

The God in the Machine (Nathan Park)

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Backstory

It is a ritual with you, every night, to summon up your Creation and to spend half an hour sitting quietly within it. You find this calming. There is nothing you cannot understand, nothing you cannot control, there in the Machine.

Every night, you find yourself thinking the same thoughts. *It does not take so much to make me happy. All I want is for things to make sense. All I want is for the world not to keep hurting me for being me. Does that make me such a bad person?*

And every night, the inescapable answer is the same. *Yes. Yes, it does.*

You have autism. “High-functioning autism,” as they say, or maybe “Asperger’s syndrome,” although neither of those things is a recognized diagnosis anymore.

This is not widely known, even among your personal acquaintances. It is not something to which you like to draw attention. When people have a conceptual pigeonhole in which to put you, they think that they understand you and that they can predict you, which usually is not true. Fortunately, it is rare for anyone to figure out that you are autistic, unless you specifically tell him. You have had many years of practice in which to learn how to act not-autistic. Mostly people just think that you are strange.

When you were a child, you gave your parents a great deal of trouble. If they had been embedded in a different culture, or if you had been the firstborn, then perhaps things would have been different and easier. They could have built a special life for you around your special needs. But as it was, you were the youngest of five, and your family was poor and rural. When you were unable to do what you were supposed to do, Mother and Father did not have the energy or the patience or the desire to put up with it.

Most of the time, you were unable to do what you were supposed to do.

Your problems were typical ones for somebody who is “on the spectrum.” You were obsessive about your few narrow interests, and unable to care even remotely about anything else. Changes to your routine sent you into screaming fits of anger and terror. You simply refused to deal with the things that you did not like, and there were many things you did not like. Blandishments and threats meant nothing to you. You would starve yourself for days rather than eating foods you found unappealing, or go limp and unmoving if you were taken to a place that you found distressing, requiring one of your parents to carry you elsewhere. Above all, you did not consider the feelings of other people, and you never took other people’s desires or preferences into account.

(In using these terms, of course, you are trying to model the viewpoint of your parents and other outsiders. Within your head, things were very different. Your childhood was one long nightmare of hateful pressures and nonsensical demands. All the people around you had such complicated desires for unfathomable things, and they never said what they actually meant; by comparison, you were incredibly simple and straightforward. Somehow, though, they all understood each other perfectly, and you were always the odd one out who was making trouble for everyone.)

(But it is good to model other people, and to present their perspectives correctly. That is the entire point.)

Mother and Father had a word for the way you were. The word was “evil.”

They were not kind, or understanding. But they were not wrong either. You *were* evil. Everyone has a point of view, everyone can feel joy or pain, and everyone’s well-being is important -- knowing that, and acting on it, is what goodness *is*. You ignored everyone’s well-being but your own. You did not care about other people’s joy or pain. You tormented your parents and siblings, forcing them to give in to you over and over at great cost to themselves, because ultimately they were less willing to harm you than you were to harm them. That is pretty much the essence of moral depravity right there.

And if, for reasons out of your control, it was particularly difficult for you to be good...if you had a hard time even getting to the point of comprehending that other people *had* points of view in the first place, if you found other people’s preferences so arbitrary and meaningless that you could not hold them straight in your mind...well, that was not fair, but no one ever said that life is fair. The requirements of goodness are clear and sensible. You had to work much harder than regular people to meet them, but morality does not come with a handicap.

All this was explained to you, over and over, by various authority figures in your life. You resented it bitterly, but in the end you could not deny its validity. And so, eventually, you forced yourself to learn how to be good. You spent agonizing years figuring out how to follow and mimic the byzantine social cues that normal people used, and in situations where your insights were not powerful enough to tell you what to do, you erred on the side of self-effacement and

deference. You struggled to believe that the things other people cared about were important, *because* other people cared about them, even if you yourself thought they were total gibberish. It was a brutal and miserable form of socialization. But it worked.

One of the few real pleasures of your youth -- the only one that involved any meaningful interaction with other people -- was working on cars with Father. He was a mechanic, and he cared about his job, and from the moment he introduced you to machinery it was your favorite thing in the world. It was so *reasonable*. You could take a machine apart, and see how each little piece functioned, and then reassemble it step by step until you understood the whole thing in its totality. Machine-craft felt right, within your mind, in exactly the way that most of the world did not. You were a genuinely valuable assistant to Father by the time you were eight years old, and by twelve you had surpassed his skills. This made him happy, which made the whole thing even better than it would have been otherwise. When left to your own devices, you would happily spend hours and hours tinkering with engines and fuel injectors and so on. You also took up clockwork as a hobby, and became skilled at assembling and disassembling mechanical watches.

(There was a brief period, during your early high school years, when your family thought that you would turn out to be a computer genius and make them all rich. This was not the case. It is true that computers follow logical rules, which means that autistics like you are supposed to find them easy to master...but, in truth, even *people* follow logical rules. Human brains are material machines, after all. It is just that there are so *many* rules governing the structure of the brain, and they are so intricate, that no one can actually understand them well enough to make good predictions using logical deterministic models. Not even very smart people who study humanity very closely, which is why no real detectives are as good as Sherlock Holmes. And it is the same way with computers, which have become so complicated that literally nobody on Earth is capable of understanding a modern computer in its entirety. You like *basic* machines, machines that are simple enough for you to hold the whole system in your mind. *This piston drives this gear which turns these three other gears*, and that sort of thing.)

From before you can remember, you daydreamed about the world being different. Autistic people almost always do. You indulged vague fantasies of an existence that was less confusing and less painful, where people made sense and didn't press in on you. But after you became a "gearhead," your daydreams became much clearer and more compelling, because you had such a powerful concept in which to ground them. You imagined a Machine World, where everything was made from mechanical parts, where every motion and every event was driven by the interaction of those parts. It would be a world where you could come to understand anything at all, no matter how big or subtle or complicated, just by looking closely at how the pieces fit together. Even the people would be made from clockwork, and would behave like clockwork mechanisms, with well-ordered and predictable behaviors. And if, somehow, a foreign contaminant entered the Machine World -- if something squidgy and messy and chaotic

forced its way in -- well, there would be systems to capture it, and systems to break it down it into its component substances, and systems to reconstitute those substances into things that would be good to have around.

It was a nice fantasy. You made the Machine World into a mental refuge, and let yourself escape into it whenever the real world became too much to bear. That happened a lot.

Immediately after you graduated from high school, you left home. Being independent was difficult in various ways, and you found the prospect frightening, but it was clear that you and your parents would destroy each other if you continued to live with them. So you moved all the way to Bullhead City, on the other side of Arizona from where you grew up, and got a job at a garage.

You rented a small room in a house. The rest of the house was occupied by Danica and Nora and Penny, who were all students at Mohave Community College. It was not very long before you were in love with all of them.

(At least, that is the easiest way to say it. You have never really understood what people mean by "love," and as far as you can tell it is not a very coherent concept. But you enjoyed looking at your housemates, and talking to them, and you wanted emotional and physical affection from them, and as far as you can tell that is a pretty close approximation of "being in love.")

Initially, it was only because they were pretty, and because their conversations were smart and funny. During high school, you had fallen in love with other girls for similar reasons. But the high school girls were always disgusted whenever you told them about your interest, and they would either ignore you or say cruel things to you. Danica and Nora and Penny were kind and sweet, and they continued being kind and sweet after you made your fumbling overtures to them, even though you had put them in a difficult social position and they could have been righteously angry if they had wanted. They seemed to feel genuinely sorry that they could not make you happy by returning your affections. This made you love them even more.

(Of course, most people believe that you are supposed to be in love with only one person at a time, although alternative theories seem to be gaining in popularity these days. You tried to settle on a single love, but your feelings about all three of your housemates were pretty much the same, and you would have been happy for any of them to be your girlfriend. So you approached them one at a time, in alphabetical order, waiting a week after each attempt. They laughed about that, with each other, and teased you sometimes. But it was good-natured. And they did not seem to find it truly objectionable. They did not stop including you in their discussions, or making dinner for you when one of them was cooking, or inviting you to their TV nights.)

You spent two years in that house. It was the most peaceful period of your life. You worked on cars, and tinkered with watches, and watched TV with your housemates, and thought about the Machine World. Sometimes, now, you think back on those two years and it makes you smile.

Life is usually not as dramatic as literature. If you lived in a comic book or a television show, you would have awoken to your demiurge magic after experiencing some hugely traumatic event. But in actual fact, it took place at the end of an ordinarily crummy day, no more or less crummy than a hundred others. A customer at the garage, who thought that you were taking too long to fix his brakes, yelled at you so much that the manager had to intervene. You left your debit card behind at the fast food restaurant where you had lunch, and had to go back to get it after work. You do not even remember the other things that went wrong, although you know that there were several. So when you got home, you flopped into bed and squeezed your eyes shut and thought very hard about how nice it would be to live in the Machine World, where forgotten objects could be seized by clamps and returned to you on conveyor belts, where horrible customers could be remade into useful robots.

It took you some time to realize that the noise of pounding pistons wasn't just your imagination. You opened your eyes, and there it was, all around you, filling your little room and going through one of the walls. The Machine World.

You stared at a little welding-torch assembly, and decided to take it apart, in the interest of seeing exactly how all the pieces fit together. Before your eyes, crane-arms with clamps and bolt-drivers swooped in on tracks, and did exactly the work that you had contemplated doing. You imagined building a simple motor from the parts, and once again the machinery carried out your intentions perfectly, as though it were an extension of your will. You thought about how you would construct something far more complicated, something you could not possibly put together in the real world -- *an eight-legged spider-mech for me to ride around in* -- and the intricate design flowed like a river through your mind, through the busy whirring clanking construction systems, into solid existence. You hopped in the mech's cockpit, grabbed the control levers, and took a few hesitant steps. It worked perfectly.

Without really knowing how, flexing a mental muscle you didn't know you had, you tried to pull all the machinery out of the space around you and inside yourself. In an instant, your room was back to normal, as though nothing at all had happened.

Then you spent an hour Googling "demiurge" and following every link you could find.

After an hour, you were sure that you were in fact a demiurge, and you had learned virtually nothing else of substance. There was no real information on the topic to be found. Nobody except demiurges knew anything about being a demiurge, and demiurges were not in the

business of sharing their discoveries with the Internet. As far as anyone could tell, they did not do much of anything except for trying to take over the world.

For a split second, you thought about the prospect of becoming a “conqueror demiurge” like that -- sending your Machine World out as far as you could, breaking down and assimilating everything in your path, trying to replace all of reality with your own Creation. The idea made you feel queasy and horrible. *Everyone has a point of view. Everyone’s well-being is important.* Other people would not want to be disassembled for parts, or live amongst the machinery that you loved, and forcing it on them would be awful and wrong.

You went on to consider the other traditional life path for demiurges: hermitude. It was more tempting. Certainly you had fantasized, often enough, about dwelling forever in the safe sane embrace of the Machine World. And the real world was not a very pleasant place for someone like you. Maybe it would be better just to close your Creation around you like a cocoon.

But that seemed like a cowardly surrender, somehow. It was important to be good, to take other people into consideration, even if you didn’t have to. Hiding away would not relieve you of your obligations. And besides -- the world was not all bad, all the time. There were things that you would miss. It would make you sad if you never saw Danica and Nora and Penny again.

Danica and Nora and Penny.

That gave you an idea.

You labored through the night. This new project was vastly harder than the spider-mech; even with the tremendous creative powers that you seemed to possess inside the Machine World, it took a lot of tinkering and a lot of trial-and-error. But by the time the sun came up, you were satisfied with the results. Your work was beautiful. It would make everything so much better.

When your housemates came down to the breakfast table, you were there waiting for them. You told them what you had become, and you called up the Machine World so that they could see it. They were stunned and a bit frightened, which was not surprising, because demiurges had done so many bad things and had such a bad reputation. But they were also very supportive. They said that they knew you were a good person, not a monster, and that they had faith that you would find a way to use your powers in a good and constructive way.

As a grand finale, you showed them the Dolls.

Look! I made a mechanical version of you, and of you, and of you. They are all clockwork, underneath the skin. You can open them up and see it. See? They talk like you and act like you, in a lot of ways. But I can understand them, because they are just machines, and not

unpredictable like real people are unpredictable. They will be my girlfriends. I designed them that way. Now I do not have to be sad that I am alone, and you do not have to be sad that I want something from you that you cannot give me. We can all have what we want. We can be happy friends, with no awkwardness between us.

Their reaction was...not good.

The next hour was probably the worst hour of your life. Mostly you sat holding your knees, trembling and moaning, while your housemates yelled and cursed and cried. They took back every nice thing they had ever said about you. They called you sick, perverted, horrible. At the end, they kicked you out of the house, and told you never to return.

You were so confused. You could not see how the Dolls were making things any worse for anyone. But, apparently, just knowing that they existed was very hurtful to Danica and Nora and Penny.

It is hard to avoid hurting people, if you do not understand them. It is especially hard if you have power. You have great power now. And you cannot understand other people, no matter how hard you try. You will make terrible mistakes. This has been demonstrated over and over.

Maybe hiding away inside your Creation was not such a bad idea after all.

For the next eight months, you tried to be a hermit. You fled to the middle of nowhere, and let the Machine World fill a small area, and remained within the zone of your ontological control. You whiled away the time in endless mechanical construction projects, and in enjoying the company of your Dolls. It was pleasant. It was easy. There were no troubles and no pressures.

You could not sustain it. By the end, you felt so guilty and so miserable about yourself that you wanted to die.

This was because of Pavlovian conditioning. All your life, you had been trained -- by your parents, by your teachers, by yourself -- to feel bad when you thought only about your own preferences. Happiness was reserved for people who considered the needs of others. And in the Machine World, there was nothing to think about *but* your own preferences, so you found it impossible not to feel like a bad person. It was not a rational response. So long as you kept completely to yourself, you were not imposing on anyone, and being selfish was harmless. But the thing about conditioning is that you cannot escape it with logic, even if you know that you are being conditioned.

My Creation is a wondrous thing, and I love it with all my heart, but it is not...cannot be...my world. It is only a Machine.

So you emerged, haggard and weary and close to suicide, and tried to figure out what you should do with yourself. You could not bear to be alone, but you could not live amongst other people without hurting them, because you were so different.

A thought occurred to you. *If I am sufficiently helpful to others, then perhaps the good I do will outweigh the harm that I cause, and it will be overall beneficial to society to have me around, and I will not have to be ashamed.*

What is the most helpful thing that I could do?

So it was that you embarked on a heroic career. Taking your cues from the Shining Princesses and Mystic Knights, you fought the supernatural enemies of mankind, against whom non-magical people could do nothing.

At first, you worked as a lone crusader, striking out against Void Terrors on your own initiative. That was not wise; you should have foreseen the obvious consequences. Before long, you were hunted down and attacked by a magical girl, who had come to destroy the “active demiurge” of whom she had heard reports.

You surrendered unconditionally. Any other course of action was sure to result in someone’s death.

Fortunately, once you’d pulled the Machine inside yourself, the Princess was inclined to hear you out. When you’d explained what you were doing, and why, she gave you a searching stare and said: *Running around by yourself, in the middle of nowhere, is next to useless. Come with me to San Diego. That’s where the real fighting is. That’s where you’ll find the people who understand, even a little bit, what it’s like. And when you finally snap and go bad -- as you eventually will -- I’ll be right there to take you down. Deal?*

So it was that you first entered the orbit of Rillian Marling.

Since then, you have been an acknowledged part of the San Diego magical community. Right now, in fact, you are functionally second-in-command to Princess Tanaroa. There were a few other Princesses who were already there when you showed up, but all of them are dead.

You have made yourself very useful. You travel up and down the West Coast fighting Void Terrors, which is something you are good at doing, because the Machine is a tremendously powerful weapon. You also go after aggressive demiurges whenever they appear anywhere

west of the Mississippi River. Fighting others of your kind is your specialty. You understand them better than any Knight or Princess can, and you can use the Machine to attack someone else's Creation directly, rather than having to navigate through the altered reality. You have defeated eleven demiurges in battle, all of them by yourself; no other magic-user has even fought against more than two.

Furthermore, you have written articles about demiurgy and how it works. You even did an online chat interview thing so that you could answer people's questions. This means that you have contributed to the stock of human knowledge, and also advanced the cause of public safety.

It is a difficult and sometimes stressful way to live, but for the most part it is very good. You feel as though you are doing something worthwhile. The community is generally very supportive and accepting, and you enjoy the weekly poker nights. (At this point, pretty much every magic-user in San Diego is some kind of awkward misfit who got taken under Princess Tanaroa's wing, so you are not quite so alone in your oddity. Even if you are clearly the *most* odd by a wide margin.) The annual house parties are a bit overwhelming, but interesting and fun in a high-octane sort of way.

You like Rillian a lot. She serves as everyone's commander -- even if you are the only person who does not try to pretend that it is a more informal and egalitarian sort of arrangement -- and her leadership gives you no cause for complaint. She has a good tactical mind, and she knows her subordinates very well, so she can tend to their needs and make good use of their various strengths. She is also the closest friend you have ever had. This is strange, because she is very much unlike you, and you understand her even less well than you understand most people. Her emotions are wild and tempestuous; she feels things very strongly, in a way that is especially complicated and especially unpredictable. And she is just as confused by you as you are by her. But she realizes that the two of you cannot comprehend one another, and she is genuinely willing to live with that, because she values your insights and your contributions. You are grateful for her esteem, and you have faith in her essential righteousness, and you trust her to guide you through things that you cannot handle yourself.

This does not mean that you keep no secrets from her.

First and foremost: you have allowed Rillian to persist in her belief that you are a ticking time bomb, that someday you will become a conqueror-demiurge and start trying to consume the world, and that she will have to slay you.

It makes you a bit sad that she thinks this. Occasionally you have toyed with the idea of trying to convince her that she is wrong. It would not be a good plan, however. You have learned enough about her psychology to realize that she would interpret your arguments in a sinister

light. As she sees it, so long as you accept the necessity of your eventual destruction at her hands, you are demonstrating a clear-headed allegiance to the public good; trying to make yourself seem like less of a threat would be interpreted as a manipulative act, a prelude to an attack. Also, she derives pride from being a strong person who can make difficult-but-necessary choices, and you do not wish to deprive her of that.

But the truth is that you are *not* a threat. You are quite sure that you will never go berserk in the way that everybody seems to expect you will. A conqueror-demiurge -- or, for that matter, a hermit-demiurge -- must believe, with all his heart, that his personal vision is superior to reality. For better or for worse, you cannot do that. This makes you unusual, perhaps unique, among your kind; as far as you can tell, the only people who *become* demiurges are the ones who pour themselves into their imaginations, and who prefer their imaginings to the real world. But your feelings about yourself, and thus your feelings about your Creation, are dominated by shame and doubt. The world will always hurt you, and in many ways you hate it, but it has a moral and emotional grip on you that will never be broken. And so, when the chips are down, your love for the Machine will always end up losing out.

You have also failed to tell Rillian, or anyone, that some of the rogue demiurges that you defeated are still alive. You do not like killing others of your kind. *Everyone's well-being is important.* And besides, you have enormous sympathy for any demiurge. Reality is hard and cruel, and you cannot fault those who believe themselves to have come up with something better, just because they do not share your guilt complex.

Those who cannot be talked down from their aggression, you slay. You have no other choice. But, often, it takes only a few sympathetic words to turn a conqueror into a hermit. *If you fight this war, you will lose. And even if you won, the people out there would curse your name, because they are attached to the world they know. Why take it away from them? You have everything you need right here. Hide away within your Creation, and never emerge, and know happiness in the Eden that you have built for yourself.*

Five times, you have spared a life in this way.

You think about them, sometimes, and wonder how they are faring in the depths of their Creations. They were all so odd, so memorable. The Earl of Loons, who reigned over a dangerously childish domain made of whimsy and dreadful puns. Thunderscream, who lived within his rock-and-roll paradise, where everything was black leather and pyrotechnics and ecstatic crowds. IN5ADER, racing forever down the neon pathways of her ridiculous cyber-world, a hacker-queen for the sort of glittering futuristic virtual-reality Internet that never was. All of them. It is hard to believe that they are not happier than you are, now. They live within heavens of their own making, and probably they are not too damaged to appreciate the experience.

You keep tabs on them. If any of them reverts to his old ways, and attacks the world, then the blood will be on your hands. But thus far they are all quiescent, and you are proud of what you have done.

That said: the magical community would not understand. It is not good at thinking of demiurges as people. The San Diego contingent accepts you, but this is because you have never ever stepped out of line. There are others who cannot even get to the point of tolerating you. Better to keep quiet about your redeemed sinners.

And of course you have never mentioned the Dolls. You have certainly not mentioned the fact that you have created a Doll version of Rillian. Your experience with your old housemates made it abundantly clear that such things should never be shared.

(Doll-Rillian is a masterpiece, and the queen of your clockwork harem. You tinker with her obsessively, because even after years of work, she is not quite perfect; the true Rillian is immensely complicated on a mental level, and simulating her behavior is very tricky. But even as she is, she is much more impressive than Doll-Danica or Doll-Nora or Doll-Penny. You take tremendous comfort in her affections. It is good to have someone brave and clever who loves you. And she sings so beautifully.)

So that has been your life for the past five years: fighting the good fight, and enjoying the company of friends, and keeping secrets. You have no regrets.

Now the time has come for another house party. You are looking forward to it, as you have looked forward to the last several. It is good to see distant friends. But the party will be uncomfortable, and difficult, in ways that previous parties were not. Recent events have been troubling, and when the community comes together, it will be obliged to deal with them.

You were very distressed to learn about the Frost War. It is frightening and unpleasant to think that your heroic friends might turn outright villainous. Princess Dansaiche and the Heron Knight are the sort of people that you like very much -- quiet, serious, thoughtful -- and they were always kind to you, so it grieves you to think of them as enemies. (Gothy Princess Lessica was not someone you ever particularly liked, certainly not someone you ever understood, but even so she was notionally an ally and her defection is still painful.)

It is even more frightening and unpleasant to think that the magical community might try to deal with this turn of events by sweeping it under the rug.

The Heron Knight did something very bad. Because of her actions, innocent people died. This needs to have consequences. You do not especially want her to suffer, but for reasons of good policy and also for moral reasons, she cannot simply be forgiven. People are sometimes dominated by powerful destructive desires, and magic-users are people capable of wreaking great harm -- they need to know, even in the throes of their greatest irrationality, that they will be made to regret giving in to their evil impulses. This is called deterrence, and without it, the world descends into chaos. Furthermore, the people of the world need to know that they can trust the magical community to police itself. If they feel that they cannot count on magic-users to be virtuous and heroic, they will attempt to impose their own ignorant authority, and the consequences will be disastrous.

(It should go without saying that "I was living up to the oaths of my consort bond" is a meaningless non-excuse, the Knightly equivalent of "I was just following orders.")

You do not know, exactly, what sort of punishment should be levied. Perhaps the Heron Knight needs to die. Perhaps it would be enough simply to banish her from the society of magic-users. Perhaps there is some alternative that you have not considered. But "nothing" is not a viable option.

Unfortunately, "nothing" is exactly what many people want to do. Rillian feels the same way that you do, and the San Diego contingent is more or less following her lead, but some elements in the broader community are trying to act like the whole thing never happened. Everyone likes the Heron Knight as a person, and imposing justice would be awkward and unpleasant; easier just to accept her apology, let bygones be bygones, and continue being friends. To be totally honest, you find this hurtful and insulting, in addition to being dangerously wrong-headed. No one would tolerate that kind of villainy from *you*. You have been on permanent probation for your entire career as a magical hero, despite the fact that you have assiduously used your powers only for good, simply because of what you are. If you had ever done anything a tenth as bad as what the Heron Knight did, you would be dead in a ditch right now, and no one would feel the least bit bad about it. But she is pretty and charming and Knightly, and she is *sorry*, so somehow everything is all right.

(Probably, if people knew about the mercy that you have shown to conqueror-demiurges, they would call you a hypocrite for your stance on this matter. They would be wrong. This...is different. Hermit-demiurges have accepted permanent exile from everything, which is an appropriate consequence for being unable to live peacefully within the world. Kennedy Wake is a normal well-adjusted person who made a normal well-adjusted decision to do something unforgivable. That too must be met with an appropriate consequence. Countenancing her choice would be tantamount to endorsing every selfish, antisocial impulse that anyone ever has.)

In the wake of the Frost War, Princess Phyrelios is trying to turn the community into an official organization, with a charter and rules and everything. This is probably a good idea, but for the most part it does not concern you. There are a number of complicated “political issues” that matter to Knights and Princesses, in terms of the way they deal with their dueling tournaments and their Shining Realms, and also in terms of their relationship to mundane society. You can safely ignore all of that.

It does matter to you, however, that the official organization has an official policy regarding demiurges that is ethical and sane. You have a disquieting sense that, for the most part, the political types would prefer just to grandfather you in as a special exception and otherwise continue to treat demiurges as monsters to be killed on sight. (Some of them would not even grant you the exception.) This is understandable. Demiurges are unstable almost by definition...and with regards to your ability to stay positively engaged with the real world, it is an empirical fact that you *are* a special exception. But it remains true that even magically-empowered crazy people are *people* who deserve moral consideration, and that hermit-demiurges are harmless, and that sometimes even aggressive demiurges can be convinced to retreat into hermitude.

You would like to push for the community to take the right kind of stance on this matter. Preferably in a way that does not require you to compromise any of your secrets.

Speaking of compromising your secrets...

The Violet Comet is a worrisome thing. Anything that powerful is worrisome if you do not understand it, and no one understands the Violet Comet at all. Various community leaders are trying to come up with plans to “take care of it,” but they are operating in total ignorance.

You may be able to help alleviate that ignorance.

The Machine contains within it an immense number of lower-case-m machines that you have constructed over the years. Some of these function by exploiting the differences between your personal understanding of physics, which is operative in your Creation, and the actual laws of nature. One of your most useful toys is the Overlarge Arcane Energy Collider, which you created in order to analyze the magical powers wielded by enemy demiurges. The OAEC smashes occult particles together -- which works because occult energies have a particulate nature inside the Machine, even though this is probably not the case in reality -- and slows them down enough that you can study their traits. This sounds very abstruse, but as it turns out, understanding some particular form of magic on the particulate level often allows you to predict

what that magic will actually do. So, in theory, you could feed Violet Comet energy to the OAEC and see what you get.

The problem is that you would first have to *bring* the Violet Comet energy to the OAEC. Since your Creation cannot exist for long in the Jeweled Beyond (and certainly not that close to such a powerful beacon of arcane force), and you cannot reach the comet in physical-space, you will need help from some other magic-user. (Probably a Princess, since Princesses are the ones who can easily travel to concept-space.) If you are going to go through with this, someone will have to go expose themselves to the comet, and then travel into the heart of the Machine.

You do not want to take anyone deep inside the Machine. It is dangerous, and scary, for people who are not you. It is very private and personal, as much so as your innermost thoughts. And it is where you keep the Dolls, who should probably never be made known to anyone. The consequences for you could be very unpleasant.

But if you can help save the world, that is more important. And it may be that the world needs saving from the Violet Comet.

It does not take so much to make me happy. All I want is for things to make sense. All I want is for the world not to keep hurting me for being me. Does that make me such a bad person?

Some Thoughts Concerning Other Persons of Relevance

Princess Phyrelis -- A wise and competent Supreme Leader in most respects, but also very soft-hearted, and mostly interested in making sure that everyone gets along. This has been a good thing for you personally; Ms. Gyld was willing to accept you when few others were, and because of her status, you were able to find a place in the community. On the flip side, when there are harsh decisions that have to be made, she may not be up to making them. She invited both a terrorist and a Void monster to her house party. The fallout may be dire.

Princess Xian Jie -- Much steelier than her superior. Level-headed and practical. You admire her a great deal. She is mostly suspicious and unfriendly towards you, which makes you sad.

Princess Reauvais -- She is very thoughtful and very kind, but she persists in believing all manner of patently absurd things about the universe. Her delusions are not even self-serving delusions; mostly they just seem to make her sadder, but she clings tightly to them anyway. You find it difficult not to be drawn into arguments with her, but this always makes her upset, so you just try to stay away.

The Oak Knight -- He is uncomfortable around you, but he tries to hide it, because he thinks that his reaction is unenlightened and unchivalrous. Probably that indicates some kind of strength of character. Overall he is wise and patient and tries very hard to do the right thing. Also, you suspect that he is the only person at the party who would stand any real chance of taking you down in a straight-up fight.

The Dragon Knight -- A witless, sloppy, boorish sort of man. Also, judging from the rumors you hear and that one YouTube video, he did not treat his consort very well in the last days of their relationship. *Pfah*.

The Ivy Knight -- You do not know him well, but he is very clever, and he likes the same sort of intricate games and puzzles that you do. You look forward to spending more time with him. Perhaps he will become a true friend.

The Whirlwind Knight -- She has no idea how to deal with someone like you, and so she defaults to extreme jocularitry, which is a bit awkward. Fundamentally she means well, but she does grate on you.

Princess Velensberg -- Susanna is such an unutterably *good* person. She is gentle and cheerful and loving, always inclined to see the best in everyone, always ready with a nice thing to say. And she is suffering so terribly, in the wake of her realm's destruction, but she tries to keep it bottled up because she does not want to sadden the people around her.

She is one of your favorite friends. You are very glad that she came to San Diego, so that you could get to know her and spend lots of time with her. You desperately wish that there was something you could do to help.

The Doll version of her is still in alpha testing. But she will probably be perfected before long; Susanna is not a complicated sort of person. And when she is finished, you suspect that she will be your favorite, even above Doll-Rillian. Her love for you will be a very natural, comprehensible outgrowth of her core personality. She will be so good at providing you with the comfort and care for which you turn to the Dolls.

Prince Nakeya -- A good friend, although it took him a few months to stop being jumpy around you. You go running with him in the mornings sometimes. Also, you were both involved with the National Speech & Debate Association in high school, and it is fun to swap stories. He is seriously trying to get over his prejudices regarding demiurges, which is a nice thing. Todd is a very fluffy and emotional sort of person, and probably the two of you do not have all that much in common deep down, but his company is enjoyable.

The Owl Knight -- He has lived in San Diego for more than two years now, and you are around him all the time, but the two of you have never really connected in any serious way. He still seems to be a bit afraid of you, although he tries to conceal it. As far as you can tell, he wants as little as possible to do with the ordinary rituals of Knighthood, which is why he moved to a city with no other Knights. Rillian is protective of him. He and Todd are good friends.

Princess Matalorn -- You have barely interacted with her at all. You admire her demonstrated combat skill and leadership ability. You are less inclined to admire her willingness to forget the crimes of the magical terrorist who attacked her own city. You get a vague sense that she doesn't yet quite realize how serious, and inescapable, the magical aspects of her life will be; she seems to think that she can be a mostly ordinary sort of person if she tries hard enough.

Princess Bonaventure -- She has always been irritatingly loud, demonstrative, and over-emotional. Now, apparently, she is also going out of her way to give aid and comfort to violent criminals. You are disgusted.

The Wolf Knight -- Rutherford Scholl is one of the most monomaniacal, self-absorbed people you have ever met; he is almost like a demiurge himself in some ways, except that he can treat Knighthood as his special private reality instead of having to invent one from whole cloth. You find his psychology very interesting, and wish you understood it better.

The Seafoam Knight -- He has a quick mind, and he is curious about things. You wish that he were overall less silly, frivolous, and annoying.

Princess Clow -- Ms. Fujimoto is a complete unknown to you, but you have an obvious special interest in demiurge-slayers. You would like to learn more about her, and in particular you would

like to learn more about the demiurge that she killed. (You cannot help wondering whether perhaps he might have been saved...)

The Serpent Knight -- A Knight of the very old school. Lost in a maze of his own emotions. Not inclined to like or trust demiurges. The two of you have never really had anything to say to one another.

The Fathomless Maw -- You understand that you yourself are a “heroic villain-type,” and that in some sense you should be extending the benefit of the doubt to this peaceful-seeming Void Monarch. But a demiurge is a *person*, with fundamentally human motivations, and as far as you know Void Terrors are just pure mind-consuming predators. You strongly suspect that this “Blackmont” is up to something bad. You will keep a sharp watch on it. One way or another, you will surely learn something important.

Game Information at a Glance

The triggers for your contingencies are listed here so that you have a chance to familiarize yourself with the conditions and as a quick reference guide. Contingencies with no listed condition will have other contingencies that instruct you to open them.

NP1: B

NP2

NP3

NP4: ~~Open after you have an unpleasant altercation with Rillian Marling or Susanna DeWitt.~~
Open when you find yourself feeling anger or a similar negative emotion towards Rillian Marling or Susanna DeWitt.

NP5: Open after you tell someone why you are unlikely to "snap" like most demiurges.

NP6: ☉

NP7: B

NP8: 𐌆

NP9: 𐌆

NP10: 𐌆

NP11: 𐌆

At the start of the game, you possess the following combat powers:

My Creation Emerges -- Innate Ability: *"By the power of my Creation, I can and must Evoke the Machine on the first round of combat!"*

Evoke the Machine -- Special attack with the following additional effect: *"By the power of my Creation, I deal no damage this round, but for the rest of the fight my attacks win ties!"* This is a **Faith** power.

You also possess the following traits:

Machine Sanctum -- You may take other PCs into the Machine, a special otherwise-inaccessible adventure location.

Bound to Reality -- You may not hold or possess a **Violet Energy Sample** item or travel to the Violet Comet. You may only be brought to the Jeweled Beyond once per day (Saturday/Sunday/Monday), and it feels uncomfortable to travel there.