

I needed a break... a-after we dismantled the robot... I thought I'd try to go on a walk... I can't figure out why the Outerspace exists... but I know that I can go there. I packed up a few things for the journey. But then... Mino showed up. "Heya, Ains. How's the new shirt fitting ya?" They said. Mino is the only tailor any of us have ever known. They sort of picked it up as a necessary skill... they're a shapeshifter, but that power doesn't extend to their clothes, so they have to make their own... despite that, they still find time to make something for the rest of us. "T-thanks for the shirt, Mino, but I haven't gotten to try it on yet..." I replied. Mino frowned for a moment, before rummaging through my wardrobe. "W-wait, no!" I protested,

"No nos, Ains! C'mon, I wanna see ya. Take off that shirt and put this on!" Mino wasn't waiting around for me. They yanked off my shirt and stuffed me into the other one... I was still a little disoriented from the sudden movement, but I was looking into the mirror, and... I think I-I was looking good? I'm not q-quite sure... Mino pat me on the back for a moment... I-I had to go before they kept me from doing so... "I-I'm sorry, Mino, but... I have to go..." "Huh?"

"Percy's had plenty of adventures... I want my own. But his adventures are often... dangerous. I'm going to the Outerspace..."

"Wait... dude, both of us know what's out there. Are you sure it's safe?"

"T-they wouldn't dare attack me... I-I can still..." I stopped... I didn't really want to show them what I could do... I don't want to hurt them... "I'm s-sorry. I-I have to go." I went out the door and locked it behind me, making sure that Mino couldn't follow me... I've prepared everything by then... it was time to see what I could find...

"Oy! Blue boy! You know where to... aw, geez, dude, you ok? You look like *you barely slept*." A monochrome robot approached me... he was... well, he's an old character of Percy's. He writes s-sometimes... I've been travelling for a-about an hour already... the Outerspace doesn't really have any discernible terrain... it's mostly dark. I've got no idea how that robot got here... "Y-yeah... I'm alright... w-what are you doing here?" "Oh, me? I'm lookin' for a kid. Not you, not you. But uhh... ooh, yeah, he's just a little taller than you, wears all white, is a chronic insomniac, and he's named Pierre." The robot explained. H-he scratched his head for a second before perking up for a second. "Ah, right! My name is Arko-3! Serial number 5395, version 5.3., product of Cascade Tech Incorporated, at your service. And you are?" I-it's like that message was pre-programmed... as he was saying that, he took a small bow towards me, probably out of courtesy... he seems nice... I introduced myself and bowed back at him. "Ainsley? I know a guy named Ainsley! He's... erm. A plural. I dunno if you know what that means... where are we, anyways?" The Ainsley that Arko mentioned... i-it's another character Percy made. I don't know what happened to them... either way, I think I could stick around Arko for a while... I remember when Percy would work on his story. He has an arm cannon, but he doesn't use it often... instead, he's a pugilist. Erm... I think. "Hey, you ok? You're spacing out a little..." Arko shook me a little... I guess I was thinking a little too hard... "Y-yeah. I'm okay... Um..." I paused for a little... I had to think about my words... "...I-I can help you, if you want!" Arko smiled after hearing this. "Well, well! The party grows!" A fanfare suddenly went off in the distance, startling me...

Arko just looked off in the distance and shrugged. "Oh yeah, that happens. Not really sure why, couldn't ask anyone about it." He said. He let me calm down a second, before hoisting me up onto his shoulders into a piggyback ride. "D-Do you know where to go?" I said. Arko shook his head. "Nope. But choosing blindly has gone pretty well for me so far. Come on, point in a direction!" I hesitantly pointed my finger in front of us; towards the door where I first came through. He smirked and started walking... a little tune on his lips. "So, I never got to ask. Whatcha doing here?" He half-sung to me. I stammered for a moment... I eventually came back into my own, though, and managed to tell him that I was simply going on a walk. He didn't seem too happy by that answer, but he accepted it...

"Huh. Wake up, Ainsley. I found something." We've been on the road for a while now... so long that I drifted off for a moment. Arko grabbed me off his back and gingerly placed me on the ground, so I could get my blood flowing. He signaled to what seemed to be a small, cozy house, with a pathway made out of some kind of reflective marble leading up to it. While I was trying to stave off my sleepiness, Arko went to the door and knocked... "Visitors! Erm, I'll be there in a moment!" A voice came out through an unseen intercom beside the door. Arko turned to me and silently shrugged... I think his holographic face represented his mood perfectly... a simple ':/'. Something rattled behind the door. I-It was probably a mechanical pulley. After a minute, the door opened, and that's when I saw it: Big glasses, hooved feet, curly goat horns, a slightly chubby figure, and a hairstyle... or fur, you could probably use it as a pillow. It trailed down from their head over to their hips in the back, and just a bit over their glasses in the front. They sheepishly looked at us, and motioned to come in. I entered along with Arko, and the hooved person closed the door behind us. "Sorry for taking so long... We haven't had visitors in a long time. U-um... here, let me show you around!" They flicked a light switch, and the room came to life. Dinghy little lights were humming overhead, doing their best to illuminate a small, cozy abode. Little painted clay figurines were dotted around the few tables and shelves found in the room. "My name is Ram, by the way." They went behind the kitchen counter and scrounged through a few unseen drawers, looking for an apron. Arko lazily threw himself on a couch, and let out a long, wishful sigh. 'Ahhh... this couch is so nice... Way better than my old bed.' He said. I-I went to admire some of the figurines. It was mostly just game characters, like Kirby, but... there was also a set of figurines representing me and the others... Percy was depicted screaming in agony and holding his head. Averill was lying in a pool of blood, with a set of gardening shears lodged in his chest... Mino had cocooned themselves in a ball of yarn, crying... Clone was lying in the fetal position, clutching a bloodied knife... and the figurine meant to represent me... I-I wasn't there. There was only a small grassy base, with a hole from an uprooted tree in it... I-I backed away... something was *t-terribly, terribly bad*. I-I wanted to run. I-I wanted to s-scream. I wanted to do anything.. but not keep looking at these. T-these were... grim portents of our d-doom...

Ram came back to us a few minutes later holding a cup of hot cocoa in each of their hands, with a third and fourth cup wedged into their curled horns. "So, what brings you here?" They asked. I carefully grabbed the cup out of his hand and sniffed at the cocoa. It seemed okay, so I started sipping it... Arko had already finished his drink, licking the faux-mustache

off his face. "Mhm! Adventure! I gotta go find a guy, and this kid... well, he's out here on a walk, believe it or not." Ram looked at me, as if scanning my body... sizing up my thin arms and short stature. "Fair enough. By the way, what are your names? I already told you mine, so it's only fair!" Arko introduced himself with the usual spunk. I-I hesitated for a bit, but eventually gave my name. "Pfft, I don't believe you. Ainsley's gone! He was uprooted!" Ram chuckled at me. "Here, lemme show you." They rushed over to the shelf, and gathered the figurines of me and the others. "My roomie sculpted these. He's got a bit of clairvoyance, and can see into the future! Pretty cool, huh? He calls them **The Stars**, whatever that means. To really understand Ainsley's story though, you gotta know everyone." He gingerly placed all the figurines on the table in a row, and pushed Percy in the front. "This is Percy. He's a kid with... some kind of will, or something. He writes, he draws, he's a kid, basically. He's uh... very dramatic, too. Probably a result of his hobbies. Nobody has like... any of his writings. They're very rare, almost nonexistent. Out of the few accounts people have given, apparently he's even developed some sort of... god complex. It's weird, but yeah. My roomie specifically said he saw what he thinks were or would be their lowest moments in life. Percy seems to act in his writings as if he's a loner, but it's clear he holds his fellow stars very dear. Yank them away from him, and desperation soon follows..." Ram pulled Percy's figure back in line and brought Averill forth. "This is Averill. The gardener demon. He's a bit socially withdrawn, and completely immune to any sort of charm, be it romantic or... otherwise. That has come in real handy, though, considering his job description also includes protecting the other Stars from danger. He lives in this huge greenhouse, where he tends to his plants and the apiary found inside. He's pretty mild-mannered, too. Got that nice British accent, you know? Anyways, as for his... worst moment. Percy has been endangered in the past, even gravely injured, but the damage was always undone in a week or two. Well... except for Averill's trauma. He's attached to his friends, and will sooner get himself killed than let anyone or anything hurt them. Valiant, but... kinda tragic. It's the guardian's life, I guess..." I-I was already feeling a little antsy... whoever this roommate Ram mentioned may be, I wouldn't have wanted to meet him... they now put Mino on display. "This is Mino. They're a shapeshifting tailor of sorts. all of the Stars rely on them for new clothes, because all of their mishaps can leave their clothes shredded. They're pretty carefree, though! They play a bunch of games in their spare time, and occasionally cook tasty treats for everyone. A few of the costumes they've stitched together have also made their way into the world. People actually found a few strings of hair from Percy in a wizard's hat. Basically, Mino's a stand-up person! The party person! As for the figurine... Mino will at one point suffer the same fate as Percy. I've already said it: yank away their friends, and desperation follows. However... they can also be a bit of a temperamental figure at times. I guess if you upset them hard enough, they'll just isolate themselves... it's rough." M-Mino is my closest friend. I know they don't like to be corrected, but... I don't know what would cause

them to do this. The disturbing sight of Clone's figure came into view. "Odd person, this one.. This kid's named Clone. He's some sort of Copy of Percy. The two of them can swap roles with each other if needed, like the perfect stunt duo or something. Despite the similarities, Clone has somehow ended up seeing... more than Percy has. His behaviour is a little tweaked compared to Percy's. He's more... tame. Not quite as mad or eccentric. Although... his snapping point is under question, and the things he'd be willing to do could be far worse than Percy. My roomie isn't even completely sure about him, but he might actually be a bad person from Percy's past, hence the knife you see in his hands. Would make a better plot twist than the Game of Thrones finale, if you ask me. And finally..."

He introduced my figurine... "The missing Star. Nobody knows what happened. Even my roomie's clairvoyance couldn't reach into his story, but something's amiss. Ainsley is... or well, was a tree. The other Stars used to refer to him as the tree of wisdom, believe it or not. He would telepathically give them advice if they were feeling down or were stumped on an issue. But one day... something happened. The tree was uprooted, and although the evidence is shaky, some say he turned into a kid and decided to stay with the other Stars. All he left us with was the earth, with the hole being where his roots used to run and suck nutrients out of the ground. My roomie could almost see something, but he had a bad feeling about it. And that's saying something, that guy's deranged. He looked into all of these people's pasts and futures and made clay figurines of their worst moments. Maybe even the end of the road for a few of them. I'd have thrown them out, but... I kinda like telling their tales. Kind of a unique experience for visitors." He explained. I tried not to cry... I-I still shed a few tears, though... "D-don't worry... my eyes dried o-out..." Ram stared at me for what felt like an eternity... then, h-he just shrugged, got up, and removed both of the cups from his horns. "Aaaaaaaanyways. I'm gonna go downstairs. You can come and see the madman behind these figurines, if you want!" He motioned to a door leading to the house's basement... I-I would've been gone, but... A-Arko emboldened me to follow.

"S-S-SHUT THAT DOOR! I'M CON-CON-CON... HAHAAH... CONCENTRATING!" A raspy, threatening voice croaked from the other side of the room, behind a relatively large fort built entirely out of cardboard, pillows, and blankets. Lanterns illuminated the room. On a shelf lay a dozen different books with v-varying titles. On the other, a few clay-sculpting utensils. Ram pulled aside the blanket acting as the door of the fort and placed one of the cups down next to a hooded silhouette, b-busy meditating... "Man, stop your freaky stuff and drink something. I'm not gonna pay your part of the mortgage." Ram poked the person on its shoulder. H-He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, then stretched. It motioned to Ram to crane their head closer, b-but I overheard them either way... "RAM-RAM. I LOVE YOU, BUT PLEASE. LET ME DO MY WORK." The figure s-said. H-His stutter was entirely absent when whispering... Ram r-replied after gulping down his own hot cocoa. "Sorry, Ghee dearie... but, we've got visitors. Actual visitors. A robot and a child." They said. The figure glanced at us through the faux-door, out of the corner of his eye... A

b-bright green stare pierced through me for a s-split second, before returning to Ram. "I'M INTERESTED IN THE CHILD. COULD YOU BRING HIM IN?" R-Ram came over and asked me to come with him. Arko almost followed me, but I-I think something kept him from doing so... entering the fort, I-I saw the figure laying out a deck of tarot cards. "C-C-COME, CHILD. I MEAN NO... NO HARM. I-I-I... HAHAA... I ONLY WISH TO P-PEER INTO YOUR FUTURE. HAHAAH... F-FIRST OFF... E-E-EVERYONE KNOWS THE-THE-THE... THESE TRINKETS." He showed me his deck. The tarot cards seemed... off, though... they d-dropped on the ground with m-much more force than expected, as if they were heavier... "M-M-MY METHODS DIVERGE A LITTLE... A LITTLE F-F-FROM STANDARD F-F-FARE. PICK A CARD FROM THESE 5, F-FIRST." He laid out 5 cards in front of me... s-somehow, I felt my hand... almost magnetized to the last one. I-I instinctively flipped it over without much thought. "Y-YOU PULLED YGGDRASIL, THE S-SACRED TREE. THIS CARD REFERS TO THE V-VIRTUES AND ATTRIBUTES OF A-AIN... HAHAA... AINSLEY CALUM, THE FIFTH STAR. A-A FAVOURED SUBJECT O-OF MINE..." H-He took the card and waved it over the rest of the deck, before pushing the other 4 cards aside and drawing 3 fresh cards from his deck. "W-WITH YGGDRASIL'S BLESSING, I BESTOW NOW U-UNTO YOU... HAHAA... YOUR FATE. YOUR FIRST CARD IS THE GEMINI. NOT MUCH IS KNOWN ABOUT THEM, BUT THEY ARE OUT THERE. ONE, A KIND-HEARTED... H-HOLD ON..." He s-stopped. He looked at the cup next to him, before gulping it all down in one go. "MUCH BETTER... AH... ANYWAYS... ONE, A KIND-HEARTED SOUL. HE GROWS AND CULTIVATES GOODWILL. THE OTHER... IS A BEING WITH NO REMORSE. HE REAPS WHAT HIS BROTHER HAS SOWN, AND LEAVES NOTHING BUT DISCORD BEHIND. THEY ARE DOOMED TO BE CHAINED TOGETHER IN THE CONFINES OF THIS VOID WE CALL HOME... FOR ETERNITY. THEY SIGNIFY DUALISM AND HIDDEN SIDES OF YOURSELF. YOU HAVE SECRETS. THE NEXT CARD... AH, THE OBELISK. A SECRET ORDER OF PEOPLE SAID TO BE THE VERY ONES RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS DARKNESS HAS BUILT THIS GREAT MONOLITH SOMEWHERE ABOVE GROUND. IT HAS BEEN IMBUED WITH RAW, SELF-PERPETUATING ENERGY, ABLE TO PROVIDE RESOURCES AND POWER GREAT MACHINES. IF IT IS DESTROYED HOWEVER... THE DARKNESS WILL CEASE TO BE, ALONG WITH ALL LIFE AS WE KNOW IT, EXCEPT FOR THE STARS. THEY ARE NOT OF THIS WORLD. THEY DO NOT REQUIRE WHAT WE DO... THE OBELISK SIGNIFIES OVERWHELMING STRENGTH AND POWER. SO OVERWHELMING, THAT IT MAY PROVE HARMFUL TO YOU, IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL. LAST, BUT NOT LEAST... THE VANGUARD. THIS ELITE GUARDIAN IS LONG DEAD, BUT HIS EFFECTS ON THE WORLD HAVEN'T CEASED. HE WAS INDEED... A HERO. HIS CARD SIGNIFIES VALIANCE IN THE FACE OF DANGER. A SENSE OF WHAT IS RIGHT. YOU CARE FOR WHOMEVER YOU HOLD DEAR AT THE MOMENT. HOWEVER, JUST LIKE THE VANGUARD... YOU'RE MARKED BY YOUR PAST. I'M SORRY FOR YOU, CHILD. I'M... SORRY... SORRY... SORRY..." H-He looked down at the cards... crying. I could hear him sniffing as he slowly repeated himself. Ram noticed, and immediately rushed over. "Oh no... come on, Ghee... shhh, shhh... it's alright... I'm here for you... come on, take off the hood and look at me." Ghee's hands trembled. He gripped the ends of his hood and pulled it off. Beneath it, lay a young person, s-scarred by a burn on his face. The discolored patch of skin around his left cheek clashed with his otherwise soft face. "Sorry, Ainsley... you should probably leave. He'll be o-"

"NO, DON'T GO!... I'M SORRY. I... I SCREWED UP. THE STARS... THEY'RE NOT JUST SOME PEOPLE. THEY'RE ESSENTIALLY DEITIES. AND WE ARE... WE ARE IN THEIR MINDS. I'M SORRY. I SHOULD'VE KNOWN. AINSLEY. THAT'S YOU, RIGHT? I'M SORRY. I WANTED TO PRY MORE INTO YOUR LIFE, BUT AS SOON AS I REALIZED... YOU WERE THE TREE THAT GOT UPROOTED. YOU HELPED PERCY FIGHT THE DOPPELGANGER. I KNOW THIS IS ALL IN YOUR HEAD. I KNOW THAT... I KNOW WE'RE JUST... TEMPORARY THOUGHTS. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT THE HEADSPACE FROM THE OUTERSPACE... THE VOID... FROM US. WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO... TO GAIN ANY SORT OF MEANING OUTSIDE FUN LITTLE NOVEL IDEAS, I NEVER WANTED TO, MYSELF. BUT... I CHERISH THIS LIFE YOU'VE GIVEN ME. I CHERISH MY LOVER. PLEASE, TAKE THESE..." Sobbing quietly, he got up and retrieved a set of shiny new figurines. I-It was... all 5 of us again. Percy, Averill, Mino, Clone, and me. E-except... we were happy. Percy was celebrating the system's 17th birthday... Averill was playing with... w-well, he had a new, potted friend... Mino was cheerfully singing, dressed in a new spiffy suit with a star on the front... Clone was sitting on a ledge, content. A radio was playing in the background... and I was there. Playing the piano... it seemed impossible, but the music sheet in front of me was actually readable... 'Rise Up High, Mind of Many'... it was a sonnet. I reluctantly pocketed the figurines. The paint had just dried off of them. "I KNOW IT'S... NOT GOOD FOR ME TO ASK. BUT... PLEASE, TAKE THEM TO YOUR HOME. KEEP THEM AS A REMINDER OF US. AND A REMINDER OF YOURSELVES. THE FIGURINES UPSTAIRS COULDN'T MATTER LESS

NOW. WHAT COMES, WILL PASS. MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR HAPPY MOMENTS, AINSLEY." He shook my hand, dried his tears, and put his hood back on... I was outside, minutes later, d-directing Arko back to the headspace. "Well... I guess this is where we part ways, lil' buddy. I'd come in with you and see your place, buuuuut... you give me the creeps, to be honest. I dunno what you talked about with that crackpot over in that blanket fort, but I won't ask. I have my own things to sort through... first of which, finding Pierre. Anyhoo, see ya later." He said, before turning around and heading in a random direction. I-I... I don't know if he continues to exist right now. I don't know if Ram, Ghee, or their homely tourist trap abode still exist. I don't know if any of the things Ghee mentioned about those cards are true. But I-I didn't care... for once, I felt s-safe, thinking it's all gonna be okay in the end...

I opened the door, and was greeted by the sounds of Percy and Averill sparring over in my lab again... Mino was raiding my pantry for junk food. The remaining scraps of the robot I dismantled before were still sitting in the corner. It was... good to be home, y-you know?