(muttered) Alright, if I just… And over here is this file… And in this file there's these files… And… Damn it! Why can't I figure out where you came from? It doesn't make any sense, there should be *something* that's happening out in the realities that would indicate that you've gone missing! Unless… Unless it's like Jonathan Alverez where it was like a duplication incident and you're somehow here and there… But that's not what Jonathan Alverez's case was like at all and I knew about that one so it can't be the same. I'm (cut of scream)

I'm sorry, wanderer. I know I said I'd get you home and I'm really trying I swear I just… (fabric rustle) You don't need to comfort me, you know. If anything, I should be comforting *you*. This is my job, the only thing I've ever known. It's the one thing I should be able to do and I just… I *can't* and you're *stuck here* and…

(sniffle) And this isn't helping. I'm sorry, I'll get it together, it's just frustrating. Probably more for you than it is for me, I know, but only one of us can voice our frustrations apparently since everything here is falling apart. (angered beeps) I know, Minerva, I'm sorry, it's not your fault. They're still healthy, yeah? People from actual reality have never stayed here like this before, we need to keep monitoring them to make sure they're alright.

I shouldn't talk about you like you're not here. It's just difficult when I don't know if you can understand me, but I'm pretty sure you can. Gods above, I wish there was just some paper here or something or that you could use my system but judging by the look in your eyes whenever you view my work station it's not in your language. I guess I could try to debug that system rather than looking for a way to get you home right now, just to take a rest from it all… Honestly, though, I wouldn't know where to start. Magic has never been my strong suit and tech magic even less so. I've sent a couple messages to Guillermo and Opal, hopefully they'll be able to get over here soon.

Why are you looking at me like that? …I've mentioned Opal before, haven't I? Probably just in passing now that I think about it. She's on the Council, but you probably remember that. A true expert when it comes to tech magic, though there's really not much she can't do. She's… Well, I call her 'the arbiter of knowledge'; her whole deal is information. What is known in each reality, who is spreading it, who is lying about it, all that junk. I actually just came across one of her files while I was looking for you, funnily enough. I think my frustrations at the whole thing just drew me to finding her in my desperate search for a solution.

…I could tell you her story if you'd like? Just to take a quick break, I promise I'll be back at my search again soon. I just… need to step away from it for a moment. Clear my head, think about something *other* than the crushing weight of trying to get you home. Not that that's your fault! I'm just very in my own head about it, you haven't done anything wrong– I'm making a mess of this. Would you like to read Opal's story? Or one of them at least? Her name story is also a fun

one in my opinion, though I've told you a lot of name stories at this point haven't I? If you're not sick of them, though, I'd love to share this one. …You've got a nice smile, wanderer, very comforting. Alright, let me pull up the file, give me a second.

There we go! Sit back and relax, wanderer, and let me tell you about Opal.

Alexandria and Sparrow never expected for another member of the Council to spring forth. Life and death were covered between the two of them, with Guillermo keeping balance in the different planes of reality and Alasdair harnessing magic for the worlds that were. It seemed to be all that they needed to govern over reality from the fringes, or at least it seemed that way until two new beings burst into life from the magic at the edge of reality where the Council made their home.

Love and Knowledge popped into life, holding each other's hands, as the worlds the Council created continued to grow. Love would go on to take the name Marigold and Knowledge, well…

They were content to be known as Knowledge for the first millenia of their life.

The thing to know about Knowledge– also called Truth from time to time or Lies by particularly nasty members of reality– was that she truly permeated reality. Magic didn't always touch the planes and time could only be altered so much while keeping things in line but Knowledge, Truth, that could differ wildly. What is known in a reality with magic is vastly different from one without, and still different from another magical plane. In order to govern, she had to know and in order to know she had to see objectively. Where Guillermo and Alasdair went into and out of reality as they pleased and Marigold practically lived in reality at all times, Knowledge existed on the periphery, never really venturing out into reality like the other members of the Council did.

It just didn't feel fair for them to go into reality when they could influence what was known, what was true, what kept society spinning in these worlds. What they feared– really, truly feared– was that their presence could break a reality as they overloaded it with knowledge from planes well beyond its reach.

So Knowledge watched, she listened, she learned, and she envied. She envied her Council cohorts who could go visit reality as they pleased, envied the people who got to live real lives in reality, envied the people who didn't *need* to know because knowing was all she was and all she could ever be.

Or, at least, that's what she thought.

Sometimes it was hard for them to feel the weight of everything that was known in every reality, so they chose instead to just focus on one for a little while, just looking in on it, feeling its knowledge flow through their system, taking in every facet of their life, and then moving on. But something about the Valley of Stars caught deep in their mind and they found they couldn't shake it. The Valley of Stars existed in reality 204 M, a perfect slice of magic in an otherwise magicless world. They didn't understand how the reality could possibly have carved such a perfectly insulated area that magic hadn't escaped its grasp and yet still existed in its borders. Knowledge thought about asking Guillermo about it when their brain caught back up to the facts.

They didn't know.

For the first time since Knowledge sprang forward from the magic at the center of the universe, she didn't know something. She would have to ask *Guillermo* of all people about it, a man who only knew one thing well where she knew *everything* well. Everything except for this. It would've been easy for her to simply ask Guillermo, to get the answer and satiate the searching part of her brain, but she didn't want what was easy. Knowing had always been easy for her, she wanted to give in to the challenge. She wanted to learn not because it was who she was but because it posed an obstacle. A hurdle to jump before she could finish the puzzle of the Valley of Stars.

Fear and curiosity warred in Knowledge as they prepared. They informed Alexandria, gathered their papers and their tablet, talked to Guillermo about making the jump, and for the first time in their life, Knowledge lept into reality.

If you'll let me step out of the story for a moment, wanderer, I'd love to tell you a little more about the Valley of Stars. I've been told that pictures don't do it justice, but they're all I've ever had to work on unfortunately. Gods, I'd love to get there some day… That's besides the point, though. The Valley of Stars is like Opal said: a perfect slice of magic in an otherwise non magical world. The sun doesn't rise there, not like it's meant to, and yet people are perfectly healthy and plants grow as they're intended to. The sky is constantly the deepest imaginable blue with millions of shining stars shining through, making the entire town feel like it's covered in string lights. As you might recall, the moon is a consistent presence, and the Valley is one of Lady Luna's many realities that she watches over closely. With how many she exists across, it's not fair to expect her to keep a close watch everywhere, but she does check in on all of them from time to time. That's beside the point, of course, as this is Opal's story not Lady Luna's.

When Knowledge first landed in the Valley, she was worried that reality would break around her but it didn't. Whether this was because the Valley was steeped in pure magic or because she had been overestimating her own power, it was impossible to say. All she knew was that she was

existing in reality for the first time in her life, basking in the soft glow of a million stars overhead and barely noticing as she wandered into a person.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” a voice called from beside Knowledge. They turned to see a person with long, curly pink hair, though whether this was dyed or natural due to magic Knowledge didn’t know. Or, at least, not at first. After staring at them for a moment, Knowledge knew that they were a woman named Sapphire– Saph for short. Her hair was dyed pink and she had lived in the Valley her whole life like most of the people in the Valley of Stars. Few people who weren’t born there ever entered and those who did rarely were allowed to remain. The Valley selected its occupants, protecting its magic and holding the people who used it near to them. “I’ve not seen you around here before, what’s your name, stranger?”

Knowledge knew she couldn’t give her name as Knowledge. It didn’t matter that that was all she had known herself as, or that Saph likely would’ve thought she had simply chosen her name herself, she knew it wasn’t a true name. She also knew that she had to say *something* because Saph was trying to be polite and Knowledge couldn't bring herself to be rude to Saph. This meant doing the thing she had been ignoring for years: finding a name. Knowledge wasn’t her name, just a moniker, and she had precious few seconds to find the name that felt right for her to share with this strange woman in the Valley of Stars.

Sapphire’s earrings caught their attention in that split second. Smooth, shining stone that looked almost like a pearl in the pale moonlight of the Valley but they knew it wasn’t a pearl. No. It was their name, after all. “I’m Opal,” they said, the name fitting so easily into their mind as if it had always been there for them, just out of reach when buried under all of the information in the universe. Now, in this moment, thinking with their heart rather than their head for the first time, it felt obvious that their name was Opal. All it had taken to make that connection was to stare at the earrings of the beautiful pink haired woman in front of her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Opal,” Saph said with a grin that could rival the sun if it were ever to rise in the Valley of Stars. “You’re new around here, that much is clear, but it looks like you could become old around here if you wanted to.”

“What do you mean by that?” Opal asked, mind blissfully free of all the knowledge in the universe as she hung onto every word coming out of Sapphire’s mouth. The everpresent buzz of knowledge fell silent in that moment and Opal felt free for the first time in her life.

“The Valley doesn’t take very well to outsiders unless they have the gift. The fact that you’ve been here long enough to have a conversation with me tells me that you’re something special. And there’s the added fact that the Valley is clearly taking a liking to you. You’re glowing with it.”

And they were. The stars from up above seemed to dance across Opal's skin in the same way they noticed it dancing across Sapphire's. How they had missed the hypnotic movement of the starlight across her skin, Opal didn't know, but they could see it now, could see it on every passing person who they also hadn't noticed until Saph mentioned the Valley taking a liking to them. It was like Saph had unlocked something about the Valley for them, had invited them in to *know* more than they ever could have as Knowledge from above.

"You're seeing it in fullness now, aren't you, Opal? Come on, I'll show you around the town and help you get situated in the Valley." Saph took her hand at that, dragging her towards the town ahead of them. The stars above cast shimmering lights all over the town and its occupants, drawing Opal's eye every which way. She had studied the Valley of Stars for years, seen countless pictures and still moments in time from the files held by Guillermo and yet it felt like she was seeing everything for the first time. Pictures couldn't compare to the view from the ground, not by a long shot. Information didn't flood her brain here as much as it slowly lapped at her mind like gentle waves on the shore; the information she needed was there, but she wasn't overwhelmed by it.

Sapphire showed them around the town, pointing out countless libraries and bars, parks and cafes, homes and sky-high apartment buildings. The Valley held a mismatch of quaint, village-like features and loud city-like scenes that shouldn't have worked together at all but under the glowing stars, laced with magic to the core, it all made sense. Eventually they made their way to a quiet pub just off the main road that seemed to stretch through the entirety of the Valley. The pub owner greeted Saph by name, passing her a drink without even asking what she wanted. His eyes went a little hazy as he looked at Opal, something they made a mental note of, before asking for their name and preferred beverage. They settled on a mug of steaming tea, something they loved but didn't often have time for since they were so busy learning and knowing.

"So tell me, Opal, what brings you to the Valley? We don't get many strangers around here, as you might've guessed, and there are even fewer who are allowed to stay." Sapphire's tone was just on the wrong side of friendly, like it was creeping into suspicion that made nervousness race down Opal's back. There was something in the tone made her think that Saph would know if she was lying.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I've seen this place before and wanted to know more?" Opal asked softly. "I know it sounds hard to believe but–"

“You’re a bit like me, aren’t you?” Sapphire asked, reaching for Opal’s hand. They let her take it, watching as sparks of magic fluttered into the air from where their skin touched. As Saph held Opal’s hand in hers, they finally figured out what they had been missing all this time:

Sapphire *was* the Valley of Stars.

She was the arbiter, the person who allowed those with magic to enter and steered away those without. The magic that sliced through this reality, landing perfectly in the Valley, brought her to life. Why it fell there was a mystery to Sapphire, but Opal now knew that it was simply a little trick from Alasdair, an attempt to frustrate Guillermo about the balance of the reality that Guillermo ended up adoring because it gave rise to Sapphire, one of his most trusted friends in all of reality. The fact that Sapphire knew Guillermo hit Opal square in the chest along with the knowledge that Sapphire knew about the Council. She didn’t fully understand but it didn’t matter because she *knew* which meant she would believe Opal.

“I’m a bit more like my brother Guillermo,” Opal said, watching as Saph’s eyes grew wide at the mention of her friend who popped into the Valley from time to time. “Well, he’s not really my brother, but we’re like family in many ways.”

Saph recovered from her shock easily enough, smiling brightly at Opal. “So what brings you to see me then? The Valley clearly called you here for *something*, and I’m happy to share a secret or two with a beautiful person related to my best friend.”

“I think I might actually be the one sharing the secret with you.” Opal rarely had people to share their knowledge with outside of the Council, most of whom knew what they knew by proxy of being, well, the Council. They didn’t know the fine minutiae of everything like Opal did, but they knew the broad brushstrokes that would usually be the kind of thing Opal wanted to share. But here, sitting with Saph, they saw an opportunity to share something that directly impacted Sapphire’s life. “I know how the Valley came to be.”

“No one knows how the Valley came to be,” Saph scoffed, leaning back in her seat but still keeping her hand wrapped in Opal’s. “Except for Guillermo but he refuses to tell me.”

“Would you believe me if I told you I’m the arbiter of knowledge? Kind of like how Guillermo is the arbiter of reality?”

Sapphire leaned in excitedly, squeezing Opal’s hand. “Arbiter of knowledge, huh? In that case, lovely, tell me *everything*.”

And she did.

So what did you think, wanderer? It's a nice little story, isn't it? Opal and Sapphire still see each other often, just so you know. The Valley of Stars is the only place Opal ever visits outside the fringes, just so they can see their girlfriend. That's the beauty of Saph *being* the Valley, she'll never get old and die like others in reality might which means Opal will always have her. Not that they wouldn't be able to find her if Saph *were* to die, I mean, there's always the possibility that Sparrow would intervene for them but– I'm rambling again, aren't I? Rambling instead of doing what I'm meant to be doing and trying to find you a way to get back home.

You have to exist in these files *somewhere*. You *have* to. Unless you're a *very* realistic hologram made by Minerva to give me a friend, but she's smart enough to give me a friend who would talk to me. Which means you're a person and you just don't understand what I'm saying, right? And if you're a person that means you came from somewhere and can be found and put back.

Don't take my determination to get you home as a sign that I don't like your presence, wanderer. I like having you here, even if we can't communicate. It's… It's nice to have someone tangible around. (beeps) I know, Min, I know. You would be tangible if you could be. Still, it's nice having another presence around after all this time. But you don't belong here, wanderer. You belong… somewhere. And I'm gonna find out how to get you home to your friends and family and everyone who's ever cared about you. I promise.

You should go and get some rest, wanderer. I'm gonna keep working on this for a while, make up for the time I spent talking about Opal and Saph. Sleep well, okay? Or as well as anyone can sleep on the fringes. Hopefully I'll have more to show you tomorrow.