to the door. As he reached for the handle, Orobas spoke up.

“I know what actually happened now. I also know the type of person you actually are. I still like you, Zombie,” Orobas said.

Zombie wanted to say thank you, but instead, he said, “You shouldn’t.”

Zombie stepped out of Orobas’ room and put his sun hat back on. He didn’t know why he had told Orobas that. It didn’t make sense to risk scaring off the only person that didn’t seem fearful of him. Orobas was the only one who was willing to turn his back toward Zombie. The others would help in the garden, but only in a row over while facing him.

Deep down, beneath his rot, Zombie wondered if Orobas truly did still like him. Perhaps it was because Orobas was willing to face him that Zombie hoped Orobas would also be able to help him face his guilt.

Questioning how to move forward, Zombie planned to determine if Orobas still liked him by seeing if he decided to help in the garden on Sunday. That would give him a definitive answer as to if he scared Orobas off. Satisfied with his plan, Zombie hobbled down the hallway.

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“Love Vigilantes” by New Order played in the car as Durus and Aristotle drove to his parent’s house.

“I can’t believe he suggested you drink! What a rude thing to ask,” Durus said as he smacked the steering wheel, briefly breaking his ten and two formation.

“Don’t you make fun of me for not fighting all the time?” Aristotle asked.

“It’s different when I do it. If you aren’t worked up, then I won’t be. I just—I’m glad you decided to come. My parents always love getting to see you,” he said. He held the steering wheel steady, his bandages visible.

“What happened to you last night? You didn’t have that cut when you guys got back from the Eel Clan.”

“Slipped,” he said before turning up the radio. Aristotle frowned.

“You think we are going to have to kill Valac and them?” Durus asked.

“I think it’s likely, or at the very least we will do the closest thing to killing a demon. Will you be okay with that?”

“I can live with it.”

They pulled up to the Abate household. It was one of many identical cream tinted houses lined in rows of suburbia. Dark green trees were etched across the horizon, disrupting the monotony of color. Each of the lawns were well cut, likely by riding mowers.

They opened the car doors and Durus rushed up to the house. He had decided to return home as he needed someone to spill his emotions to. Durus did not care to share his thoughts with the team, especially after his recent miscalculations. He prepared for how he would tell his parents about the last couple days.

Aristotle watched as a crow settled onto the powerline above her. She wondered what reason it had to be lurking in the middle of suburbia. Aristotle hurried to catch up to Durus who waited at the door.

He knew he would be honest about everything. Durus knocked on the door. Would he be up front? *Mom, I'm a failure. Dad, I can't get out of my head. Mom, instead of going to sleep at night, I roll in the bed for hours until I finally drift to unconsciousness once the stress tires me out. Dad, I have pushed away everyone in my life except for Aristotle.*

The door opened to reveal a woman hunched over. The scent of a cinnamon candle wafted out of the house. Her bob cut hair was entirely white. She had the same eyebrows as Durus and when she smiled, the resemblance was uncanny.

"Mom, I'm a—" he was cut off as she stepped forward to embrace him.

"Elias! We missed you oh so much! It's so wonderful to have you home and I see you brought Ann! Come in. Come in," she said before hobbling off into the house. Mr. Abate was busy setting the table. He paused to give Durus and Aristotle a hug.

He was a much taller man than Durus, but they shared the same eyes. Mr. Abate's hair was a similar color to Durus' if you ignored the strands of white throughout. Countless cats lurked around the house covering nearly any surface. They dragged their fur against Durus and Aristotle's legs once they sat down at the table.

"Can I get you both a soda? We got pretty much anything in the garage," Mr. Abate said.

“I’ll take a root beer,” Durus said.

“I’ll take a Coke, please,” Aristotle said.

Mr. Abate hustled into the garage. The sound of his slippers shuffling across the tile floor echoed through the house. He returned with off-brand cans of soda.

“Foods in the oven. It’ll be done in just one minute,” Mrs. Abate said.

“You said you are about to catch a big fish tomorrow, right?” Mr. Abate asked as he looked eagerly at his son. They weren’t made aware of Abraham’s demise and would not be told of it. To them, this was just another exciting week in their son’s momentous life.

“It might be our biggest yet. It’ll be important we’re ready for it,” Durus said.

The oven beeped and both of his parents got up to prepare the dishes to be served.

“Well, good thing you both stopped by for a home cooked meal then!” Mrs. Abate said.

Oven baked macaroni and cheese was soon scooped onto the dishes to be served with boiled broccoli. Durus reached for his fork and his mom noticed the bandage on his arm.

“Eli! What happened to your arm?” she asked. She reached across the small dining room table and flipped over his arm to get a better look at it.

“Have you been changing this bandage routinely?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom,” he said.

She nodded and let go of his arm.

“Alright, let’s say a blessing. Who wants to do it?” Mrs. Abate asked.

“I’ll do it,” Durus said.

They all grabbed hands.

“Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu melek ha'olam shehakol niyah bidvaro,” Durus said.

They began to eat. Durus immediately got up and dug through the kitchen cabinets until he found the salt. He walked back to his seat and poured some on his food.

“You didn’t even try it,” Mrs. Abate said.

“I did. You just didn’t see it,” Durus said.

“Ann likes it, right?” Mr. Abate asked. Aristotle had already cleared half of her plate.

“It’s wonderful! Thank you both,” she said.

“It’s our pleasure. I didn’t ask yet, how are things for you?” Mr. Abate asked.

“I’ve definitely been worse before,” Aristotle said with a laugh. As his parents continued to speak with Aristotle, Durus wondered how to confess his mistakes. Why did he feel the need to tell his parents anyway? Perhaps this was another aspect of his morality destined to go by the wayside. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by his mom.

“I just wanted to say, I tell everyone I know that my son and his friend are the greatest superheroes to ever grace this world. They’re as good as the old Alpha Squadron. I tell them about all the adventures you both go on and all the people you save. You’re both the real pride and joy of this small town!” she said. Durus looked up to see genuine joy in her eyes. Delight radiated off her smile. He looked over to his dad who began to speak too.

“We’re so proud of you both. It can’t be easy going out there and facing the worst in the world, but you both do it so well. It takes a lot of strength and a lot of courage. That’s all a parent could ever hope for from their kids.”

“Thanks,” Durus said.

“You’re all too kind,” Aristotle said.

After lunch, Durus did not want to stay for long as he had somewhere else he wanted to go. Aristotle pet an orange cat at the doorway as she spoke to Mrs. Abate. Durus was tying his shoe in the living room as his dad stood next to him. He bent back up to face his dad.

“Dad . . . I made a mistake the other day. That’s why I came home. I needed to tell you guys about it,” he said.

His father paused briefly.

“That’s bound to happen, Son. You have to make a lot of decisions every day. It’s okay if every so often you slip up. Everyone does.”

“But I’m not sure if I can fix this one,” Durus said.

“I know you’ll try your best though.”

Mr. Abate reached his arms around Durus and embraced him tightly.

“Thanks . . . Dad,” Durus said, trying not to cry in front of his father.

“I’m always proud of you. Always,” he said.

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As Durus and Aristotle walked back up to their car, Mrs. Abate shouted out.

“You both be safe! Aristotle, you watch his back, okay?”

“Always, Mrs. Abate!” Aristotle said before she stepped into the car.

“Go get ‘em!” Mr. Abate shouted as Durus and Aristotle drove off.

“I see why you wanted to go home,” she said as Durus honked the car’s horn to indicate their departure.

“Yeah, thanks for coming. I was wondering. Would you want to go to Wiscopyte? I’ve been thinking about going back there for a while. It would be hard to go alone, but I could manage with you,” he said, looking over to her.

“Is that so? If that’s the case, then I say we run the gamut,” she said with a smile.

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Etheria sat next to Bliant. A water bucket rested firmly on the ground. Two of her tentacles held rags in them, two of them fluffed up Bliant’s wings, and one of them wrapped around Bliant’s hand.

“He was a good man. He had a way of making anyone feel special. Sometimes I feel like I’m destined to slip into the background as more interesting people live their lives. I feel like I’m a static character destined to get forgotten in the story of the Nexus Magistrate. When I spoke to Abraham, that all disappeared for a moment. I will always be grateful for that,” Etheria said.

Bliant did not listen to Etheria as she spoke. She stared forward as the tentacles sifted through her feathers. It felt wrong. *It should be Abraham doing this.* She was used to the way he methodically moved feather to feather.

The world had left Bliant as the last one standing again. Even if she avoided every fight forever, life would still make sure she was the only one. He had promised to never leave her. Her breaths began to speed up as she gripped tighter to the mattress beneath her. How long until the Nexus Magistrate was gone? She was the last angel, now the last of her family, and she would likely be the last of the Nexus Magistrate. Bliant began to fixate on the wall in front of her.

She slowly started to conflate the blankness of the wall for an emptiness surrounding her. The sensations of her feathers being moved ceased to exist. All she could think of was his blood on their carpet. The cup filled with it. It dried across his skin. The pain in his still eyes.

“Bliant, you okay?” Etheria asked. There was no response.

“Bliant . . . Bliant! Come back here!”

Etheria floated in front of Bliant and grabbed her head so they stared directly at each other.

“Bliant, tell me five things you can see.”

Bliant looked forward. She stared at Etheria’s hood then began to look around.

“Your hood, the wall, your arms, the sponges, and the water bucket.”

“Good. Now tell me four things you can feel,” Etheria begged.

Bliant eased her grip on the mattress and felt her face. She reached behind to touch her wings, her face, and then her hair.

“The mattress, my feathers, my skin, and my hair,” Bliant said.

“Yes. Yes. Now, tell me three things you can hear.”

Bliant listened. She could perceive the air flowing through the vents, the sound of footsteps creaking down the hallway, and the water swirling in the bucket.

“I can hear the vents, footsteps, and the bucket.”

“Great. Where are you right now?” Etheria asked.

“I’m on my bed and you’re cleaning my wings.”

Etheria, overwhelmed by relief, hugged Bliant.

“Thank you,” Bliant said as she wiped her eyes.

“We’re going to make it through this,” Etheria said.

~~~

As soon as the meeting had ended, Swamp Gut immediately went to the gym where they started to work out. For over an hour they made circles around the fitness room lifting weights, running on the treadmill, and doing pull-ups. The elevator buzzed as Slime Knight stepped out with a small bag in his hand.

He walked over to Swamp Gut who was currently catching their breath on a bench. Slime Knight sat down next to them and reached into the bag. He pulled out a chocolate chip cookie and offered it to Swamp Gut. They stared at it briefly before denying it.

“Sorry, don’t need those empty calories. I appreciate it though,”

“I’m worried about you,” Slime Knight signed.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t read sign language yet, at least not that well. It’s only been a day of you using it,” Swamp Gut said. Slime Knight pulled out his phone and typed out the words he wanted to say.

“I’m worried about you,” he typed out and showed Swamp Gut.

“Why would you be worried?” they asked.

“Because the diet scares me. You collapsed when we were fighting the ghouls and barely had anything to eat before we fought the Eel Clan. These sorts of things are a slippery slope.”

“The diet is perfectly healthy. I’ve done the research on it. It helps metabolism,” they said.

“Why do you feel the need to diet and spend so much time in the gym? You already are plenty strong to fight,” he typed out.

“But I’m not as strong as everyone else here. Can’t you see my body most of the time? I’m scrawny. You can pretty much see my ribs. They don’t keep me on the team because of this version of myself. They only like the big, buff version of me when I touch water,” they said.

Swamp Gut had always experienced a dissonance between their normal self and their soaked form. To others, it appeared to be the same person, just different variations, no different than changing clothes day to day. To Swamp Gut, their stronger variation was a different person that eclipsed their normal self. The others only liked them when they were strong. The team

never brought Swamp Gut into battle so their dry self could fight. They were always brought in with the assumption they would use some source of water.

“Swamp, they don’t care what form you take in fights. Anyone can be buff and strong, but they bring you to fights because of who you are on the inside. It’s your decision-making and quick thinking that makes you a part of the team.”

“But why can’t I just always be that big version of myself? I work out all the time. Why can I never maintain my stronger form?” Swamp Gut asked. They worked themselves to the bone every single day, yet their body could never compare to that of Bliant or Charles.

“You ever considered that the buff form is your normal self? You’re part fish, so wouldn’t that mean your aquatic self is your innate form? Instead of viewing it like you are normally small but you get bigger in water, maybe view it as you are inherently big but constricted by being on land. We each have our strengths and being on this team commonly forces you into a weak state.”

Swamp Gut had never considered this perspective. They had always viewed themselves as weak but had never thought of it that way. Slime Knight so effortlessly perceived the situation in a way that made Swamp Gut appear strong. When they would traditionally view themselves as weak, Slime Knight saw them as someone determined, valiantly fighting an uphill battle.

“I don’t like intermittent fasting. It’s a dangerous game that you shouldn’t feel the need to be playing,” Slime Knight typed out.

“I just want to be strong like everyone else,” they said.

“You’ve always been strong to me.”

Swamp Gut wiped some sweat off from their forehead as they stared at Slime Knight. The cyan goo oozed in and out between the gaps in the metal that formed the suit of armor. It pulsed as if it was breathing, anxiously awaiting to see how Swamp Gut would respond.

“Thanks, Slime Knight. I really appreciate you.”

“You were there for me. I will be there for you. We all have some part of ourselves we’re fighting,” Slime Knight typed.

“Maybe I will take a bit of that cookie, actually,” Swamp Gut said.

Slime Knight pulled out a cookie and broke it in half. He gave half to Swamp Gut and threw the other half into the abyss of his armor. He was still unable to actually eat food, but there existed a joy to sharing it with others. Swamp Gut ate their piece slowly as the two of them sat next to each other on the bench.

~~~

Durus and Aristotle pulled their car into a gravel parking lot as they arrived at Wiscopyte. The sun had begun to set in the horizon and most people were leaving by now. This small town sat on the side of an enormous river constantly crashing against rocks. The town thinned to a few stray buildings after progressing more than two streets in. The aroma of river water perpetually hung in the air.

Aristotle stepped out of the car and bent over to stretch out her back. As she bent backward, she noticed a murder of crows resting in the tree above where they parked. They tilted their heads as their empty eyes analyzed her. *How peculiar.* She stood back up straight and looked at Durus.

“Not much is going to be open at this point,” she said.

“I didn’t come for the overpriced shops,” he said.

Wiscopyte was the place to go for any and all local families. The river, a small waterfall, and countless hiking paths could keep any family busy for the day. Both Durus and Aristotle had visited this place many times with their partners. It was a common day trip for any young couple.

This place was once dreamy to Durus. It filled his vacant thoughts during the day and the smell of the water would bring him comfort. Driving here was one of his favorite routines every year. There was something special about leaving the city, driving through long forgotten towns, entering the woods, then driving down the hill to reach the valley Wiscopyte sat in.

It was a tender location to visit now. At this point though, he had already cut off any location associated with the Eel Clan, so Durus wanted to minimize places forbidden to himself.

Durus led Aristotle down one of the main paths that took them down the riverside. They began to cross a large bridge connecting the town to the forest on the other side of the river. As they walked, they stared past the wooden columns forming the bridge to see the rushing water below.

Aristotle pointed to a spot over by the river.

“We took a picture right over there. I mean we took a lot of them here, but my favorite is right in front of the river,” she said.

“You could be pointing anywhere right now, Stotle,” Durus said as he stared at the entire riverside.

She pushed her finger forward again, unsure of why he couldn’t just make an imaginary line from the tip of her finger to where she was pointing.

“That still isn’t helpful. You could be pointing anywhere along the river,” he said.

Aristotle rolled her eyes as they finished crossing the bridge. They took an old stone staircase down to the riverside. Each step was covered in moss and would be dangerous to step on if it would have rained recently.

“What are your thoughts on the fact that we are going to have to kill those demons?” he asked.

“I’m not a fan of it, but I don’t foresee much of a choice.”

Durus nodded.

“Do you think you will come with us?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” she said.

Durus nodded his head once more. They continued walking down the riverside.

“Why do you ask questions when you are looking for a specific answer? Don’t you know me enough to stop testing me?” she asked. Durus opened his mouth as he thought of how to respond. Aristotle tilted her head to the side, basking in Durus’ shocked expression. She was baffled that no one had ever noticed that he does this.

“People tend to disappoint me. I just like to check in every so often to make sure they’re still a person I respect. At the very least, it allows me to predict disappointment.”

“What would you have done if I didn’t give the right answer?” she asked.

“Probably just asked another question later to test again,” he said.

Aristotle rolled her eyes, then smiled.

“What a productive process,” she said.

“Whatever. You know you don’t have to come tomorrow. We can handle it. I know what Charles told you, but don’t feel pressured.”

The sun was now at the horizon line and heavy shadows cast behind them from its final bursts of light.

“Are you testing *her* right now?” she asked.

Durus continued walking.

“Maybe,” Durus said.

Aristotle nodded her head.

They stepped up onto an enormous rock that etched into the river. The foam frothed up against the wall of stone, presumably slowly cutting away it. They were now on the opposite side of the river from where they parked. The entire town was within their view.

“If I could, I would burn this place to a crisp and the memories with it,” Durus said as he tightly gripped his cursed hand.

“Do you ever listen to what you say? I don’t think you actually would. I like this place. I like what it represents. It’s like a snow globe. I can look here when I want to remember good parts of my life. Besides, for a lot of other people this place will never sour,” she said.

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After walking for another twenty minutes, they got to a small waterfall that quietly pattered against the ground. The water fell from a modest height and quietly crashed against the smooth stones below. Each person who visited Wiscopyte made sure to stop by Lavender Descent. It was a magical place where the mist from the river left the aroma of lavender in the air. No one knew if this was due to the composition of the rocks that the water smashed against, or if it was just a placebo. Once they were done looking at the waterfall, they walked back to the riverside.

They hobbled over a patch of stones careful not to step into the water. At the end, they came upon a flat rock that rested just above the water. They stared at the river quietly flowing past them. The moon reflected off it, illuminating the dim forest.

“This was our rock. The first time Rory and I came here we sat down for a bit to cool off. We both took off our shoes and socks to rest our feet in the water. The river was so clear. I thought it was cute seeing our feet in the water together.

“I can’t help but think about when we came here again later, and he didn’t seem as excited to sit here together as I did. To me, it was a core memory, but it seemed like he barely remembered it. It’s easy to look back and see all these points where we really weren’t on the same page,” she said.

“Who knows what Rory was thinking, but I wouldn’t read into when he did and didn’t want to sit on a rock.”

“Oh, so you can give these imaginary tests to people, but I can’t?” she asked, smirking.

Durus groaned as he reached down for his shoes.

“Touché,” he said as he unzipped his boots.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, you said this is the best spot, so I want to try it out.”

Aristotle bit her cheek to hide a smile. He sat down on the rock and dangled his feet in the river. It was surprisingly cold, but he was determined to keep his feet in the water until he acclimated. Aristotle took her shoes off and sat next to him. His arm radiated a small aura of pink that reflected off the water’s surface.

“Did you have a favorite spot here?” she asked Durus.

“I do. We once sat in this gazebo back by the playground. There was something special about seeing the kids playing there. I think a lot of them were locals. It was the one part of the town that didn’t feel fake or designed to make you buy something. There was a small part of me that . . . I wondered if one day I’d bring my kids to play on that playground . . . our kids,” he said.

“That curse better not be genetic,” she said.

“Damn right it better not be,” he said.

They both laughed.

“How are you doing with everything?” he asked.

“I . . . don’t know.”

“Tell me something he did that you didn’t like,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Just do it. Take him off the pedestal for a bit,” Durus said as the lake water continued to roll across his legs. He dug his feet into the muddy riverbed.

“Sometimes, if we were talking about something and he got too sad or mad he’d decide it was actually an argument then give me the silent treatment for a few days because he needed to process his emotions.”

“Not sure if I am a fan of that,” he said.

“He would have said it was better than letting his emotions take control, but I always thought it was ridiculous. He always picked the worst times to give me the silent treatment. Somehow, my life would immediately fall into a crisis when he wasn’t there to support me and I was just left to fight those problems off myself.

“I’d spend the entire day wondering if this was it. Maybe he had enough of me? He’d just let me sit there and cook and I’d start beating myself up. You know, like I’d wonder why I didn’t say a certain word differently or think about how one phrase came off a little harsh. By the time he was ready to talk again, I was so sick to my stomach I’d accept anything he said. I didn’t even care about what we were originally talking about anymore. I just wanted him to talk to me again.”

“That’s not fair,” he said.

“It really wasn’t. That’s just how things were. He needed what he needed, and I was always left to follow along or get lost. Doesn’t mean there wasn’t good too.”

“As is true for most things,” he said.

“I made mistakes too. I had this group of guys I’d always hang out with.”

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked.

“It’s not the act, but how I went about it. I know deep down I did it because I wanted to get a response out of him. I wanted him to be jealous. I needed to see that he cared, no matter how I had to get him to show it,” she said. Aristotle broke eye contact with Durus to stare up at the twinkling stars.

“Did it work?” he asked.

“Barely.”

Durus shrugged before dragging his right hand through the water. Perhaps miniscule amounts of the curse covering his body could be washed away over time similar to how the water stole dust away from the rocks. Aristotle gazed at the other side of the river and noticed a crow perched on a pile of rocks. It dipped its beak in the water and stood back up before flying away.

“You know what the nicest thing she ever said to me was?” he asked.

“What?”

“She said, ‘I like your thoughts.’ How wonderful is that? I—I still think about that. I wish I liked how I thought. I was right that she thought I was suffocating. I’m not sure what to do. I don’t want to be as strict as I used to be, but I don’t think I could act like the Eel Clan does.”

“There’s room in the middle. It’s just going to take time to find that spot,” she said.

Aristotle watched Durus stare blankly at the water.

“We are going to get through this,” she said.

“Is that so?” he asked.

Aristotle saw a brief smile in the corner of his mouth. They continued to sit together on that stone reflecting on their past and contemplating how to push forward into the future. The river continued to flow past them, as it had done consistently for countless years regardless of the season or time of day.

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Charles worked to prepare ammunition for the next day’s fight. Bullets and grenades lined the table in front of him. Golem watched a nature documentary on TV. This one focused on the melting ice at the Earth’s poles. Golem was unsure as to why Charles felt the need to always prepare so much. As long as Golem was there, Charles would always be safe.

“What are you watching?” Charles asked.

“Ice.”

“That’s a bit of a sad one. It’s really unfortunate what’s happening there. The people that can stop it don’t and the people who want to don’t have the power to. At least we let the Eel Clan

free. Maybe they can fix it,” Charles said as he considered how many grenades would be too many to bring.

Golem was not bothered by the rapidly decaying ecosystems of numerous animals. He was not fazed by the concept of animals drowning at sea because they couldn’t find any land. He wasn’t concerned with the lack of food leading to starvation. He was just grateful he got to live in a world with penguins and seals.

“Animals cute.”

“I’ll second that.”

The serenity of this moment began to soak into Charles’ perception. They may be preparing for a battle, but there was a peace to this current point in time. He liked being in the same room as Golem with the sound of documentaries playing in the background.

“I know you’re committed to keeping me safe, but maybe keep an eye out for yourself tomorrow too. You’re my best friend, you know?” Charles asked as he continued to work at his desk.

“I do.”

His parents would have never expected their son to be a werewolf deep in his underground headquarters talking to a stone creature watching a documentary as he prepared grenades to fight demons. No, they expected and desired something different for him, but he was proud of this life. Charles shook his head as he laughed to himself.

“You think you could punch a demon?” Charles asked.

“Yes.”

With all ten of them, there was no way they could lose tomorrow. Each of them brought unique strengths to the table and together there was no force stronger. Charles dared to consider the thought that they may even rival the power of the Alpha Squadron.

“Good,” Charles said.

“Rory, I know you’re busy, but it really hurts my feelings when you forget about our anniversary,” Aristotle said. She sat across from him at the dinner table. It was the twenty-sixth day of the month which meant it was their monthly anniversary. At this point, they were far beyond gifts, but she at least expected him to acknowledge it.

“Stotle, it’s been years. How long are we going to celebrate it?” he asked as he toyed with his food. He spun a stray fry around in the pile of ketchup on his plate. Aristotle had ordered burgers from one of the high-class restaurants around where they lived.

“I just think it’s fun to do. I bought us some special food to eat tonight, and you didn’t really do anything. It doesn’t need to be much. Even just a sentence would do,” she said before letting loose a nervous laugh.

“You know, I don’t really like it when we argue. I feel like we do it all the time anymore. I can’t even eat in peace,” he said.

“We—We weren’t arguing . . .”

The room around them separated at the corners and each wall flew off into an abyss, revealing a darkness surrounding them both. The furniture in the room disappeared one by one until the only thing left was the table, the two chairs, their meals, and themselves.

Rory continued to eat as if he was moving through stage directions. The sound of his fork scraping off his plate echoed into the void. *When will these dreams ever stop?* The fact she called

them dreams revealed her true emotions. These had never been dreams. She was reliving the worst moments of her relationship over and over. She was stuck in nightmares.

You forgive him for his mistakes and move on. I'm not saying you forget, but you can choose to let go of this anchor wrapping around your heart. Only then, will this all finally leave you alone.

Abraham's words came back to her.

"So, how was work today?" he asked, continuing to move through his usual script.

This wasn't him. What good would it do to forgive this empty husk in front of her? A cool breeze blew gently past them, lifting her bangs up into the air. She didn't have bangs on this anniversary. She didn't style her hair like that until after it all.

Aristotle stared at this version of Rory trapped in her mind. The real Rory likely did not even reflect this anymore. This man stuck in her dreams did not exist in the real world currently. She got up and walked toward him so she could put his head in her hands. His warm skin rested against hers. His prickly stubble had not changed for months in her mind. Each night he wore the same clothes.

"I love you . . . or at least some part of you," she said.

He did not respond. Rory froze in place as if he was an automaton awaiting its next command.

"You're right that we argued a lot. You usually didn't take the blame for things, and I had always known it wasn't mine to shoulder alone. It's okay."

Aristotle paused as she mustered the courage to continue speaking. She was afraid to admit it, but she was scared that finally obtaining closure may mean he wouldn't show up in her dreams again. With that ending, he would truly exit her life once and for all.

“That’s why we aren’t together anymore, and I forgive you for it all because I wasn’t perfect either. I like seeing you at night even if it’s like this, but I’m afraid I can’t keep on if you continue to show up unannounced.

“I want to tell you about everything that’s happened. I’d like to think you’d be proud of me and where I’ve made it to, but I need you to go . . . please.”

Aristotle was jostled awake by a bump in the road. She looked over to see Durus quietly steering the wheel with just his gloved hand. “It Never Rains in Southern California” by Albert Hammond played on the radio.

She rubbed her eyes. They ached after being torn away from a nap.

“Sorry, did I wake you? I tried to keep the music pretty quiet,” he said.

“You’re good. Thanks for taking me with you today.”

Durus smiled.

Aristotle stretched out then leaned against the window. She was comforted by the mix of sunburn and sweat coating her skin. After blinking heavily, she looked up to watch the moon and stars slowly drift in the sky. Durus and her quietly listened to the music together as they drove home.

Bliant sat on her bed preparing to fall asleep. The countless conversations meant to comfort her floated across her mind. This would be the first time she has gone to sleep alone in years. She was forced to sleep in her drab, empty room as her home was filled with the stench of death. Bliant put Abraham’s ring on her bedside stand.

She kneeled on the floor.

“God, I don’t like you.”

She was unsure if her voice was reaching anyone. It had to be. Who else could have sent her here originally?

“You don’t have to like me either.”

Would it be worse if God truly was real and let Abraham die? Perhaps it was better for him to be fake so at least there was a justification for the carnage.

“I’m not going to ask for your help killing them, but don’t get in my way.”

She stood back up and laid in her bed. A knock echoed through the room.

“Come in.”

Aristotle entered the room with a sleeping bag in her arms.

“Sorry I missed you earlier today, but I figured you might be sleeping alone tonight. I know from experience the first night alone isn’t fun,” Aristotle said as she rolled out her bed on the ground.

“Stotle . . . I . . .”

Tears welled in Bliant’s eyes as she watched Aristotle prepare to go to sleep. Aristotle hugged Bliant.

“We’re going to make it through this together . . . just like always,” Aristotle said.

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Charles walked into the artificial garden to find Zombie quietly working under the sun.

“Must be nice never seeing the moon,” Charles said as he approached Zombie.

“The moon has its moments,” Zombie said.

Zombie stared at the place in the garden where Lucas’ bones were buried. Guilt wiggled in his skin like worms seeking the surface.

“Can’t sleep?” Zombie asked.

“As per usual.”

“Heh. I understand,” Zombie said.

Zombie pulled a weed out from the garden and threw it into the center of the walking path. Its seed must have been dragged in here under the sole of someone’s shoe.

“Why are you bringing me tomorrow? I know it isn’t for my looks,” Zombie said.

“I—I just want everyone there so we have the best chance at being capable of responding to anything that could happen,” Charles said.

“You know, it was only a theory when I told Orobas that a bite would probably kill him.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting. Doing that would be incredibly risky. Last thing we need is a zombie demon,” Charles said.

“That isn’t the most concerning possibility. A bite might not affect him,” Zombie said.

“A bite isn’t on the table,” Charles said.

“We both know it is,” Zombie said.

Zombie picked a few tomatoes and set them in a woven basket.

“It’s okay to be worried about tomorrow,” Zombie said.

“How aren’t you worried about tomorrow?” Charles asked.

“It would be hard for something to kill me. Even if they did, I’ve made my peace. Only so many years I could farm for as my body slowly decomposes,” Zombie said. His mouth slowly pronounced each word with impressive diction.

“For someone always thinking about decomposing, you do a hell of a job growing things,” Charles said.

“Well, it isn’t that hard to grow tomatoes.”

“Beyond that. You’ve been a real help to Orobas. You were his introduction to humans, and I couldn’t think of a better first human to connect with. You’ve almost been like a father to him.”

Zombie stopped raking and gently set his tool down in the soil.

“You really think so?” Zombie asked.

“I do.”

A mix of juices condensed in the corners of Zombie’s eyes. His tear ducts had long since stopped working. It must have been the combination of some leaking internal fluids and condensation from the humidity in the room. He wiped it away.

“Need any help in the garden?” Charles asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Zombie said as he passed over a shovel.

## Saturday: Bed of Daisies

Bliant kicked down the door leading into the top floor of the office building. The Nexus Magistrate followed her into the room filled with cubicles. Crimson Claw, Swamp Gut, Golem, Etheria, Durus, Slime Knight, Zombie, and Orobas scanned the room for any adversaries.

“How are they not here?” Bliant asked as she flew around the room searching for clues.

“You’ve searched the entire building. I’m not sure where they could be,” Aristotle said over the intercom. She sat in their van outside the building staring at blueprints. They were on the twentieth floor. There wasn’t anything else.

“Where could they be?” Swamp Gut asked. They wore a hydration backpack with a tube they could suck water out of.

Crimson Claw lowered his gun and slung it over his back.

“The better question is why did they want us here?” Crimson Claw asked.

A rumble rolled up the building increasing in power as it rose higher. The ground beneath them shook rapidly as the floor swayed. Dust fell from the ceiling and coated their shoulders. The groan of the foundation rocked against their ear drums as the ceiling lights flashed off briefly.

“What was that?” Durus asked as he tightened his grip on his crowbar.

Through the windows to the bottom floor, Aristotle saw a red flare.

“Someone is setting explosives off. Get out of the building!” she shouted over the intercom. A red pentagram appeared on the floor beneath the Nexus Magistrate. Cracks etched out into the concrete from the glowing, crimson lines. Orobas had seen these in use before.

“They lined the floors with traps! We must move!” Orobas shouted.

Crimson Claw immediately distributed commands.

“It’s too late to make it out through the stairs. Zombie, Orobas, and Slime Knight have the best chance of surviving the collapse. Bliant, try and take Durus down with you. Etheria, grab Swamp Gut. Golem—”

Another rumble rolled across the building and the floor collapsed beneath them.

Within a split second, they scrambled to act.

“PROTECTIVE TACKLE!” Golem shouted. He crashed into Crimson Claw and wrapped his granite arms around him. Bliant flew forward. She grabbed both Zombie and Durus before they sank into the floor. Etheria wrapped her tendrils around Swamp Gut, keeping them from falling.

Slime Knight tumbled down onto the nineteenth floor as concrete gave way. He quickly assessed what brought a greater risk to him. Was it safer to risk a jump out of the building or to gamble that none of the foundation would crush him? A red pentagram formed beneath him.

Aristotle watched from the van as the red flares rose floor by floor. Now, there were flares simultaneously moving down from the top floor. Each floor would glow crimson briefly, before the building rumbled.

As the nineteenth floor cracked under Slime Knight, he stumbled to a run. He sprinted past the cubicles as they dropped into the depths of the eighteenth floor while he looked for something to break his fall. If he was to have any internal organs; they would have been pumping with adrenaline at this exact moment. Every neuron in this sentient slime fired off as he searched for the best way out.

Slime Knight grabbed one of the office chairs and threw it forward. It crashed through the window, spraying glass outward. He grabbed a second chair and leapt out through the opening. As he fell through the air, he repositioned himself to be sitting in the chair.

Etheria and Bliant remained in the air. Bliant flapped her wings rapidly as she struggled to hold both Durus and Zombie. Etheria held onto Swamp Gut. Even though Swamp Gut was the lightest of them all, she had never quite flown like Bliant. It was more of a hovering. They had nothing to do but wait at the top. The walls and ceiling were not a part of the demon's trap, so they had not collapsed yet.

The weight pulling down on Etheria and Bliant kept them from being able to generate enough force to crash through a window. Below them, a mess of dust and concrete awaited. Etheria continued to sweat as she held onto Swamp Gut. They slowly descended downward as Etheria lost ground to exhaustion.

"Let me go!" Swamp Gut shouted.

"No. I'm not going to let you go!" Etheria shouted.

"You gotta trust me. I can handle myself," Swamp Gut said.

Durus grabbed his crowbar with the hand not holding onto Bliant's. He let energy surge across the metal then threw it through the window. The rumbling continued to echo up from the floors below.

"There's an opening!" Durus said. Bliant began to slowly fly toward it when a chunk of concrete dislodged from the ceiling and fell toward her. Etheria used two of her free tentacles to summon a burst of energy that crashed into the rock, breaking it to dust.

"Thank you!" Bliant said.



Another boulder fell from the ceiling. It crashed into Etheria. Her and Swamp Gut fell into the pit of dust below.

“ETHERIA!” Bliant shouted.

“Throw me and Zombie off on the outside of the building,” Durus said.

Unsure of what Durus was planning, Zombie had to trust him. “Swamp Gut and Etheria need help. I can make it,” Zombie said.

“But . . .”

“THERE’S NO TIME TO WASTE!” Durus shouted. Zombie nodded in agreement. Bliant regretfully flew closer to the opening in the window and tossed them both out before immediately nose diving into the dust.

Zombie and Durus fell together.

“What was your plan?” Zombie shouted over the wind.

“Contemplating it right now! Slice yourself open and start spilling some guts out for us to land on! I’ll work on step two!”

Orobas fell through the floors slowly toppling to the ground unphased. It felt no different to him than rolling down a hill or going over a speed bump would feel to a human. He attempted to look through the dust for an outline of someone to save. He could see the shadow of someone and pushed off the debris to grab them.

At the start of the fall, Golem hugged Crimson Claw tightly. They fell through each floor one by one toppling against concrete.

“Close eyes,” Golem said as reformed stone crashed against reinforced stone.

Charles remained encased by Golem’s embrace.

“You gotta trust me!” he could hear someone shout from above. He peeked through a gap in Golem’s two arms to see Orobas falling through the floor. Metal rebar stuck in the walls had been excavated by the explosion and tumbled in the debris, scraping against Golem’s skin.

Crimson Claw knew why Golem had grabbed him, but he hated that Golem chose him to save. He knew that Golem could have just saved himself by leaping out of the window.

Bliant dove through the cloud of dust evading chunks of debris that spurt up at her. She was not able to see more than five feet in front of her and needed to be careful of using her rapier to cut anything that came into view as she risked hitting something before realizing it was an ally. A wedge of the flooring spewed upward at her and she slammed her wings downward to evade it. She leaned to the right and spiraled down farther, looking for someone. She needed to save at least one of them.

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Aristotle listened over the intercom.

“... Etheria, grab Swamp Gut . . .”

“What’s the status? Anyone?” she asked.

Grumbling sputtered out through her headset. The ground rumbled as the building folded in on itself. Red light shined off Aristotle as she popped open the glove compartment. She stared into the compartment and rapidly considered her options. She didn’t have long to make a choice. With each second passing, her friend’s chance of death increased exponentially. A bottle of whisky sat in the open glove compartment taunting her. The brown liquid rattled in the bottle as the building shattered against the ground.

*They need you. They need you right now!*

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Orobas collided with the shadow and looked to see Valac within his arms. Stunned, he let go, but Valac latched onto him.

“Found you!” Valac shouted as they fell through the rubble. Orobas crashed downward as Valac held onto him.

“What are you doing?” Orobas asked.

“Figured you’d survive the blast no problem and it would weaken your abductors. Win-win to me!” he said before cackling.

Bliant continued descending into the abyss as someone came into view. Swamp Gut tumbled downward, crashing against debris. A rock collided with Swamp Gut’s back, shattering their hydration pack. The water from it sprayed meaninglessly into the dust.

“Swamp Gut, GRAB ON!” she shouted as she extended her arm outward.

They did not respond.

Zombie and Durus fell downward. Zombie cut open his stomach, but his internal fluids sprayed back up into their faces.

“That’s not ideal. We need a new plan!” Zombie said.

A piece of steel rebar fell past them. Durus grabbed onto it, letting his energy surge through it. How could he use this to stop their fall? He grabbed onto Zombie with his left hand then used his right to jam the rebar into the brick siding of the building. Durus screamed out as his right arm flared with pain. Their descent slowed briefly before the building rumbled again. The bricks the rebar was stuck in were knocked out and they fell once more. Zombie’s hand slipped out of Durus’ and he fell downward into the plume of smoke.

A wave of energy spread throughout the area and every single bit of debris exploded in a burst of daisies. Slime Knight’s chair landed on the ground and the bottom half shattered into

pieces. The seat grinded against the road and Slime Knight was flung off it. He rolled across the ground to a stop.

Etheria fell into a pile of flowers. Durus fell into another pile, landing on top of Zombie. Valac captured Orobas with a bear hug before landing on the ground with him. Bliant grabbed onto Swamp Gut and gently set them into the flowers. Golem collided with the daisies hard enough to crack the underlying concrete. He rolled over to let Crimson Claw out of his grasp.

Aristotle floated above them. Daisies fell around her. Bright, yellow light filled her eyes. Her trench coat rippled in the air as energy surged off her. Valac began to drag Orobas toward the side where Forneus, Paimon, and Seir awaited him.

“Quick, Forneus. Break any hexes the Nexus Magistrate put on him,” Valac said.

Forneus pointed his hand at Orobas as Valac held him tight. Forneus grumbled then shook his head in disapproval.

“What—That’s impossible. What have they done to you?” Valac asked.

“Nothing. I’m not coming with you,” Orobas said as he broke free from Valac’s grasp.

“HE STAYS WITH US!” Crimson Claw shouted out.

“If he won’t come because you’re here, then we’ll remove you from the equation! Once he’s home, he’ll understand this is for the best,” Valac said.

Crimson Claw picked himself up and looked around at his teammates scattered throughout the bed of daisies. Some of them began to get up while others laid quietly.

“Aristotle, we need time!” Crimson Claw shouted out.

Aristotle nodded her head.

“Nexus Magistrate, steady yourselves! This is it! The battle starts now!” he said, unsure of who could hear him. He ran to help pull Etheria up. Bliant kneeled over Swamp Gut

attempting to wake them up. Golem slowly stood back up. Slime Knight ran to the others but was slowed by the uneven gait created from the dents in his armor. Durus dug Zombie out of the flowers.

“I can’t feel my legs . . .” Zombie said as Durus pulled him out of the pile.

Zombie looked down to see his intestines hanging out beneath his stomach. His legs were nowhere to be found.

“Hmph. That would appear to be why,” Zombie said.

Aristotle looked to the demons on the side. They began scampering toward the Nexus Magistrate members. With such a small amount of alcohol consumed, she likely had enough energy for about four more small spells. Aristotle opened her right hand up and an enlarged energy projection of her hand formed on the ground next to the demons. The projection mimicked her hand’s movements and she swung it viciously, hoping to grab at least one of the demons.

“You can’t do a thing to us!” Valac shouted.

“Is that so?” Aristotle asked. She continued to spin her hand through the air.

The Hunters halted their approach to dodge the projection. Valac deflected it, Seir leapt over the hand, but Aristotle wrapped her fingers around Forneus. Paimon scampered across the yellow body and bit down on one of Aristotle’s fingers. She loosened her grip and Forneus slipped from her grasp, but she managed to pinch down on Paimon. Aristotle reeled her arm back and thrust her hand forward. The projection launched Paimon upward and he rocketed off into the stratosphere with a squeal.

“The Hell? Did you just throw Paimon into space?” Valac asked.

Aristotle snickered as she cast her next spell. *We need reinforcements. I need to find them first with a locator spell.*

“So, we spent all that energy to bring Paimon with us to this realm and he gets thrown into space before doing anything of use? This world never ceases to amuse me,” Valac said.

*Got ‘em. Now to use a teleportation spell.* Valac, Forneus, and Seir continued their approach on the Nexus Magistrate as the heroes regained their footing. Each of them stood in various conditions of health. Blood seeped out from cuts and their uniforms were torn.

A white portal formed in the air next to the Nexus Magistrate. Four people stepped through it.

Eel Master, Jellyfish, Shark, and Anemone appeared on the battlefield. Durus looked over in awe at Eel Master. Her black armor glistened as electricity crackled across it.

“You came here to save us?” he asked.

“Blowing up buildings is a form of pollution,” Eel Master said to him.

She turned on her intercom then said, “This is Eel Master. I need all members to correspond at my location. I’m located at a former office building. It’s secluded, but I need you all to secure a barricade within a two-mile radius. No one gets in and move anyone in out. The officers and I will handle the disruptors.”

Aristotle lowered herself back to the ground and snapped her fingers. Marble chains formed from pure energy, the very essence of our actions, whipped out from nothingness and bound each of the demons by their limbs. The yellow light faded from her eyes.

“They’re bound! Our time to strike is now!” Aristotle shouted.

“Eel Clan, maneuver twenty-four. Wrap and Shock,” Eel Master declared as she ran forward. Her officers followed behind her. Anemone extended her fingers and they intertwined

with Jellyfish's hair. They leapt up into the air and each landed in one of Shark's open hands. He threw them forward and they spun through the air like a bola. They collided with Seir and knocked her out of the energy chains while wrapping her in their own entrapping. Jellyfish and Anemone held her tight letting their poison seep in as Eel Master charged forward.

Eel Master reached for a dial on her wrist and cranked it all the way up. Each light on her helmet shined so bright they rivaled that of the sun. Electricity surged across her armor. It crackled viciously desiring to be let loose. She approached Seir and reeled her arm back to deliver an uppercut. Jellyfish and Anemone untangled themselves from her.

"TASTE THE STRENGTH OF TEN THOUSAND EELS!" Eel Master shouted as she uppercut Seir. Within an instant, six million volts of electricity spread across Seir's body, sending her flying backward. The Eel Clan continued their pursuit of her.

As the Eel Clan performed their maneuver, Bliant burst forward toward Valac. He attempted to break his bindings, only freeing one of his arms by the time she reached him.

"I will remove every atom of you from existence!" Bliant shouted as the wind crashed past her. She drew her rapier and plunged it into Valac. He laughed and smacked her away with his free arm. As she tumbled across the ground, he broke himself free from the other marble chains. Bliant used her wings to pick herself up and she flew back toward him.

Just before Bliant crashed into him again, she thrust her wings downward, so she flew upward. As Bliant rolled over his body, she withdrew her rapier from his chest. Bliant landed behind him and slashed at his ankles. It did not faze him.

"I will eradicate you!" she yelled.

"Bliant, you seem to hold a grudge. I think—"

"RIGHTEOUS FIST!"

Golem's fist collided with Valac. The scratches from the building's collapse in Golem's skin grew worse. The force from the impact with Valac deepened them into cracks. Valac slid backward. Bullets peppered off his body as Crimson Claw locked Valac in his sights. Slime Knight charged forward with his sword drawn. Orobas watched patiently, seeing potential openings, but avoiding intervention.

Forneus had freed himself from his chains, but was busy fighting Aristotle, Swamp Gut, Durus, and Etheria. Etheria maintained a fair distance from the demon and blasted crimson orbs of energy against his putrid body. Durus cracked his rebar against the monster's porous skin then stepped back to avoid the retaliation.

In a perfect world, Forneus would have set up hexes as traps for this specific battle, but he had expected the building to be enough. Instead, he had to fight with his fists. Forneus could hit hard, but his motions were slow enough that the Nexus Magistrate could play around them.

Swamp Gut had thoroughly searched for any source of water when Aristotle was fending off the Hunters with her magical hand. They reached their hand into the ruptured water sac in the backpack, but it was completely dry. Seeing they had no other option, Swamp Gut decided to fight with what they had. Currently, Swamp Gut was latched around Forneus' neck attempting to strangle the demon. Aristotle jabbed a piece of rebar forward, attempting to break through the monster's skin.

As Valac effortlessly fended off Golem, Crimson Claw, Slime Knight, and Bliant, he maintained a conversation with Orobas.

"Why are you doing this? Why do you take so much joy in it?" Orobas asked.

"Because we're the only ones that can see the world for what it is. Humans are destined to despise themselves. These people don't get it yet. They fill themselves with ignorance by



consuming false pretenses. They hide under their friends or under their sheets, but they come to us eventually.

“We see the end result digging through the shit sent to the underworld. Knowing what we know, how couldn’t it be funny watching these insects scramble for some sense of meaning or purpose. I am just expediting the process while I clean up some loose ends,” Valac said.

“Humans aren’t like that. They aren’t destined for self-hatred. These people fight it every day. Together, they can be more,” Orobas said. Bullets clattered to the ground as they crumpled against Valac’s skin.

“You say that, yet I can read each of them from here. Their internal wounds scream out telling me hidden secrets. They believe that time will suture these cuts, but infection is inevitable. In the end, their issues will kill them all the same,” Valac said. He knocked away Golem and flicked Bliant’s rapier, flinging it across the battlefield.

“They aren’t that simple,” Orobas said. He believed that he could talk Valac down. As long as he could calm Valac, everyone could go home alive.

“It’s all repeated. I’ve seen these issues millions of times in my infinite career of torturing. The signs stay the same. Each of you are snakes choking on your own tails,” Valac said. He let loose a heavy yawn and jabbed his tail forward. Valac skewered Slime Knight through his chest plate and lifted him into the air.

“Kick rocks and die,” Slime Knight signed.

“You don’t know the meaning. You heroes are used to fighting to stop people that are fighting to stop you from stopping them. It’s a cute game, but you don’t understand dying.

“Maybe I should teach you. After all, this battle bores me. I expected more from the

famed Nexus Magistrate. Each time I find myself bored we will kill one of you . . . starting . . . now,” Valac said. He threw Slime Knight to the side.

“FATED FIST!”

Valac halted Golem’s punch with the palm of his hand. The force of his immediate stop sent a shockwave through Golem’s sediment body. The crack from his arm spread farther across, etching onto his chest. Valac used one hand to pummel Golem as he held the stone guardian steady with his other. He brutalized Golem with meticulous attacks.

Slime Knight and Bliant slashed at Valac hoping to stop him, but it did not even slow him. Crimson Claw fired off each bullet aiming directly at Valac’s eyes. The empty casings fell into the bed of flowers and piled at his feet.

Valac’s claws tore through the stone and turned it to sand. Chunks of rocks flew off Golem’s body. With each blow, crevices and gaps were spread across him.

“You moron! How about you perform a STABLE BLOCK or a DIMWITTED DODGE? Brawn alone doesn’t cut it in the big leagues,” Valac said. Golem’s chest was cracked open, and a large chunk was missing from the back of his head. The Nexus Magistrate’s granite warden stood helpless, waiting for Valac to finish him off. Golem’s deep, molded eyes were closed in anticipation of what awaited him. Valac sneered as he reeled his arm back.

Crimson Claw attempted to dive in between them, but Valac swatted him away with his tail. Orobas watched in horror as Valac’s fist collided with Golem, sending him flying backward. Golem toppled across the ground. With each bounce off the concrete, a piece of his body flew into the air until only a torso with a head and one arm laid on the ground.

Valac turned to continue fighting the others as Crimson Claw ran to Golem’s side. Valac would break Orobas’ ideals even if it took every member of the team being killed.

Charles had never seen Golem in pain. This stood true as Golem still didn't seem to be in pain right now, but he knew Golem must be past hurting at this point. Charles reached his arm forward and dragged his fingers across the cracks, trying to feel how deep they were.

"I'm broken," the quiet, gravelly voice said.

"I know . . . that's okay. We can fix you later," Charles said. His fingers told him otherwise. Bits of rubble fell off as he moved his hands across Golem's skin. Water welled in his eyes and his lips began to whimper.

"I'm too broken."

"I know . . . don't worry, Buddy. We'll fix you up." Charles' throat hurt as he spoke. He wanted to sound strong for his friend at this pivotal moment, but his voice croaked seeing Golem so mangled.

"It's okay," Golem said. His solemn voice stood out from the background noise.

Golem knew what was about to happen. He didn't mind. He had done his job and kept Charles safe every single day he lived. The only thing that crossed his mind at this moment was the question of where stone creatures went when they died. Did they get to spend eternity with werewolves? He wondered if he would ever see Charles again or if his consciousness would return to nothingness like before he was summoned to this realm.

"Golem, just stay with me. We are going to make it out of this. It's okay," Charles said. The battles raged on behind him, outside of his perception. Daisies that Golem's tumble had kicked up fell down upon them.

"I'm leaving soon," Golem said.

"No, don't leave. Just stay here with me," Charles begged.

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t ever be sorry. You were incredible.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll—” Charles was cut off as his throat began to cave in.

“I’ll miss you too,” Charles said. He put his hand on Golem’s cheek as the gallant figure looked up so his final sight could be his best friend. Golem’s body began to cave in on itself as pieces chipped off, blending into the rubble around them.

His best friend returned to the sediment from which he was melded. He stared at the ground where Golem had just laid.

Blood was always on his hands. Crimson colored claws.

Bliant and Slime Knight struggled to hold Valac back with only the two of them on the offense.

“OROBAS! HELP OUT!” Bliant pleaded in between strikes.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. Orobac, if you’re going to side with them, you may as well help stop what you brought upon them!” Valac said.

Golem’s death replayed in his mind. While only dust had sprayed out of Golem’s injuries, Orobac had seen blood and guts bursting into the air. How was he supposed to intervene? His plan had been rooted in responding to an attack directed at him, but the Hunters focused only on his friends. To fight head on would make him just the same as his brethren.

“CLAWS OUT!”

His thoughts were broken by a howl.

Crimson Claw ran forward and leapt into the air. His back two legs latched onto Valac and he used his front two arms to rapidly scratch him. Hoping to draw blood, his claws dug into

Valac's skin. Blood. He wanted to see blood! He needed to see it. His namesake must become reality. Crimson Claw snarled as he continued his assault.

Durus, Aristotle, Swamp Gut, and Etheria continued to fight Forneus in an attempt to injure him. They appeared to be at a standstill as Forneus was too slow to hit them, but their attacks seemed meaningless to him.

They had considered stopping to help Golem. If they had done that, Forneus would have been free to intervene elsewhere. The Eel Clan could only handle Seir and Valac was already overwhelming the others. Even if they couldn't win this fight for now, keeping him preoccupied was a victory in itself. If the Nexus Magistrate could only win by attrition, then that's what they would do. Unbeknown to everyone, Zombie was slowly dragging himself closer and closer to Crimson Claw.

Zombie wished to tell the team of his plan, but their intercom had been blown out in the collapse. His plan disgusted him, but at this point he saw few other options.

Eel Master and her officers had been attempting to hit Seir once more since their initial attack. Seir continuously evaded their offense, flipping over punches and sliding under jabs. Eel Master analyzed her opponent. *We just have to hit her once more. She's dodging because she knows she can't take another hit.* The death of Golem scared her. That stone guardian had effortlessly cut through her grunts and rivaled the strength of Shark. If Golem was useless against the Hunters, then what chance could the rest of them have?

She had known they were stepping into a dangerous situation and death was not a foreign concept to her, but to see lives thrown away so frivolously was frightening. She had only considered killing as a means to an end and at this point in time she could not tell what Valac's goal was.

Her officers were in danger right now. Any one of them could be killed in an instant. They had to finish this now. Seir clicked her tongue as she danced around their attacks. With no lips, she could not pronounce any words. The chattering of her teeth echoed through the Eel Clan's suits.

"Eel Clan, bring this monster to its knees! Anemone, cover as much area as you can. Shark and Jellyfish, we hit where she looks to dodge. NOW!"

Anemone extended her fingers creating a web of colors. Thin skewers of various tints and hues sprayed out through the air. She channeled all of energy to extend her body farther than ever before. If she couldn't cover enough area, Seir's movement would be too unpredictable.

Her entire life, Anemone had been told to reach farther. She needed to get better grades, volunteer more hours, earn more money, give more time. Reaching was all she had ever done and all anyone had ever wanted was more. Right now, for the first time ever, she was the one who wanted to reach farther.

Her fingertips stretched outward until a sea of colors formed in front of her. Seir thread through the attack and leapt out toward the ground.

Shark appeared where she was about to land. Seir crashed into Shark and used him to bounce back up into the air. Something grabbed onto Seir's ankle, stopping her from flying upward. She looked down to see a tendril stuck around her.

Jellyfish struggled to yank Seir back to the ground. Eel Master wrapped her arms around Jellyfish's waist and helped her tear Seir to the ground. Eel Master and Jellyfish worked together to drag Seir across the floor covered in flowers.

Seir writhed on the ground, attempting to rip herself free, but was unable to tear off the tendril. Shark stumbled back up and moved to take advantage of her disadvantageous position.

Valac ripped Crimson Claw off him and assessed the scratches etched across his body. Nothing cut more than an inch deep.

“I’m bored again. Seir, kill one of them,” Valac said.

Eel Master heard this command and shouted, “Don’t let her loose!”

She knew it was all or nothing now. If they didn’t stop Seir, she would kill one of the officers. Seir rolled across the ground avoiding Shark’s attacks. Behind them, Anemone still worked to retract her extended fingers. Free to kill someone, Seir desired to pick off a member of the Eel Clan. Shark slammed his fist down again and Seir moved so her foot was crushed underneath his metal teeth.

Now maimed, she was able to easily slip her foot out from Jellyfish’s grasp. Eel Master watched as Seir stood up with one foot and flipped into the air. She pushed off Shark with her upper arms and landed next to Anemone. Seir stood on one foot and tore her arm into Anemone’s chest, shredding through her armor. She pulled out Anemone’s heart and stared at it pumping in the air. Seir chattered quietly as blood poured out from the gaping hole in Anemone’s chest.

Anemone collapsed to the ground. Seir’s yellow eyes locked with Eel Master’s as she ate Anemone’s heart. Eel Master gazed, silent. With no lips to hide the chewing, the Eel Clan watched Anemone’s heart get torn to nothingness as porous, pink pieces of it slipped from Seir’s mouth onto the ground. Each shred would bounce lightly off the floor before settling near Seir’s feet. Blood slipped out from between Seir’s stained teeth and down her chin. The monster appeared giddy as she devoured Anemone’s organ.

She was interrupted as something yanked her down. For her final action, Anemone had wrapped her fingers around Seir’s legs. Seir attempted to crawl backward, but Anemone’s

fingers were stuck around her. She slowly dragged Anemone's lifeless body across the ground. Seeing an opportunity, Shark ran forward and crashed into Seir. His suit hissed. The hydraulics fired off as he pulverized Seir. Green bodily fluids spurted up into the air as he massacred her.

“YOU SICK BASTARD! I’LL KILL YOU!”

Durus heard Shark shout out as he continued to fight Forneus. He didn't hate the Eel Clan anymore, but he couldn't help the fact that he was grateful Valac decided to have Seir kill someone instead of Forneus. Their lives were simply up to chance at this point.

Aristotle continued to jab at Forneus, but her efforts were for naught. Deep down, she prepared for the idea that Forneus may be chosen next to kill someone. If that were to be the case, she wanted it to be her.

Swamp Gut was thrown off Forneus and they tumbled across the ground. Once more, they scanned their surroundings for some source of water. There was nothing within view. They couldn't leave their friends here, but they needed to change tactics if the team was to win. What other options were there? Zombie continued to drag himself across the ground out of anyone's view. He grew closer to Crimson Claw.

Underneath her hood, Etheria had suffered significant wounds from her fall. The jagged edges of the rock colliding with her torso had cut deep into her body. The thought that one of them was up next to be killed made her tentacles shake. She knew it was selfish to think this way, but she feared dying right now. She wasn't scared by the act of dying, rather the notion she would likely be quickly forgotten. A conversation she had with Abraham came back to her.

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It was one of the routine meetings they used to have many years ago. Abraham quietly sipped orange spice tea from his mug as Etheria floated just above the cushion of her chair.



“So, what’s the problem this week, Etheria?” he asked. He set his mug down on an origami instruction book from the local used bookstore.

“I—I feel like I’m boring. I feel like people just forget about me.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked. There was a page in his origami book folded in at the corner. He was trying to learn how to make a tiger.

“I just play board games at night. It’s not very exciting. That’s about all I do in my free time,” she said.

“What’s beneath your hood? I notice you always keep it up.”

“My face is unperceivable to humans. It would explode your mind if you saw it,” she said.

“Sounds pretty interesting to me.”

Abraham took the tea bag out of his mug as he didn’t want it to seep for too long.

“I think anyone can feel they’re boring if they only look at certain traits they possess. By your definition, I’m boring too. I just sit around all day waiting for my wife to get home from her adventures,” he said.

“Do you think you’re boring?” she asked.

“I just don’t care that much. As long as I enjoy my job and I get to see Bliant each day, I could care less about how someone may perceive my life. I’m happy and that’s what matters.”

Etheria listened carefully to each word he said. It seemed as if him having a drive usurped any concern for his life’s stagnation. What was her drive? What did she want from this world?

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In the present, Etheria channeled more and more energy out from the Absence. *Why do I fight? Is it because I want to be remembered? No, it has to be something more.* This needed to be a larger blast than she had ever channeled before if it was going to affect Forneus. The orb of crimson energy steadily grew in size, kicking up daisies from the winds rushing off it. *Why? What is my motivation?*

Visions of past Nexus Magistrate members crossed her mind. She saw Spirit Rider, Hellraiser, Demon Duster, and everyone else up until Golem. Each of them had sat at the table to play games. There were always enough players for the games, but who controlled each piece changed over the years.

She didn't want to be forgotten because she saw that the others were no longer mentioned by most. Etheria never forgot their smiles, the way they rolled dice, or the way they planned turns in board games. She was scared that if she left, then who would remember everything?

*I don't want to be forgotten because I'm the one that needs to stay here to remember it all! I was never boring; I was just always so focused on others.* The ball of energy grew denser as power was extracted from the Absence. Etheria channeled all of her spirit to throw the orb of power forward. Forneus was too slow to avoid it. Durus, Aristotle, and Swamp Gut dove to the side. Etheria fell to the ground as soon as the energy left her hands.

Crimson energy rolled across Forneus' body. The mystic waves pulled at his exterior, pricking and nipping at the bindings which held it together. His skin began to fragment and flake off revealing a pink layer to his body. Durus ran forward and jammed cursed rebar into Forneus' fleshy stomach.

Forneus' pink color was overtaken by magenta energy that spread throughout his body. His veins slowly exploded as cursed energy seared his blood. His slimy exterior quickly

dehydrated before turning to ash and flaking into the air. He collapsed to the ground as Durus pushed down on his rebar, tearing farther into the monster's flesh. Durus grit his teeth as he attempted to dig farther and farther inward.

Aristotle appeared at his side.

"TOGETHER! ALWAYS!" she shouted.

She slid her sweater's sleeves over her hands then grabbed onto the metal too. Aristotle winced as the cursed energy crackled against her skin, but together they tore a deeper gash.

Forneus' eyes rolled backward into his head. Once every inch of his body was coated in ash, Durus removed the rebar from his stomach. Forneus fell forward and did not get back up.

Durus grabbed at his mouth as vomit tickled his throat.

"God damn it. The Hunters are absolutely useless. One of them is stuck in space, Shark bashed in one, and you just cursed Forneus to death! Consider me flustered," Valac said. He swung his arm forward, no longer holding back. His fist collided with Bliant and she tumbled across the field of daisies.

Letting loose all his strength, he effortlessly crashed through the entire remaining Nexus Magistrate and Eel Clan members. Regardless of how the individual attempted to defend themselves, Valac cracked through, knocking them backward. Valac skipped Orobas and stomped forward toward Aristotle.

Aristotle watched Valac approach her. Her knuckles faded to white as they tightly gripped a piece of rebar. Powerless, she watched all her friends get demolished. She would not win head-on. Just before he ran into her, she dove to the side. He grabbed her leg and her eyes opened wide.

“I’m not really bored anymore, but I am irritated. Don’t think I forgot about that stunt you pulled at the start,” he said. A slight smile formed at the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not going to beg for mercy,” she said as he dangled her in the air.

“Wouldn’t mean anything coming from you anyway,” Valac said.

Valac slammed Aristotle downward and her body collided with concrete. Her bones cracked off the cement. Still holding her by the leg, he stared at the repercussions of just one collision with the ground. Blood oozed out from her body.

One of her eyes had been shattered by the impact. A viscous mix of organic tissue and blood sat in a pool where her left eye once was. The front of her nose had been scrapped off on the ground revealing bone. The corners of her mouth had been torn open making it hard for her to put her upper and bottom lip back together.

“You didn’t take that too well. I was hoping for something more dramatic,” Valac said. He put Aristotle on the ground, and she silently collapsed to her knees.

“STOP IT!” Orobas shouted.

“Or what?” Valac asked.

Aristotle rested on the bed of flowers she had made. Each breath she took was delicate and forced. Only ten minutes had passed since the Nexus Magistrate was standing at the top of the building.

At this point in time, Orobas wanted to step farther away from violence than ever before. To watch those he ran from live up to all his worst memories rattled him to the core. Valac faced Orobas. Valac’s tail writhed in the air as it circled Aristotle’s head.

“. . . or I’ll kill you,” Orobas said. Durus watched as Orobas caught Valac’s attention.

*Please, keep him busy. Don’t let him take Aristotle.*

“Consider me *very* interested now. Although . . . let me wrap this up first.”

Orobas ran to stop Valac as his violet tail extended outward. It impaled Aristotle through the shoulder then retracted. It impaled her through the chest then retracted. He kept piercing Aristotle, until Orobas got close enough.

Valac slammed his fist forward and Orobas stopped it.

“You aren’t meant to live with these toys. Come back home to us. Embrace who you were born to be,” Valac said as they pushed their arms against each other.

Orobas leapt backward.

“You will still end up being a powerful ruler. It’s your birthright,” Valac said. His tongue swung in the air.

As the demons spoke, Aristotle watched the blood slip from the holes littering her body. Warmth slowly coated her. Was she feeling her blood soak her skin or was that feeling just a part of dying? While her body collapsed, one memory came to mind. It was last night when Durus and her were sitting on their rock as the moon peacefully shined down upon them.

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She looked over to Durus then said, “I used to look at other relationships and wonder if mine was truly right for me. Was I destined to be ignored? Did everyone else feel valueless? Perhaps those facets of the relationship were not specific to my partner, but indicative of me. I believed there could be better out there. Now, I get a chance to know. I’m not sure if I was right to assume that, but I guess I’ll know some day.”

“You’ll find that answer,” Durus said as he continued to wave his hand through the water.

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In the present, Aristotle continued to think. *Loves me. Loves me not. Loves me. Loves me not. Loves me? I guess I'll never get to know.* She looked over to Durus who was running toward her. With each step he took, daisies burst into the air. Any that touched his right arm immediately disintegrated. He was shouting something, but she couldn't quite make it out. Aristotle fell forward and Durus slid to catch her before she fell completely flat.

"Ann . . . ANN! Come on . . . you can't leave us now. We didn't finish fighting yet. We were . . . We were supposed to figure out our lives together. Who is going to keep me in line if you up and leave?" He made sure not to touch her skin with his right hand as he used his left to push away the blood that was trickling toward her right eye.

They locked eyes and Durus stared at her blue iris as she stared at his. One of them was a natural earthy brown, and the other was tainted magenta. Durus looked to the corner of her right eye where a bit of dried blood, mucus, and dust had congealed. He reached down with his left hand and used one finger to delicately wipe it out.

"You . . . you got a bit of sleep in your eye," Durus said as his lips quivered.

Aristotle smiled briefly.

"Is that so . . ."

*Maybe I did know.* Aristotle slowly closed her eye as she stared at Durus' face. *To die in someone's arms; I suppose that was the goal all along.*

"ANN! Please. Just please don't die . . ." Durus said as he leaned over her body. Tears streamed down his face as a light breeze blew by knocking a few daisies into the air. Durus screamed out as he did not know how to endure losing someone else.

"You don't give a shit about that. You just want the credit for bringing me back," Orobas said as Valac and him circled one another.

“Am I really that bad of a liar?” Valac asked. His crooked teeth shined underneath his smile.

“I am well aware of what awaits me back there. I never wanted it.”

Valac clenched his hand into a fist.

“This was just supposed to be a simple retrieval mission, but you made it so much more complicated! You were born into a pool of filth the same as me. We were designed to murder and torture. You will never escape who you truly are,” Valac said.

“Do not blame this on me! Their blood is on your hands!” Orobas shouted.

The Eel Clan laid unconscious on the ground. Valac had shattered their armor leaving them helpless. Rubble and debris laid around them, stained with blood from their fighting.

Crimson Claw continued to crawl away as their battle carried on. Smoke clogged his lungs causing each motion to require more exertion. The ash on the ground filled his chest with each breath. Blood spewed out from his mouth and splattered across the daisies surrounding him. His internal fluids quickly mixed with the debris forming a scarlet paste.

He remembered just yesterday thinking that with all ten of them, there was no way they could lose. *What a fool I was. To think we were anywhere close to the strength of the Alpha Squadron. The Nexus Magistrate is an insult to the very premise of heroics, and I am a stain on a history of leaders.*

Daisies fell out of the air. He had kicked them up when he was originally knocked backward. Through the shower of flowers around him, he could make out their hulking outlines. Daisies stuck to the blood coagulating on his face. A few peppered off, delicately falling back to the ground.

*How could this have happened? This wasn't S-Day. This wasn't the Reckoning. This was just a Saturday.*

Orobas slowly stepped forward. He had been holding back since the moment he fell into this beautiful world. He refused to break even the smallest flower in an idyllic realm. He couldn't fathom hurting anything he cared about. At this moment, all he could see in front of him was something he wanted erased from existence.

“TAKE OFF THAT MASK! STOP HIDING YOUR TRUE SELF FROM THESE OAFS!” Valac shouted. He pointed at the black cloth covering the bottom of Orobas' face, hiding his maw.

Bliant stared at the mangled wings on her back. They were contorted after being crushed in Valac's hands. She pushed herself up to her knees. Her disfigured wings slowly began to retake their normal shape, excruciatingly untangling every knot. Daisies were now stuck in between the layers of feathers.

*I still have work to do. He is still standing.*

She unclipped her armor and it clanged against the ground. With only the spandex under suit on, she could now move faster. Bliant spit blood out from her mouth and picked back up her rapier.

*He's not dead yet.*

With each step, Orobas did not hold back his weight. He let the ground crumble beneath his hooves. Rage surged across his body as anger bled over his eyes.

“I know the cesspools you speak of. It was there that those better than yourself taught me to be more. They showed me that I could achieve greater things. I care not for what we were



supposed to become. You are nothing but a bloated heretic in this pure world. I refuse to become anything like you because I am better. I will be better!” Orobas shouted.

Durus looked at the two of them. To kill someone. Perhaps he would not only learn to accept this, but would enjoy it in this specific instance. He had to channel more energy forward than ever before. Routinely, he tried to hide this part of himself, the mistakes. Right now, he needed to let it loose.

He grabbed a flower off the ground with his right hand and watched it disintegrate to ash after burning a pink flame. Cursed energy spread through him. Lilac colored sparks popped off his skin and fell across the daisies.

Durus ran over to the Eel Clan to find them unconscious, but alive. Valac had likely shattered the hidden energy cell to each of their suits. He looked toward Eel Master’s gauntlet. In his years of studying the Eel Clan he had learned much about this suit. The power cell created the electricity and the gauntlet stored that energy to release it. Durus slid the gauntlet off Carina’s hand and put it over his right arm. Pink electricity surged across it.

Valac threw his fist forward and Orobas grabbed it. Charles watched in awe as Orobas engaged Valac. Orobas tightened his grip around Valac’s arm and fired off all his muscles to rip Valac backward and into the air. He flew over Orobas and was slammed into the ground behind him. The flooring shattered from the force, spraying debris into the air.

“THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT. I’M NOTHING LIKE YOU!” Orobas shouted. Smoke hissed out from his mask and up into the air. Valac picked himself back up as Orobas stood ready.

Slime Knight assessed the damage to his armor. Dents and scratches lined the plating. He struggled to stand once more. Kinks in the joints of the suit made it difficult to maneuver the hulking chunks of metal properly.

He dug his sword into the ground and used it to slowly push himself upward. This battle had gone on for too long. Slime oozed through the armor stretching into each cavern of metal.

It was time to strike this beast down once and for all.

“There is a violent side to the golden child after all. I’m glad to have been here when it bubbled to the surface,” Valac said.

“Try it again!” Orobas demanded. Smoke hissed out Orobas’ mask, but he did not clench his fists.

“Your inability to take action will be your downfall,” Valac said.

“It’s what makes me better than you!”

Swamp Gut dragged themselves across the ground leaving a trail of bare concrete in the bed of daisies. *I need more power. I need to be stronger.* Their bruised body scraped against the ground as they continued to inch closer to their destination. *If he wants to fight dirty, I can do that too. Just a little more and I can turn this around.* They could taste what they were dragging themselves to in the air. *Power.*

They came to Anemone’s body laying far away from anyone else and tore of their broken backpack. What they planned to do made them want to gag. Swamp Gut saw few other options left. It was either this or death. Swamp Gut closed their eyes and winced as they wiggled their arm into the hole in Anemone’s chest.

“I’m so sorry to dishonor you like this. I hope you can understand.”

Her body was still warm as they dug their arm inward. Blood coated their shaking elbows. Their hands slid against her slimy organs, digging deeper, trying to grab as much blood as possible. Swamp Gut pulled their cupped hands out of her body and began to lather themselves with blood.

Swamp Gut's body was a blank canvas and before starting to paint, they needed to lay down the background color. It was sunset and the sky was a dark red. Swamp Gut whimpered as they dragged blood across their body. They slowly grew in size as the water content was absorbed into their skin. Red, dry flakes were left at the surface. Their yellow eyes glowed in the night, contrasting the crimson coloring of their body.

Valac stomped his feet as he ran forward. He channeled all his energy into his right fist as he slammed it through the air. Orobas dodged the punch and retaliated as Valac's arm was extended. Orobas threw his left arm under Valac's right armpit and his right arm around Valac's neck. He linked hands on the other side of Valac and pushed him to the ground, pinning him from performing another motion.

Valac's tail writhed in the air and Swamp Gut saw an opening. The ground shook beneath them as they charged toward Orobas.

"Let loose!" Swamp Gut shouted they crashed past, grabbing Valac's tail. Orobas slipped off and Swamp Gut dragged Valac behind him. As Valac's skin grated against the rubble, he scraped at the ground with his claws, but he couldn't anchor himself. Swamp Gut leapt into the air.

They gripped Valac's tail tightly in their hands and channeled every ounce of strength to swing their arms forward. Valac rocketed into the ground.

Zombie shouted out to Crimson Claw.

“Charles, if you can find a weak spot on him, I can bite him, and this can be over.”

Crimson Claw analyzed Valac as he looked for a weakness. His skin was likely too thick to be bitten into. Perhaps there was another way for it to affect Valac. The remaining Nexus Magistrate members were standing, waiting for a command from their leader.

Swamp Gut grabbed Valac by the head and rammed his face against their knee before following up with a flurry of blows. Rage fueled each punch. Valac’s tongue swung in the air as he recoiled.

“Golem and I used to see who was stronger. You better hope he was the stronger one!” Swamp Gut said before drop kicking Valac. Swamp Gut chased after Valac as he rolled across the ground.

Crimson Claw saw a plan.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Cut off my head. That way you can move me quickly,” Zombie said.

“We can find another way. You don’t have to do this!” Charles said.

“Just do it!” Zombie shouted.

Crimson Claw morphed his hand into a werewolf’s paw and slashed down at Zombie’s throat. He grabbed Zombie’s head and stuck it onto the end of the barrel on his gun and hung his gun over his shoulder.

“Nexus Magistrate, we have already defeated seventy-five percent of the enemies. There is one left with eight of us still standing. This battle ends once Zombie bites him. I need his tongue held out. If you all can do that, I will move Zombie into position.”

His teammates nodded.

“Hit him with everything you got!” Crimson Claw shouted.

Swamp Gut spun through the air. The back of their leg collided with Valac's jaw, and he stumbled backward. From above, Etheria fired off orbs of crimson energy that exploded against Valac's skin, filling the air with smoke.

"Get his tongue!" she shouted down at Swamp Gut.

Crimson Claw had morphed his lower body into that of a werewolf's and sprinted around the outside of the battle waiting for his opening. He thought to himself as he watched his teammates attack.

*He was right. We are snakes eating our own tails.*

The gray smoke turned pink as cursed lighting crackled through it. Durus burst out from the cloud and uppercut Valac with his right fist unleashing massive amounts of stored cursed energy. Durus was knocked backward by the shockwave of the impact. Valac tumbled across the ground toward Slime Knight.

Slime Knight drew his sword. The blade glistened under the moonlight before slashing down into Valac who just barely blocked it with the back of his fist. Slime Knight continued to push his metal against Valac's purple skin.

*But, every time the sun rises we will step outside again. Every time our world spins once more, we will rise back up.*

Valac reached over with his other hand in an attempt to fling Slime Knight off him, but Orobas grabbed Valac's free hand and held it back. Swamp Gut sprinted forward and pinned down both of Valac's legs. Bliant saw an opening and burst forward. She stared at his writhing tongue and prepared to strike this miniscule target. Bliant extended her rapier forward and impaled Valac's tongue. He screamed out in pain as she landed by his head and pulled the tongue taut.

*We won't stop until we fight off our burdens. We aren't ouroboroses, we are the Nexus Magistrate!*

“Your opening is now!” Bliant shouted as she pulled against Valac’s tongue. Valac attempted to attack with his tail, but Durus grabbed onto it with his gauntlet.

Crimson Claw sprinted forward. This was it. The end was in sight. Everyone had worked together to get to this one moment. Crimson Claw leapt into the air and pulled out his gun. He retrieved Zombie’s head as he slid to a stop next to Valac.

Crimson Claw swung Zombie’s head forward, and he chomped down on Valac’s tongue. Everyone let go of Valac as Zombie drew blood with his teeth. Charles watched to see if the bite’s infection would kill or reincarnate Valac.

Valac began to lose control of his body to the virus, but he giggled at the realization of one last action to spite them. He retracted his tongue and before anyone could stop him, he clamped down on Zombie’s head. Decrepit flesh slipped down Valac’s throat as he showed a stained sneer. The Nexus Magistrate stared in dismay. Orobas grabbed Valac by the neck and lifted him into the air.

“YOU . . . WHAT DID YOU DO?” Orobas asked. Anger seethed in his body as his hand shook. Instinct beckoned action, but his past inspired resistance.

Valac spit out the remains of Zombie onto Orobas. Black ooze dripped down Orobas’ face. Valac’s skin faded to gray as the poison spread through his body.

“Before the snake chokes on his tail, what does he feel? I think he would feel full,” Valac said as all color seeped out of his body.

Orobas’ arm was still shaking when he set Valac back on the ground. He wondered what had gone through Zombie’s head before his death. Was it regret over his mistakes? Was it

memories with his friends? Perhaps his second death was so instantaneous, there was no time to think.

No one would ever know, but as Zombie was engulfed in Valac's maw, he looked to Orobas. Pride filled his molding brain right before it was crushed.

The Nexus Magistrate stood surrounded by rubble and burnt petals. Within twenty minutes, eight lives had left this earth.

## Sunday: Sleep

It was midday when Slime Knight and Swamp Gut were walking through the woods that surrounded their headquarters. Swamp Gut's bruises were growing a darker purple and not all of the dents in Slime Knight's armor had been hammered out. The Nexus Magistrate didn't spend much time outside of their headquarters as there were few needs the base couldn't meet. Swamp Gut had wanted a break from the gym and Slime Knight was more than willing to accompany his friend on their excursion.

"I hope it doesn't sound bad to say this . . . but I'm glad you weren't one of the people killed. I don't know what I'd do without my experiment buddy," Swamp Gut said as they walked next to Slime Knight.

The sun broke through the foliage above, forming intricate patterns on their bodies.

"It would have been hard to kill me. I'm not even sure he could have," Slime Knight signed.

"I . . . keep finding dried bits of Anemone on me. I can't believe I did that. I'm sorry I resorted to it. I know you told me I didn't need water to fight."

Swamp Gut shuddered. Their stomach hadn't stopped aching since feeling the warmth of Anemone's organs. The Eel Clan didn't know that Swamp Gut had done that after they had been left unconscious. Swamp Gut couldn't fathom telling them. How would one even go about describing such a horrid act?

"I'm proud of you for trying to fight just by yourself at the start. I said your ability to make decisions was why the team needs you and you made a tough call yesterday. It's because of everyone's decisions that some of us did make it to today," Slime Knight signed.



Birds chirped in the distance, unaware of what had transpired yesterday.

“We lost so much and that wasn’t even the main bad guy. We still haven’t destroyed all of Mr. Perplexus’ anchor points. The Hunters weren’t even on our radar until Monday,” Swamp Gut said.

“We gained some stuff too. We didn’t know Orobas before Monday either.”

“I wish the losses didn’t hurt more than the gains,” Swamp Gut said.

They continued walking down the poorly kept dirt path. Weeds grew up from the sides of the forest and leaned over the walkway. Ticks would be of concern if either of them possessed desirable blood.

“What was that all about when Valac discussed how a snake feels when it’s eating itself?” they asked.

“He just wanted a last word; one last thing that would stick with Orobas,” he signed.

“It doesn’t make sense. Why would the snake feel full? It would be in pain because it’s biting itself,” they said.

“Yeah, that was pretty stupid of him to say. It was a lame last phrase,” he signed.

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Durus and Aristotle sat next to each other watching a movie. It was a slasher flick. They liked watching really crappy ones because it was okay if they didn’t pay attention to it. The screams and blood splattering became background noise as they would talk about any number of things.

On the screen, a man ran into a dark room. He scanned his surroundings looking for something to use as a weapon.

“Oop, he’s definitely dead,” Aristotle said.

“Undoubtedly,” Durus said as he stuffed popcorn into his mouth.

Glowing, yellow eyes appeared in the darkness and large claws extended outward to wrap around the man. He was yanked into the darkness as he screamed.

“That’s honestly on him,” Durus said as he looked over at Aristotle. She looked into his eyes and saw something stuck in the corner. Dust and mucus had formed a small clump in his brown eye.

“You’ve got something in your eye,” she said.

“Do I?” Durus asked. He rubbed at his face and grabbed the clump from his eye. He flicked it off his hand.

“Ew. Sorry about that eye booger. That was gross,” he said.

“You mean sleep?” she asked.

“No . . . What do you mean by ‘sleep’?”

“I call it sleep. It makes it seem less gross than ‘eye booger’. I think it’s a more appropriate term for something that naturally occurs.”

Durus paused to consider the new framing of this seemingly insignificant part of life.

“I guess you’re right. I did have some sleep in my eyes,” he said.

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Durus lifted his left hand from an engraving of the Eel Clan symbol as he finished reliving that memory.

“See, it can’t hurt you,” Carina said. She wore a cast and had a black eye. She stood with Durus in the empty Eel Clan headquarters. Shark was in the background still working to clean up from the Nexus Magistrate’s attack on Thursday. Jellyfish was currently asleep, still resting from

yesterday. Anemone's body was being prepared for a proper burial with the entire Eel Clan present. The Nexus Magistrate was invited as well.

Durus stared at the circle formed by an eel on the wall. This symbol had been the root of all anxious thoughts for years. He perceived it to be the antithesis of himself. Each day he strived to be better and better so this horrific entity could seem lesser. Now, he stood here wearing Eel Master's gauntlet on his right arm and the symbol was staring directly at his face.

"Yeah," he said.

Carina began walking and Durus followed her.

"It was real stupid of you to just keep a normal glove on your hand this entire time," she said.

"It was slightly enchanted, and I liked how it looked," he said.

"It was crude. You could have been doing so much more with your cursed energy," she said.

"I never really wanted to do more with it. I wanted to forget about it."

"We all make decisions, and all decisions have consequences. People might as well make the most of them," she said.

"I'm sorry," Durus said.

"For what?" she asked.

"You know what," he said.

"No. What could the all-knowing Elias have to apologize for?" she asked. She turned her head to face him. He could see she was holding back a smile.

"I was wrong about the Eel Clan. I didn't understand them, and I overreacted."

"It's okay. I could have done a better job helping you understand."

“But it’s worse. I—I spent all that time we weren’t together mourning. I hated myself. I thought if I treated myself worse and worse you would somehow notice, then that would make you come back. I thought I could punish myself to fix this, but that was just easier than apologizing.

“I used to say that I would tear the moon from the sky if it meant we could be back together—” he said.

“That would be horrible for the ocean’s ecosystems,” she interrupted him to say.

“I know. The point is, I wanted to believe that I desired to give you the moon because I thought if I did something incredible it would bring you back to me. Really, I just thought you would come back to save me in the ensuing chaos. It was self-destructive and manipulative of me. I’m sorry,” he said.

Carina paused.

“It’s okay, Durus.”

“I was thinking . . .” he began to say.

“No,” she said.

“You didn’t even hear what I was going to say.”

“No, you can’t join us,” she said.

“What? Are you insane? Why would I ever want to join your little group? I don’t want to be some sea animal,” he said.

“Fair enough. I figured you would maybe be an anglerfish or something with that glowing hand of yours,” she said. Carina smirked.

“What was your question?” she asked.

“This one cookie store offers a ten-dollar monthly subscription. You get a cookie a day. I was thinking I would buy it and split the cookie with someone. We would each pay five dollars and then each get a total of fifteen cookies over the course of the month. I was going to do it with Aristotle . . . but would you want to partake?” he asked.

“Make it six and four dollars, then I’m in.”

“You pay six?” he asked.

“No, you pay six,” she said.

“Are you shitting me right now? I am offering you a thirty-three-cent-per-cookie plan, and you still want more?”

“Wow, you clearly have put some thought into this,” she said, surprised by the fact Durus had already done the math for the dollar to cookie ratio.

“I’ll do it for five!” Shark shouted over.

“Sold!” Durus said. Carina sighed, frustrated that Shark had intervened in her bargaining.

“By the way, whose idea was it to call this the Eel Clan anyway? It should be the Sea Clan or something. You all aren’t even themed around eels,” Durus said as he continued to walk with Carina.

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Etheria and Bliant were in the living room together. A bucket of warm water sat next to them. Etheria held rags in her tentacles and dipped them in the water before delicately brushing over Bliant’s feathers.

“Thanks for doing this, Etheria.”

“Of course.”

Bliant looked to the ground then said, “I got Abraham’s ashes back. His parents are dead, and we never had kids. I’m the only one who is going to remember him.”

“I’ll remember him. I’ll remember Golem, Aristotle, Zombie, and even Anemone,” Etheria said. She looked at the rounded wall. Perhaps some form of a memorial should go there so former Nexus Magistrate members could be honored.

“Losing someone isn’t hard. It’s missing them that’s difficult. I keep expecting to get a call from Abraham,” Bliant said.

Etheria continued to prod at the feathers as she checked for dust, guts, blood, or anything else dried in them. She searched for any words that could bring Bliant comfort.

“It’s a shame some people don’t get to stick around for longer,” Bliant said.

“But *we* are gifted with the chance to remember them. We miss them because those memories are so wonderful. That doesn’t take away the pain, but maybe it helps reframe it a little,” Etheria said.

“A little.”

Orobas stared at the variety of garden tools in the shed. How was one supposed to care for an artificial garden? Up until now he had just done what Zombie had told him to do, but he knew little about the nuances of nurturing a garden full of tomatoes. He grabbed a pair of gardening shears and stepped out from the wooden shed.

The elevator bell buzzed and Bliant walked over to him with a bag full of dust in her hands. She did not lift her eyes from the ground.

“Hey,” she said.

“What brings you down here?” he asked.

“I hope you don’t mind, but Abraham had always wanted some of his ashes spread in the soil. He said . . . He said he wanted to keep helping others grow even in death,” Bliant said. She leaned her head down as her voice began to break.

“I—I figured Zombie’s garden was a good place. That way I could always be close to Abraham too,” she said as tears rolled down her face. Even though Abraham had wanted all his ashes spread into the soil, Bliant planned to always keep a small amount in a jar. She knew he would forgive her if he were to somehow discover this.

“It’s no problem at all. Do you need any help?” Orobas asked.

“No. Thank you though. This isn’t something I want to go by fast.”

Orobas kept Bliant company. As she slowly scooped out handfuls of dust into the soil, he snipped away dead branches.

“Bliant, how do we know we are the good guys?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“We killed those people yesterday that technically speaking are no different than me. How can we be sure that we were the people that should have won?”

“Because for better or for worse, we love this world for what it is. We are able to enjoy the wonderful things like bowling or board games, but we also care enough to push it to be better. The Hunters fought us because their perception of the world didn’t include those things. They didn’t love this world; they loved their idea of this world.”

Orobas struggled to wrap his head around that vaguely philosophical answer from Bliant.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Orobas said as he went off to get a rake. He came back and Bliant was continuing to pour out ashes at the base of the plants.

“Thanks for continuing to care for his garden,” she quietly said.

“It’s the least I could do.”

The artificial hum of cicadas filled the silence as Orobas sought to continue where Zombie had left off and Bliant desired to approach closure.

That night, the rest of the Nexus Magistrate gathered in the kitchen. A tomato pie sat on the table. The smell of the red fruit filled the room.

“Tonight, I didn’t think it was the right thing to do to play a board game. It’s important we still enjoy our lives as that is why others have made sacrifices, but I felt we could do something to honor them tonight,” Etheria said.

She pulled out a documentary about the Amazon that was roughly twenty years old from her cloak.

“To honor Golem, we will watch a documentary. To honor Zombie, I had Orobas pick some tomatoes that I cooked into a tomato pie. To honor Aristotle, I’ve asked Durus to speak about her briefly,” Etheria said. She waved a tentacle at Durus and he rose to speak.

He cleared his throat, then said, “Aristotle and I shared a lot in common. Our lives were much the same. We experienced similar growing pains and enjoyed the same type of movies.

“One thing we always differed on was how we saw the world. She was definitely a glass half-full type of person. Where I saw the burnt remains of memories, she saw a snow globe to be joyfully looked back upon. When I saw an impossible decision between two extremes, she saw the middle path hidden beneath the overgrown weeds. She was my best friend . . . and I—We will miss Aristotle dearly.”

The Nexus Magistrate members clapped as Durus sat back down in his chair. They gathered around the TV in the living room as Charles cut slices of tomato pie for everyone. Etheria put in the CD. Swamp Gut dimmed the lights as the movie began.

The voice of a middle-aged man echoed through the room as he guided them through the rainforest. At the sight of any flora or fauna, the camera would zoom in and numerous facts were distributed to the audience.

A bird with red feathers and blue wings appeared on the screen. The Nexus Magistrate began to learn about the scarlet macaw as they watched it peck at a juicy banana.

Swamp Gut took a bite from their pie then said, "What if we trained a bird to say a spell? It could be the team mascot."

"I thought we already had a team bird," Durus said. He smiled as he looked at Bliant.

"Very funny," Bliant said.

Charles couldn't help but wonder what Golem would have said at this moment. He would have probably corrected Durus and told him that Bliant was in fact an angel.

"Those things sometimes stay up late. I don't want it affecting my sleep here," Bliant said.

Orobas expected Zombie to chime in at this point to note that he didn't sleep so the bird wouldn't bother him, yet the conversation carried on.

"You can just put a blanket over their cage, and they go to sleep," Swamp Gut said.

"I don't believe that," Charles said.

"I've heard about that before," Etheria said.

"I'm looking it up," Durus said as he pulled out his phone.

Their discussion on the ethics and nuances of keeping a bird continued throughout the rest of the documentary.

Afterward, Charles stepped outside to get some air before going to sleep.

He stared up at the moon in the sky. It was full tonight. Was Golem somewhere up there above him right now? Tonight, the moon seemed beautiful. Charles saw how the pale light shined down against the tops of the trees rustling in the breeze. The aura from the moon melded with the darkness of the sky, creating a beautiful hue of blue.

Who really cared if this was all actually the sun's doing? The fact was the moon looked pretty. He stared at the craters barely visible on its pasty surface. What would someone on the moon see looking back down on the Earth?

~~~

At this instant, Paimon was scampering across the surface of the moon. He needed to get back to Earth to assist Forneus in their battle, but how would he make it back? His snout faced toward the Earth, and he stared in awe at the wondrous mix of blue and green. Why rush to get back? This was a nice view.

He put his small hands up against the rocks next to him and a blue aura shined off his fingers. The rocks reformed as pillows and Paimon curled up on them. He snarled quietly, as all noises were quiet in the vacuum of space, as he prepared to go to sleep for the night. The options were limitless on this rock left entirely to himself. Maybe tomorrow he would go sledding. The Earth could be conquered some other day.

Paimon closed his eyes. They immediately reopened to reveal a farmhouse. Hay sat stacked in bales, covering the walls. The moonlight shined down on him from a small hole torn

in the roof. His miniscule body was scrapped from the landing and a large gash oozed a blue fluid that soaked into the straw floor.

“He’s alive!” a high-pitched voice exclaimed.

Paimon looked over to see a small boy staring at him. A slightly older girl stood behind the boy. While the Nexus Magistrate had believed that Paimon was thrown into space, in fact, he landed in West Virginia.

“We have to tell Dad. I’ve never seen a farm animal like him before,” the girl said.

“Don’t tell Dad. He’ll make us get rid of him,” the boy said.

“We don’t even know what he eats,” she said.

“I bet he likes apples,” he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an apple that he rolled over to Paimon. It rolled to a stop right in front of him. Paimon looked at the apple, then at the kids, then back at the apple.

“Go ahead! I picked that from the orchard just for you. It’s one of the good ones!” he said.

Paimon slowly reached his arm forward. Paimon grabbed the apple and quickly bit down on it. He took one bite cautiously, then continued to eat.

“See. He likes apples. I told you he would!” he said.

“Well, he’s going to need water too. I’ll be back with a bowl,” she said before running back to the house.

The boy sat down on the ground a few feet from Paimon.

“Don’t you worry! I’m not sure what happened to you, but we will look after you. We’re going to be best friends!”

In response, Paimon politely snorted. Perhaps Paimon was too weak from the collision to express or feel dissatisfaction with his situation, but for now, this was comparable to landing on the moon.

~~~

“Sea, Swallow Me” by Cocteau Twins played in Durus’ room as he stared at his phone. He looked through his old texts with Aristotle. So much had happened, but here he was still waiting for a text from someone. At least it was someone different now. Had things really changed at all for him over this week? Perhaps he had just walked in one big circle.

No. Things had changed. He looked at the gauntlet on his desk. He remembered his night at Wiscopyte. He remembered dragging his hand across the Eel Clan symbol. Things are always moving. No one is ever walking in a circle. Change always happens, no matter how small.

“I’ll miss you, Aristotle,” Durus said.

Swamp Gut shouted over from their room, “Turn the music down, Durus! I can’t even understand what they’re saying!”

“Sorry!” Durus said. He walked over to fumble with the volume dial on his speaker.

~~~

Charles sat on his bed preparing to go to sleep. He looked over to Golem’s empty bed. It was still made from the last time Golem had woken up . . . yesterday. The silence made his stomach turn over.

He walked over to the TV and opened the cabinet beneath it. Charles pulled out a disc for a documentary about the Sahara and readied it to play. He walked back to his bed as the narrator began to discuss general statistics of the desert. He sat dazed, listening to the discussion of scorpions.

Charles got back up, exited his room, and entered the elevator. He stepped out of it and walked up to the doors to their archive. Dust that covered the handles stuck to Charles' hand as he twisted the cold metal. No one had bothered to check out the books as Etheria had already read them all, but Charles dared to wonder if she had ever gone this far back into the room. If she had, he hoped this reading material had to have been too boring for even her to have consumed it all.

The doors creaked open as the automatic ceiling lights flickered on to reveal a room filled with rows of bookshelves. A number of vacant desks sat at the entrance. On each of them, a dust covered lamp rested untouched.

Charles walked past the books to the back of the room where the shelves were lined with boxes of files covering everything the Nexus Magistrate had ever encountered. He walked down until he came to the section labeled "G".

He slid out the box and flipped through the folders stopping at one with the words "Golem Project" written in black ink on the label. Charles opened the file and skimmed it to see that it contained pages of dry, objective observations recounting what appeared to be an enormously long process.

Charles closed the file and set it on the ground. He slid the box back onto the shelf, then left the archive with the manilla folder clasped in his hands. When he returned to his room with two empty beds, he set the folder on the larger one. He spread out the file's contents across the quilt as the documentary began to discuss the intricacies of snakes.

## Epilogue

“... do for a living?”

“Huh?”

“What do you do for a living?” one of the mothers at the barbeque asked Charles again.

The sun shone down on them as children ran about kicking a soccer ball. He held a paper plate with ribs and a hot dog on it in his hand. She held a glass of lemonade.

“Night guard,” he said. She scrunched her eyebrow, aware that he was giving short answers.

“How do you know Daniel?” she asked.

“Older brother.”

“What? You’re joking,” she said, grinning widely.

“No, I just made sure to wear sunscreen as a kid,” Charles said. He continued to watch the kids play, not making eye contact with the mother.

“You’re a funny guy, you know. I like dry humor,” she said.

“Thanks,” Charles said as she walked off to talk to someone more interesting.

A crow hopped across the grass picking up the crumbs dropped from the kids. Charles tore off a piece of the hot dog bun and threw it for the bird to eat.

He walked over to the grill where Daniel was continuing to cook burgers, hot dogs, and ribs for the guests.

“So, what do you think? I throw quite a barbeque,” Daniel said. He wore a large apron stained from past events. It said “Hungry Like a Wolf” on it with a caricature of a werewolf painted beneath the letters.

“I like the apron,” Charles said.

“Inspired by you,” Daniel said with a beaming grin.

“You need any help?” Charles asked. He looked over and watched the children knock the ball into the net.

“Actually, yeah I could—”

“What?” Charles asked.

He looked over to see that his brother had disappeared. As his heart dropped, he noticed an assortment of people were no longer at the barbeque. Instinct took over and he sprinted around the exterior of the house, weaving through the other parents scrambling about. Countless names were uttered from the crowd to no response.

He was unable to find his niece or nephew. His sister-in-law was nowhere to be found. All of them vanished in an instant, leaving no trace. Families around him scattered to look for their missing members as Charles reached for his phone.

*It can't be happening. Not today. Not like this.*

~~~

Durus knelt at a tombstone in Friday's Graveyard. The gauntlet sat firmly on his hand.

“So, I got cookies for about a month with Shark, but I got tired of the place. I keep hearing about this new place that opened around Langsle a while ago that I want to see. They rotate their flavors every week which seems interesting.

“It's themed around sharks this week for Shark Week, so Eel Master wanted to get some for the officers. I like Swedish Fish, but I don't know if I like the thought of them on the cookies. I'll get back to you on that in a couple weeks.”

Durus stood up and looked out at the countless tombstones spread around him. A breeze trickled through the blades of grass. He grabbed a stone and gently set it on top of her tombstone. It rested next to the dozen other stones placed by him in the past weeks.

“They say Phantom is buried around here,” Carina said.

“Is that so? You keep track of those people?” Durus asked.

“We used to keep track of all hero activity. Not too hard to do in the modern day. You know, there’s a farm where some ex-heroes are raising a few kids?” she asked.

“Hmm. Haven’t heard of those people.”

“They aren’t too active in this area. They mostly jet around to solve specific issues. Never really been of concern to us,” she said as she walked over to her car.

“I prefer it this way. No need for another Alpha Squadron,” Durus said. He stepped into the passenger’s seat of the car.

Carina walked over to the driver’s side of the car and sat down in her seat. The car was empty.

“Durus?” she asked as she rapidly panned her head around.

Where could he have gone? Elias never makes jokes like this.

“Elias!” she shouted. Carina stepped out of the car and looked under it. Color faded from her perception as she stared at the surrounding cemetery seeing nothing. Skum City stood tall off in the distance, making her feel small.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted once more, “ELIAS!”

~~~

Jellyfish chopped one of the grunts in the throat, immediately knocking him unconscious, then grabbed another by the shirt and threw them over her head. She continued to fight them as



their daily sparring proceeded in the training room. The white walls were each marked with an Eel Clan symbol in black paint. One of the grunts snuck up behind her and crashed their fist against her head. Everything turned white.

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She was standing in emptiness. The ground and sky were absent of color and no walls were within view. Shark, Anemone, and Eel Master stood next to her.

A voice hummed in their heads, "I've transported you all into a space outside of time. The Nexus Magistrate is under attack by the Hunters. Casualties will be high if no help arrives. We need your help, but the fight is dangerous. I will not force anyone to come. You may discuss here as long as you desire and decide if you wish to help. Once you make your decisions, you will be immediately transported to the fight."

"Who's saying that?" Shark asked.

"It's Aristotle. We should each take some time to make our decision," Eel Master said.

Jellyfish pulled Anemone off to the side so they could discuss.

"Are we seriously going to help those people after they stormed into our base two days ago?" Jellyfish asked Anemone.

"..."

"Quit the strong and silent shtick. We have to make a decision. Eel Master is going to go to help Durus. Shark is going to go because he wouldn't miss a fight. We can still go our own way though," Jellyfish said.

Anemone took off her helmet and let her long, brown hair hang in the air. Jellyfish stared at her green eyes.

"I think we should take the side of the people fighting the demons," Anemone said.

“But what if one of us dies? We joined this group for a reason . . .”

“A commune full of calico cats and collarless border collies,” Anemone said, repeating their shared desire. She stared at Jellyfish’s helmet as the tendrils writhed aimlessly in the air.

“Could you take that off for a second?” Anemone asked.

“Not in front of the others, you know the rule about officers,” Jellyfish said.

“You’re such a worry worm,” Anemone said as she put her hands around Jellyfish’s helmet. She slowly slid it off to reveal Jellyfish’s curled, blond hair and brown eyes. Freckles lined her nose and cheeks. Anemone stood up on her toes and pecked Jellyfish on the lips.

Jellyfish’s concerns melted away to reveal determination beneath the ice. It was as if a sea of small fish were swimming circles inside her stomach.

“It’ll be just like anything else we do. We will fight this together and make it home together,” Anemone said as she put her helmet back on.

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Jellyfish laid on the ground. The grunts had stopped the sparring session as soon as she was knocked down. They all stood there, watching her on the ground. She could hear each of their hearts beating. She could see the red aura pulsating off their chests. Anyone could cease it when they decided it was so.

“You good?” Shark asked. Jellyfish looked up to see his extended arm. She grabbed it and he pulled her up.

“I need to be stronger. It was my fault.”

“No one could have stopped what happened. We avenged her, that’s what matters,” Shark said. He had told her that first sentence nearly every single day for a month now. As he stared at the grunts, he wondered when or even if she would ever believe him.

Suddenly, about half of the grunts disappeared. Shark turned back to Jellyfish, and she was gone too.

“Jellyfish!?!? What happened?” Shark asked as he raised his hands preparing to fight their unseen attacker. The grunts scattered about trying to assess who had gone missing.

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“You have got to be shitting me!” Swamp Gut said. They lifted up their eye patch to get a good look at the game board with both of their eyes. Bloody Mary was surrounded by three velociraptors.

“Looks like I got you surrounded,” Slime Knight signed.

The elevator buzzed and Orobas stepped out with Bohrs. Bohrs walked over to the fridge and pulled out the Brita to fill a cup with water. Orobas walked past the whiteboard. It now had eight magnets in the center, with his name being one of them.

“Alas, my chainmail makes the heat of the farm unbearable!” Bohrs said. He adjusted the purple cloth that hung over his body. He drank from his chalice which was actually a blue, plastic cup bought at Target. Water dripped down his thick, brown beard as it missed his mouth.

“You could always take it off,” Orobas said as he sat down on the couch.

“Doth the crows ever stop cawing?” Bohrs asked as he filled his cup back up.

“Make sure you refill the Brita when you’re done,” Orobas said.

“What’s this accent about? You’ve been here for a week or two. It doesn’t even make sense timeline wise,” Swamp Gut said.

“‘Tis thou that wears an eyepatch,” Bohrs said.

“It’s to signify character development and because it makes me feel like a pirate. If you’re going to be so insistent, I’ll take it off,” Swamp Gut said as they set the eye patch on the table.

“No, you don’t have to take it off, Swamp Gut,” Orobas said.

“Too late. It’s done,” Swamp Gut said as they leaned back in their chair.

Slime Knight would have rolled his eyes if he still had them. Bohrs was encroaching on his archetype. A team can only fit so many knights.

A parrot flew over and landed on Swamp Gut’s shoulder. Its feathers were green and it had a black beak. A tiny eye patch covered one of its eyes.

“Crep—”

“WOAH. Don’t go saying that word, Cormy. Not around friends,” Swamp Gut said. They grabbed a piece of pretzel from the bowl next to them and broke a small piece off to give to Cormy before eating the rest of it.

A siren rang through the base causing Swamp Gut to jump in their chair. The normal lighting faded out as a red aura coated the room. Cormy flew up into the air and began darting erratically around the room.

“What is that siren?” Slime Knight signed.

“I don’t know!” Swamp Gut shouted.

~~~

Etheria floated in Bliant’s room. She was trying to read the rules for *Marvel Champions*, but there were a lot of small facets to the game she was unsure of. None of these were game breaking but add them all together and it ruins the sanctity of the challenge. With each playthrough she watched, it seemed the game was played differently.

Bliant laid on her bed reading the Bible.

Etheria had spent much of the past month preparing a memorial area for former Nexus Magistrate members. Empty pedestals laid around the edge of the main room waiting to be transcribed with the history of the heroes. She had been studying sculpture making in order to create monuments to the lost.

“You know, I’ve never read this book,” Bliant said. She delicately flipped over another one of the thin pages.

“I’ve read through a few versions of it. It’s not one of my favorites. Too many characters and they bring back dead ones,” Etheria said.

“Spoilers! Wait, there’s multiple versions? How would I know if I am reading the best version?” Bliant asked.

“It doesn’t really matter which version you read. Don’t you already know about the stuff that happened there? Didn’t you live it?” Etheria asked.

“I don’t remember much before the Reckoning.”

“There’s a lot of lore to—”

Etheria stopped talking and collapsed to the ground. Her skin burned as energy pulsed across her in waves. She shuddered as it felt like her entire essence was being stretched outward from the inside.

“ETHERIA! Are you okay?” Bliant asked as she hopped off the bed and grabbed Etheria in an attempt to hold her steady.

“Something . . . is happening . . . in the Absence,” Etheria said as her body rattled with agony.

A siren rang through the building and red light coated their bodies.

“The Reckoning Siren? I’ll be back!” Bliant said.

She burst down the hallway and crashed into the main room where she then fumbled with one of the panels on the side of the wall. Bliant pulled off the metal cover to reveal a number of buttons and levers. She pushed one of them and the ringing stopped.

“What was that?” Swamp Gut asked.

“The Reckoning Siren. It was set to go off if a large amount of life quickly disappeared from the area. It’s the only indication we have that the Reckoning will return,” Bliant said.

“I thought that was just a rumor,” Orobas said.

“Maybe it was a misfire,” Swamp Gut said.

Bliant’s phone rang, and she answered it.

“People are disappearing. My family is gone. It’s happening,” Charles said.

\*\*\*

Within the hour, Crimson Claw, Bliant, Orobas, Bohrs, Swamp Gut, Slime Knight, Etheria, Eel Master, and Shark stood in the headquarters of the Nexus Magistrate. Swamp Gut, Shark, and Slime Knight sat on the sofas while the rest stood in the kitchen.

“Hold on, how can we be sure the Reckoning is coming again?” Shark asked.

“The headquarters detected a drop in life within Moroseville. That was the only warning we were given of its return,” Crimson Claw said.

“But we weren’t in Moroseville when Durus disappeared. We were near Skum City,” Eel Master said.

Swamp Gut quickly searched the internet for answers. They said, “I’m checking the news. People are disappearing across each of the four points. There was a plane that crashed in Skum City.”

Things were changing so fast. Countless posts of people questioning what had happened to their loved ones filled the internet and numerous car crashes had been reported on police lines. This was all in less than two hours. Who knows what could happen over days of these people's disappearance?

"That doesn't make sense. It should be local to Moroseville," Bliant said.

Orobas watched them talk as he wondered if anyone from his home would soon be coming to Earth for a Reckoning. God only knows what the residents of Hell were thinking when the Hunters did not return. Did they still expect Valac to come back any day from his mission or was it assumed he failed and that it was a lost cause? While he was grateful the Hunters were no longer roaming this planet, he was not anxious to fight another demon.

"The directions were never specific. It may be a broader radius of people that are affected than we previously suspected," Crimson Claw said.

"I felt a disturbance right before the siren went off. Something is off in the Absence. Do you think it could have anything to do with this?" Etheria asked.

"Was the Absence involved last time?" Swamp Gut asked.

"I don't know. So much was involved. It's possible the Absence was relevant to the original Reckoning," Bliant said.

"What kind of disturbance did you feel, Etheria?" Eel Master asked.

"The space felt bigger. It felt like something had entered the Absence," she said.

"Like human lives? They had to have gone somewhere," Eel Master said.

"They could have gone anywhere or nowhere. If it is like the last time, each of those lives were likely destroyed," Crimson Claw said.

"That's not possible, right?" Shark asked.

“Aristotle was strong enough to turn a building into flowers. Who knows what someone with enough power could do?” Slime Knight signed.

“Why were none of us in the base affected? How was it determined who vanished?” Orobas asked.

“This base is engraved with protective symbols. Anyone inside is safe from spells cast outside,” Bliant said.

“That still doesn’t explain why it took Durus and Jellyfish, but not Eel Master or Shark,” Swamp Gut said.

“Do we even know what caused the first Reckoning?” Orobas asked.

“No. We know almost nothing about it,” Bliant said.

“We need more information,” Eel Master said. She was baffled that an organization formed around preventing such an event was so uninformed about it. They didn’t know what was happening right now or what should be happening to prove the Reckoning is coming back.

“We aren’t going to get any more,” Crimson Claw said.

“You said you felt something in the Absence, right, Etheria? How confident are you that it was human lives?” Eel Master asked.

“I can’t be sure. I just pull energy out of it. It’s not a window,” she said.

“Can you make a door to there?” Eel Master asked.

“It wouldn’t be a door, more a pathway, but it’s possible. It would take a few hours to move through, but we could make it there,” Etheria said.

Bohrs listened as they spoke. While he wasn’t unfamiliar with magic from his home time, to see it used so frequently by so many different people in such different ways still surprised him. To work with a werewolf would have been the making of a fine joke where he came from.



“We don’t need any doors of any sort right now. If this is the Reckoning again then we need to be right here ready for it to start,” Crimson Claw said.

“Did you just hear yourself? One of your team members is stuck there, as are your family members,” Eel Master said.

“They *might* be. If the Reckoning returns, we need all the hands we can get here. We can’t risk sending people off when the fight could be coming to us. No point in getting them back if there is nothing to come home to,” Crimson Claw said.

Crimson Claw rubbed his head as sweat formed above his eyebrows. He assessed the potential ways he could utilize the might of the Nexus Magistrate and Eel Clan. As leader of the Nexus Magistrate, a Reckoning was the only thing he was truly mandated to stop. This was the very reason for the organization's formation.

Eel Master slammed her fist down on the table, “That’s bullshit! The only thing we know for certain is that a large amount of people disappeared, and we have a damn good idea of where they were sent to.”

Shark moved to stand behind her.

“Let’s just take a moment to think,” Etheria said.

“We don’t have time to think! Thousands of people are trapped in some hellscape with no food or water. We have days to get there, save them, and get back. We need to get going now,” Eel Master said.

“No one is leaving here. I told Spirit Rider I would protect Moroseville from the Reckoning and I plan to fulfill that promise. The entire Nexus Magistrate will be needed to do that. We can’t be off in the Absence if the attack could start any minute,” Crimson Claw said.

“God, she’s been dead for twenty years or so by this point and you still hold onto that promise more than the safety of your family. Doesn’t make sense . . . Never mind, I forgot your family treated you like crap. I bet you’re glad they’re gone,” Eel Master said.

“KNOCK IT OFF!” Bliant said.

“What if we send out two teams? One will go to the Absence and lead a rescue mission and the other will stay here in preparation for a potential Reckoning,” Orobas said.

“You said you needed the entire Nexus Magistrate. Just let Shark and me go, please,” Eel Master said.

“I will need to come with you in order to provide a way back,” Etheria said.

“I can’t lose any members,” Crimson Claw said.

“I know of some other heroes you can reach out to in order to replace Etheria,” Eel Master said.

“I am not going into New Hope City. I don’t have a death wish,” Crimson Claw said. It was the only place he knew of where heroes still actively worked on the books, but he was aware of how powered individuals were treated there.

“It’s not there,” Eel Master said.

“I’m not working with the Protectors for Profit,” Swamp Gut said.

“It’s not in Skum City either. There’s a farm not too far from Langsle. There’s a woman with some children. Their power potential is that of the Alpha Squadron. They have their own demon among other powerful individuals,” Eel Master said.

Orobas shook upon hearing that another demon had been existing on this world without him being aware of them.

Having someone on the level of the Alpha Squadron excited Crimson Claw. With that kind of power this battle could be effortless. Crimson Claw rolled his lips as he thought.

“We will send Swamp Gut and Slime Knight there. The rest of us will remain here and help Moroseville while you take your trip,” Crimson Claw said.

Etheria began channeling energy across her tentacles and started to paint crimson lines on the wall that slowly began to form foreign symbols.

“Please pack supplies while I prepare the path. We should expect to be out there for days and to face resistance. If the Absence has been filled with human lives, the entire balance has been upset. There’s no way to know what horrors have unfolded,” Etheria said. Eel Master and Shark ran off to prepare supplies.

Swamp Gut grabbed their Kevlar reinforced hydration pack off the back of their chair and a pair of keys hanging on the wall then ran up the stairs with Slime Knight following behind them.

“Give us a ring if the Reckoning starts!” Swamp Gut shouted.

“Bring back the cavalry!” Bohrs shouted.

“What’s the plan here?” Orobas asked.

“We don’t leave Moroseville, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people that need help here. If random people have gone missing, that means any number of things could be going wrong. We need to search each house for big things like children left without parents to even the smallest things like ovens left on,” Crimson Claw said.

“We’ll know if the Reckoning officially starts. If that happens, all efforts go to protecting the center of town. The enemy forces will convene there in an attempt to gain control of the Nexus Point,” Bliant said.

This time it would be different. She was prepared. The others knew what to expect. She wouldn't be the last one again. Werewolves, demons, and all manner of monsters may soon onslaught Moroseville, but this time they were also protecting it.

A scarlet portal formed on the wall. A dull hum echoed out of it. Energy calmly spiraled around a path visible within the portal.

"Haven't been home in a while. Should be fun," Etheria said.

She wondered if they would accept her back after such a long time away. Few of her kind ever decided to move to another realm, let alone to rarely visit once gone. The locals couldn't be happy that she had a tendency to siphon off some energy and store board games in their home realm.

Eel Master and Shark ran back into the main room with backpacks filled to the brim.

"Let's get this moving. I sent a transmission to the Eel Clan. They have been ordered to help out in Moroseville in the event of a Reckoning," Eel Master said.

"We'll be back before the Reckoning, if it's happening. I wouldn't miss something as epic as that," Shark said.

"Stay safe," Crimson Claw said.

They nodded before walking into the portal, disappearing in a haze of red as the doorway closed. With Etheria, Shark, and Eel Master approaching the Absence, Slime Knight and Swamp Gut off to search for help, and Durus missing, Crimson Claw looked to see who was left.

"Nexus Magistrate, let us defend our town!" Crimson Claw said as Orobas, Bohrs, and Bliant prepared themselves for the greatest battle of their lives.