

What started as a harmless bit of roleplay between Lettuce and Pinkie Pie, the two of them pretending to be grizzled private eyes on the job, quickly turned into something more once they began trailing Firehawk and Reinhard Heydrich, the latter having traveled to Coastal Falls to meet with the former. His daughter, Emma, also traveled there to meet with Firehawk, but ended up getting captured once her true nature became apparent to Omnus and the Rangers. However, the team was too late to prevent a coup that resulted in the murder of dozens of high-ranking Federation officials. A confrontation then occurred in the capital between the Rangers and Heydrich, along with Amon Göth, Firehawk and Ilsa. Göth ended up killing Usagi, who died saving Starhawk's life. Starhawk killed Göth and Ilsa in retaliation, capturing her sister afterwards. Heydrich escaped, and went into hiding somewhere on Core Earth.

Firehawk was put in a cell, and Usagi's various friends, family members and enemies reacted to her death in different ways. Alma Wade eventually convinced Omnus to free Emma, after seeing how broken the woman was...or appeared to be. Firehawk, meanwhile, also went free, and made amends with her sister. The two of them ended up adopting a young Russian orphan named Anna, a girl with a fondness for hunting and sharp objects. Anna settled into her new home well enough, but ended up getting captured by Nazi soldiers, handed over to Dr. Josef Mengele, and tortured quite extensively. This left her heavily scarred, blind in one eye, and more than a little unhinged. A Nazi general, Heinz Guderian, defected to Core Earth after helping Starhawk and Firehawk rescue Anna. The German commander quickly took a liking to his new home, and gave some advice to Lettuce, who had ruined his relationship with Pinkie and his friendship with Kira, and, indirectly, played a part in creating a rift between Undyne and Alphys, after the former decided to express her affections towards him in a way most carnal.

Now, after Usagi returned from the dead, Starhawk gave birth, and Anna returned home after several days in the hospital, a mysterious female Hawkian has arrived, claiming to be Aquila, Blackhawk and Starhawk's daughter...

Blackhawk stared blankly at the female Hawkian in front of him, eyes wide and jaw dropped open. He didn't understand how she, an adult version of Aquila, was there. She stared back at him, still smiling. She wore a long back trenchcoat, much like he did, with pants of the same color, light brown boots, and a wide-brimmed hat. A pair of twin holsters, each containing a revolver, rested on her hips, one on each side. She was also heavily scarred, the most notable mark being a jagged line that went from her left cheek to her forehead.

"Who are you?" Starhawk asked hesitantly.

"I am your daughter, Aquila." She replied, her voice rather deep. "I came here from a rather terrible future."

"B-but how?"

“Me.” the voice of Captain Retro answered in her head. “I have precognitive abilities and at least to some degree, the art of time travel abilities. Let me explain. As the Avatar of Clifford, I’ve been granted what you might call superpowers. I don’t use them too often, since time is a very fragile thing when it comes to the Tower. You have to remember, Starhawk, that I operate outside of normal space-time.”

“Does that make you a god?”

“Oh, nononono...I’m not a god. I’m just as fallible and mortal as you are.” the dog-man answered. “I’m just, well, a bit abnormal.”

“I am sure you have so many questions.” Aquila said. “I will gladly answer them once the rest of your team, both officially part of it and not, are able to hear what I have to say.”

“Why are you here?” Starhawk inquired.

“I will answer that once your team is assembled.” Aquila said. “I promise. I just don’t want to repeat myself multiple times.”

Starhawk nodded, going through her contacts and calling Omnus. He answered on the second ring. “Hello, Starhawk. What is it you need?”

“There is something you need to see.” Starhawk said. “Gather the others.”

“Alright.” Omnus said, hanging up. An hour or so later, the Rangers, save for Firehawk, Starhawk, Blackhawk and Usagi, who was still thought dead by many, were assembled in the Command Center. Hinata was with Naruto, having arrived in Coastal Falls a few days earlier. After a few minutes of waiting, the rest of the team arrived, with Usagi and Aquila stepping out last. Pinkie immediately burst into tears upon seeing Usagi, and nearly tackled the blonde when she ran over and hugged her. Lettuce stared, slack-jawed. Omnus had a similar expression.

“Usagi?” He said, stunned. “Is it really you?”

“Nope, it’s Slaanesh taking Usagi’s form.” the blonde answered coyly.

Omnus chuckled before hugging her. “It’s good to have you back.” Usagi hugged him back.

“It’s good to be back.”

Aquila then cleared her throat. “Hi, all.” She said, awkwardly waving. “I’m Aquila, the daughter of Blackhawk and Starhawk.”

“...I guess it’s true what they say.” Usagi said. “They grow up so fast.”

"I know." Blackhawk said, completely deadpan. "It came as quite a shock when she hatched out of her egg as an adult."

"Yes." Starhawk agreed.

"I get it, guys. I'm not funny." Usagi replied just as deadpan.

"I'm from the future, obviously." Aquila explained to the others. "This future isn't a very happy one."

"How bad?" Naruto questioned.

"Most of you are dead." Aquila replied, taking out a cigar and lighting it. "That's how bad."

"What happened, exactly?" Lettuce asked, wondering just what might've caused this kind of future.

"Things started going south when Abaddon killed the Emperor." Aquila began. "This happened about a year from now in my timeline. The Warmaster's forces broke into the underground vault where the Emperor is, and Abaddon murdered Him. The repercussions of that event were catastrophic. Mass suicides occurred across Core Earth and beyond as people who were even slightly psychic were driven mad by the energy unleashed by the Emperor's death. The forces of Chaos, emboldened by this major victory, leapt on the Federation like jackals. Millions upon millions of people were slaughtered in the first wave of attacks, as Chaos Space Marines, Daemons and cultists rampaged across various worlds, raping, killing, burning and pillaging everything and everyone they could find."

"Oh my God..." Naruto muttered. "Were we among those killed?"

"No, your team wasn't." Aquila said, pointing to Hinata. "Though she was."

"Me?" Hinata asked.

"Yep. A pack of Slaaneshi Daemonettes did all sorts of nasty things to you, before sending what was left to Naruto." Aquila replied. "He...didn't react well. At all."

"Y-you mean I...my anger got the best of me..." Naruto whispered.

"The slaughter that followed Hinata's death, as you avenged her against Chaos, came to be known as the Red Week. You slaughtered thousands of Daemons, and nearly as many Space Marines. It took Abaddon himself to stop you, and even then, the Warmaster lost an arm."

“So the entire planet fell into anarchy?” Usagi asked.

“At first, yes.” Aquila replied. “Anarchy reigned for about two years...until you stepped forward and acted. You managed to bring order to Core Earth, and unite most the people living on it under you.”

“So how is this a ‘bad’ future?” Usagi inquired.

“I am 25. I was four when you took over.” Aquila answered. “Things were relatively stable for two years or so, until the Stormlord finally invaded. The Necrons began committing genocide on a scale that the forces of Chaos could only dream of. They made their way across Federation space, killing everyone that was in their way. Aunt Firehawk, Pinkie Pie and Lettuce were killed during this war, the Machine War, as we called it. The latter two died while holding off an army of Necrons so that a convoy of civilian ships could make it to safety, while my aunt perished saving the lives of myself and my parents.”

“...” Starhawk stared at Aquila blankly. “...Firehawk sacrificed herself?”

“Yes.”

“A-and Pinkie and I died too.” Lettuce said. “So we made up after all.”

“War tends to unite people.” Aquila replied. “Alphys and Undyne, for example, ended up getting married when I was five. Now that I've mentioned her, I should say that almost everyone under the banner of Chaos was terrified of Undyne. They called her ‘Undyne the Undying.’”

“She called herself that before once.” Lettuce said.

“She was one of the few people who survived up until my journey to the past.” Aquila responded. “Now, the Machine War was bloody. Very, very bloody. It was basically a three-way battle of attrition between the Necrons, Chaos, and the Federation. The body count was ludicrously high. Then, things got even worse four years later. The Third Reich launched an invasion. It wasn't long before the Federation, and Core Earth in particular, was in ruins. This world became a wasteland, devastated by years and years of endless combat. Cities were reduced to rubble and ash by bombs, artillery and even worse weapons. As the war dragged on, those of you who remained fell into despair, forced to employ inhumane and cruel tactics in order to continue fighting. These tactics included sending children to fight, strapping bombs to expendable soldiers and sending them at the enemy, and bombing your own people in order to hit hostile positions.”

“...Did it eventually end?” Usagi asked.

“Yes, but not before many more of you died.” Aquila replied. “You, for example, were taken prisoner by the Nazis, and handed over to Dr. Mengele. I’m sure you can guess what sort of fate would have awaited you.”

“He killed me.” Usagi concluded.

“Yes...eventually.” Aquila said. “I won’t tell you what you looked like when your body was found, but it was bad. Bad enough to nearly drive my mother to suicide.”

Starhawk began crying, hugging Aquila tightly. “This might seem irrelevant, but did any of us have children before we died?” Naruto asked.

“Yes, actually. Kras’hir and Usagi had twin sons, with Mamoru providing the sperm. You and Hinata ended up having a daughter, with her giving birth not long before her death. Pinkie and Lettuce had triplets.”

“We...we had triplets?” Lettuce asked. “What did we name them? More importantly, who raised them after we died?”

“They don’t exist anymore, so what does it matter?”

“...They don’t exist?”

“I left them behind in the future, a future I plan to change. You may still have children, but they likely won’t be the same children.” Aquila replied. “I’m sorry, but, for all intents and purposes, they don’t exist anymore.”

“Just like her father.” Usagi snarked. “Always so cynical.”

Aquila snorted, putting out her cigar. “I take after both of my parents in a lot of ways.” She said. “You will see that soon enough, I’m sure.”

“You have Blackhawk’s snarkiness and smoking habit down, at least.” Lettuce said.

“My father was quite fond of dad jokes, too.” Aquila replied. “Yes, dad jokes.”

“Did he ever say his name was Hugh Mungus Johnson?” Naruto replied.

“No, but he did used to say he was going to call the toe truck every time I hurt my foot.” Aquila said. “He said it every. Single. Time.”

“Blame my dad for those jokes.” Blackhawk replied. “He used to make them a lot.” Starhawk began giggling. A few moments passed in silence, before Amberley and Ciaphas entered the

room, the two of them laughing over some private joke. They stopped upon noticing how crowded the room was.

“Oh, hello.” Ciaphas said, waving. “I didn't expect to see so many faces.”

“Hey, who's this?” Lettuce asked.

“Ciaphas Cain.” The former Commissar said.

“I'm Amberley Vail.” his companion chimed in. “Omnus and I are old friends.”

“Oh, I bet you are.” Lettuce said mock-flirtatiously.

“Is this the first step towards polygamy, Lettuce?” Pinkie asked him, her tone bitter and angry. “You going to try and shack up with her, then move on from there?”

“...Why, yes, yes I am.” Lettuce replied dryly.

“I hope you get crabs.” Pinkie spat before heading for the exit, leaving before anyone could stop her.

“She and I are...not on good terms.” Lettuce said to Amberley. “And, for the record, I do find you attractive, miss Vail. But I can see you and Ciaphas have a thing going, so I won't intrude.”

“Good.” Amberley replied. Omnus, meanwhile, had tuned out of the conversation. He was busy listening on different radio frequencies.

“Command, this is ATC Security Team Gamma-2. We are currently moving through the ruins north of the crater, and are closing in on Replica forces, over.”

“Roger that, Gamma-2. Proceed with caution, over.”

“Affirmative. Wait...Command, I have eyes on a little girl in a red dress, bare feet and black hair, maybe 8 years old. Moving in to investigate, over.”

“Understood, Gamma-2, over.”

“Hey, little girl. Come over here. It isn't safe. Are your mommy and daddy around? Come on, let's get you out of here...whoa, what the fuck?”

“What is it, Gamma-2?”

“She's gone. She vanished into thin air. I don't know where she went, but-shit! SHIT!”

Frantic gunfire echoed for several seconds, followed by screaming, before the frequency went silent, save for static.

Usagi noticed this, and walked over to Omnus. "What's the matter?"

"Something is happening in the ruins surrounding the facility that the Point Man destroyed." Omnus replied. "Something big. Armacham has a small army combing through the debris, looking for something, and the Replica are on the move. I don't know what Alma's endgame is here, but I don't like it."

"We'll investigate it." Usagi assured.

"I know you will." Omnus said. "You haven't failed me yet, Usagi."

Usagi was about to gather the team, when she felt Omnus' hand on her shoulder. "Wha-?"

"Be careful, Usagi." he said. "I already lost you once. I can't bear to lose you a second time."

"I won't...Omnus-papa."

"Isn't that precious?" Came the voice of Paxton Fettel from somewhere nearby. "You just can't help yourself when it comes to damaged and broken girls, can you, Omnus? Mother might get jealous if she is no longer the object of your affections."

"Shut it, Paxton." Usagi replied.

"And why would I do that, Usagi?" Paxton replied, stepping into the light. His lips and teeth were caked with blood. "You must remember, it is only because of Mother and myself that you are alive right now."

"He's got a point." Lettuce interjected, having been idly conversing with Amberley and Ciaphas. "Then again, what do I know? I ruined my relationships with Pinkie and Kira thanks to my own idiocy."

"Why are you here, Fettel?" Omnus asked.

"I came here to tell you that Mother is planning something, much like you've suspected. However, what that something is, she has asked me not to say." Fettel said. "Defying her is not in my best interests. Usagi knows that better than most of you."

"Right." Usagi said. "We need to head to the Armacham ruins."

"Good luck." Omnus said. "And be careful."

Pinkie ended up meeting them near the edge of the ruined section of the city. She glared at Lettuce, but didn't say anything to him. Gunfire echoed in the distance as they made their way into the destroyed streets, along with the occasional scream.

"I don't like this place." Kras'hir said. "It's making my skin crawl. It's like a thousand voices are screaming in my head all at once, but they aren't saying anything rational."

"So," Naruto asked. "What are we gonna do?"

"Hmmm..." Usagi pondered. "Do we split into groups like last time we were here?"

Kras'hir was about to say something else, before she heard something. A low whistling that grew louder and louder, as several objects flew through the night sky above them, beginning to descend towards the Rangers moments later.

"MORTARS!" the Daemoness shouted, running for cover. The other Rangers immediately followed, ducking behind Kras'hir as the mortars exploded.

"...OK, scratch that. We should probably stick together." Usagi said, panting heavily.

"No shit." Naruto muttered.

"Who is shelling us?" Blackhawk wondered as another wave of mortars came down.

"It could be the Replica, though I doubt it." Firehawk said. "They are under the control of Alma and Fettel, and, as far as I know, neither of them want us dead."

"So that would mean there's probably someone else going after us." Lettuce observed. "The question is, who and why?"

"That is a very good point, Lettuce." Starhawk said.

"Could be the ATC Security Teams." Firehawk replied. "After all, I'm sure Armacham doesn't want us finding out what they're searching for here."

"Exactly." Usagi agreed. "So, we stick together and try to find whatever they're looking for before they can."

"But what are they looking for, exactly?" Starhawk inquired.

"I might have an idea, though I could be wrong on this." Lettuce interrupted.

"OK, let's hear it." Naruto asked.

“The remains of Project Origin.” Lettuce said. “It’s the only conclusion I can come to.”

“That project was designed to create powerful psychic commanders, using Alma’s DNA.” Firehawk replied. “Fettel and the Point Man were the products of that. Of course, Alma is now dead, for all intents and purposes, so restarting the project using her is impossible. That being said, they may be here to recover any research data that survived the explosion. As for what Alma herself is planning, I cannot say.”

“OK, so now we have a goal.” Naruto said. “Get whatever data from that project remains.”

A moment later, footsteps echoed from down the street, followed by the chatter of soldiers. An ATC Security Team was headed their way. “...Shit.” Usagi muttered. “We need to move. Quickly.”

“Do not fear.” Alma whispered to all of them. “I am with you.”

A moment later, she, looking like a little girl again, appeared out in the street. She stared at the soldiers for a moment, before flicking her wrist. Instantly, a truck sitting nearby flew into the air, landing on top of the soldiers and exploding, killing most of them and setting the few survivors on fire, causing them to panic and flee. “Thanks.” Lettuce said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Alma nodded, before gesturing for the Rangers to follow her. They did so, silently. Gunfire continued to echo in the distance. Alma hummed to herself as she walked, her footsteps silent. The Rangers trailed behind her.

“Your daughter is a psychic.” Alma said to Firehawk and Starhawk after a few minutes. “Did you know that?”

“...Anna?” Starhawk replied. “She’s a psychic?”

“Yes.”

“Why weren’t we told of this before?” It was a fairly reasonable inquiry.

“It wasn’t really relevant before, was it?” Alma replied.

“No, I suppose not.” Starhawk conceded.

“She and I talked when she was unconscious after you brought her to the hospital.” Alma said. “Anna, despite not always showing it, sincerely loves the two of you.”

“I know that. We love her too.”

“She is very lucky.” Alma replied, her tone slightly bitter. “She has two mothers watching over her. My mother never looked after me. Neither did my father.”

“I’m sorry, Alma.” Starhawk whispered.

“It is alright.” Alma said. “I didn’t need my father. Omnus did a good job taking care of me.”

“Indeed he did.”

Alma went silent, before suddenly stopping in her tracks. “Oh, God...” she muttered, eyes wide, slowly beginning to back away from something. “Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God...”

“What’s wrong, Alma?” Usagi asked, worried.

“Oh, God, oh, Christ in Heaven...” Alma said. “LEAVE ME ALONE!”

After shouting that, she began running the other way before disappearing, clearly afraid of something. A moment later, a low growl came from down the street, before a strange creature appeared. It was quadrupedal, with white skin, no eyes, and a very strange mouth filled with sharp teeth. It looked at the Rangers for a moment, before vanishing into thin air.

“What. The. Fuck.” Lettuce said bluntly.

“Was that.” Naruto finished.

“I don’t know,” Usagi said. “But whatever it is, we have to avoid it.”

“Considering it just made Alma flee in terror, yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Kras’hir said. “We should keep moving.”

“Right.” Usagi replied. And that’s just what they did. After a little while, they encountered the Point Man, who was also making his way through the ruins.

“Hello, Rangers.” he said with his usual stoicism.

“Hello, Point Man.” Usagi greeted back just as stoically. “What brings you here?”

“Oh, you know, I was trying to have kinky butt-sex with a gay prostitute, but, alas, it seems I am in the wrong part of town for that.”

“If you want some recommendations...” Usagi replied, noting the sarcasm.

“I would be glad to have you recommend someone to me.” The Point Man replied. “I just have one question: is he into fisting?”

“Yes.” Usagi said, now trying to contain her laughter.

“I mean, I'm not a man, but give me a tub of lube and bend over, and I can show you a good time.” Kras'hir chimed in. This made Usagi break down into a fit of giggling like a madwoman. The Point Man chuckled quietly to himself, this conversation having broken the tension.

“Seriously, though, I am here because I overheard radio chatter about what Armacham is doing here.” he said after the laughter stopped. “I wanted to investigate.”

“So are we. What a coinky-dink.” Usagi replied.

“...The fuck does that mean?” Kras'hir asked, staring at her. “Did you just say ‘coinky-dink?’”

“Why yes, yes I did.”

“Are you high?”

“I dunno, am I, my love?”

“We don't have time for this...” Lettuce growled, faceflipping.

“We're just making up for all the banter we weren't able to have when Usagi was, you know, dead.” Kras'hir replied. “Isn't that right, dear?”

“Of course.” Usagi said, kissing her cheek. A moment later, a shot echoed, the round hitting the Point Man in the shoulder. He barely flinched, calmly getting into cover and firing back at the sniper. The Rangers ducked behind him, watching the shootout. After a few minutes of this, Kras'hir decided to act. She walked out of cover, the sniper's rounds ricocheting off her armor, before ripping a lamppost out of the ground. She then turned towards the destroyed apartment where the shooter was, raising the pole, and hurled it like a spear. It went clean through the window, and killed the sniper instantly. “...Have I ever mentioned how awesome you are?” Usagi asked.

“Yes, but don't stop doing it.” Kras'hir replied. “I could use a good ego boost.”

Usagi kept complimenting her, which eventually devolved into her giving some very unusual compliments. Kras'hir, who enjoyed the compliments at first, eventually got a bit weirded out by the later ones, and was seriously beginning to wonder if Usagi really was high. “...Am I getting too into it?”

“Yeah.” Kras'hir said. “Either you're high, aroused, or both.”

"I'm not high, I swear."

Kras'hir nodded, before picking Usagi up and walking off. "We'll catch up." She said over her shoulder before heading into a nearby building.

"Where are we going?" Usagi inquired.

"We're going somewhere where we can screw each other's brains out without being overheard." Kras'hir said bluntly.

"Yaaaaay~" came the response.

About an hour later, they finally caught up with the other Rangers, both of them panting and grinning widely. Usagi, they noted, was near-completely in the buff. The only thing she wore was a pair of panties and her shoes. "...You know," Lettuce said. "There's such a thing known as modesty."

"Does it look like I care?" Usagi said. "Besides, you and your ex-fiance are practically naked all the time."

"Don't remind me."

"Don't forget that Usagi is still the leader of this team, Lettuce." Blackhawk interrupted. "She can wear whatever she likes."

"..I said, DON'T REMIND ME!" Lettuce shouted.

"Calm down." Blackhawk said, his tone perfectly tranquil. "Now." Immediately, Lettuce went silent, as if Blackhawk's voice had put him into a trance.

"...S-sorry."

"You should be." Blackhawk replied. "Don't take your anger about your current situation out on us, Lettuce. We're your friends, not punching bags."

"When one of your 'friends' is your now ex-fiance, you have every reason to be angry."

"Be angry all you like, but if you treat the rest of us like shit, I'll fucking shoot you."

"...Noted, John Wayne." Lettuce muttered.

"Usagi?" Blackhawk said. "Do you want to hit him? You are the team leader, after all." Usagi happily smacked the penguin across the head.

“Can we get moving now?” Firehawk said. “We've wasted enough time already. The sun will be coming up before long, and the daylight will leave us even more exposed to enemy fire.”

Starhawk nodded. “Yes, we need to hurry up and get that data.”

A few minutes later, Alma returned. “Oh, you're back.” Usagi said.

“I am, indeed.” Alma replied. “I am sure you are wondering why I ran the way I did.”

“Because of...whatever that thing was?”

“That creature is my father.” Alma said. “Or, at least, a recreation of him, formed from my memories of his worst attributes.”

“Holy shit. Is it gonna come back?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” She replied. “I can't say for certain, but I hope it doesn't come back. That thing scares me.”

“Me too, Alma. Me too.”

“I don't have fond memories of that son of a bitch, either.” The Point Man said. “Once, when I was very young, Wade had me spar with a soldier in full body armor. Predictably, I lost, and he beat me with a bucket, to the point that I was sent flying into a concrete pillar.”

“Jesus H. Fuck...” Naruto said, beyond horrified.

“Is it any wonder my brother is insane?” The Point Man asked. “After everything they did to us, to our mother, it's little wonder we're all crazy.”

“Yeah, one big screwed-up family...”

Soon after, they came across an Armacham building. It was damaged but largely intact. The Point Man went inside and began looking around. Usagi and Naruto cautiously followed him inside, weapons drawn. As the three of them walked by a desk, Alice Wade leapt out at them, swinging wildly with a pipe. The Point Man caught it before it could connect, taking the heavy object out of her hands and tossing it aside. “What the hell...she's alive?” Usagi muttered.

“I thought you got out of this part of the city before the explosion.” The Point Man said.

“I did, but those damn Armacham thugs came after me. I had to hide out in the ruins.” Alice replied.

“...How have you survived?” Naruto asked.

"I've been living off of the food and water that's left here." Alice said. "It isn't exactly high-quality, but it's enough to keep me from starving or dying of dehydration."

"Well, at least you're OK. We need your help." Usagi told Alice.

"I'll do what I can. What exactly do you need help with?"

"We're looking for leftover data from Project Origin. Armacham wants their hands on it."

"There are a few consoles here that still work. I don't know if they contain anything from that project, but it's worth checking, right?" Alice suggested.

"Right." The Point Man said, making his way over to one of said consoles, turning it on and beginning to look through the files it held. He found many emails and documents related to Project Origin, along with extensive data on Alma.

"Huh." he said. "That is...interesting."

"What?" Usagi asked.

"Fettel and I weren't the only children conceived during the Project. We were simply the first who survived."

Usagi nearly vomited at the thought. The Point Man, for his part, looked quite ill. "There were, in total, 11 children who were murdered by Armacham, either before or after birth, because they didn't meet the standards set for psychic commanders. Jesus Christ..."

"L-let's just get the data and get the fuck out of here..." Usagi muttered.

"Agreed." The Point Man said. "Beginning data transfer now. Watch the door, please." Usagi nodded, staring intently at it. The Point Man watched the screen intently, waiting for the data to finish downloading. Alice fidgeted nervously, wringing her hands and pacing. The silence was soon broken by a growl, followed by the creature that had chased Alma off earlier entering the room. Usagi immediately drew the Full Moon Blade, poised to attack.

"Usagi Tsukino." It said, circling her and keeping its distance. "You should be dead, yes? Then again, so should I."

"You're about to be." Usagi said, striking the creature in the neck, or at the very least making an effort to. Unfortunately, this failed. All this accomplished was making it laugh.

"I was born from my daughter's mind, girl." it said mockingly. "You must know how powerful she is. I was born from her fear of me. I can't be killed!"

"You can't be killed right now," Usagi said. "But when she stops fearing you..."

"She won't." it said before disappearing. The Point Man exhaled, relieved that the creature was gone. The data soon finished downloading, and they exited the building.

Back in the Command Center, meanwhile, Omnus was still flipping through radio frequencies, when he picked up a rather unusual one. "To anyone on this channel, this is Genevieve Aristide, President of Armacham. I'm being pursued by ATC kill squads and Replica forces. If they find me, I'm dead. If you can hear this, please send help!"

"She's made her noose, and now she wants to be saved before she's hanged with it." Omnus said. "Unbelievable."

"I suppose karma will get her eventually, if she hasn't been killed already." Hedrian observed.

"I'd ask the Rangers to save her, but two things keep me from doing so: She's a horrible person, and Alma won't be happy if they keep the Replica from catching her."

"So just leave her there?" Hedrian asked. "Oh, my dear Omnus, you are terrible."

"Karma's a cruel bitch." Omnus said. "Who am I to get in her way?" Alpha looked at his father figure and sighed.

"Oh, how I wish I could see things from your perspective."

"No, you don't." Omnus replied. "The way I see things comes with a liberal amount of crippling depression."

"Trust me, robot, you don't want that. The only cures for crippling depression are chocolate and booze." Ciaphas interrupted, walking in with Amberley.

"And anal sex." The latter said cheerfully, grinning and nudging Ciaphas playfully. Ciaphas grinned back, Alpha trying to ignore them from there on out. A few minutes passed in silence, before the elevator opened, and Heinz Guderian stepped out, lighting a cigarette as he did so.

"Oh, hello." Alpha greeted.

"Greetings. I hope I did not come at a bad time."

"Oh, no, not at all!" Ciaphas assured him.

“Good.” The former Nazi general said, exhaling smoke. “I wanted to, if I may, provide a brief history of the Reich. It will give you a better idea of what you are dealing with.”

“I see no problem with that.” Omnus said.

“Good.” Heinz replied. “Now, I have read about how events went in this universe in regards to the Nazis. Things diverged in mine back in 1943, when SS agents uncovered highly advanced technology that had been buried deep underground in Ukraine. This technology, which consisted of guns, artillery, aircraft and vehicles far beyond anything we could produce, allowed the Reich to turn the tide of the war within months once it became mass produced.”

“And you used that to conquer the world?” Ciaphas asked.

“Ja.” Heinz said. “It took only one year to destroy the Soviet armies. Most of their leaders were killed in combat. The ones who were captured were given show trials before being shot or hanged. The leaders of Britain and America suffered similar fates. It was quite the spectacle, really.”

“Oh, dear.” Ciaphas said. “I hope it was quick and painless.”

“Roosevelt and Churchill were beaten bloody, blinded and rendered deaf and mute before being dragged through the streets of Berlin behind the Führer’s personal car.” Heinz replied. “Stalin...well, perhaps it is best I do not tell you what the SS did to him.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen with my own eyes before.”

“A fair point.” Heinz said. “After the trials ended, the Reich’s conquest of the world was quick and effortless. Puppet leaders were put in place in the former USSR, Britain and America, with all three regions under heavy military occupation. The Final Solution was carried out across all continents, before the camps were destroyed and buried, never to be spoken of again.”

“It reminds me of the Unification Wars.” Ciaphas observed.

Heinz nodded, silently smoking his cigarette.

“And you say you killed Hitler?” Alpha questioned.

“Ja.” Guderian said. “I did. He was a bastard.”

“No kidding.” Hedrian said. “Tell me, how’d you do it?”

“Poison. The only reliable way to kill a mad king, I’ve found.”

“As Shakespeare himself proved.” Ciaphas said. “..What? I’ve read ancient literature.”

“Of course you have.” Hedrian replied dryly.

“And thus I clothe my naked villainy  
With odd old ends stol'n out of holy writ;  
And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.” Guderian said, putting out his cigarette.

“Where is that from?” Alpha inquired.

“Richard III.” Guderian replied.

“Ah.” Ciaphas said. “A fantastic story, that one.”

“Indeed.” Guderian said.

“You're lucky that I didn't know about your reading habits back during the days of the Imperium.” Amberley said to Ciaphas. “Reading those sorts of books was heresy.”

“Then again,” Ciaphas reminded her. “Everything could be considered heresy if one wished.”

“Your Imperium is similar to the Reich in many ways.” Guderian commented. “The difference, of course, is that, for the most part, the Imperium was harsh and cruel because it had to be to survive. The Reich is cruel because it can be. Power for the sake of power. Violence for the sake of violence. To quote Orwell, a writer who was shot in my world, ‘If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - forever.’”

“Ah, yes, I have also read Orwell.” Ciaphas said. “So has Amberley.”

“It was rather startling how similar the world he described in 1984 was to the Imperium.” Amberley replied.

“Indeed. It made for good instructions on how to get information out of a heretic, though.” Ciaphas said. “But what they did in the Ministry of Love is mild compared to what the Inquisition, and even the Federation’s own Delta Green, can and will do.”

“I believe Omnus can confirm this based on experience.” Alpha added.

“There are over 350 ways I can torture someone, and that's just with my hands and nothing else.” Omnus said.

“I would make a crude joke,” Ciaphas said. “But I feel that now isn’t the time.”

“Indeed, not.” Omnus replied as Aquila stepped into the room, a cigar hanging out of her beak.

“Oh, hello.” Ciaphas greeted.

“Greetings.” She said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“You know, Omnus, seeing the Hawkian here reminds me: I am interested in taking the bird in your team on as a...hmmm...well, apprentice isn’t the right word...”

“Which one?” Hedrian snarked. “We have three birds.”

“The small one.” Ciaphas said.

“You mean Lettuce?” Alpha asked.

“Yes, him.” Ciaphas said. “I see something of both myself and Amberley in him. He has potential to be a hero, unlike me.”

“Do you know how you died in the future I am from, Ciaphas Cain?” Aquila asked. “You perished saving Amberley Vail and your twin daughters, who were born five years from now. That seems pretty heroic to me.” Ciaphas’ eyes widened, and he nearly fainted from shock. Amberley kept him steady.

“To answer your thought about taking Lettuce as an apprentice of sorts, I do not think that is wise at the moment.” Omnus said. “He is in hot water with most of the team. If he starts training with you, they might react badly, as, to them, training with such a legend is something he doesn’t deserve.”

Ciaphas raised a brow. “May I ask what he did to deserve such scorn? From how you’re phrasing it, it seems rather serious.”

“He was engaged to Pinkie. However, she found a shrine in his closet devoted to Kira Ford, a former Ranger. This, understandably, angered Pinkie once she found out, along with the rest of the Rangers.”

“While that is certainly reprehensible, and this may be just from my perspective, that isn’t exactly worthy of such scorn.” He then grunted, realizing that the words may not have come out exactly as he intended them.

“That may be so, but Lettuce dug his hole even deeper by trying to justify it.” Omnus replied, noting the glares Hedrian and Amberley were sending Ciaphas’ way. “His excuse was that polygamy is something that comes naturally to his species.”

“Hmmm...” Ciaphas considered his next words carefully. “I would say he should have checked with both of them first to gauge their thoughts, but things might have turned out worse.”

“It’s rather amusing that he picked Kira, of all people, as his object of obsession.” Omnus responded. “She is not, nor has she ever been, into men.”

“I have actually known a few lesbians.” Ciaphas said. “While it’s irrelevant to the discussion, I think Lettuce should have, again, checked to see if Kira was, as they say, ‘into’ him.”

“It’s a bit late for that.” Omnus replied. “Kira refuses to talk to him. She’s been spending a lot of time with her girlfriend, anyway.”

“Who’s she dating?” Guderian asked curiously.

“Emma Heydrich.”

Guderian, who had been taking a sip off of a flask he kept in his coat, promptly spat out his drink. “You...you are shitting me, ja?”

“No.” Omnus said. “I’m not.”

“Mein Gott...” Guderian muttered. “Kira Ford is insane.”

“Oh, I’m certain it can’t be that bad.” Ciaphas said.

“Emma Heydrich is, without a doubt, the most dangerous person I have ever met.” Guderian said. “The people of Berlin know her as ‘the Spider’, because her web of spies has influence everywhere. Over the years, hundreds of people that Emma has been associated with have simply disappeared. Musicians, movie stars, poets, authors, officers, generals, governors...it didn’t matter who they were. The second even a hint of subversive behavior cropped up...gone. Like they had never been born.”

“Then Kira is in danger.” Alpha concluded. “We have to save her!”

“Perhaps.” Guderian said. “Emma is an enigma, too. I cannot say what her motives are. Perhaps she genuinely has turned over a new leaf. Perhaps Kira is a pawn in some twisted plot. What I do know is this: Emma already has an escape plan. If you rush in guns blazing, as they say, she will go to ground, and you won’t find her again.”

“Then we must be more stealthy.” Ciaphas concluded. “And I know just the person for the job.” He stared at Amberley with a smirk. “Inquisitor Vail, I order you to move into their apartment so that you can keep a close eye on our loving couple. Find out what Emma is up to.”

Amberley left without a word. She returned twenty minutes later, dragging Emma behind her. The German woman was unconscious, a bag over her head and rope binding her hands and feet.

"This will be faster." She said, tossing Emma into the center of the room. A few minutes later, Emma stirred, and sat up, beginning to chuckle.

"Ah, I see how it is." She said, still laughing. "You had your pet cunt come and drag me here, Omnus, instead of doing it yourself. How noble." Immediately, Ciaphas began choking her, his eyes widened in rage. Emma continued laughing as he strangled her, mocking him. Omnus pulled Ciaphas away.

"...You do not mock me or my lover, bitch." Ciaphas growled.

"You do not scare me, Cain." Emma replied, coughing. "Really, you do not. I don't care how much of a legend you are. You were dead until very recently, remember? Dead men don't scare me." Ciaphas continued to glare at her.

"And you don't scare me, either." Ciaphas said. "I will ask once and only once: what are your plans for Kira Ford?"

"Well, she and I were enjoying a nice night of sleep before your lovely girlfriend dragged me out of bed." Emma replied. "Assuming you don't lock me up here, she and I will likely go for coffee in the morning. She likes hers black."

"We will lock you up here for as long as it takes." Ciaphas said.

"Oh, are you going to punish me?" Emma asked, getting onto her knees and facing away from him, shaking her ass provocatively. "Please do. I've been naughty."

Ciaphas stared at her, not blinking. He was reminded of a number of women from the past, whose names he cared not to remember at the moment; the memories were far too painful for him. He barely noticed he was drooling over her, in fact. It didn't help that Emma was wearing nothing but a rather skimpy robe, along with a pair of slippers. "A-are you hitting on me?" he inquired. "Because I'm taken."

"Ja?" Emma replied, snorting. "Then why are you staring at my ass, hmmm?"

"I...I..."

"You are pathetic." She said. "You, like all men, are pitifully easy to seduce. You think with your cock instead of your brain."

"That's enough, Emma." Guderian said.

"Ah, Heinz!" Emma responded. "I'd heard about your defection. I have to ask: Did you leave because of your own moral code? Or me? After all, our little affair was quite something. I am quite certain you don't show your own wife the same level of passion. Oh, whoops. She's dead, ja? I forgot."

"You little bitch." Guderian spat, walking towards Emma and backhanding her.

"Oooh, that was a good one!" Emma shouted, laughing. "Hit me again!"

He did, striking Emma over and over, progressing from slaps to punches. It took Omnus, Amberley and Aquila to restrain him, the former giving Guderian a sedative, before dragging him out of the room. Emma managed to remove the bag from her head, her face now covered in bruises and shallow cuts. Ciaphas was even more awestruck, as much as he hated to admit it; he did prefer blondes, after all.

"If you wish to make me talk, you are terrible at it." Emma said, before casually cutting the ropes binding her with a knife hidden in her sleeve. She got up, rubbing her wrists. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to Kira."

With that, she left, not sparing any of them another glance. Ciaphas let out a loud sigh, hanging his head. "...Damn my preferences for women..."

Emma was not the only one going to bed. Kras'hir and Usagi were doing the same, having returned home after securing the data. The Daemoness fell asleep almost instantly, beginning to snore moments later. Usagi giggled, before snuggling into her wife.

Lettuce would have loved to go to bed; unfortunately, however, he had to work an unexpected late shift at Chez Manchot. He was gonna need a ton of coffee and cough drops, he decided. Once he got there, he, rather frustratingly, began his usual set of jazz, big band, and pop standards from the post-WWII era. The place was largely vacant, save for a few people passed out drunk at the bar. Alphys was among them. Stopping the set for a brief moment (they had just barely begun Pink Cigarette), Lettuce hopped down from the stage and made his way towards Alphys' barstool, sitting next to her. "Alphys, what are you doing here?"

Alphys stirred, opening one eye. "Oh, hello, Lettuce." She said. "I was just...contemplating things."

"What kind of things?" Lettuce inquired, sounding worried.

“Undyne.” She said. In her hand was a picture of her and Undyne together. They were in Alphys’ lab, Undyne holding Alphys close and grinning widely, with the former smiling sheepishly. Lettuce placed a sympathetic flipper onto her shoulder.

“Listen, Alphys, it’s my fault...Undyne chose me to be her ‘exception’, and...and I...” Lettuce said, trying to find some way to put the blame on himself, even though it was indirect and out of his control.

“No, Lettuce.” She said. “You aren’t to blame. Undyne made her choice. I just thought that, as long as we’ve been together, she wouldn’t do something like this.”

“...Well, relationships don’t always work out the way they should. Hell, I wanna make things up with Pinkie, but fat chance of that happening. But that’s not the point. Point is, I’m here for you. You’re my friend, Alphys. And I couldn’t ask for anyone better.”

“Thank you, Lettuce.” Alphys replied, before vomiting on the counter and passing out again. Lettuce made sure to get her back home once his shift was over, and he stayed by her side until dawn, where he himself passed out.

Alphys wasn’t the only one who was taking the breakup badly. Undyne was torn up about it as well. Sans, Papyrus and Toriel, who Sans had called, had spent most of the night talking to her. Toriel herself had been disappointed with Undyne for her actions, but she knew Undyne was a good person nonetheless. All three of them pushed her to try and make things right with Alphys. Undyne, however, was taking it hard to the point where she refused. Later that morning, Kras’hir came over, having been called by Sans. The Daemoiness knew what Undyne needed. Not a caring friend, but a drinking buddy. So, the two of them went to a bar, and Kras’hir let Undyne vent.

“Fucking Alphys...not wanting me to have Lettuce as my exception...IF YOU DIDN’T WANT THAT, THEN WHY’D YOU SAY YOU LIKED HIM TOO, YOU CUNT?!” she ranted. Kras’hir simply listened, sipping her drink and not saying a word. Undyne let out a loud sigh that sounded more like a growl. “...I just wish I had a girlfriend who understood my needs.”

“Not everyone is comfortable with polygamy, Undyne.” Kras’hir replied. “Alphys is hurt because you, for all intents and purposes, cheated. After all, you did rub one off while looking at a picture of Lettuce.”

“...Don’t remind me.” Undyne said. “Fuck Lettuce.”

“How long have you and Alphys been together?”

“About a few years. It’s...really hard to tell, actually. It feels like only a few years have passed since Blackhawk saved us...but why does he act like he’s gone through his past before? Like...he’s walked so many paths before coming here.”

“Sometimes time is cyclical. It loops.”

“Like that one movie Papyrus and I watched that one time...you know, that one where the guy from Ghostbusters repeats the same day over and over?” Undyne asked, wobbling a bit from how tipsy she was.

“Yeah.” Kras'hir said, having never seen that film in her life. “I think I do.” She made a note to herself: ask Usagi what that movie’s called.

“So...maybe Blackhawk’s walked that road for God-knows-how-long. Maybe that’s why his past seems so...is ambiguous and contradictory the right term?”

“Yeah.”

“One minute, he’s some mystical kung fu warrior, the next he’s the savior of the Underground...” Undyne rambled. “Does he even remember the time loops, do you think?”

“For the sake of his sanity, I hope not.” Undyne downed the rest of her beer, before ordering another.

“Have I ever told you you’re really hot?” Undyne asked, her voice starting to slur a bit. “Like...in both your human and regular forms?”

“No.”

“It’s true, y’know?” Undyne said. “You and I have a lot in common.”

“Like what, aside from our mutual love of fighting?”

“We’re both into shy, geeky girls.” Undyne said. “...Fuck, I’m jealous of you, if I’m honest. You’re everything I aspire to be, and more.” She turned to face Kras'hir fully, looking into her eyes. “I think I’m in love with you.”

“If you and I had met ten years ago, then I would gladly jump into bed with you.” Kras'hir replied. “Now? I’m in love with two wonderful women. I can’t betray their trust, Undyne.”

“...You’re in a polyamorous relationship, why don’t you fucking ask them?”

"You're not thinking straight, Undyne." Kras'hir said. "You're drunk, and at this rate you're going to make a decision you'll regret."

"Fuck it, I have nothing left to lose." Undyne said, pulling Kras'hir into a brief, yet forceful kiss. Kras'hir shoved her away.

"No." The Daemoness said firmly. Undyne fell onto the bar floor, grumbling irritably. Before she could go any further, she was escorted out of the bar by the bouncer. Undyne called Papyrus, who drove her back to his and Sans' home.

Lettuce, meanwhile, was helping Alphys through drowning her own sorrows...albeit through the classic tub of ice cream. Besides, she was having a rather bad hangover, and Lettuce had decided she didn't need more alcohol. Alphys had spent an hour in the bathroom after waking up, vomiting into the toilet. After that stopped, she had begun eating ice cream. Lettuce wrapped a sympathetic flipper around her waist, and held her close to him. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"Physically? Yes. Mentally? No." Alphys replied.

"Don't worry. You've got me to make you feel better." Lettuce assured. "That, and lots of ice cream. Oh, and comforting hugs."

"Thank you, Lettuce."

"No problem." Lettuce said. "You're like me in a few ways." Lettuce said, as he began eating ice cream with her.

"Am I, now?"

"Yeah. We're both really smart, for one. I mean, I'm not trying to sound egotistical or anything, but I've been studying a lot about physics and mechanical engineering when I'm alone."

"It doesn't matter how smart you are." Alphys said. "There is always more to be learned."

"That's true. Did you know that, if the square-cube law applied to the Zords, they would move extremely slowly? And that the Megazord wouldn't move at all due to all the combined weight?"

"The Megazord would be crushed under its own weight if the square-cube law applied to it." Alphys said. "That's why those giant monsters in old Japanese films would never be dangerous, because their own mass would be their worst enemy."

"I didn't know you watched those too!" Lettuce said, beaming. "I told Omnis that they make perfect study material if you wanna know how to defeat an enemy."

“Indeed, they do.” Alphys agreed, eating more ice cream. After that conversation finished, the two of them began watching old monster movies.

Blackhawk and Aquila, meanwhile, were eating breakfast with the former's parents and brother. Coop looked at Aquila quizzically. “So, you're my niece from the future? COOOOL!”

“Yup.” Aquila said, idly tracing a scar on her cheek as she ate. Ace noticed this, but chose not to inquire out of politeness.

“The future I came from was hellish, to put it lightly.” Aquila continued after a brief silence. “I'll spare you the details, but it wasn't pretty.”

“Like..are we taking All-World hell...or...” Abby asked.

“No, but we weren't far off when I was sent back.”

“Oh, boy.” Ace replied. “Hopefully things can get better for your time.”

“That's why I'm here.”

After an awkward silence, they continued eating. For Blackhawk, however, he knew Roland was getting closer for the Tower; once he did, none of this-his time with the Rangers, his relationship with Starhawk-would matter. It would just repeat, over and over. However, Blackhawk had a plan. First, he noted with dull unease, he would have to die. From there, he could go where he needed to.

“I'm sorry in advance for what I'm about to do.” Blackhawk said to his family, before drawing one of his guns and shooting himself in the head. Immediately, he was rushed to the hospital. He was quite dead by the time he got there. Starhawk nearly broke upon hearing the news. Firehawk comforted her, wondering why Blackhawk had killed himself. The answer was made apparent upon searching his room, where he had put a note under his pillow addressed to Starhawk. She read it, nearly tearing it in half with her trembling hands.

“H...he wishes to break a cycle...”

“What cycle?” Firehawk asked.

“The cycle of the Tower...” she answered before embracing her sister, crying her eyes out. Firehawk hugged her back, trying to soothe her. Blackhawk's family was even more devastated, but none more so than Ace. He knew exactly what Blackhawk was talking about, and how he intended to do it. He was going to intercept Roland before he reached the Tower, and, hopefully, convince his old friend to give up his endless quest.

The blue-eyed gunslinger fled across All-World, and the Hawkian followed. Blackhawk trailed Roland for several hours, careful not to reveal himself just yet. Roland wasn't alone, he noticed. There were several unfamiliar faces traveling with him. A young boy of perhaps eleven and two women: one of them was an African-American (and in a wheelchair to boot), and the other looked no older than 16 or 17, maybe 18. She was a pretty blonde girl, with fair skin and what appeared to be a red prom dress clothing her. The boy walked next to the girl, pushing the black woman's wheelchair with all his might. "Jake, don't strain yourself now." the disabled woman chided gently.

"I'm...fine." Jake said, panting.

"You sure?" Susannah asked. "If you want, you can take a rest and Carrie can push me."

"Alright." Jake replied, letting the blonde, Carrie, push Susannah. Jake then fell into step beside Roland.

"Where are we going, exactly?" He asked.

"I do not know, Jake." Roland said bluntly. "All I know is that this is the path of the beam."

Blackhawk was about to finally step forward, when he heard growling behind him. He turned just in time to see three wolves circling him. They weren't normal wolves, he noticed. They were machines. They didn't resemble normal wolves, either, save for their heads. These were the dreaded Wolves of the Calla, he realized. He heard a female voice call out, before the wolves were seemingly crushed, as if out of nowhere.

"Hm?" Roland asked. "What is it, Carrietta?" He never called her 'Carrie'. Only 'Carrietta'.

"We have a visitor." She said, pointing to Blackhawk, who turned back to face them.

"Well, hello, Roland." The Hawkian said cheerfully. Roland blinked a few times, then rubbed his eyes for good measure.

"Blackhawk?"

"...A friend of yours, cowboy?" Susannah asked.

"A very old one."

"He doesn't look that old. I'd say he's about Carrie's age, really."

"Looks can be deceiving." Carrie said. "He has an old soul. Much like you, Roland Deschain."

“...I have not seen him in...God...it feels like centuries, nay, eons.”

“Time is a funny thing, isn't it?” Blackhawk replied, beginning to strip the Wolves for parts. “It can go forwards, backwards, and even sideways.”

“Like in that one book Susannah once told me about.”

“I wasn't talkin' about time, sugar. I was talking about an elevator.”

“Yes, an...ellelator,” Roland said, mispronouncing the word. “One made of glass, if I recall.”

“The Crimson King knows I'm here.” Blackhawk muttered upon removing the memory core from one of the Wolves and examining it. “And I was hopeful things wouldn't go to Hell this quickly. I should know better.”

“The King...he knows you're here? Then that is a bad sign, indeed. What reason have you for visiting me? Not for a palaver, I'm certain.”

“I wouldn't be here if what I wanted to discuss wasn't important.” Blackhawk said. “I left my family, lover and newborn daughter behind to come here, Roland. That's how dire this matter is. I have come here to stop you from reaching the Tower.”

“Why?” Roland asked, distrustfully. “Have you betrayed the ideals of our lineage, persuaded to side with those who wish to see the Tower fall?”

“If I wanted the Tower to fall, I would have cut your throat hours ago when you stopped to take a short nap.” Blackhawk said. “Come now, Roland. After what the Good Man did to my father, do you believe me foolish enough to think siding with his Master is wise?”

“How did you know I was taking a nap?” Roland asked, seemingly missing his friend's point.

“I've been trailing your group for hours now.” Blackhawk replied. “Believe me, Roland, if I wanted to kill you, I would have done so by now.”

“...That still doesn't answer why you want to stop me from reaching the Tower.”

“Because you've already reached the Tower, multiple times.”

“No, I am being serious. Why are you hindering my quest?”

“I am being serious as well. You've already reached the Tower. I know this because I have memories of numerous past events that contradict each other.”

“...Do tell.”

"I distinctly remember my father dying when I was five, while also remembering the Good Man's forces parading his body around at Jericho Hill. I recall beating Cort in my test to become a gunslinger, while also recalling that I failed, and was exiled. I recall growing up on All-World, and I recall not growing up on All-World."

Roland went blank, much to the confusion of his ka-tet. I have been traveling to the Tower all this time..., he thought, nearly, in the words of one Howard Phillips Lovecraft, going mad from the revelation.

"Don't you see, Roland? Traveling to the Tower is precisely what the Crimson King wants you to do. By keeping you trapped in an endless loop, He can carry out His plans without interruption."

"But if I do not save the Tower, then it will collapse."

"We will find another way to save the Tower, Roland. I swear it. But not like this. Venturing to the Tower is folly."

"...If I am not to venture to the Tower, then what?" Roland asked.

"Come with me, you and your new ka-tet. The city I call home will be a good place for all of you."

"...The city where you call home? Where is this city?"

"It is called Coastal Falls, and is located on a world known as Core Earth." Blackhawk replied.

"Core Earth? Is it like All-World?"

"I hope not." Susannah muttered. "I'll take anything over this hellhole."

A short time later, in the hospital where he had been taken, Blackhawk's body disappeared, turning to ash and scattering to the wind. There was panic amongst the Rangers, who had arrived to pay their respects. Then, the door opened, and a familiar voice spoke.

"My God, what's with the long faces?" Blackhawk asked. "Did somebody die?" Immediately, he was tackled by Starhawk, who kissed him profusely, much to the amusement of everyone, Rangers and ka-tet included. He kissed her back, holding Starhawk close. Starhawk noticed the ka-tet, more specifically Carrie and Jake.

"Oh, joy! You adopted another child! And brought in yet another female to our wondrous polyamory!" Naruto snickered as Usagi and Firehawk facepalmed, while Roland glared at Starhawk.

“This is your beloved. You can pick them, can’t you, Blackhawk-sai?” the gunslinger asked.

“Indeed. This, Roland, is Starhawk. Starhawk, meet my old friend Roland Deschain.”

“Hello, Roland. ...Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you assumed Jake here was your son. Sorry, hon, but Roland’s his adopted daddy.” Susannah said bluntly. Lettuce took an immediate liking to her sass.

“Good.” Anna, who was sitting on the other side of the room, said. “I do not wish to share my parents with anyone else, aside from little Aquila.” Roland chuckled as Carrie let out an audible squeal. Anna sighed before Carrie pulled her into a tight hug, gushing about how adorable she was.

“Easy, Carrie. Don’t hug her too hard. Otherwise, you might squeeze the vodka out of her.” Susannah joked. Given she was from the early 1960s, she only had the Soviet Union as a frame of reference for Russians. Boy, would she be surprised once she saw the rest of Coastal Falls. Anna squirmed in Carrie’s grip, wanting to be let down. Eventually, Carrie obliged, setting the Russian girl back in her chair. That was when the rest of the tet took notice of Lettuce and Pinkie. “A-am I seeing things?” Susannah asked.

“No.” Blackhawk replied.

“I’m seeing things, right Jake?” Susannah repeated. “‘Cause I’m seeing a pink pony and a green...is that a penguin?”

“Yep.” Jake answered. “What’s your name?”

“Retthi Manchot, though you can just call me Lettuce.”

“And I’m Pinkie Pie!” the pink pony cheered.

“No, you’re still not hallucinating.” Blackhawk said to Susannah. “They’re real.”

“Susannah Holmes, pleased to meet ya.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Lettuce said. “And who’s the blonde?”

“That’s Carrie.” Jake said.

“Hellooo, nurse.” Naruto said, before being slapped by Usagi. “...Sorry.”

“Just because she’s a cute blonde in a pretty dress doesn’t...” Usagi said, looking around nervously. “I...I mean...I’M MARRIED!”

“All...right?” Roland replied, raising a brow.

“And this is my sister Firehawk.” Starhawk introduced.

“Hi.” Firehawk said, taking a drag off a cigarette she had lit moments earlier.

“Are the three of you related?” Roland inquired to Blackhawk.

“I'm not related to them, no.”

Starhawk gave a big smile to Carrie, and was sorely tempted to hug her. Carrie smiled back, before hugging Starhawk. The former, in her excitement at making a new friend, kissed her on the cheek. Carrie giggled.

“I like you.” She said. Starhawk blushed a bit, embarrassed.

“Y-you like me?”

“Not like that, silly.” Carrie replied. “As a new friend.”

“Oh, joy!” Starhawk said happily. Lettuce took on a comically grumpy expression.

“What, the cute penguin gets no love?”

“...Not with what happened recently.” Usagi snarked.

“I think I should mention that Starhawk and I are married.” Firehawk said. “Just to get it out in the open now.”

“T-that’s gross.” Jake said.

“Hey, you do what you want.” Susannah said. “I speak from experience when I say discrimination isn’t OK, even if it involves something I don’t personally agree with.”

Roland himself had no reaction. After all, some gunslinger families did intermarry with each other. A moment later, the door opened, and Kras'hir entered.

“Gods, that was the longest shit I've ever taken in my life.” She said, not noticing the ka-tet at first.

Jake's first response upon seeing Kras'hir was to scream, and Roland armed himself. Susannah was very dumbstruck. “I-is that a demon saying she just took a shit?”

“Who the Hell are you guys?” Kras'hir asked, not bothered by Roland aiming his guns at her.

“New friends, apparently.” Usagi said.

“Uh-huh.” Kras'hir said, turning to Roland. “If you're going to shoot me, kid, you'd best make your first shot count. You won't get a second.”

“Kid? I am no child, spawn of the Red. I am Roland, son of Stephen, last gunslinger of All-World and heir to the house of Eld.”

“Oh, are we comparing titles? Fine, Roland. I am Kras'hir, Wrath of Khorne, Red Butcher, and Breaker of Kings. I am called the One Who Reaps, the Oncoming Storm, and the Death of Worlds. I am a Bloodthirster of the Blood God, and I have spent over 80,000 years fighting and killing. So, to me, you are little more than a child throwing his weight around. Don't expect me to care who your father was, kid. Dead men don't impress me.”

“...She's got you there, ol' Long, Tall, and Ugly.” Susannah said. “Best if you step down now unless you wanna get torn to bits.”

“Lower your guns, Roland.” Blackhawk said. “Kras'hir doesn't care that we're friends. She'll kill you if you attack her. But she's also kinder than most of her kin. She'll be civil if you are, too.”

“Fine. But we will duel later to prove your worth, Red spawn.”

“I'm looking forward to it.” Kras'hir replied, grinning savagely. Usagi introduced her to Jake, Susannah, and Carrie.

“Get out of my head.” Kras'hir said to Carrie a moment later. Carrie, for her part, was backing away, a look of terror on her face.

“So much blood...so much death...” The girl muttered. Jake hugged his, for lack of a better term, sister (though they were not related), trying to comfort her. The boy later informed the Rangers that Carrie was psychic.

“Huh, what a coincidence.” Lettuce said. “So are Kras'hir, and Usagi...I think. Can't be sure.”

“Are you psychic?” Kras'hir asked Usagi.

“I'm the Emperor's daughter.” she answered bluntly.

“What am I thinking right now, then?” Kras'hir asked, smirking.

“How good my tongue feels on your-”

“WHOOOOOA, HOLD UP! THERE’S A KID IN HERE, GUYS!” Naruto interrupted, pointing to Jake.

“...Dude, I know what sex is, come on.”

“...Ass.” Kras'hir said, finishing Usagi's sentence.

“...Do I honestly wanna know what you two enjoy?” Susannah asked.

“Not really.” Usagi said casually. “Hey, Carrie, look into my mind, it’ll help you feel better.”

Carrie did so, but, unfortunately, due to the topic they had been discussing, the first memory she came across was rather...kinky. All she saw was a collar, a whip, and Kras'hir calling Usagi ‘mistress’ while the latter put those two things to use.

“Jesus Christ.” Carrie said, her face turning bright red, turning away from Usagi.

“Oh, uh...sorry. My mind’s a bit dirty right now.” Usagi said, also blushing.

“We’ll be back, everyone!” Kras'hir said cheerfully, dragging Usagi out of the room.

“N-NO, WAIT, LET ME GET CARRIE IN THIS TOOOOO!” Usagi shouted, her voice echoing down the hall. An awkward silence fell after that. It lasted until Kras'hir and Usagi returned half an hour later. Kras'hir was now in human form, dressed as a nurse; Usagi was naked, save a surgical gown covering her and lipstick marks all over her face. Kras'hir was wearing a collar, fresh marks from a whip covering her skin. The Gods only knew where those two items were found.

“Should I ask whether that was a hospital fantasy or a dungeon one?” Naruto asked.

“Why not both?” Starhawk replied.

“It was both.” Kras'hir said casually.

“You can examine me any day, nurse.” Usagi said flirtatiously. She then noticed the ka-tet and several members of the team were gone.

“As my mistress commands.” Kras'hir replied, kissing her cheeks.

“Hey, where did everyone go?”

“Oh, Blackhawk went to show Roland and his group around the city, Pinkie and Lettuce got into another argument, and then the latter stormed out, saying he was going record shopping to calm himself down.” Naruto said as if casually discussing the weather.

“Two relationships destroyed in such a short time.” Kras'hir said. “Undyne and Alphys aren't on good terms, either. Undyne got drunk this morning and kissed me.” Usagi stared at her, before facepalming.

“I'll go talk to her, OK?”

“Knock yourself out.” Usagi nodded, and soon found Undyne in yet another bar, drunkenly doing karaoke. Sans was standing nearby, keeping an eye on her.

“hey, usagi.”

“Hey, Sans. I never knew you were into karaoke.”

“I'm not, but somebody has to watch undyne. papyrus is working, so i have to make sure she doesn't get into trouble.” Sans replied.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot Papyrus had a job.” Usagi said. “Speaking of jobs, I never got to ask what your job of the day was.”

“I'm selling fried snow.”

“Fried snow? How does that work?”

“can't tell ya. i don't have any snow.”

“I'll never understand you, Sans.” Usagi said with a laugh as Undyne, after barely managing to get through Don't Stop Believin', stumbled back to her table. “Oh, right. I'll talk to you later, Sans. I have some business to take care of.”

“see ya.”

Usagi sat across from Undyne. “Hey. Can we talk? It's kinda important.”

“Sure. I'd love to talk.” Undyne replied, sipping her drink. “What are we talking about?”

“You kissed Kras'hir earlier when you got drunk...well, not as drunk as you are now, anyway.”

“Yep, I did.” Undyne said, nodding.

“Why?”

“Because I think I'm in love with her.”

“And what about me? Did ever consider the fact that I’m married to her? I’m not mad, Undyne. Just...well, kinda annoyed that you’d kiss her like that.”

“I fucking hate you.” Undyne replied. “Did you know that?”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Maybe you don’t. Maybe you wanna be part of the little harem I have with Kras’hir and Starhawk.”

“Maybe I want Kras'hir to myself.” Undyne said before smashing her bottle over Usagi’s head. Usagi didn’t budge, before grabbing Undyne’s arm and twisting it.

“Gonna play that game, are we? Well then, maybe Alphys doesn’t deserve you. Maybe she deserves someone like Lettuce. Because Lettuce actually wants to fix his mistakes instead of running away from them like a little. Emo. Bitch.”

Undyne pulled away, headbutting Usagi hard. Usagi pinned her down onto the table, smashing it in half, grinning.

“You’re forgetting something, Undyne.”

“You’re right.” Undyne said, before Usagi flew across the room, pinned to the wall by one of the former’s spears. Several security guards attempted to restrain her as Usagi removed the spear from the wall. Usagi then threw it at Undyne before bolting from the bar. Undyne tossed the guards out of her way as she sprinted after Usagi. Usagi was not willing to fight, and she just kept running. Undyne eventually stopped, exhausting overtaking her. She sat down, panting and coughing. Usagi turned to face her.

“Come on. You’re drunk and you need to rest.”

“Fine. I’m...too tired to argue anymore.” Usagi carried her all the way back to Sans and Papyrus’ house and laid her on the couch. Undyne fell asleep moments later. Usagi kissed her gently on the forehead before leaving.

Lettuce meanwhile returned to his and Alphys’ apartment, having bought a few punk and metal records. “Hey, Alphys.” he greeted the female lizard.

“Hi, Lettuce.” She said warmly.

“I went shopping and got you something.” Lettuce said with a smile.

“Oh?”

He proceeded to hand her a CD of anime theme songs done in a symphonic metal style.

“Ta-da!”

She squealed in delight, pulling Lettuce into a tight hug, thanking him profusely. Lettuce blushed profusely, but hugged her back just as tightly anyway.

“Knew you’d love it.” Lettuce said. “You’re such a sweet and caring gal, Alphys, especially given what’s happened to both of us recently. I wanted to thank you for everything.”

“It was no trouble at all.” Alphys replied. “You’re my friend, Lettuce.”

“And you’re...well, my only friend right about now.” Lettuce said. Alphys, seeing how sad he was, invited him inside, and they listened to her new CD together.

Omnus, meanwhile, was listening in on radio signals again. Armacham security teams were still scouring the ruins, and Replica forces were stalemating them. He was still uncertain what the endgame of either faction was, so, he listened, trying to figure it out.

“Alpha? Have you finished going over the data the Rangers brought back?”

“Yes, and it is very disturbing indeed.” Alpha said. “It lists names of children that were produced for Project Origin, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Is the name ‘Carrietta White’ familiar to you?”

“No.” Omnus replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Because she’s one of the names listed in this data.”

“You wouldn’t point that name out on a list of dead children unless...” Omnus paused. “My God...she’s alive, isn’t she?”

“Yes, somewhere...” Alpha said, then came to a realization. “Ay yi yi, Omnus! Do you know what this means?!”

“Do tell.”

“If Armacham finds out Carrietta is alive, then...oh dear, I don’t even want to say it.”

"They'll kill her...or worse." Omnus replied.

As for Carrie herself, she was walking with Blackhawk, Roland and Jake, pushing Susannah's wheelchair as she did so. "It's strange," the latter observed. "Who woulda thought that we'd eventually stop discriminating against people of color?"

"Don't forget gays and lesbians." Jake added.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I caught Blackhawk staring at an older gunslinger?" Roland asked with a laugh. "An older male gunslinger?"

"That was uncomfortable." Blackhawk said dryly. "I didn't intend to reveal I was bisexual in that manner, but, hey, what's done is done."

"Blackhawk, you're talking to a handicapped black woman who comes from the 1960s." Susannah reminded him. "There's no reason I would look down on you."

"Yeah." Jake interjected. "To us, you're family."

"I was raised in an abusive home by my mother, who followed a crazed, prejudiced version of Christianity." Carrie said. "I'm in no place to judge anyone, either."

"The only person who cared about me before I met Roland was my housekeeper." Jake said. "What does that tell you, other than why Carrie and I are like siblings?"

"We've all had pretty shitty lives, haven't we?" Blackhawk said, chuckling humorlessly.

"Yes, we have." Roland answered. "But we've united by growing past them."

"Indeed." Blackhawk replied.

"Where are we gonna stay, if you don't mind me asking?" Susannah inquired.

"We have spare rooms in my house." Blackhawk replied. "It's about time we went to see my family anyway. They'll be ecstatic to see you, Roland."

"Hopefully, there will be no pleasuring ourselves with apple pies." Roland said dryly.

"Shut your gob, whelp, before I shut it for you." Cort growled through Blackhawk's mouth.

"...Cort?" Roland asked, briefly startled.

"Yar." Cort said. "It's me."

“B-but how?!”

“I am a ghost inside Blackhawk’s head. He keeps me alive, in a sense.”

“Ah.” Roland seemed unfazed by this revelation.

Then, Susan took over. “Hello, Roland.” She said. If Roland hadn’t been surprised before, he certainly was now.

“S-susan?!”

“Yes, love, it’s me.” Roland pulled her into a kiss, not caring that it was actually his closest living male friend. Susan kissed him back, wishing that she could be with him in person. This got a few lighthearted snickers from the ka-tet, which subsided once Roland pulled away.

“How many spirits are with you, Susan?” Roland asked.

“Several. Cort, Alain, Cuthbert and Margarita, to be precise.”

“All of them are gone now.” Roland observed bitterly.

“Not quite.” Cuthbert said. “Hello, Roland.”

“Hello, Bert. Been up to any pranks lately?”

“I’ve thought of a few, but Blackhawk won’t let me set them up.” Cuthbert replied, chuckling. “Most of them involve messing with that jilly of his. Dying her feathers and the like.”

“I’m sure she’d be a good sport about it.”

“Believe me, Starhawk is quite proud of the color of her feathers.” Blackhawk said. “She’d strangle me if Cuthbert dyed them.”

“Wow.” Jake said. “At least it wouldn’t be as bad as what happened to Carrie.”

“Yeah.” Carrie agreed. “It would only lead to one murder instead of dozens.”

“Hun, you don’t have to worry about that anymore.” Susannah assured. “You’ve got a new life here, just like the rest of us.”

Blackhawk was about to speak, before he noticed Omnus walking towards them.

“Who’s this?” Roland inquired.

"I am Omnus, mentor to Blackhawk and the rest of the Rangers." He replied upon reaching them. "A pleasure to meet you, Roland."

"Rangers...yes, I've seen them before. Or rather, felt them."

"Indeed." Omnus said, understanding what he meant. "Now, I didn't come here to idly chat. I came here because of your companion, Carrie."

"What about Carrietta?" Roland asked.

"I will be happy to discuss that, but not here." Omnus said. "Too many prying eyes. Come with me, if you would."

He led them to the Command Center. Jake, upon seeing the building, asked, "So, it's a school? Isn't that a bit counterproductive?"

"It isn't the school itself, Jake." Roland said. "It is located underneath the school."

"Yes." Omnus agreed. "You'll see what he means in a moment, Jake."

"So, is this like a special school like in the X-Men comics?" Jake inquired.

"No, though I can see where you get the idea." Blackhawk said. "It's just a regular high school."

"Oh." Jake said, slightly disappointed. The Command Center itself was much more impressive than the school it was built under. Jake's spirits were soon lifted, and he marveled at the sight of it.

"One more question." Susannah asked. "Why under a high school?"

"It actually wasn't built under a high school on purpose." Alpha said, having met up with them moments earlier. "That came later. And besides, a number of Ranger teams have been high school students."

"And I can keep close tabs on the Rangers." Omnus added. Once they stepped out of the elevator, he introduced the ka-tet to Amberley, Ciaphas and Hedrian. Amberley instantly took a liking to all of them, especially Susannah.

"Hello there." Susannah greeted. "How do you do, Amberley?"

"I'm doing well." Amberley said cheerfully. "And you?"

"Fine."

"I am sorry." Ciaphas said. Susannah looked at him, puzzled. "Your legs. They're gone."

"..Oh, don't worry yourself. Just 'cause I don't have legs, that doesn't mean I'm not like everyone else."

"Let's get to the main reason I brought you all here." Omnus said. "Carrie White is being hunted."

"By whom?" Roland asked. "Agents of the Crimson King?"

"No. At least, not at the moment." Omnus replied. "She is being hunted by the Armacham Tech Corporation, a company that has conducted numerous unethical and abhorrent experiments and projects."

"What do they want with Carrie?" Jake asked.

"That, Jake, is a simple question with a complicated answer. It starts with a girl named Alma Wade." Omnus said. He then explained Project Origin to the ka-tet, telling them of its goals, how it had gone, and the results of it.

"It reminds me of the Sombra Corporation and its methods." Roland said.

"Here's the kicker: We believe Carrie here is Alma's daughter."

"...What." came the collective response.

"That's impossible!" Jake said. "Carrie's mom was a fundamentalist Christian named Margaret White!"

"Tell me, Carrie, because you are the only one here who actually saw her: How much do you look like your mother?"

"There were quite a few differences." She said.

"You are my daughter, Carrietta." Alma said, appearing nearby. "You were taken from me at the moment of your birth and sent away. I never even got to hold you."

"OK, let me get this straight. We're all from different universes and times, right? So how in God's name did they manage to get Carrie to another reality?" Susannah asked, beyond puzzled.

"Margaret White was an Armacham agent." Omnus replied. "They sent her to another version of Earth using highly advanced technology, with one objective: Abuse Carrie so badly her powers are suppressed for good. Obviously, she failed."

“So the whole fundamentalist Christian thing was a sham?” Jake asked, trying to keep his anger restrained.

“Yes.” Omnus said.

“Margaret White is being punished for her sins as we speak.” Alma said, grinning. “My Almaverse is not just an expression of my emotions. It is a Hell for those who have wronged me or my children.”

“...” Jake said nothing, hugging Carrie tightly. She hugged him back, before running over to Alma and embracing her as well, beginning to cry. Alma held Carrie close, humming softly and stroking her hair. Roland watched this, a small smile crossing his face.

“Aren't they adorable?” Asked Paxton Fettel, having appeared out of nowhere next to Roland. The gunslinger turned to face him, arming his guns. Fettel grinned, his teeth and lips stained with blood.

“Don't bother with your guns.” Fettel said, amused. “My own brother shot me in the head quite a while ago.”

“I am more concerned with if you wish to harm Carrietta.” Roland said, not even taking his eyes off of Fettel.

“Oh, come now.” Fettel laughed. “Do you honestly think that I would wish to harm my long-lost sister?”

“Yes.” Roland answered bluntly.

“I don't hurt family.” Fettel said truthfully. “Besides, Mother would have my head if I harmed little Carrie.”

“...I am still going to be wary of you.” Roland said, holstering his guns.

“Good.” Fettel replied, laughing again. “I would think you insane if you weren't wary.”

“Roland isn't insane.” Susannah laughed. “He's just really stubborn.”

“Aye, like a mule.” Roland confirmed.

“So like me.” Ciaphas replied. “Right, Amberley?”

“Yes.” Amberley said, nodding.

“Your little group consists of a gunslinger, a boy, a slightly unhinged psychic, and a cripple.” Fettel said to Roland. “You’re fucked, my friend, once a real threat comes around.”

“Fuck off.” Roland snorted.

“How’d you get crippled, anyway?” Fettel asked Susannah, his tone completely casual. “I mean, I could pry the answer out of your head, but that’s no fun.”

“Some dickhead named Jack Mort attempted to kill me by pushing me into a train’s path.”

Fettel was about to speak again, before Alma said, “Paxton, enough.”

Fettel sighed, before disappearing. Susannah pushed herself towards Amberley, smiling. “I like you, Amberley. How’s about you, me, and your boyfriend there have ourselves a night on the town?”

“That sounds lovely.” Amberley said.

“Hey, what about us?” Jake asked.

“What about you?” Ciaphas asked. “Do you want to come with us?”

Jake shrugged. “Hey, Roland...”

“I am fine with the idea. You and Carrietta are more than capable of taking care of yourselves and each other.”

“I’m going to get hammered tonight.” Amberley said, smirking at Ciaphas. “And you, my dear Commissar, are going to have me all to yourself.”

“...We’re gonna need fake IDs, then.” Jake joked, much to Susannah’s amusement. When evening rolled around, they headed out to a nearby nightclub. Jake and Carrie both had fake IDs, and were about to enter when they were stopped by a certain skeleton.

“We have IDs, so we’re OK.” Jake said, a bit too eager to get at least a drink or two.

“listen, my buddy, pal, friend, chum, amigo, you don’t wanna go in there.” Sans said, grinning like he always did. “i may be lazy, but i ain’t stupid. i know you two aren’t adults.”

“Come on.” Carrie said, trying to use her powers to influence Sans’ mind. “Just let us go in.”

“i’ll warn ya once and only once, kid: stay out of my head.” Sans replied, his eyes turning black for a second before going back to normal. “unless you want to have a bad time, don’t mess with my mind. got it?”

Carrie nodded nervously. Sans nodded as well, before clapping them both on the shoulder. "if you kids really insist on heading inside, then i'll let you, on one condition: you stick with your new pal sans."

"You're gonna make sure we don't have too much fun?" Jake asked.

"i'm gonna make sure you don't act stupid." Sans replied. "or see something you really don't wanna see."

"OK, Sans, lead the way." Jake said, before gesturing to Carrie. "After you, milady."

Carrie giggled, following Sans inside. The dance floor was packed with people. Some of them danced with a partner, some danced with groups, and others danced alone. Firehawk and Starhawk were there and dancing together. As were Kras'hir and Usagi, the former wearing her glamour ring. Amberley and Susannah were already drinking. The two of them were doing shots, trying to outpace each other. "Honey, you'll get drunk as a skunk before long."

"That's the plan." Amberley said cheerfully, downing another shot. "Worried you can't keep up with me?" Susannah downed shots faster, eventually getting drunk herself. Amberley was equally drunk by that point, dragging Ciaphas onto the dance floor. Ciaphas danced awkwardly with her. The dancing eventually turned into a frenzied make out and groping session, before the two of them went off to somewhere more private. Jake, meanwhile, had a drink or two himself, but Sans ensured he was merely buzzed. Carrie was less restrained. Living in an abusive household for nearly her entire life made her throw caution to the wind and down drinks at a rapid pace.

"Whoa, Carrie, slow down." Jake said.

"No!" She shouted, hiccuping a bit. "I'm having fun."

"You're gonna end up as a hard-drinking party girl, just saying!"

"And I'm fine with that!" she replied, downing another drink. Usagi, exhausted from dancing, sat next to her.

"...Fake ID?" she asked, nearly giggling at Carrie's drunk state.

"Yup!" Carrie said cheerfully.

"You're cute when you're drunk." Usagi said, a bit tipsy herself.

"I know." Carrie replied, before vomiting all over herself and passing out. Jake noticed this, and had Sans get her back to Blackhawk's home. Blackhawk opened the door once Sans arrived, blinking before letting the skeleton inside.

Meanwhile, Lettuce and Alphys had spent the evening watching more Japanese monster movies, and they were now half-asleep, adorably cuddling each other. Their rest was interrupted by a knock at the door. Alphys got up to answer it, only to find Undyne standing there, dressed in nice clothing and holding flowers. Alphys blinked a few times, trying to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. "I...hope I'm not interrupting anything." Undyne said.

"No, you're not." Alphys said, shutting the door behind her so Lettuce wasn't disturbed. "What are you doing here?"

"..I want to apologize for what I did. I'm not expecting forgiveness, Alphys. If it had been you fingering yourself to Lettuce, I'd be beyond pissed too. I still love you, and I want a fresh start."

Alphys stared at her for a few moments, not saying a word. Then, she pulled Undyne into a kiss. Undyne kissed her back, pulling away after a few minutes. "Whoa, hold up. You're gonna forgive me that easily, after what I did?!"

"Yes." Alphys said. "I know you, Undyne. You wouldn't go to the trouble of dressing up and buying flowers if your apology wasn't sincere. And...well...I need to have you in my life."

"I missed you too, Alphys." Undyne said."Can I just say one thing, though?" Her mouth turned upwards into a smarmy grin.

"Me first." Alphys said, taking out a ring and sliding it onto Undyne's finger. "Marry me?"

"..Y..y..." Undyne began, staring at Alphys. Alphys waited, grinning. "You and Lettuce look adorable when you two are cuddling."

Alphys deflated a bit, her grin fading. "Oh, I see." She said. "I knew I should have waited to ask. I just thought that, after forgiving you and telling you I need you, it would be the perfect time."

"I get that, Alphys. Believe me, I do." Undyne said, her smile fading as well. "But I don't deserve you. Let me tell you something Usagi told me earlier: Lettuce is more deserving of you. Why? He doesn't run away from his problems...like me." She slipped off the ring and gave it back to Alphys. "So no, I can't marry you. I'm just not ready. Goodbye, Alphys. I have some maturing to do."

Alphys stared at the ring, before her fists clenched, and she punched Undyne in the face. "DAMN IT, UNDYNE!" she shouted, grabbing the fish woman by the shoulders and shaking her. "I DON'T CARE WHAT USAGI TOLD YOU! I DON'T WANT LETTUCE! I WANT YOU!"

She then took a deep breath, and said, "You're not going anywhere, Undyne. You understand? Stop acting like the coward you think you are, and start acting like the strong, brave, caring woman I know you are." That was when Lettuce was jolted out of his sleep and spoke up.

"Uhhhh, should I leave? I'm not gonna end up being an indirect factor in your relationship again, am I?"

"Please leave, Lettuce." Alphys said. "Undyne and I need more time to talk alone."

Once he was gone, Alphys headed inside the apartment she and Undyne had been sharing for years, gesturing for the latter to come in. She did, noticing that Lettuce had left via the Papyrus method. "He nailed the landing, at least."

Alphys smiled, sitting down on the couch. "What's Frisk up to these days, anyway? I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Little dude's doing well. Asgore and Toriel are getting married again."

"Are they?" Alphys asked. "About time. He's been trying to woo her for years now."

"Frisk says he's always wanted a dad."

"Papyrus will be ecstatic when he finds out." Alphys said. "Sans, too, even though he pretends not to care."

"Speaking of, where are those boneheads?" Undyne asked, laughing at her own pun.

"you called?" Sans said from behind her, casually dodging the spear she threw at him out of reflex.

"How do you do that?"

"that's a very interesting story." Sans replied. "it all started when me and papyrus were..."

He trailed off, closing his eyes and beginning to snore. Undyne thwacked him with the blunt end of her spear. Sans instantly stopped snoring, opening his eyes and grinning even wider than usual.

"gotcha." He said. "you two have fun, now."

A moment later, he was gone. Undyne sighed, looking at Alphys. "Frisk was actually having some pretty bad nightmares a while ago. Saying that there was some...demon girl in a green dress. We're actually gonna take him to Omnus."

“Poor guy.” Alphys said. “Frisk is too damn nice to deserve any bad dreams. I hope Omnus can help him.”

“Me too.”

Lettuce, meanwhile, had gotten a bit lost in the back alleys of Coastal Falls. He hated the night sometimes; made it too damn dark to get around easily. Once he stopped to look around, somebody walked up behind him, before the cold metal of a gun barrel was pressed against his back, with another man binding him.

“Well, well.” a man with a thick Russian accent said. “It appears little Lettuce Manchot has wandered into our turf. What should we do with him, boys?”

“What the hell...?” Lettuce grunted, struggling to get free. “WHO ARE YOU?! WHERE AM I?!”

“You're in our alley now, little bird.”

“What are you, the Russian Mafia?”

“Da, pretty much. Now-”

“Step away from him.” a commanding female voice, that of Toriel, called. “Right now.”

“OH SHIT!” one of them said. “LET’S GET OUTTA HERE!”

“What?” The first man said. “Are you boys really running from her? She's not even scary!”

“I can be.” Toriel said. “But, even if I don't scare you, I think my husband-to-be will.”

“Hello, boys!” Asgore said cheerfully, emerging from behind Toriel. “Now, are you going to run, or are we going to have a fight on our hands?”

“LET’S RUN!” the other mobsters shouted, running. The first one did the same after a few moments of hesitation. Lettuce struggled against his bounds, until Toriel and Asgore got them off of him.

“Thanks-Ow. Ow ow ow ow ow...” The bird winced, holding the back of his head. Toriel had lightly swatted him after the ropes were gone. “I know, I'm dumb.”

“I wouldn't say that, but heading into a dark alley wasn't the smartest decision you could have made.” Toriel said.

“Yeah...sorry about that. I was just heading home...well, if I had one.”

“You don't have a home?”

“Long story. It involves a breakup, and me moving out of my parents' place.”

“Come on.” Toriel said. “Let's talk about it. But first, let me ask you a question: Do you prefer cinnamon or butterscotch? I have no real reason to ask. I am just curious.”

“Butterscotch. I mean, I like cinnamon, but it's a bit spicy on its own. Let me tell you a secret: sometimes I'll go to the grocery store and buy an entire bag of butterscotch chips, just for myself.”

“Oh, my!” Toriel said, giggling a bit. “How scandalous!”

“You know, speaking from a chef's perspective, it really is!” Lettuce said. “My names Retthi, but everyone calls me Lettuce, since I'm pretty sure no one I know aside from my mother speaks Maori.”

“Let me guess: They call you Lettuce because you're green?” Toriel asked rhetorically, shaking her head and looking at Asgore, grinning playfully. “His friends are as terrible at naming things as you are, dear.”

“What're your names, if I may ask?” Lettuce politely responded. He could tell Toriel and Asgore were upper-class just as he was, and he had learned many things from high society.

“My name is Toriel.” She replied

“And let me guess,” Lettuce said, gesturing to Asgore. “He's Two-Toriel?”

Toriel and Asgore both looked at each other before cracking up. After a short fit of laughter, they both composed themselves. “No.” The latter said, amused. “My name is Asgore.”

“Asgore...hmmm...do people say when they see you, 'Run, before your ass gets gored by Asgore!?'” Lettuce said. “That's my best shot, OK?”

“I'd give that a 5 out of 10 for effort.” Asgore replied. Toriel snorted, before looking over her shoulder.

“Frisk?” She called. “Are you still there, child?”

“Yes, mama!” they called; Lettuce noted they were about maybe 6 or 7, dressed in a blue and purple shirt and pants. They seemed to have a perpetual neutral expression, and yet could still see. “Are the bad guys gone?”

“Yes, my dear.” She said. “It’s safe to come out.”

“Hi, Mr. Penguin!” Frisk greeted, walking alongside Lettuce. Before Lettuce could respond, Anna’s voice became audible from nearby. The Russian girl was singing to herself, twirling one of her hatchets as she walked out of an alley, several skinned rabbits hanging off her belt.

“Mama, that girl’s scary...” Frisk whispered.

“Child, what are you doing out here all alone?” Toriel asked Anna, who paused, looking at the four of them with her one good eye.

“My parents are out on the town, so I went hunting.” Anna said, completely casual.

“Anna, it’s not safe out here.” Lettuce said. “I’ll call Starhawk and Firehawk, let them know I’m gonna watch you for the evening.”

“If the Angel of Death could not kill me, then what hope do that scum of this city have?” Anna asked, before hurling one of her knives at Lettuce...or not. Rather, the blade sailed over him, sinking into the throat of a man who had been sneaking up on the group. He gurgled out a strangled breath before collapsing, twitching a bit before going still. This caused Frisk to bury his face into Toriel, crying his little heart out.

“Mama...she-she did a violence, just like the demon girl...”

Anna walked over, kneeling next to Frisk and gently taking his hands, turning him towards her. “I am sorry for scaring you, little one.” She said, her voice soft.

“N-no you’re not...people who do a violence never feel good...”

“Sometimes, little one, violence is the only option one has left.” Anna said gently. “Talking things out isn’t always a choice. I am not encouraging you to kill anyone. I am simply saying that sometimes you have to fight back to ensure your own survival.”

“...You’re not like the demon girl.” Frisk said. “You’re a good person...I’m sorry.”

“Demon girl?” Lettuce asked Asgore and Toriel.

“I will explain, but not in front of Frisk.” Toriel said. “Talking about her makes him upset.”

After that, Toriel, Asgore, Lettuce, Frisk and Anna walked to the apartment the former two had rented upon arriving in Coastal Falls. The two children went off to play together, and Toriel began baking a butterscotch pie for Lettuce. “...Thanks.” Lettuce said. “The fact you took me in as a guest means a lot. Believe me, I’m going through a lot right now.”

"I'm happy to listen if you want to talk." Toriel said.

"As am I." Asgore added.

And so, Lettuce explained all that he had been through. By the time he finished, his pie was ready, and Toriel had set it in front of him. Rather than take a slice, Lettuce proceeded to devour the pie whole, then belch up the empty tin. Toriel and Asgore both stared at him, blinking.

"What?"

"I certainly didn't expect you to eat the whole thing, tin and all." Toriel said.

"I'm certainly full of surprises, aren't I?"

"That is true." She replied.

"Anyway, what should I do about this whole 'breakup' situation?"

"It won't be easy." Asgore replied. "Believe me, I know how difficult it is to get your partner to trust you again after a nasty separation."

"So what's my best course of action?"

"Take things slow." Toriel suggested. "Prove to her you are still a good choice for a partner, without trying to rush back into a relationship."

"So just try and start talking to her again?"

"Yes, but let her talk to you on her own terms. Don't force her to talk."

"So when she wants to talk, then that's when I start?"

Toriel nodded. "Just do your best to prove you've changed. The rest will follow."

"Now, about this demon girl..."

"Ah, her." Asgore said. "Chara."

"That's her name? Chara?"

"Yes." Toriel said.

"OK...so what's the story here?"

Toriel and Asgore went on to explain everything that had occurred between Chara's fall into the Underground and the death of their son, Asriel. Lettuce was horrified and asked, "How old was she?"

"She was eight." Toriel replied.

"...And how many years has it been since she...?"

"That is hard to answer." Asgore said. "For monsters, years tend to blend together, due to us being immortal. However, if I had to guess, it has been at least a few decades."

"And her ghost is...for lack of a better term, haunting Frisk?"

"Yes." Asgore replied. "She torments him constantly, especially in his dreams."

"Hold that thought, will you, Asgore? I need to make a call." Lettuce said, running outside the apartment and calling Omnus.

"Hello, Lettuce." he said once he picked up. "What can I do for you?"

"OK, I know this is gonna sound odd coming from me, but I need you to conduct an exorcism."

"...Come again?" Omnus replied, confused. "You need me to do what?"

"An exorcism, Omnus. Look, it makes more sense if I explain it." Lettuce said, explaining Toriel and Asgore's situation to him. Silence for several seconds, before Omnus said that he would be over soon, and the line went dead. Now all he needed to do was tell Asgore and Toriel, and that in itself wouldn't be easy. Lettuce walked back into the apartment, visibly worried.

"What's wrong?" Toriel asked. "You look frightened."

"...I know how to free Frisk from Chara, but it's not exactly easy to tell you."

"You might as well say it." She replied.

"An exorcism has to be performed."

"Oh, dear." Toriel said. A moment later, there was a knock at the door. Omnus had arrived. Asgore got up to let him in. Omnus entered, dressed in the robes of a Christian priest and carrying various religious items, including a crucifix, sticks of incense, a menorah, a Bible, a Jewish Torah, an Islamic Quran, and an Imperial Aquila and book of prayers.

"Thank God you're here, Omnus." Lettuce said.

"I wasn't sure exactly what sort of entity we are dealing with here, so I wanted to be prepared." Omnus replied to explain the various items he had brought. "Where is Frisk?"

"In his room with Anna." Toriel replied, going to get him. "Frisk? Can you come out here for a minute?" She said upon opening the door. Frisk had been playing with Anna, and he came out, looking around.

"Yes, mama?"

"Hello, Frisk." Omnus said, lighting the sticks of incense as he spoke. "My name is Omnus. I'm here to help you."

"Help me with what?" Frisk asked, tilting his head.

"The demon who has been bothering you."

"...A-are you gonna hurt me?"

"No, child." Omnus replied. "I won't hurt you. I am, however, going to have to tie you up, so that you don't hurt yourself or someone else if the demon takes over. Okay?"

"...OK." Frisk whispered, suddenly now aware of what Omnus meant.

"Good, then." Omnus said, before tying Frisk to the chair that he had sat down in. He then walked over to Toriel, Asgore, Anna and Lettuce.

"If you wish to stay, there are a few things you must know, and a few rules you must abide by." Omnus said. "Firstly, do not engage the entity in any way. Do not ask questions. Do not reply to anything it says. Do not react at all to anything it says."

"Understood." Lettuce said.

"Can you two handle that?" Omnus asked Toriel and Asgore. "The things it says to you might be vulgar, nasty, and, above all else, personal." They nodded.

"Good." Omnus replied. "Secondly, whatever it does, whatever it says, it will not be Frisk I am speaking to. So, even if it sounds like Frisk is speaking, pleading for me to stop, you must not interrupt."

"We will not, even if we have the urge to do so." Toriel confirmed.

"Good. Now, lastly, if you wish to say any prayers, now is the time. Once I begin, silence is vital."

"Please, God, if You exist, aid Omnus in expelling this...being from my child. Amen."

“Elohim, bless this ritual.” Anna said, clutching the Torah scroll Omnus had brought. “Elohim, Lord on High, guide the hand of Thy blessed servant as he casts this demon into the pit. I beg of you, help my little friend before he is lost to us forever.”

Omnus took a deep breath, before walking over to Frisk, holding the crucifix out. “Show yourself, demon.” he commanded. “Now.”

“Fine.” Chara said, speaking through Frisk, the boy’s eyes turning red. “Here I am, cursed priest. This meat puppet isn’t the most useful vessel, but he will have to do for now, won’t he?”

“Silence, demon. Leave this boy’s body, or else face the wrath of God, whatever or whomever He may be.”

“God? God?” Chara spat. “Foolish shaman! Ignorant follower of a cursed lie! God is dead! This universe has proven too cold and evil for Him to stomach. The forces of Hell won a long time ago, Omnus. Our Abyssal Father saw to that.”

“I have seen many things, demon. War, genocide, famine. I have loved and lost. But I still have my family: my Rangers, Queen Hedrian, Amberley Vail and Ciaphas Cain. They are the few things that give me hope.”

“My Master will crush your hope, your spirit. Everyone you love will die. Slowly. Painfully. They will all burn in the fires of the pit, all while you watch, nailed to a cross of your own making, shaman.” Chara hissed.

“The Power of Christ compels you. THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS YOU!”

“Hell take you and your Christ! Foolish priest! Wretched shaman! Your God is dead! The crows picked His bones clean long ago!” Chara shouted, straining against the ropes.

“...The Power of the God-Emperor compels you.”

“There is only one God who can free Frisk from her.” Alma said, having appeared behind him. “That God is me.”

“Can you do it without harming him?”

“I make no promises.” Alma replied. “I am sorry, but the battle of wills between myself and Chara could leave Frisk comatose.”

“Please...” Toriel begged. “Make certain that doesn’t happen.”

"I will do my best not to harm your child." Alma said. "You have my word, Toriel."

With that, she vanished, entering Frisk's mind. What she found was...disturbing. His mindscape was fractured and dark. It vaguely resembled a house, said house appeared old, abandoned and overtaken by dark shadows and twisted creatures. In one of the rooms was Frisk, or, at least, a mental reflection of him, being guarded by Toriel, who represented his strength and determination. Alma observed them for a moment, watching as Toriel kept the darkness at bay.

"Face me, Chara." She called, turning away from Frisk and his guardian. "Come into the light. Or are you afraid to speak to me...daughter?"

"Daughter...?" Chara growled. "Whatever do you mean?!"

"You are no demon, child." Alma said, smiling. "You are merely a very powerful, very dead psychic. Just like me, rage keeps you going. Or am I wrong?"

"...No, you are not." Chara said, stepping into the light. She resembled Frisk, albeit much paler, red-eyed, and wearing a green dress.

"I know who I hate." Alma replied. "I do not, however, know who you hate, who you want to kill. So, enlighten me: Who do you want to see dead?"

"...Everyone. Humanity and monster alike."

"Like mother, like daughter."

"Are you saying we are related?" Chara asked. "Because you are not my mother."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes." Chara said bluntly.

"Who was your mother, then?"

"I...I cannot remember."

"So how do you know I am not your mother?"

"I don't." Chara admitted.

"Exactly."

"But how do you know I'm your daughter?" Chara asked.

"My children are all very powerful psychics. It runs in the family." Alma replied. "I know someone of my blood when I see them." Chara stared at Alma and broke down.

"...B-but..." she whispered through her tears. "...how?"

"How what, Chara?"

"How can I be your daughter?"

"You were taken from me when you were just an infant." Alma replied. "I never even got to hold you, or see you."

"A-are there others?"

"I have three other children." Alma said. "Two sons and a daughter."

"A-another daughter...?"

"Yes."

"What is her name?"

"Carrie."

"A very pretty name, I think." Chara said. "...I am willing to leave Frisk's body if it means meeting her."

"That is acceptable." Alma replied. "Go on, child." Chara smiled slightly and disappeared. The darkness within Frisk's mind went with her. Alma smiled at this before fading away as well, returning to the real world. Chara appeared next to her, now aged a good decade or so, and as such she was more voluptuous. Alma smiled at her, putting an arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"I-is it over?" Frisk asked, slowly awakening.

"Yes, child." Omnis said. "It is."

"M-mama...daddy..." Frisk said, looking at Toriel and Asgore.

"We're here." Toriel said.

Carrie, meanwhile, had awoken from her drunken state with a pretty bad hangover. Coop had been asked by Blackhawk to keep watch over her, and he grabbed her hand as soon as she got up. "Whoa, slow down there, party animal. You're not in good shape right now."

"I'm fine." She said defensively, before immediately vomiting. "Fuck me...that tasted better going down than coming up..."

"Yeah, yeah it did." the young bird replied. He didn't notice Usagi walking in.

"Is she gonna be OK?" Coop immediately squawked in surprise.

"Whoa, where'd you come from?!"

"My mother." Usagi said dryly. "Blackhawk let me in so I could check on Carrie."

"Yeah...she's not in the best condition right now." Coop said.

"Hey, Carrie." Usagi said.

"Hi, Usagi."

"You know, even when trashed, you still look pretty."

"Thanks." Carrie said before vomiting again. Usagi went to get her some water so she didn't dehydrate.

Jake, meanwhile, stayed with Sans and Papyrus. He didn't get too drunk, just a bit tipsy. He was still perfectly capable of logic and reasoning, however; this made him worry quite a bit about Carrie. Sans assured him that Carrie would be fine. Susannah and gotten plastered and Ciaphas had dutifully taken her back to the Command Center. Apparently, Alpha had given her a pair of prosthetic legs. Amberley was nowhere to be found. Last anyone had seen her, she was very, very drunk and dancing naked through the streets. Omnus had gone looking for her to no avail.

Amberley eventually came to with a pounding headache. She blinked, looking around. She was in an alleyway. She was completely naked, she noticed, and bleeding. She had no recollection of the night's events. There was a tattoo on her thigh, Amberley realized after a moment. She contorted herself a bit to read what it said. Emperor's Whore. Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of Ciaphas. "Wow. They could have at least used something more tame. Like 'Emperor's Escort'."

"Who gave me a tattoo?" She wondered, getting up. "I can't remember anything about last night."

"I don't know. Why are you asking me, my love?"

“I thought you might know.”

“Well, I don’t.”

Amberley nodded. “I need clothes.”

“Let’s go find you some, then.”

Amberley followed him out of the alley, shivering slightly. Ciaphas took off the coat he’d been wearing and wrapped it around his lover.

“Thank you.” She said.

“It is no trouble.”

Meanwhile, Usagi had returned home and was relaxing with Kras’hir. The Daemoness was cleaning her weapons and armor, humming to herself as she did so. Usagi was flipping through the TV channels, bored.

“Khorne wants me to kill you, you know.” Kras'hir said.

“Tell him I’m gonna become a housewife like my mom.” Usagi responded.

“The day you give up being the White Ranger, Sailor Moon and the Anathema’s Daughter is the day I decide I’m done fighting.” Kras'hir said dryly.

“And that’s not gonna be for a good long while, huh?” Usagi responded. “You know, my mom chose to be a homemaker. I don’t get why some see that as a problem.” The conversation, like most, seemed to have no particular direction.

“I dunno.” Kras'hir said, running her hand along the edge of one of her blades to test the sharpness.

“Yeah, same. How’s Starhawk been doing?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Let me call Firehawk to see if she’s OK.” Usagi said, taking out her cell phone and calling Firehawk.

“Hello?” Firehawk said upon answering.

“Hey. It’s Usagi. Just checking up on you and your sister.”

"I'm alright. Starhawk, however, ah, can't talk right now."

"Why not?"

"She's, well..." Firehawk began. "...eating me out."

"...Gross." Usagi said, cringing a bit.

"Fuck you, Blondie. Some of the kinks you and your Daemon wife have make this look downright normal."

"N-no, I didn't mean it like that, Firehawk..."

"Relax. I'm just fucking with you." Firehawk said, snorting.

"Bet you'd rather be fucking me if I wasn't married."

"You know it." Firehawk said before hanging up. Usagi stared at the phone, then Kras'hir. Kras'hir stared back at her.

"...Did I just say that out loud?"

"Yep."

"...I'm a dumbass."

"Course you are. You're blonde."

"...HEY!" Usagi said.

Kras'hir laughed. "Come on. You know it's true. Maybe not all the time, but you can be quite the ditz."

"...OK, yeah, that's true. I'm a total bimbo." Usagi said, laughing.

"Oh, and just so we're clear, I can live with you sleeping with Starhawk. But if I find you in bed with anyone else, they're dead, and we're done." Kras'hir said casually, as if she were discussing the weather.

"Not even Firehawk? Because you know how she looks at me."

"I don't care." Kras'hir said. "I'm still angry about you sleeping with her, you know."

"I know. Even if you don't say it, I know." Usagi whispered.

“Luckily for you, my love for you outweighs the anger by a lot.”

“...I'm gonna go out and get coffee and doughnuts. You want anything?”

“I'm going with you.” Kras'hir said, before getting up and gently embracing Usagi. “I love you, you know, in more ways than words can express.”

“...I love you too, Kras'hir.”

“After we get coffee, how about you and I take a nice, long stroll?” Kras'hir asked, slipping on her glamor ring. “I'd like to spend some time alone with you.”

“You know it.” Usagi said, smiling.

Meanwhile, on Vipera's ship, Toby and Ebony were assisting their boss in creating a new monster. Though they were still thoroughly traumatized by Alma's assault on their minds, they had put up a facade of “getting over it” to save face. Drako, for his part, thought about just ejecting them right there. Alma haunted them constantly, whispering in their minds, or simply watching them. The reptilian honestly thought getting rid of those two would steer Alma away from the group. Or at the very least, not haunt them the way she was.

And besides, he hated how they'd betrayed their teammates. He just wished that he could kill Toby and Ebony, give the Rangers their old friends back...and then Drako got an idea. Drako got a wonderful, awful idea. Luring Toby and Ebony towards the ship's back rooms with the promise of drugs and beer, Drako locked them there, then began a ritual to summon some counterparts to do the dirty work for him; of course, poisoning them might've been easier, but being a minion of the Changer of Ways meant that plans were not always simple.

A god answered him, but it wasn't the god he was expecting. Alma appeared to Drako, smiling sweetly and giggling. “Hello.” Drako greeted. “I wasn't expecting you, but oh well.”

“Hello.” Alma said, still smiling.

“Do you know why you're here?”

“Yes.” She replied.

“I am not one to order you around, I know my place.” Drako said, stepping aside. “They're locked in the back rooms.”

“Good.” Alma said. “Paxton, dear, he's all yours.”

“W-wha?” Drako inquired.

“Hello, Drako.” Paxton Fettel said from behind him, cackling a bit. Drako turned around and nearly screamed. Fettel was covered in blood, a wide, sadistic grin on his face.

“P-please, do not hurt me!”

“Oh, chin up!” Fettel said. “You and I are going to be very good friends...”

Drako was not reassured by this, and began backing away slowly. Alma watched as Fettel slowly walked towards Drako, giggling madly and twirling a knife. “WHAT ARE YOU DOIN-”

That was when Fettel cut his throat open. Drako fell to the floor, his throat spilling a river of blood. Fettel watched him die, while Alma walked into the next room, where Ebony and Toby were. “...OH GOD, NOT HER AGAIN!” Ebony shouted.

“Ebony,” Toby whispered. “Get as far away as you can.”

“But she’s gonna kill both of us! Can’t you see it?!”

“Aww, are you two unhappy to see me? I’m hurt.” Alma said mockingly.

“She is. I’m not. I’ve accepted that I’ve fucked up, Alma. What are you gonna do? Kill me slowly and painfully?”

“Yes...and no.” Alma said. “I’m not going to kill you. No, no, no. Death is something you two will never experience.”

“Then what?”

“I’m just going to send you to the Almaverse, where you two will spend the rest of time in agonizing pain.”

“Do it. I FUCKING DESERVE IT, DON’T I?!” Toby shouted. “BECAUSE NOBODY’S GONNA MISS ME! NOT MY FAMILY, MY FRIENDS, NO ONE! BECAUSE I FUCKING DROVE THEM AWAY WITH MY STUPIDITY, RIGHT?! WELL?! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, ALMA WADE?! TORTURE ME FOR ETERNITY, I DARE YOU!” Toby then broke down, sobbing. “I’m sorry...” he whispered. “I’m sorry, everyone...Usagi, Lettuce...I know none of you are gonna hear this, and even if you did, you wouldn’t accept my apology for betraying you; I get that. But if I could take it all back...especially my relationship with Ebony...I would.”

“..YOU FUCKING BASTARD!” Ebony shouted, drawing her wand to kill Toby herself. “I thought you loved me!”

“No, I didn’t.” Toby answered. “I was in love with the drugs and the do-nothing lifestyle. But you know what, Ebony? I was a fool. You’re nothing but a conceited, sex-addicted sociopath who looks down on those who don’t fit into your model of a person. A lot like a Nazi, I’d say. So no, Ebony Dark’ness Dementia Raven Way-what a stupid fucking name-I don’t love you. I never did. In fact, I’ll accept my eternal torture by Alma if it means being away from your sorry ass forever.” He then turned to Alma. “I only ask something of you, Alma. Make sure my friends have the Toby they knew and loved back. Even if I can’t do it myself, I want to make it up to them for being such a shitty person.”

Alma stared at him, before she grinned again. “Going to my Almaverse would be release for you, wouldn’t it?” She asked. “You feel it would be penance for your treason. Is that correct?”

“Yes. I feel I am deserving of punishment.” Toby answered honestly.

“Request denied.” Alma said. “You will still live forever, Tobias, but not in physical pain. The pain of what you’ve done is far more severe.”

“What will I do, then? I can’t go back to Coastal Falls, but I don’t wanna stay here.”

“Oh, I have a place in mind for you.” Alma said, before pushing him backwards. Instantly, he was transported to a dark, wet room with no doors or windows. He looked around. At least he was away from Ebony. In time, madness would set in. He would try to kill himself to escape the isolation.

Alma smiled at this thought, and idly said, “‘In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them.’ Such is the fate of Tobias Jones. No matter how low he gets, no matter how many times he tries to end his own life, death will never come.”

“Hell is other people.” the voice of Randall Flagg, the Man in Black, spoke in her head. “For him, though, that’s not the case. It’s a lot like Pink Floyd’s The Wall, I think. He may think he’s in perfect isolation now, but soon enough, the worms will come for him and eat into his brain - metaphorically, of course. Though it would be hilarious if it were literal.” Alma, ignoring Flagg’s seemingly-incoherent ramble, made her thoughts known.

“Why have you tapped into my psychic field, Man in Black? Didn’t you learn from our last psychic battle? Or are you looking to challenge me once again?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no, dearest Alma.” Flagg replied. “I am merely on my way to Core Earth, since my old adversary, the gunslinger Roland. You need not worry yourself with defense, for I will not be arriving for a long, long time.”

“Good.” Alma said. “I will be waiting, and when you arrive, you and I will duel, servant of the Crimson King.”

“It’s a challenge I will gladly accept. Farewell.” Flagg responded, before his presence faded from Alma’s mind. In the brief time she had been mentally conversing with Flagg, Alma had not taken her eyes off of a still-cowering Ebony, who had attempted to escape while the former was distracted; instead, Alma tore open a hole in space-time and threw Ebony into some part of the Almaverse, her only company being untold amounts of eldritch horrors who would tear her apart, devour her, then do it all over again once she regenerated. Alma exited the room, silently ordering Paxton to follow her; now, Vipera’s group consisted of the snake-woman in question, Baphomet, Kraky, and Lightning Galaxy. No matter, they would continue working on their new monster and unleash it on the Rangers soon enough.

Early the next day, Lettuce found himself waking up with newfound confidence in his step (his talk with Toriel and Asgore having helped a bit) and walking to a nearby coffee shop with his phone queueing up an appropriate song for the occasion - Kim Smoltz by Ween. The bird began singing along as he neared the cafe, joyful as could be:

“Take it easy

Walk with a light step, baby

Catch a breezy

Live amongst life forms in your day

Marinate a good piece of beef

Understand the mind of a leaf

Swim around 'til the fish float out of the socket in your skull

Dive deeper

Corner all the fungus in your brain

Take it easy

Wanna live the life in vain

More you chew things, or leave them to rot

Woke up with a nose full of snot

Baked some muffins,

The tops burnt and I had to throw them away...”

The small green bird’s singing was interrupted when he nearly ran into something, or rather someone: a pink-haired mongoose girl no older than Lettuce, with chocolate brown eyes; she appeared to be wearing a too-short skirt and a crop top displaying the Motorhead logo. She was someone Lettuce had known for a while, and a good friend to Blackhawk in one of his many past lives: Patricia Smiles, or as everyone called her, Patsy. “Hi, Lettuce!” she greeted cheerfully. “Wow, you’re looking cheerful today!”

“Thanks, Patsy. What are you doing up this early?”

“I work on military time. My dad’s an ex-Marine, remember?” Ah, yes; Commander Gerhelm Smiles, otherwise known as Commander Hoo-Haw. Lettuce had met the fellow before, and had certainly found it odd that he was a water buffalo and Patsy was a mongoose. He was also a real hardass, and had not reacted well when his daughter started finding her own voice - granted, it was a punkish, anarchistic voice, but Patsy’s own voice nonetheless; he had kicked her out when she had turned 18 and the two were still not on speaking terms.

“Well, since I’m here already, want me to buy some coffee for the both of us?” Lettuce offered.

“Sure.” Patsy replied, taking his flipper into her hand and they walked into the coffee shop together. Heinz was sitting in a booth, drinking some strong black coffee. He turned and grinned at Lettuce and Patsy.

“Ah, Herr Lettuce! Looking for love again so soon, ja?” the old German replied with a laugh. Lettuce stared at him, blushing furiously. Patsy let out a giggle at Lettuce’s reaction.

“No, no, I’m just a really good friend of his. What’s your name?”

“Ah, I am Heinz Guderian, Fraulein. May I know your name as well?”

“Patricia, but everyone calls me Patsy.”

“I much prefer Patricia, if you do not mind me saying so. Patsy makes you sound like a fool. And from the look in your eyes, you look like a strong, capable woman. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not.” Patsy said, sliding into the booth and leaving Lettuce all alone. And so, they talked; Heinz was certainly impressed by Patsy’s vast knowledge of military and defense strategies; their conversation lasted a good half-hour. By the time they were finished, Lettuce had ordered two French vanilla coffees for himself and Patsy. As they drank their beverages in silence, Patsy broke the ice with something certainly unexpected. “I know you like me, Lettuce.”

The penguin nearly choked on his coffee, which would have resulted in him burning his throat were he not careful.

“W-what?” he responded. “I don’t.”

“Bullshit.” Patsy replied, slapping him on the cheek lightly. “You think I don’t notice the way you look at me whenever you’re practicing that New Age stuff with Lazlo?”

“One, it’s not ‘New Age’ stuff. He’s helping me harness my ki energy. And besides, I thought you liked Lazlo.”

“I do. But if he believes in free love and all that stuff, then I can too. Whatever makes him happy, I’m fine with.” Patsy said.

“Before you go any further, Patsy, I just want to make something clear: I’m trying to get back together with Pinkie, so I’m not interested in a new relationship.” Lettuce calmly, if rather bluntly, interrupted. He felt Patsy pull him over the table into a passionate kiss, the latter gently sucking on his tongue. Lettuce soon relaxed into the kiss, but it was over as quickly as it began, Patsy smirking flirtatiously.

“I’m not asking for a relationship.” the mongoose informed him, her voice a lustful whisper. “I’m asking that we be fuckbuddies; no strings attached. You get what I’m saying?”

Lettuce considered it for several minutes; he had an opportunity to be a free bird (pun very much intended), so he might as well take advantage of it until he was ready to get back together with Pinkie. And so, he walked with Patsy to her rather affluent apartment, and they made love. It was rather passionate, if a bit rough.

Meanwhile in the Command Center, Omnus, Alpha, Hedrian, Ciaphas, and Amberley were all sitting around drinking coffee (indeed, Ciaphas expressed puzzlement as to how Alpha could ingest liquids if he had no visible mouth, as well as not short-circuiting himself doing so). The elevator doors opened a moment later, the Point Man stepping out, followed by Paxton, who was giggling to himself.

“Oh-ho-ho, Mother is in a foul mood today.” he said, continuing to laugh. “Even more foul than usual.”

“What happened this time?” Hedrian asked dryly.

“Someone tried to kill my dear brother.” Paxton replied. “I am sure you can guess how Mother reacted. There are few people in this multiverse she doesn’t hate, and she’d burn worlds to protect them.”

“What moron tried attacking him?” Ciaphas inquired.

“I didn't get their names. Mother dragged them into her personal universe before I could devour them to gain their memories.” Paxton said, before cocking his head. “Let's see...oh, dear...she's just sent me a little peek of what she's doing to those poor bastards. None of them have skin anymore...or faces, for that matter.”

“Nothing any of us haven't seen before.” Hedrian said casually.

“Oh, she's getting creative now. I'll spare you the details.” Paxton said. “I failed to mention the second thing that made her angry today. Genevieve Aristide is alive. You know, the President of Armacham?”

“Yes, we are aware of who she is.” Ciaphas said, getting himself more coffee and a doughnut or two as well.

“Mother is hunting her.” Paxton said. “I wouldn't want to be Aristide right now...”

Alma, meanwhile, was making her way through Coastal Falls. As she walked, vehicles exploded, glass shattered, and random people burst into flames. The sounds of her rampage interrupted Lettuce and Patsy's post-coital snuggling, albeit the latter knew something was up.

“I, erm...” Lettuce said.

“No, I get it. You need to go do Ranger things. But I'm coming with you.” she said firmly.

“B-but Alma is dangerous, Patsy! You could get killed if you cross her!”

Patsy's face turned into a determined smile. “...You're forgetting who you're dealing with here, bird boy. I live dangerous.”

At seeing his newfound friend-with-benefits' determination to help him do whatever he could to halt Alma (a task he thought impossible), Lettuce let out a frustrated sigh. “Fine.” And so, he promptly morphed, and with Patsy following him, he ran across the rooftops of Coastal Falls, hoping to track Alma's location. The key word was 'hoping'.

He only had to follow the screams and explosions. He and Patsy soon came across what appeared to be a warzone, a pile of what used to be cars set ablaze, mangled bodies of men, women, and children, and...things. Horrible, eldritch things. They were eating the corpses. In most circumstances, Lettuce would have just run away, and indeed he was about to until Patsy grabbed him by his neck, or whatever passed for it, and glared at him. “You're not turning back now, Lettuce.” the mongoose girl growled fiercely. “Wanna know why? Because that's what a

coward does. Are you a coward? Are you going to risk the lives of whoever else is in Alma's path just for your own personal safety?"

"N-no..." the green bird choked out before Patsy let him go, throwing him to the ground.

"Then press on, soldier." Patsy commanded; had Blackhawk seen this, he might have been reminded of a female Cort. "That's an order."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" Lettuce responded as he made his way further into the wreckage, Patsy following him once again. It wasn't long before they encountered Alma.

"Go. Home." Alma hissed moments later.

"Listen, we mean you no harm." Patsy said calmly. "We just want you to stop your rampage without fighting."

"Uhhhh, Patsy? Do you realize who you're talking to?" Lettuce asked. "Alma cannot be talked down easily."

"I know that." the mongoose girl said. "I'm just trying to not get either of us killed."

"I will say it again: Go. Home." Alma said, her voice still a low hiss. "Or I'll kill you both. Slowly."

"I'd do as she says, Patsy." Lettuce warned.

"...Just tell me one thing, Alma." Patsy said. "What do you want?"

"Revenge."

"On who?" Patsy asked.

"Everyone." Alma said simply. "I want revenge on a cruel, uncaring world."

"...You don't have to. There are still good people in the world, you just have to look for them." Patsy whispered.

"Do not speak as if you know my pain." Alma spat. "You know nothing of pain, nothing of suffering."

"I don't know your pain. I don't know your suffering. Tell me, Alma. Did you ever know your birth mother? Did you ever have to suffer under the army boots of a former Commander from the Marines as you got older because he disapproved of the woman you were becoming?" Patsy challenged. "Don't tell me I don't know pain and suffering as a way to justify your hateful, nihilistic bullshit."

“Six days.” Alma whispered, finally appearing in the form of a little girl. “Six days. That’s how long it took me to die when my father shut off my life support. My anger kept me alive for six days. They decided to kill me because I had linked my mind with that of my son, Paxton, causing a Synchronicity Event. I did this because I couldn’t stand to see what those bastards were doing to my children. Forcing them to fight, day after day, and beating them senseless when they failed. My two sons grew to hate each other as time went on, and only Paxton wanted anything to do with me. My other son ignored my voice. I was 15 when I gave birth to my older son, and 16 when I gave birth to Paxton. I never even got to hold them, or my other children, which I didn’t even know I had. My own father provided some of the seed used to impregnate me. I wasn’t even awake when they inseminated me. I was locked inside an underground Vault two days before I turned eight.” Immediately, Patsy was horrified by what she had said before, nearly breaking down into tears.

“I-I am so, so, so, so, so sorry...I had no idea...”

“No, you didn’t.” Alma said, turning away. She was then, much to her surprise, pulled into a hug. Patsy held Alma close to her, crying softly. Alma hugged her back, slowly beginning to calm down...before the other Rangers arrived, followed by numerous police officers and soldiers, all of whom were shouting at her to step away and put up her hands.

“...Oh, dear fucking God.” Lettuce said dryly, facepalming.

“Burn.” Alma whispered. Instantly, everyone, aside from the Rangers and Patsy, burst into flames. Patsy stared at Alma, fearing for her own life. The Rangers scrambled to put out the blaze.

“...What are you...?” the pink-haired mongoose asked, terrified.

“The Mother of the Apocalypse.” Alma said, before walking away, stepping over the burning, thrashing bodies and humming softly to herself.