Misadventures In the Multiverse 3

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Chapter 1: Home We Wished For?

A new day dawns, a new story starts. Clyde slowly opens his eyes looking around at his surroundings. He had almost forgotten everything that had happened it felt almost like a dream. For so long he was trapped in his boring world with no purpose and meaning, but he had found that, and more, and now he was experiencing his reward. He looks over at the still sleeping Raleigh softly clinging to him in their makeshift camp with a smile, and then out towards the world that was now their home.

It was so foreign and yet familiar. The sky was bright pink, small floating islands seemed to dot the landscape. Trees also shared this coloring, everything else from the grass to the dirt, and mountains were white almost like the place wasn't complete just yet. Animals scurried around outside almost looking as he would expect but a quick readjustment showed that they barely resembled the creature he expected to see.

Raleigh slowly rustled herself awake looking up at Clyde with the same kind of smile. “Good morning my love.” She said only to quickly choke unable to keep a straight face. “Sorry, that sounded kinda cringe. Just wanted to try it out.” She said with an apologetic smirk. “I mean I figured pet names would never really be your thing, but don't give a guy a heart attack like that,” Clyde said slightly

annoyed but he leaned in kissing her anyway which she accepted with no complaints. After a brief silent moment, Raleigh jumped up filled with excitement. “Enough sappy shit let's do some exploring we still got a ton of places to venture to!” With that, she pulled him up rather forcefully dragging him along on another adventure.

As they were walking a random crab-like monster sprung up clawing at them, it was around their size, but neither of them seemed to be concerned sideswiping it without letting go of each other. The crab-like monster scuttled toward them, its claws clicking furiously and emitting faint bursts of light, as if it were powered by tiny fireworks. Raleigh didn’t hesitate, kicking it so hard it soared into the pink sky, trailing sparkles as it disappeared. It was expected of Raleigh, but it would seem Clyde too had come a long way in strength. “So where are we going this time?” He asked her as they neared the top of a hill. The ground seemed to react to their prescience showing the ever-so-slight shimmer of light.

“I was thinking we hunt some game, and then we do some more, experimental exploration.” She said giddy. “What do you mean by experimental?” He asked with a wary tone. “You'll just have to see.” She said letting go of his hand to catch one of the animals nearby for them. He just sighs now at the higher vantage point able to see all the possible locations. There were plenty of places to explore still, but here he could see the world did have an edge the ground they were currently on was one of the floating islands wrapped in a seemingly endless sky. The place was pretty big, but compared to other places they had visited they were bound to explore it all in due time.

He knew how restless Raleigh could get, was this the perfect home crafted just for Raleigh by the Wishing Door? He wasn't so sure, and that wasn't even addressing their oversight of not having a way off the world if they ever needed to, they never did get back The Hopper, something she still grumbled about every now, and then. He was just a little worried, that things would end up like the future versions of themselves they met. “Clyde... Clyde! Pay attention to me!” Raleigh said squishing his face in annoyance breaking him out of his contemplative trance.

“Sorry just lost in thought.” He said rejoining her she had taken down a large boar creature, already having it over the fire. He sighs taking over the task of cooking as Raleigh wasn't the best at it, she didn't have the patience most of the time. Raleigh drooled starving. All this time together, and he still didn't know how she fit so much food in her smaller by comparison body, did it have something to do with her more Cyborg side? “Calm down it will be ready soon enough you want it to taste good, and not give you food poisoning right?” He said with a sigh.

“Food is food.” She protested. A noise caught both of their attention of another animal approaching. This may be their home, but it still held dangers even if they weren't the toughest. “What do you think that's gonna be?” Clyde asked half curious, mostly just focusing on cooking still. “Desert!” Raleigh answered licking her lips and preparing a spear she made out of wood. The bushes rustled like a large behemoth of some kind was approaching but instead of a monster, a small, fox-like creature with glowing blue markings stepped out. Its oversized ears twitched as it looked up at them with wide, curious eyes. The creature tilted its head, its luminous tail swishing slowly behind it as if it were studying them.

Even amongst the other monsters they had encountered this one stood out in a way they couldn't quite place. Raleigh put down her spear looking at it with admiration. “Aw look at it. It's...” She started to say only to get lost for words. “Adorable, but you know that doesn't mean it's safe,” Clyde said finishing her thought. Even still she picked it up the fox-like creature didn't seem to like that, but made only minor half-hearted attempts to remove itself from her grasp giving up halfway through. “See it's fine. The little guy probably just wanted some food.” She said with an almost baby-like voice.

The fox yelped almost like it was responding to her words. He looked at it curiously seeing what felt like intelligence behind its eyes. “Well I suppose we can share, but he's taking part of your portion,” Clyde said taking only a small bit of the meat for himself. She groans but gives in giving it a small part herself keeping the biggest chunk for her. After all the food was gone the fox quickly scampered off without another sound. She looked a little sad that it already ran off, but hopeful it would

return in the future. She stood up. “Now let's do that thing I was talking about.” She said as she excitedly ran off. Clyde followed her struggling to keep up with her until they reached the very edge of the island.

“Alright so here is the plan.” She said handing him a rope. “I'm going to jump down there and see what it's like below the island so hold on tight ok.” She said ready to jump off right away, Clyde quickly gripped her arm eyes wide. “Are you insane! What if you die?” He said like it was one of her stupider ideas. “I swear, sometimes you're the dumbest smart person I've ever met.” He said mocking her.

“First off, hurtful, second It will be fine, Probably.” She said still gassed up and ready to do it. Clyde took a deep breath picked up a rock, and simply dropped it off the edge. He then looked at her as they both listened for some kinda sign it hit bottom, and like he expected that sound never came. “Listen Clyde exploration sometimes takes bold risks this is one of those times, and I trust you to keep me from falling.” She said confidently. “Raleigh you are like two hundred plus pounds at least,” Clyde said as his face dropped. “Did you just call me fat?” She said frowning a little upset for real. “Alright fine I won’t do it.” She said pouting standing too close to the edge even still. Before she can move away the ground gives way causing her to fall before she can grab onto something. “Clyde!” She shouts as she falls to the endless sky below.

“Raleigh!” He yells frantically as he is barely able to grab it in time, and like he feared the sudden weight shift is hard for him to hold onto almost making him fall off as well, and then the line snaps. His heart breaks briefly thinking he might have just lost her, and yet before he can even really process it he can hear her faint screaming from above. He looks up seeing her falling Landing right on his face ass first. “I was right!” Raleigh said triumphantly. Clyde groaned trying to talk under her posterior. “I can't tell if this is heaven or hell.” He said muffled. She quickly gets up blushing.

“It's about to be hell if you keep being perverted... You do make a pretty good chair, and or landing pad though.” She said still unsure of herself when it comes to things like that. “I think I earned

as much after having to deal with that, you could've actually just died there.” He said more upset with her now. She sighs helping him up. “You're right... it was stupid for me to do that, but we still have these don't we.” She said trying to change the subject as she raised her left arm and his right. The arms that held the aspects after the wish the symbols stayed on their arms not fading away like they both got matching arm tattoos or something. “Isn't it more of a lingering power if we still have any of it at all? I don't think we should be testing that too much.” He said in protest, but was a little curious about why it ended up like that, and why it was only those that now appear like that, was it because he had the arm for the longest?

“Clyde the fun killer over here.” Raleigh whines. “More like Clyde, the make sure we don't die from being stupid.” He fires back. “Think about how you'd feel if it was reversed.” He said trying to get her to understand. She blushes a little seemingly thinking about the wrong thing. “Not that part!” He shouted. She frowned looking more softly at him. “I get it, I'm sorry.” She said walking off a little. Even after everything she still got ahead of herself sometimes and regretted it now.

He stopped her taking her hand once more. “I still love you. You are my everything, I was just worried.” He said reassuring her. “I know.” She said lightly resting her head on his shoulder. “Let's head back to the camp.” He said this time leading her. “Speaking of that, Aren't you a little tired of sleeping in a makeshift tent? I kinda miss having a bed.” Raleigh asked. “Well yeah, but... I'm not exactly an architect and it's not like we can hire a contractor without a way off this world.” He said more speculative. Almost like the world responded they could hear the faint and familiar hum in the distance of a machine.

Raleigh's eyes lit up. “I think I know what that is!” She said rushing off before he could say anything. He chased after her both of them stopping to see none other than The Hopper parked right next to their little camp. “It's here, it's here!” Raleigh said hugging its metal frame and nuzzling it like it's some sort of creature itself. “But why is it here? Who brought it here, and why.” Clyde said nervously. She took a deep breath realizing that was a problem both of them steeling themselves to go

inside ready for a fight.

They approached the door as it opened up cautiously entering its confines, yet inside they found no one. They dropped their guards looking around seeing that was virtually unchanged from the last time they saw it. Upon a closer look, the center console held the answer. Noir's multi-tool broken from their clash lay there, and on the floor were locks of freshly cut black hair. “But why?” Raleigh asked completely at a loss on why her clone would do this after everything.

For as long as they knew her she didn't seem to want anything but to kill or take Raleigh's place. Clyde looked at the hair on the ground. “Do you think this is her way of saying she had a change of heart?” He asked seeing that she wasn't exactly around to explain. “I don't know. Wait you don't think she booby-trapped it or something do you?” She asked in sudden concern. “Would you do that to your Hopper?” Clyde asked. “Well no but... better safe than sorry right.” She started to search the ship for any signs of such a thing.

Clyde walked towards his room to do the same but not expecting to find anything. His eyes widened in shock upon seeing the mess. “The hell did she do in...” He started to say quickly hushing himself like he didn't want her to hear. Raleigh perked up walking over. “What do you mean...” She asked as he slammed the sliding door closed blocking any entry with his body. “Oh, nothing I forgot I did that before we lost it.” He said hoping she would believe him. “What is in there Clyde,” Raleigh said grabbing his shoulder and glaring at him. “Nothing, let's move on she might have left something in your room right, or maybe Mark's?” He said trying to get her to drop it.

She sighs. “You are right.” She said calmly entering her room and closing the door. Clyde sighed in relief about to push it open again only for her to already reopen the door with scornful eyes like she was waiting for that seeing that he hadn't yet she closed her door again. Clyde paused waiting to see if she would stay this time. After a moment he reached toward the panel to open it again only for her to open her door again. “Enough! Let me see what is inside!” She said lunging at him trying to rip him away. He knew she was stronger, but he couldn't let her see, so he wore his suit fully to give him

an extra boost. He was still struggling to stop her.

“Why are you so adamant!” She demanded. “It's personal alright!” He said pleading for her to give in. “The hell did she do!” She said tearing him away from the door and rushing inside. She sees what looks like some sorta doll with Clyde's face on it. “Welcome back babe.” It says with a synthesized voice that seems supposed to resemble Clyde's. Her face gets redder than he had ever seen. “I would... I would never do something like that! This must be some glitch in her clone mind or something.” She said in protest. “It’s... weirdly flattering? I guess?” He says trying to reassure her.

“Come lay with me, my queen. I can tell you how amazing, and cool you are.” The Robot said seeming not to have a mind of any kind just saying random lines. She covers her face in embarrassment running out of the ship. Clyde looks at his counterpart. “OK, that's enough of you.” As he stared down at it. “You're the hottest girl in every universe.” It says. “I might steal that one from you. I can't tell if she is creepy or sad.” He said, disconnecting it from a power source and dismantling it. “I Guess I'll tease her about it later.” He said smiling softly looking over in amusement at the bat that was still kinda just lying there even after almost four years of not using it.

He takes the disassembled parts outside setting them next to their camp. “Raleigh come out I took care of it.” She peaks from behind a tree like a scared animal. “Come on it's fine everyone's got a little bit of a strange side right? Come down here don't you want to try and find a contractor or something a house would be nice, wouldn't it? Not sure how we would pay for it though.” He said looking down.

She relents coming down thinking it over herself. “I bet we could find someone over in Porta Nexus. As for payment.” She said only to walk off toward the cliffside He followed her trying to see what she was getting at. “Materials. We probably have all sorts of them in this world. She scans the rocks as well as some of the other things around into a device recording them all as information to barter with. “Wow, we should've tried this sooner everything here is so raw and unrefined more than I've ever seen on well... any world.” She said in awe. “Which means what exactly?” He asked.

“It means we are sitting on a gold mine, no more than that the whole mountain is the gold. We can make a lot just from a little bit of it, but we need to be careful. It might attract people we don't want.” She said wary. Clyde looked up at the sky. “What about just some air particles? That seems simple enough to transport, and maybe throw off the scent?” He suggests.

“Ah yes selling premium air.” She jokes waving her hands as if to visualize it. “It sounds stupid, but this stuff is no joke. It might be worth a shot.” She further elaborated. “Well, what are we waiting for I'm low-key a little eager to get back to civilization for a while. With that, they took a vacuumed sealed jar from The Hopper sucking the air instead and lifting it off to Porta Nexus.

The port was as busy as it always was even more so with all the rebuilding going on people on every corner seemed to be hard at work repairing everything. “Wow, what has it been three months or so since the siege? They have come a long way,” he said looking down at his torn clothing. They didn't have the luxury of regular bathing, and other wonders of modern life in their new home yet. “I guess we kinda have been running around like cavemen though.” He said a little embarrassed now that he realized it.

“You say that like anyone is going to care, people have their things going on they aren't going to notice.” She said confidently only for someone to point at them in shock. “Oh my god, it's Orion, and Captain Raleigh!” They shouted as a crowd started to form. “You're forgetting we are like semi-famous now,” Clyde said as they both ran in the other direction. “Wait come back we just want to thank you!” The man said but they kept running. They duck into a crowd losing them. “Let's head for the guild I think we will be safe there, and maybe we can sell our goods,” Raleigh said taking his hand leading him that way.

Aion Anderson spits out his drink just being told that Clyde and Raleigh had been spotted in the city by Crow who is with him now with Tristan for some reason. “Well what are you waiting for we need to get an interview with them like yesterday. That was the biggest missed opportunity of the last year. “I'm not sure if they will be super receptive to the idea even if we do find them. I didn't spend a

ton of time with them, but it didn't seem like they wanted that kind of attention.” Tristan nervously said rubbing his back.

“Nonsense that girl loves the attention. You didn't see her in Coliseuma she was eating it up.” Aion said countering. “Now hurry before they disappear back into whatever hole they were hiding in. Tristan sighs nodding his head and rushing out the door while Crow is already flying out the window to search for them. “I was starting to think we'd never see them again. We owe them you know.” Mia said from the corner where she had been silently listening this whole time.

Chapter 2: Summoning of Omnihack

Rebbecca's boss looks at the blue endless sky of his world sighing. A robotic woman with a sleek white design walks closer to him. Her hair is white with rainbow-like highlights that seem to glow her face childlike, yet lacking any sort of emotion. “Mainframe, it's time... Send for them.” He said not bothering to face her. “All of them sir?” She asked tilting her head. He gives her no answer and yet she seems to understand leaving his presence.

Elsewhere, a blue-haired man wearing a matching neon jacket and sunglasses stands over a body that seems to be withering away. “But how could a mere mortal best me?” The being said weakly.

The man lowers his glasses looking more annoyed than anything. “Heh? You gods are all the same, ya think just because you have some fancy code no one can touch ya. I've fought street thugs tougher than you.” He said disrespectfully spitting on the ground near the god. “Curse you.” The god said as it vanished completely.

The man in blue smirked swirling the energy of the world around his hand and condensing all of it into a small orb leaving him in a dark void. His arm started to blare with the sound of an alarm or notification. Just like Rebbecca both his arms were mechanical. The man groans clicking on it as a hologram of the robot appears. “All colored members of Omnihack are to return to base immediately for a meeting. Priority level delta, Scenario 234.” The Robot said ending the call as soon as it started. He sighed slipping the orb into a bag and seeming to reluctantly comply.

A woman in red is in the middle of a battlefield surrounded by an army. She had the same aesthetic as the man's mechanical arms, and all, but her hair, and jacket were red. The army fired everything they had at her some closing in with melee weapons, but a red holographic-like force field prevented them from making any progress. She sighed almost as if she was bored by it just wanting them to give up already. She gets the same message soon after. She cracks her neck and pops her knuckles even though they are mechanical. “Alright looks like I gotta wrap this up with a speed run.” She said smirking rushing forward.

Other members get the same message. A bulky man in orange is testing explosives, while another person in yellow is performing live on stage as some sort of idol, all of them answer the call leaving to meet with the boss. All of them arrive in a room utilitarian by design leaving nothing but what is required. The blue one sees the red growling. “The hell are you doing here Akane!” He said as he got closer staring her down. “What does it look like dumb ass the boss called us all here.” She said growling back seemingly ready to take him on right here.

“Now there is no need to fight. We are all here for a greater purpose after all. Isn't that spiby?” A man in purple said smirking with a duplicitous smile. Both of them turned to him more confused than

angry. “Spiby? What the hell does that even mean old man, you should stop trying to relate to the kids with random lingo, and go back to the nursing home.” Akane said. He tried to brush it off but it clearly upset him.

The one in yellow lounged on a nearby chair looking adorable and very small in comparison to the large man next to them. “Look at these losers they can't stop being at each other's throats for five seconds.” They laughed. “Shut up Elliot!” All three of them said together. The large Orange man just tilted his head not seeming to get it. “You are just jealous,” Yellow said with a snorting laugh. All of them break out into a shouting match until the faint footsteps sound in the distance. All of them go silent right away a few of them even sweating out of nervousness.

The boss enters the room with Mainframe, and Rebbecca at his side. Rebbecca goes off to the corner to sit alone while Mainframe and the boss walk towards the room's projection board wasting no time. “Time grows short, The Once, and Future Foe is just beyond the horizon, and we are not prepared.” He said only for Vincent to but in as the others distance themselves slightly. “You say that, but we have done all sorts of plannin for you how can this threat you're always yapping about stand up to something like that? Is this not enough.” He said pulling out the orb of energy that had the power of an entire universe within.

The boss walks closer to him calmly taking it from him. “This is nothing.” He said as he walked back to the center of the room placing it with countless others. “The threat we face is far stronger than a single universe. You should already know this.” He said with a sigh. “Well it's just... some of us have never met this future foe you are always talking about...” Akane said nervously in his defense. “They are terrifying. Trust me when I say this isn't good enough.” The man in Purple said seeming to shiver from the mere thought. Orange and Rebbecca seem to do the same.

“There will be no more questions on whether what we are doing is enough. It's simple, we need to be ready, and that means doing everything possible to prevent its rise. We finally have the key to all of it.” He said showing a hologram of a pink planet. All of them look in awe seemingly able to tell

there is something special about it that not just anyone would notice. “After The Empire's Project Deforestation we were able to obtain a copy of the seed, but replicating it was another matter we did not have the power necessary to do so. This world does. Trojan will be in charge of hacking it. However, all of you will have missions just as crucial to it.”

“Why is it always her? She failed her last mission. You favor her way too much boss. If any of us did that you wouldn't hesitate to erase us.” Yellow argued glaring at Rebbecca. “I didn't fail my mission. I simply didn't make the wish for myself, it worked out perfectly did it not?” Rebbecca said firing back. “You say that, but those two punks are still alive and kicking. Let me at 'em they don't look that tough.” Vincent said

The Boss raised his hand silencing them. “Enough. The reason she gets more... leeway is simple. She is better than all of you. None of you compare in usefulness like she does.” The Boss said pacing around the room only to stop. “But you do make a good point.” Before anyone could react he appeared next to Rebbecca grabbing a hold of her and ripping off one of her arms as she screamed in pain. “What are you...” She started to say as he ripped off the other.

“Perhaps a punishment is in order.” He said lifting her by the head and opening a portal as he dangled her inside over a seemingly deserted island. “Start from zero, prove to everyone why you are the best.” The boss said as she struggled dropping her down to the world below as monsters already surrounded her helpless body. The portal closed as he turned to face them again brushing his hand free of dirt. “Are you satisfied?” He asked as all of them looked in shock even more terrified than before. Yellow just nodded like a deer in headlights. “Good, all of you should have been sent your assignments now, so go.” He said leaving the room with Mainframe without another word.

Rebbecca breathed heavily already in great pain from the sudden impact of the height she fell this world she was thrown into lacked any sort of technology, and dangerous-looking beasts were already closing in on her. She struggled to sit up trying to remind herself she had no arms barely able to rise to her feet because of the pain. She grits her teeth looking up at the sky. “Ok, old man. I'll take your

little test.” She said sounding angrier than she ever had her cool, and playful persona vanishing into the wind.

Chapter 3: From Priceless Air to Tasteless Tea

“What is this? There is no way you...” a woman said, unable to believe her eyes as she looked at the specs of the air Raleigh and Clyde brought. I'm going to need a moment, apologies.” She said, quickly leaving the room. They both looked at each other, unsure what it meant. They had come to the guild to have it appraised and sold something that, despite them working for them for a while, Raleigh had rarely done or understood its process.

The woman returns with Garrick and another man who goes to study the condensed air with interest. “Well, I'll be damned. I thought this must be some elaborate scam until I saw you two were

involved. Looks like the Multiverse has been treating you well as of late.” He said rubbing his beard. “Incredible. This supposed air. It's like nothing I've ever seen I can't even really understand what I'm looking at, and the readings are off the chart.” The man said in shock that it wasn't some outlandish lie.

“So what does that mean exactly,” Clyde asked. Garrick thinks it over choosing his words carefully. “This energy it's... priceless, put simply we can't afford it. Where in the Multiverse did you get it?” He asked. “That's a Secret,” Raleigh said defensively. “And you should keep it that way if you are asking me. So why are you bringing it here?” The Guild Master said unsure why. She sighs. “Well because we'd lack the funds to buy a house, and well... I think you're the only one I can trust to not abuse something like this. We don't have to sell it at full price.” She further explained.

“A house huh? Look at you two finally settling down. I'm proud of you.” He said with a smile. “We are not settling. We are going to have lots of crazy adventures, but we need a home base!” She argued. “Right.. listen I don't know if The Multiverse is ready for this. I can tell by your faces you feel the same.” Garrick said as Raleigh looked down with hesitation. Selling it was a means to an end but was it really a good idea? “Aren't you supposed to try and haggle us for something so life-changing instead of swaying us?” Clyde asked skeptical of his intentions.

Garrick sighs walking toward the window. “You're right, but I can't help but wonder the cost. This energy potentially could help a lot of people, but it could also... well do more. How about its we forget about the air for now, and I'll lay the groundwork for its inclusion.” He goes on to explain. “but that doesn't answer our current financial woes.” Raleigh fired back. He walked closer sitting down to face her. “Well, that's another matter. I suppose you were never clued in but I offered bounties for the higher-ranking members of the siege, and the while man masquerading as The Reaper isn't dead you were the one who took him down Orion, as well as some of his Honor Guard. It should say you up with plenty of capital for something like that.”

Both of their eyes widen in shock having no clue he did such a thing. Both of them celebrated by embracing each other Clyde only breaking out of his excitement after processing all his words.

“Wait they didn't execute that guy yet?” He asked surprised. “The plan was to do that, but they are still thinking it over. They are afraid it might make him some sort of Martyr.” The guild master sighs. “Who would think an evil man like that was anything?” Raleigh said a little upset. “Who can say,” Garrick answered.

He rose from the chair again. “It was nice to see you both, but I'm swamped right now with work for both The Guild and The Port. Go get them their credits.” He said motioning for the woman to go do that. The man studying the air looked in shock. “Hold on how could you reject this? It could change everything.” He said at a loss on why he wouldn't. He turned to face him with a stern face. “Because it can change everything. You won't breathe a word of it until the time is right.” He ordered. The man frowned but nodded his head in compliance secretly making a copy of the information onto another device behind his back.

Garrick started to walk out the door. “It was great to see you both again good luck on your search you may need it with how busy things are right now.” He said vaguely eluding to something. “Both of you take care of each other alright.” He said disappearing. “What do you think that meant?” Clyde asked only for Raleigh to shrug.

Not long after the woman returned with a case of money placing it before them. They open it up seeing countless gold bars with the symbol of the guild on it. “Wait just how much was the bounty?” Clyde said in amazement. “1 Billion central credits for The Reaper, 1 million for each honor guard member.” She said flatly sounding a bit jealous. Raleigh started to do the math in her head. “So a Billion, and 2 million? Oh my gods with that will could build a whole empire.” She said almost not believing it. “Do we even need all this money? It's not like it means much other than construction on a house in our new home.” Clyde said with mixed feelings it was a life-changing amount of money, but with their new lives at least in their current form money didn't matter that much.

“I guess you're right, but It wouldn't hurt to sit on it if that ever changes.” With that, she pulled out a multi-cube placing it all inside as it condensed itself back into a small cube doing the same to the

air. “Congratulations. Is there anything else I can help you two with?” The woman asks seemingly much more intimidated by them now. Raleigh is about to shake her head only for Clyde to grab her shoulder stopping her. “There is one thing.”

They leave the guild in new outfits hoping this would be enough to keep people from noticing them. Raleigh of course wouldn't part with her hat but the rest of her outfit was more casual than normal a Hawaiian shirt that fit on her loosely. Clyde wore a simple black jacket and some jeans with some glasses. “I'm not sure this is enough.” He sighs hesitantly looking around to see if anyone notices.

“You would be surprised how different someone can appear with just glasses on.” She said pulling them off his face and posing trying to look cute. “You know like that super person you mentioned that one time. He smiles at her as she hands them back. “I was kinda mocking the fact that no one noticed he was that super person, Let’s just hope the trope works for us. We could use a little suspension of disbelief right about now. Should we head to the closest construction contractor?” She nods as they head off just to do that.

“No, we can't take on any more jobs right now.” The first one they find says. “Why?” Raleigh said looking a little angry. “Are you serious? Look around little ms every construction crew in the city is swamped trying to finish reconstruction by Founders Day.” He said looking at her like she was stupid. “Hey, I'm not little!” She said growling as Clyde held her back. “What's Founders Day?” He asked curiously. “It's this little shindig the port is throwing to celebrate it. They say it's supposed to symbolize peace and renewal after the siege and all that, but if ya ask me the big guys upstairs just want to brag. But I ain't complaining we are all making good money from it.” The man explained.

“And you are saying that everyone in town is going to more or less give the same answer?” He asked the man still holding onto Raleigh like she was a dog. “Yeah probably. Look I'd love to help you guys out but it just ain't in the cards right now best of luck with your search.” He said walking into a back room as she steamed. “I bet they won't be saying that if we give them 10 times the going rate.” She said in anger pulling out the cube holding the money. “Calm down Raleigh I'm sure we can find

someone no need to throw all our money down the drain.” He said in protest.

“You said it yourself what good is having it.” She fired back he just sighed. “Maybe it's past me talking but you're a little too impulsive with money I think I should hold onto it.” He Suggested holding out his hand. She groans slapping it into his hand. “Find but we are going to search tirelessly until we find someone.” She stormed out the door before he could say anything else.

“No.” The next one said closing the door in their face, the next one did the same. They find another one quickly after but before they even have a chance to knock they see the door just has the word no taped to it. They sigh going all over town only to hear the same answer from everyone. The last person they go to is testing Raleigh's patience. “Ugh if you are all busy who isn't!” She said in answer. The man looks down with hesitation. “Well, I understand your need it's just. Well, it looks like you understand why now.” The man sighs like he is debating saying something but isn't sure. “There is one place that might help. I used to work for him a long time ago.” The man finally spits out.

“Is there something wrong with this place?” Clyde asked raising an eyebrow. “No, no they are one of if not the best... well... you'll understand when you see it.” He said writing the address on a sheet of paper and handing it to Raleigh before slinking away. “Why would the best not be working on construction for Founders Day,” Clyde asked skeptically. “Only one way to find out,” Raleigh said back.

They arrive at the location both looking at the sign out front with confusion. It is a huge sign that says Wainwright Family Construction but the Family Construction part of the sign is half hazardly covered by a banner that just says Tea. It looks as though it was done in a fit of rage. Both of them nervously enter not sure what they will find. “Welcome!” A bunch of burly men all say in unison as they rush up to them nervously. “How can we help you today? What sort of tea are you in the market for.” One of them says trying to act refined, but his gruff exterior makes it difficult to take seriously.

“We were wondering if we could have you build something for us,” Clyde said still very confused. One of the men in the back just stomps his foot in anger rushing off in frustration as the one

talking takes a deep breath. “Oh, it seems a lot of people confuse us for a construction company, but that is a misunderstanding. It is not like we are an established name with over 40 years of history or anything. No, we are just a simple tea shop always have been.” He said still trying to sound fancy but with more frustration behind his eyes. Before either of them can say anything they start to push them toward a table holding out the chairs for them and forcing them to sit.

“How about some Earl Gray everyone loves Earl Gray.” The man said as another bulky man came in pouring it with his pinky out. Both of them still seem really confused but pick up the tea and try it spitting it out right away at each other's faces. “What is this it tastes awful,” Raleigh said in anger. “It's like a mix of hot water and despair,” Clyde said in disgust.

“Oh yeah, it's a bit of an acquired taste trust me drink enough of it and you'll start to love it. True Tea lovers know all about it.” He said as calm as he could but it was obvious that he was struggling to keep up the act. Another one of the men throws down his teapot in frustration. “Enough of this. I thought things would turn themselves around by now, but no we are still pretending to be a damn tea shop screw this. Wainwright Beyond has been trying to hire me for years.” The man said storming out of the store.

“Wainwright Beyond? Care to explain what this is all about?” Clyde asked a little annoyed. He looked like he was about to cave and explain everything only for another man to walk in he had bright pink alien-like skin and a short stature. It looked like he had seen many days. “Listen, kids. Regardless of what this place used to be it ain't that anymore. If you want some Tea we will be happy to serve you some, but otherwise, get out.” He said more calmly than some of the others. “but boss, are you ok with this our tea isn't even very good.” The man from before said in quite a defeat. “It doesn't matter we don't have the license or the permits anymore. You boys need to move on already Chester was right you would all excel at Wainwright. Leave a stubborn old man to die already.” He said solemnly walking out of the room.

The man looked down as did all the others in the room defeated unsure how to feel. “Sorry

about him." They said apologetically. "What up with that rude old guy." Raleigh groaned half interested but mostly annoyed they are having to deal with it after all the other rejections. The man hesitates, glancing nervously at his coworkers before speaking up. "Look, Mr. Wainwright built this city, literally. Half the foundations you're walking on right now are his work. They used to say, 'It ain't right unless it's Wainwright.' But... things changed." "What changed?" Clyde asked, leaning forward.

The man sighed, the weight of years of loyalty evident in his voice. "His son. They used to work together, but the kid wanted to innovate and try new techniques. The boss wasn't having it. They fought. Next thing we know, the son pulls some shady move, gets his dad's license revoked, and starts his own company—Wainwright Beyond." Raleigh's fists clenched. "So what? Did he just give up? Stuck all of you here serving bad tea while the son runs off and takes all the glory?"

Another man interjected, his voice tinged with both pride and regret. "We didn't stay because of the tea, lady. We stayed because of him. He gave us purpose. Even if he's lost his way, we're hoping one day he'll find it again." Raleigh stood abruptly, determination flaring in her eyes. "This is stupid. I'm gonna go talk to him right now." "Wait, Raleigh," Clyde said, grabbing her arm. "We need him to say yes, not just yell at us to leave. Maybe take a second to think this through?" Raleigh shook him off. "I'll think when we've got someone who can build us a damn house!" She stormed toward the back room, leaving Clyde and the crew exchanging uncertain glances.

Mr. Wainwright was sitting in his room with a sigh looking over at the desk with a bit of longing. He averted his eyes like he wanted to remove any thoughts about it from his mind, but he couldn't help but be drawn to it. He walked over to the workstation with half-finished blueprints with a smile taking out a pencil and putting the final touches on it. Even if he couldn't build anymore he could do this. But Raleigh busted in soon after making the smile fall as he tried to cover up his work.

"What's the big idea you can just break into people's room like you own the damn place missy!" He said with anger. "Are you seriously content just sitting here while your son goes out there tainting your legacy!" He growls. "What do you know about me, kid? Leave my son's name out of your

mouth.” He said in anger surprisingly defending him. “You built half this city, and now you’re sitting here pretending you don’t care? That’s bull shit, and you know it. He stole your name and turned it into a brand. Why won't prove to everyone that it still means something?”

“Because I don't deserve that!” The old man said causing her to pause. “I don't know what the boy's told you but... This is my fault. I pushed my son too far I was too stubborn to realize that. I deserve everything he did to me, and despite all I put him through he's doing well, I couldn't be prouder.” He said looking down with conflicting feelings. She sighs taking in the new information with uncertainty not knowing who to believe now. She opened her mouth to fire back but stopped. His voice wasn’t just angry, it was... proud. She hadn’t expected that. “And what about them? You Crew. Look at them, they’re still here, waiting for you to get back to the building. If you don’t care about your legacy, at least care about theirs.” She said pointing to a group picture she saw on the shelf of them.

The man sighs. “They should've moved on a long time ago. Listen even if I was to give it another go I'm legally not allowed to anymore.” He started to say seeming a little more open to it now. Clyde walks in leaning against the door frame. “It wouldn't be legal in Porta Nexus.” He said crossing his arms. “What are you getting at boy? That's what I said, isn't it? “We don't live in Porta Nexus their laws don't dictate our home. We have plenty of resources, and no limitations on space at the moment. You could come to build yourselves a place there too. You could start over just like we did do what you always wanted. You don’t have to keep punishing yourself, Mr. Wainwright. Come to our world and do what you love. Prove to yourself, not anyone else, that you’re still the best. ” Clyde suggested hoping Raleigh wouldn't be against the idea.

She looked conflicted but ultimately accepted the answer. His crew was just outside the door listening. “Boss please it looks like these two got an opportunity for us that doesn't come around that often.” One of them said. He sighs still seemingly reluctant. His eyes darting all over his room looking at his tools, The Blueprints, and even a framed picture of him and his son both smiling. “I just... What the hell I've had about enough of this awful tea nonsense as you guys. Let's do it.”

Chapter 4: Building More Than Walls

Mr. Wainwright looked around at Clyde and Raleigh's home with worry. Some of his confidence already left him. “You know when you said you didn't live in Porta Nexus I didn't expect for you to bring me to a place like this. I've never worked in an environment that didn't at least have a little civility to it.” He said with a sigh. “Not up to the challenge?” Clyde asked. “No, no, I welcome it even. It's just. Different then expected. I'll have to approach building here in a new way I think.”

“Great I already have the perfect spot picked out.” Raleigh said happily but before she is able to say anything else the world begins to make strange noises followed by the ground shaking as if it is

responding to the new people now on it.” The get down to avoid getting hurt. “What in the blazes in going on!” Mr. Wainwright asked. Both of them look at him just as confused. Then the island started to expanded outward, and grow in mass stabilizing and becoming silent once more like nothing happened.

They all took a deep breath the old man look at them for an explanation. Clyde sat up, shaking dirt off his jacket. “Yeah, about that… we’ve noticed this place has a way of... reacting to us.” “Reacting?” Mr. Wainwright asked incredulously, standing up and surveying the now-wider expanse. “Land doesn’t just react. It’s not alive!” Raleigh smirks ready to explain like she knew all the answers. “Well this world is different it seems to readjust itself based on our actions, and as we just learned. The amount of people that are on it.” She said as though that answered everything. “It does seem kind of... selective. Like it knows us. But it’s never done anything this dramatic before. Look at your feet the grass, and dirt. It responds to your presence with light. If I had to guess It has something to do with the wish we made through the door.” Clyde further explained not knowing how much he knew about that.

He looks down and like Clyde said there was little sparkles of light at his feet. “I must admit, this is far beyond anything I’ve encountered in my career. But it also means we’ll need to be careful.” He said pacing his mind filling with plans, and work around certain problems. “Does that mean you'll stay?” Raleigh asked a little scared he would have been scared off.

“Of course, I'm a man of my word my mind hasn't been like this in years. “Well then consider this the world itself welcoming you to it.” Clyde said as Raleigh grabbed onto the mans hand and started to pull him away. “Enough of that follow me Mr. Wainwright!” She said excited. He chuckled letting her pull him but still a little nervous the ground might start to shake again being cautious of his movements. “Call me Russel.” He said. Clyde followed behind them. His crew had gone off to collect materials for the construction.”Careful guys. There are some dangerous creatures some places.” He warned them only for them to nod and keep going.

Raleigh brought him to the top of a cliff just at the edge of the island. “See this is perfect, there is a good view of everything here.” She said more happy then Clyde had seen her in most of the time

they had been together. “I'm sure it can be done, but what sorta house are you two thinking. Got any plans drawn up already?” Russel asked them. “Oh well it need's to look super cool, and have a secret room, and maybe a secret secret room, but if we are doing that we might as well go another layer with that, Oh and a super good defensive system, and a hanger for the hopper on the edge?” She started to list off he quickly pulled out a notepad taking all of it down seriously.

“If our whole house is nothing but secret rooms wont everyone know that it is because it only has like 2 rooms? Sounds like your trying to make a maze more then a house.” Clyde asked confused. “That’s the point. If anyone unwanted tries to snoop around, they’ll get lost before they can find anything important.” She answers. “I think that will just result in me never being able to find the bathroom, and what about you know a living room, a kitchen, you know stuff you expect to find in a house. Are we sharing a room?” He said sighing.

“What good is all that stuff if we can't fight off against invaders.” She argued back. “Raleigh it will be alright we don't need to do that.” Clyde said more or less putting his foot down on the matter. “What about style? How do you want it to look.” Russel asked them both. “Something Super flashy and cool! Maybe it can transform into a super robot like the hopper.” Raleigh said. “Why not something more modern.” Clyde rebutted. Both of them looked at each other like are about to have their first argument as a couple. “You know being married for a long time I learned sometimes its better to meat half way. Compromise.” Russel said.

“We aren't married!” Raleigh said embarrassed. “He does make a point though how about it? Something in between or perhaps a mix of both?” Clyde asked her. “Fine. I suppose everything will be alright. I just... It's my first one I want everything to be perfect.” She said more timid then before. Russel tapped his pencil against his notepad, the rhythmic sound drawing their attention. “You two are quite the pair. I can see this is going to be a house like no other. But tell me, what’s the most important feature? If everything else has to wait, what’s the one thing that makes this house yours?”

Clyde and Raleigh exchanged a look, both pausing to think. Raleigh was the first to answer, her

voice softer now. “A place where we can be us. Somewhere safe, but exciting. Somewhere that feels like... home.” Clyde nodded, stepping closer and taking her hand. “Yeah. It doesn’t need to be huge or flashy. Just a place where we don’t have to look over our shoulders anymore.” Russel smiled, the warmth in his expression softening the lines of his face. “Now that is something I can build.”

One of his men run up to him out of breath interrupting them all. “Boss you gotta see this its crazy!” “What is it we were going over important business.” He said slightly annoyed. “You have to see for yourselves. You guys too.” He said to Clyde and Raleigh running off again. They follow him to where the rest of the crew is surround a single tree. They have piled several logs next to it, and yet none of the trees around appear to be chopped down. One of them started to hack at the tree until it fell only for another tree to regrow out of the stump right away amazing them all.

“Woah infinite fire wood.” Raleigh said almost like she was tempted to hack at trees all day just for the novelty. “I wounder where the limit is, and if we should go near it.” Clyde said pondering. “This... this changes everything,” he murmured. “Imagine the possibilities for construction. Renewable resources of this magnitude, no one in the multiverse has seen anything like this.” Russel said thinking of all the ways they can use this to built. “I say we only take what is necessary. It's incredible alright but being greedy seems like a bad idea to me.” Clyde suggested. Raleigh sighed, but seemed to give in. “Your right we should be grateful, and not abuse our new home.”

With that everyone got to work. Clyde, and Raleigh helped out with the construction of both their home, and the crews, but mostly fended off any monsters that showed up. It would seem the trees were not the only thing with the regrowing property even rocks from the earth seemed to do the same making there attempt at a mine look like it was never going to leave the starting line.

They started by building a small warehouse, and office for Mr. Wainwright to put all the equipment they had. It looked similar to the one they had on Porta nexus, Connected to the back was a collection of apartments for him, and his men. Clyde and Raleigh stayed with them until their house was completed which he forbade them from entering until it was complete saying he wanted to surprise

them.

After about a month everything was completed even a road leading between all the buildings. Everyone looked at their work proudly. Clyde, and Raleigh look at their new home that was atop the cliff in disbelief it seemed to be a clash of modern ascetics, and more futuristic ones. “Well what are you waiting for you two. “Go ahead and look.” Russel said with a smile. They take each others hand approaching the front door. “A state of the art defense system. You wouldn't even know its there unless you were a threat.” Russel explained as he pushes a button activating it as turret raised out of the ground and the windows where shuttered with strong metal plating. He deactivated it just as fast.

They look at the front door taking a deep breath and looking at each other. “You ready?” Clyde asked. She nodded clinging to him more tightly as he reached for the door knob opening it. As Clyde turned the knob, the door swung open smoothly, revealing the interior. The entryway was a perfect blend of sleek modern lines and futuristic functionality. Light panels along the walls glowed softly, illuminating a spacious living room with high ceilings and large windows that framed the pink sky outside.

The Living room, and the kitchen seemed to bleed into each other giving a very open and big feel with high ceilings. A fire place around the center, a couch, and tv, and all the other things you would expect to find. Stairs leading up to another floor. “Don't worry we put a couple bathrooms in so you wouldn't get lost, and some secret rooms like you requested missy.” Russel said teasing them both. Raleigh gasped in excitement. “Really where are they? Actually never mind I want to find them.” She said with glee. “Well I will share at least one of them.” Russel said walking over to the fire place and pressing a panel on the wall. The fire place transformed and opened up to reveal an elevator.

“You mentioned a hanger for your ship, well its in the lower levels. Hidden where only you can find it.” Russel explained. “Lower levels? I know we basically gave you an unlimited budget, but how much did the all cost.” Clyde said with concern. “Surprisingly not that much. Because the resources of the world the only thing we really need to buy was things like parts, and appliances.” He said with a

smile. Raleigh seemed to be less interested in that torn between exploring the lower levels, and what ever is upstairs.

Russel closed up the elevator. “I'm sure you'll want to go down there eventually, but I think we should head upstairs first. He said walking up the steps as they follow. “There are a total of four rooms, right now they are set up as a master bedroom, and office, and the other two are for whatever, Perhaps for some little ones in the future.” He said as they both go deep red. “I think we are good without any of those.” Clyde said as Russel nodded briefly showing them all the rooms stopping at the Master bedroom. With this I mostly left it plain you got your bed, and shelfs as well as another bathroom, but what I think is the crown jewel is this.” He said pointing to a balcony overlooking everything.

Both of them approached it looking in awe it was only now completely sinking in that it was all theirs. They had made it finally no more running. Raleigh smiled before frowning lowering her head. “It's perfect, everything about it. I... I never thought I'd have this, and yet here we both are.” She said sheepishly. “But?” Clyde asked knowing something was eating at her. “It feels too perfect. Do I really deserve this, and if I do how long before someone takes it from me?” She said looking down.

Clyde hugs her thinking over her words trying to find the right one. “This multiverse is a crazy one, and who knows what the future holds for us, but one thing is certain to me. I love you, and this is our home now. I will fight for it for the rest of my days. For you, and anyone else who decides to make it theirs too.” Clyde said with a soft smile. Raleigh raises her head reaching up to kiss him.

Russel leaves them room with a smile. “Maybe some little ones are on the way sooner then you think.” He said to himself letting them be alone. The future seemed bright yet ominous who knew what threats lurked in the dark.

Chapter 5: Charting New Horizons

A rickety, patchwork vessel lands on Clyde, and Raleigh's home on the opposite side. Two older gentlemen quickly exit. Looking around in wonder one is tall and lanky, while the other is rather short and pudgy. “Well it was quite the ordeal but we have done it Mister Buckthron we made it to a new frontier untouched by man.” The taller man said to the shorter. “Yes indeed Mister Prescott. I believe congratulations are in order.” He said with a smile. “Quite so, let us survey the land post haste!” He said rushing into the more jungle-like area as Buckthron struggled to keep up.

They keep running around seeming amused by everything before Mr. Buckthron catches a

glimpse of what looks like a footprint. “My word the animals of this world. They must have feet almost like shoes. Truly the multiverse is full of surprises.” He said rubbing his beard and looking to see the footprints lead in a direction. “Yes, I would like to get a glimpse of such a creature myself.” Before they can the little fox from before shows up yelping at them cutely but trying to look intimidating like it's telling them to leave.

“Aw, isn't he just the cutest thing you ever did see? I believe he is trying to defend his territory.” Mr. Prescott says leaning down to get a better look, but both of their attentions are drawn away to the sound of a giant tiger-like monster roaring at them. “Oh dear.” Both of them say. The fox looking just as scared all three of them start booking it away from the tiger as it pursues them.

Raleigh and Clyde enter Russel's shop seeing all of them just sitting there looking bored. “Are you guys good? We thought we would check on you.” Clyde asked. “We are fine it just. We kinda set out to build all the things we promised the question is what now?” Russel explains. “Build more stuff?” Raleigh asked. “For who do you want a bunch of empty buildings?” He said sighing. “Yeah, I guess that is fair,” Raleigh said attention turning to the commotion outside of the two men and fox screaming for their lives.

Everyone perks up going outside to see what is happening seeing them all rushing towards them. “Do my eyes deceive me Mr. Buckthron? That building isn't some sort of illusion is it?” He asked running out of breath. “No Mr. Prescott I do believe I see the same. Raleigh jumps past them delivering a powerful kick to the tiger reminding it of who is the top predator in this world.

The tiger yelped and bolted into the jungle, its massive form disappearing into the trees. Raleigh stood tall, brushing her hands together like she'd just swatted a fly. The fox snuck off once more crying with sounds of gratefulness but still wary of people. The two men stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. The taller one, Prescott, adjusted his monocule and spoke first. “Madam, that was... quite the display of valor! I must ask, are you by chance the legendary Captain Raleigh?” Raleigh blinked, caught off guard. “Uh, yeah? Who’s asking?” Prescott straightened his posture, trying to look dignified

despite his mud-streaked coat. “I am Percival Prescott, and this is my esteemed colleague, Barnaby Buckthron. We are the Horizon Voyagers, and it is an honor to finally meet you.”

Buckthron stepped forward, nodding vigorously. “Indeed, madam. The multiverse itself must have led us here. We’ve come in search of your guidance. You see, we wish to chart the uncharted multiverse, as you and your namesake once did.” Raleigh glanced at Clyde, then back at the explorers, her brow furrowed. “Wait, what? You want me to do what now? My Namesake?” “I'm more interested to know how you found us?” Clyde said a little worried.

Percival coffs. “Well forgive me I misspoke. We were not looking for you but.. perhaps the idea of you?” Buckthron smiled nervously. “We mean no harm, of course. We merely wish to continue her work… with your help. You see we have been exploring rather aimlessly that is how we found this world in fact, but that only proves this meeting itself is fate I say!” “The idea of me?” Raleigh said with raised eyebrows. “You're not about to try and sell us some overpriced meat like a door-to-door salesman are you,” Clyde said just as skeptical.

“There is no ploy! Like he says the idea of someone like you, someone bold, unyielding, willing to chart the uncharted and inspire generations. You are, how do we say… emblematic of everything we aspire to be! You have heard of Raleigh the Explorer yes?” Buckthron asked. Raleigh looked down in thought. “Well yeah my mentor gave me that name, he said I reminded him of her. I met her once or twice but well. By the time most of my sisters were captured, she had mostly become a husk.” Raleigh said with conflicting feelings enjoying praise but not liking remembering anything to do with The Trial Worlds.

Prescott took over not fully reading into her discomfort, his voice gaining confidence. “Raleigh the Explorer, *the* Raleigh, was a legend, our leader. She showed us that the multiverse is not a series of barriers but a collection of frontiers waiting to be embraced. She didn’t just explore. She redefined what exploration meant.” Clyde frowned, his arms crossed. “And what does that have to do with her? Doppel or not, she’s not that Raleigh.” Prescott took a step back, bowing his head slightly. “You’re

right, of course. It was not my intention to compare. We would be honored if you'd join us not as Raleigh the Explorer... but as Raleigh, the captain of this horizon."

"What's with all the grandiose talk. Get to the point. Something more literal." Raleigh said, crossing her arms and glaring at the two men. Her patience was wearing thin. "Buckthron coughed, adjusting his hat nervously. "Er, well, we need your help to chart the multiverse. Properly. There's a lot out there we don't understand, and, frankly, we're a bit lost. Literally, and metaphorically. Raleigh was our guide, our inspiration." he said, his tone heavy with regret. "I sometimes forget that normal people have a lot more trouble navigating the multiverse hanging out with you all the time Raleigh," Clyde said with a laugh.

Percival goes on. "You see before her abduction by that abhorrent empire we were working on a few projects the most important one being the expedition to The Source world. The world of origin. She had found a back door and was ready to explore it with us. We would like your help in reaching it before anyone else does.

Both of them look at each other and then back to the old men smirking and breaking out into a laugh. "We have been there twice. The Empire didn't even bother closing the door so it's not that hard to get there anymore." Clyde explained. "You don't watch the news much, do you? Pretty much everyone and their dog has been there at this point, and well it's honestly kind of... underwhelming. " Raleigh said with a raised eyebrow. Both men look in shock. "You mean to tell me that the over-the-top news anchor's report on that was... accurate? " One of them said.

Percival sighs. "Mr. Buckthron, I'm sorry to say, but we are failures as explorers." He said looking down and draping his arm over the shorter man. Buckthron nodded solemnly, mirroring his companion's defeated expression. "I do concur, Mr. Prescott. Remember the days when every discovery we made was groundbreaking? Beneficial to the multiverse? Now, look at us. Outpaced by the masses."

"Hey don't say that I'm sure you are both still great explorers, I'm sure you have something

cooked up," Clyde said trying to reassure the old men. "No, I'm afraid not perhaps it is time for us to retire... Although there is that one thing." He said raising his head and looking at his partner."Yes, I had almost forgotten perhaps we can finally get it back with their help." Buckthron said with excitement.
"Well spit it out already then," Raleigh demanded.
"Before she was taken. She was working on a map. A special map would more or less do what your mind does to a limited degree. She thought that perhaps the Multiverse would be a safer place if everyone had such a thing, We aren't sure how far she got with the idea, but we do know where she last was with it. So what do you say? Will you help us?" Percival explained.

Raleigh thought for a moment knowing just how valuable, and dangerous something like that could be. The Empire had hunted her for her entire life for a power like that. "I don't know if anyone should have something like that," Raleigh said with uncertainty. "What if making it more of a common thing makes it less valuable, and gives less of a reason to kill for it." Clyde counters, but is not fully committed to the idea. "How many people like me have to suffer before we get that far." Raleigh fired back. Clyde relents sighing. "You're right, but even still isn't that more of a reason to go after it we don't want it falling into the wrong hands?"

"Alright, fine we will help you." Raleigh reluctantly says. "Excellent. We are incredibly grateful. Meet us aboard our vessel on the hour!" Percival said with excitement walking away as Barneby handed them a device with its coordinates. It would seem the ship they arrived in was sorta like a dingy they had a much larger ship outside the world waiting. Raleigh turns to Russel who is mostly just standing there awkwardly now. "So looks like we are setting off sooner than expected sorry about that. Are you guys going to be ok?" She asked. "We will manage one way or another. Boredom isn't exactly the worst problem to have." He said laughing.

With that, both of them walked towards their house leaving them to their own devices. Raleigh had a bit more of a pep in her step excited to use the hanger for the first time. They opened the secret elevator as they suited up in their normal outfits ready for another adventure. It seemed to go deeper

than you would think but once it finally reached the bottom it opened up to a hallway. There was a big door leading to the Hanger, but other hallways as well as of now lead to nothing but empty rooms modular by design so they could be used for anything. The door creeks open slowly showing The Hopper sitting there waiting for them.

They wasted no more time entering and flying out of the hangar up into the sky of the world and flashing out. Mr. Wainwright watched with his men unsure how what to do now. “Any idea you guys? I guess we could play cards or.” He started to say almost like he was begging for them to bring up something he overlooked only to be cut off by a mysterious voice. “Of drat looks like I just missed them.” The voice said as Russel backed away but once he saw who it was he calmed down seeming to know them by reputation. “We sure are getting a lot of visitors today considering this is the armpit of the Multiverse,” Russel said.

“Fear not, I am here to end your boredom and get you started on a new building for me in this fine world.” The man said to him causing him to raise an eyebrow. “I don't think the owners are going to appreciate that very much.” Referring to Clyde and Raleigh. “Nonsense we are best of friends they won't mind at all.” The voice said showing them proof of their claim. Russel sighs but seems to accept it smirking. “Alright boys looks like we have a job to do after all.”

Chapter 6: Echoes of the Explorer

The Hopper docks on a giant ship that seems to have been grand back in the day, but now is showing its age barely held together. They look around seeing that while there are other Voyagers aboard it's not enough to maintain a ship of this size fully. Even still Percival is waiting for them with excitement. “Welcome friends to the Explorer III. Isn't it incredible? The greatest exploration vessel of the century. The Pride and Joy of the Horizon Voyagers!” “Explorer three? What happened to the other two?” Clyde asked looking at the wall as a part of it just falls off. “Eh well... We had to do some downsizing you see.” Mr. Buckthron said reluctantly. “That's beside the point. Come let's go to the

bridge so we can explain the mission.” Percival explains leading them to it.

The ship groaned under its weight, a relic of a time when the Horizon Voyagers were in their prime. Now, it felt like a floating museum, with patched-up walls, flickering lights, and corridors filled with forgotten echoes of old triumphs. It rumbles and shakes already on its way. “I'd say it should take a good week or two to arrive. 10 jumps give or take.” Percival further elaborated. “Just tell me what we are aiming for and I can get us there today,” Raleigh said a little surprised he didn't ask. “Ah yes, your ability. I forgot how useful it could be its been so long since our Raleigh did the same for us... I didn't want to ask. I was afraid it might be... how you say a touchy subject.” He said hesitantly.

They arrive on the bridge where he shows her to the center where there is a sorta platform seemingly designed for the other Raleigh, it's a little different though no cords sticking out of it as it's likely the other her never had such modifications. She touched the two handles most likely used to channel the power. “Hmm I had no idea we could, that I could use it like this. I'm used to a more direct connection.” She said rubbing the outlet on the back of her head.

“Ms. Raleigh always put her hands on the two handles took a deep breath, and then got to work. It's speculation but I believe she would visualize it and the ship as if it was herself.” Barnaby said with uncertainty as the only one who knew was her. “Right, I think I can figure it out just tell me where we are going.” She asked as Percival handed her a tablet with the information. She handed it back taking a deep breath like he said and thinking trying to make the ship an extension of herself in a way she never had before, and without much trouble, her eyes started to glow like always though this time she stayed stationary on the ground. The ship shook and in a short while they had arrived in the orbit of their destination.

All the Voyagers on the bridge begin to clap and cheer as if it was the greatest thing they had ever seen, or perhaps it reminded them of the past in a more nostalgic way. Raleigh smiled seemingly enjoying the praise, but it was short-lived as the lights started to flicker on and off before staying off, and the whole ship seemed to power down. “What is going on?” Clyde asked. Barnaby groans. “It's

nothing the ship does that every now in then after a jump.” The engineers are starting to rush around the ship with flashlights trying to fix the issue. “Sometimes all it needs is a good kick to get it going again,” Percival said as he walked over to the console and gave it one. Like he said the lights seemed to flicker back on as everything turned to normal.

“I don't see how that... how did that work,” Clyde said confused. All of them shift focus to the planet. It appeared to be covered in ice with little cracks of red all over. This is Gamalon-8. Percival explained. Raleigh shivered. “You didn't say it would be cold.” Seemingly more annoyed about that than anything else. “It's very cold, below zero. What is worse is the changing terrain and unpredictable Lava spouts. That's not even getting into the monsters. As inhospitable as it gets I'm afraid.” Barnaby said. “Can we even breathe down there?” Clyde asked. “Most areas are thankfully fine as far as that goes.” The man further explains.

“Why exactly did she leave it here of all places?” Clyde asked not so sure. “This is her last known location she mentioned working on it here, after this we never could get in contact with her. We only found out later about her abduction.” Percival said with a hint of regret. “Later? Why didn't you look for her right away?” Clyde asked a little frustrated. “She liked to go off on her own we knew she was collaborating with Mr. Novastride but we didn't know the extent, and at the time they had not shown the depths of their depravity. We wanted to know, but we simply lacked the information until well... Until it was far too late to do anything.” He said lowering his head.”

“Seriously that's all you have as an excuse. You idolized her, and yet you didn't fight for her?” Clyde said getting more heated than he normally does both of the men looked down in shame. “Perhaps you're right maybe we could have tried harder,” Percival said thinking it over in his head Raleigh pulled on his arm. “Clyde calm down.” She said with worry not fully understanding his rage. His glare softened but was still hiding behind his face. She pulled him into the hallway feeling strange it was usually him who was trying to calm her down. “Why are you getting so upset?”

“Don't you see they could've prevented all of this if they had pushed a little harder? You might

have never even been abducted.” He explained. “Come on Clyde look at them. They aren't warriors and even if they knew, what could they have done to The Empire? Besides... we never would have... we never would have met each other if they did.” She said defending them it would seem in their short time together she had already grown a soft spot for them but still appreciated him fighting for her. “What I did. I wasn't strong, I'm still not, but I did everything I could to save you when they captured you. Isn't it better that we didn't meet if you didn't get hurt?” He blurted out.

Raleigh gasped as if she was shocked he even said that looking down but seeming to understand where he was coming from. “Did you forget? What good is living if you never grow, look you know I'm not good at this sorta thing, this is your thing. All that matters is what did happen and that I'm with you.” Raleigh said acting more wise than usual trying her best to be on this side, but still getting frustrated. Clyde took a deep breath thinking it all over. “You are right I'm sorry,” Raleigh smirked faintly, her usual confidence creeping back in. “Don’t apologize to me. Let’s just do this, for them, for her, and for us.”

Both of the men look up like they haven't said a word since they left. “You have every right to be angry, Mr. Vesper. You saved her because you knew she was in danger. We... didn’t know until it was too late. And even when we did, what could two old men like us do against an Empire?” Percival said defending himself. “We had no allies, no resources, and no idea where to even start. By the time we learned the truth, Raleigh and the others were beyond our reach. It doesn’t excuse our inaction, but it is the truth.” Buckthron added.

Clyde waved it away. “Forget it I was out of line. Let's just get back to the task at hand.” He said trying to move them back to the goal. “Right. We will provide you all with gear for cold weather, and set out at once. We have this tracker that will lead us to the last location she spoke to us from.” Percival explained. “However we are not able to safely land close to it so there will be a bit of a trek, be prepared for anything,” Barnaby explained. “Always are,” Raleigh said with a smug grin.

They got into a smaller vessel and landed on the planet's surface in a more open area covered in

miles of ice the ship couldn't land on the unstable ground so instead it dropped them off with a few of the other Voyagers now in attire for much colder weather. Mr. Buckthron started to lead them with the tracker as they followed. “This isn't so bad besides the cold,” Raleigh said shivering not seeming to be a fan. “Raleigh you should know by now saying stuff like that makes...” Clyde started to say as the ground shook apart, lava spewing from the ground. “That happen,” Clyde said grabbing the closest Voyager as Raleigh did the same pushing them out of danger.

The whole field of ice erupted into a sea of lava. Leaving them a much smaller path to follow that seemed to be melting quickly. They started to book it to the other side. The base of a mountain that would be their haven. “I'm starting to understand why you guys had trouble!” Raleigh said as the ice broke apart behind them. A giant monster rose from the lava with a roar. Its skin is almost translucent showing its skeletal structure. It spits lava blocking their way forward just as they almost had made it.

“Do you think we can make that jump with them?” Clyde asked Raleigh as she nodded. Clyde wrapped the full ultra suit armor around his body lifting up one of them as Raleigh did the same just barely able to make the jump. They turn around jumping back to get the other as the monster wades closer to them making the lava move more violently. They had only moments to jump back and grab the other two to safety all of them started to run as Clyde and Raleigh stayed behind to fight the monster. Raleigh reached for her tool only to remember it was still broken. “Man, I really wish I had Novabreaker right now.” She sighs.

Clyde pulled out his multi-tool which had seen much less use now that he had the suit. “Want this?” He asked her. “What am I going to do with a knife? I bet it would just melt.” She groaned looking around for something she could use as Clyde made sure to keep her attention. The monster reached the edge resting its hands on the rocks as all the ice around it melted. Clyde tried forming the ultra Saber and slashing at it but it seemed to melt it completely. He looked down at it a little concerned they might not be up to the challenge. The monster’s translucent skin glowed with the molten rivers coursing through its body, its skeletal frame cracking audibly with every step. Each roar

sent waves of heat rippling through the icy ground, melting their path and leaving them teetering on unstable footing.

Raleigh returned chucking a huge chunk of ice on it. The monster cried out in pain as some of the lava within its body seemed to harden making it harder for the creature to move. It screeched as if calling out to something. Smaller four-legged lava creatures jumped out of the lava but unlike the big one, they didn't seem to have a problem with the ice their form was hardening but still able to move with no issue circling Clyde. Unlike the big one they were much easier to defeat he simply formed the Ultra-saber again and broke them to pieces.

Raleigh kept throwing the ice at the monster until it was almost completely hardened the monster retreated as fast as it could back into the lava as they both caught their breath. The others joined back up with them as Clyde undid the suit sitting down most of his stamina lost from the strain of using the suit for so long. “Incredible. Both of you!” Percival said with wonder. “Are you well Mr. Vesper?” Barnaby asked. “I'm fine, I just need a minute after that, but just call me Clyde, you're making me feel old.” He answered. “Your age is clearly getting to you though, how else do you explain all the huffing and puffing Grandpa? You never used to do that.” Raleigh joked sitting next to him and jabbing his rib as he just glared at her unamused.

She throws her arms around him resting her head on his body even still. “Good show to the both of you. We never could have gotten this far without you. I'd say it won't be much farther just a few more miles.” Percival said as a small crack formed in the ice spewing out lava almost hitting him. He nervously sweats pulling at his collar. “Perhaps with a bit more haste?” He said both of them nodding recovered enough to keep going.

He was right just around the ridge they ran into what looked like a town from a civilization that had long passed on. “Hmmm so people lived on this planet once upon a time, I wonder did the climate change wipe them out, or was it perhaps something else.” One of them said with speculation. All of them enter. The ground seemed a little more stable but the town center had a ravine going down the

middle it looked like it formed long ago revealing gas violently rising from it. They all made sure to avoid it following Barnaby to the back of the town to the base of a cliff. A shadow flitted across the ridge, too deliberate to be the wind. Clyde's eyes narrowed, his heart quickening. Was it just his imagination, or had they been followed from the start?

There was a group of massive doors that had long fallen over and crumbled leading to some sort of ancient temple inside the cliff-side. The hallway was long and mostly untouched but very dark a faint glow in the distance was the only thing leading them forward, and finally, they found what they were looking for there in a circular room the path forks into 3 directions. The crumbled walls were etched with faded glyphs, whispers of a civilization long lost to the ravages of time. The air was thick with the sulfuric stench of rising gas, and every step echoed as if the ruins themselves were holding their breath. It would seem Raleigh the Explorer had made it a temporary base in the past. A sleeping bag was splayed out with some clothes, and a computer monitor somehow still on despite it being years old and damaged. There were signs of some sort of fight scorch marks all over.

Barnaby rushes over to the monitor looking to see if it has any answers but after a quick search, he sighs. "It's been wiped out of all data." All of them search the room for something that would lead them to the map or more information about her in general but they find nothing. Until Percival noticed the Horizon Voyagers symbol carved into the wall. "Curious. Anyone else might have missed it because it blends in with the other symbols, but it does not belong." He said pressing into the wall that reacted opening up and revealing the missing data drives. "This could be it, everyone." He said plugging it back into the monitor and searching through it.

But even still there is only one file a video that simply says I messed up. He clicked on it as it played displaying Raleigh the explorer leaning against the wall holding her shoulder that had been run through with some sort of weapon as she winced in pain. "You ever look back on your life and think, 'Wow, I was kind of an idiot?' That's me... except it's not just once or twice. It's a whole highlight reel. A greatest hits album of bad decisions."

She paused for moments like she wanted to get across the words more thoughtfully than she had ever before. “I believed in him, you know? He had this spark, this passion that made you think he could really do it bring peace to his world. And for a while, he did. The Empire wasn’t supposed to be this... monster. It was supposed to be something better, something that could unite the shattered pieces of his home. So I said what's the harm of helping him I have the powers to do so. So I gave him everything: my knowledge, my time... my trust.”

“But then his wife... she died, and everything changed. The Doppelgänger War? That was the beginning of the end. He became someone I didn’t recognize, someone consumed by grief and ambition. The man I helped was gone, replaced by someone willing to do anything, sacrifice anyone, to expand his reach. I gave him everything: my trust, my knowledge, my time. And what did I create? Not peace, but a monster. A machine of conquest fueled by grief. My greatest sin wasn’t pulling the trigger, it was handing him the gun.” She said her voice shaking fully coming to terms with her part in it.

"I’ve always been... a bit of an airhead. A free spirit, as some would kindly call it. I didn’t think about the consequences. I just explored, poked around, and told anyone who’d listen what I found. The multiverse was like this endless playground, and I wanted to share it with everyone. It’s only now I realize how stupid that was. I wasn’t sharing; I was giving people roadmaps to destruction. Take the map, for example. My masterpiece, my magnum opus.” She said with quotation marks or as best as she could with the pain she was in. “The map that could’ve charted the entire multiverse. It was supposed to be my gift to explorers like me a way to show them the wonders I’d seen, the hidden treasures, the artifacts of unimaginable power. But what was I thinking? I wasn’t just marking down points of interest. I was drawing targets on the multiverse itself. I didn’t see it then, but I do now.”

"I gave up on the map for two reasons. The first? It’s just not who I am. I’m not a cartographer, not a historian. I’m an explorer. And explorers? We don’t write the book; we live it. The second reason? Well, I realized I was being stupid. Really stupid. You can’t just casually hand out a detailed guide to weapons and powers capable of rewriting reality and expect nothing bad to happen. I wasn’t trying to

hurt anyone, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t hurting them.”

"Percival, if you’re somehow listening to this, I’m sorry. I know I let you down. I let all of you down. You believed in me, followed me, trusted me. And I... I wasn’t worthy of that trust. The Empire is close, and I don’t have the energy to run anymore. I think I always knew it would come to this. But you? You’re better than I ever was. You’ll carry on, won’t you? Not for me, but for what we believed in the spirit of exploration, of discovery. I’m counting on you to do it right, to avoid my mistakes." She said with a tear.

"I regret so much. Helping Lucius. Starting the map. Maybe even believing in something as big as peace. I don’t know. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s this: you can’t unring a bell. You can only try to keep it from ringing again. Maybe that’s why I kept wandering. Trying to outrun my mistakes. Or maybe I was just hoping to find something, someone, that could make it all make sense again. The map is further in this temple, and thankfully the empire doesn't know about it, that and well... it is not nearly as impressive as I might have made it sound, but it is still dangerous, and I urge you. Whatever you do. That being destroying it or otherwise, keep it out of hands like the empire. So long Voyagers." She waved at the camera with her free hand as the video ended.

Percival fell to his knees starting to cry. “You're sorry? No you stupid girl, the only thing you did wrong was believing in people.” Barnaby was more reserved but tears were running down his face as well the other explorers were silent. Raleigh looked down hating that it ended like this for her. In a lot of ways the other her was the biggest loser in the Multiverse no one had suffered quite as much. She just silently takes Clyde's hand as they wait for the others to have their moment of grief. She squeezed his hand, her gaze fixed on the floor. ‘She deserved better,’ she said softly, more to herself than to him. Clyde nodded, his grip firm. ‘We’ll make sure it’s not for nothing."

Chapter 7: So long Explorers

The Voyagers and co continued to walk down the long corridors of the ruined temple following the occasional markings of their symbol left for them to find. The place was a labyrinth leading to many dead ends and death traps that had long stopped working or triggered in the far-flung past. They reached yet another dead end yet the symbol was prominently displayed in the center. Percival took a step forward pressing against the wall until he found the right panel clicking it open. The hidden door started to reveal its contents only to get stuck from age.

All of them sighed not seeming to be expecting that or knowing what to do other than Raleigh who immediately slammed her foot into it breaking it off its archaic hinges and allowing them access. All of them shivered knowing she was strong but not that strong. The secret room was now revealed to be a large open-air room with something floating in the center though it also looked like it had been swapped out for whatever the original contents were. “That must be it! The Map.” Mr. Buckthron said with delight.

Both of me rushed over to examine it freeing it from the air with no issue. Clyde thought about stopping them thinking the temple might collapse but he didn't in time and nothing seemed to happen. It appeared to be almost like a scroll upon which when open revealed itself like a hologram of a tree with flashing dots all over. Although more the half the three wasn't there. “Incredible! And yet.” Percival started to say. Raleigh got closer studying the map “It's nowhere near complete she must have abandoned it early on.” She explained. “Then why go through all this trouble to hide it?” Clyde asked.

“It must have to do with what she said during the recording.” He said interacting on one of the dots as it zoomed in and text started to show up with a ton of information. “My word it has everything from pretty locations to visits to transcendent powers. No wonder she was worried.” He said shocked. “Transcendent powers?” Clyde asked. “Like the young Ms. Universal mind or the Aspects of the Multiverse. You had one in the past yes.” Mr. Buckthron explained. “Hmm, I guess I somehow never made the connection but they do seem to have that factor that supersedes universal code to think there are numerous just on this map.”

“We should destroy it even one of them could lead to a lot of trouble for the multiverse. I'm not doing a second aspect war.” Raleigh blurted out more serious than normal. “We can't do that, we... oh... blast it all you are right it's not safe for anyone to have,” Percival said in protest only relenting when he realized he couldn't really defend it. “Is it that simple? Complete or not isn't a map like this approaching the level of a transcendent power? Is it so easy to destroy?” Clyde asked with concern.

“Let's not find out.” A voice said as a blur of blue light rushed through the room and grabbed

the map from their hands. They stopped on the other side of the room holding it firmly. “Hey give that back, who the hell are you, how did you even get here?” Raleigh said outraged. The man smirked adjusting his sunglasses while trying to look cool. “We have eyes, and ears all over of course we jumped at the chance to follow you when we learned what you were after, as for who I am? They call me The Backdoor.” He said as he kept the pose trying to look cool. “They did what to your backdoor?” Raleigh asked more confused than anything.

The man lost his composure almost right away. “Ugh fine the name is Vincent ok? Vincent Cross, don't forget it. I didn't design the damn code names.” He paused for a moment realizing he shouldn't have told them that. “Now that I look at you. Clyde squinted at Vincent, his expression caught between curiosity and amusement. "You know," he said, tilting his head slightly, "you kinda look like Rebbecca. Same whole... cyborg chic thing going on, just blue, Are you two cousins or something?" Vincent froze mid-stance, his smirk vanishing as his face twisted into an offended grimace. "Cousins? With her?" He jabbed a thumb toward himself in mock disbelief. "Please. That second-rate hack wishes she had half the style I do. I'm leagues ahead of her. She's a backup program compared to me!"

Raleigh raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "Pretty defensive for someone who’s *not* related," she remarked dryly.

Clyde shrugged, unfazed by Vincent's rant. "Sure, sure. But you’re both rocking the whole ‘robot arms and neon glow’ thing. You’d make a cute family photo. So you know her but, not friends huh,” Clyde said as he tried to go for the map as he was more heated Vincent was able to move out of the way pretty easily. “Listen you little piss-ants. I'm only here for the map, but you two being here is a bonus. If I bring your heads to the boss I'll show the others who's the real top dog!” He said as he put the map away and stretched out his arm as a weapon formed out of light. It was wild and hardly keeping form. Was it formed by his robotic arms? Clyde wondered stepping backwards as Raleigh joined him ready to fight.

Vincent charged forward seeming to target Clyde, not because he thought he was stronger but because he pissed him off more. Clyde ducks backward barely able to avoid the slash. Raleigh picked up a nearby rock and chucked it at his head. He catches it in mid-air and melts it with the same energy forming his weapon. “Oi! What's the big idea? I thought you had some crazy high-tech weapon, why are you throwing rocks at me like a caveman?” He said suddenly focusing more on her, but in that time Clyde was able to flip on his back and jump back up upper cutting him in the face.

Vincent gritted his teeth spitting out some blood. “That was cheap, just like some of my old buddies used to hit me with.” He said with a smile seeming to have calmed down almost enjoying the fight now making them both get a little nervous. “Voyagers get out of here looks like we are going to have to take this guy seriously,” Raleigh said as they all nodded rushing out of the room. “It was a mistake to ever think otherwise,” he said holding out his hand and shooting out the energy rapidly at Raleigh. She was able to evade it but running. They were both surrounding him now Clyde formed the Ultra-saber clashing with him directly as the hacker tried to keep Raleigh back with the blast.

Even outnumbered the man was holding his own against them both rather well. He smirked as he disengaged his weapon on Clyde only to reform it inches from his face. Raleigh stepped in just in time slamming her fist into his face and making him fall backwards. “Well, shit I'll give you one thing you two are tougher than I expected.” He started to say but both Clyde and Raleigh were not giving him a chance to monologue beating the shit out of him while he was still on the ground. “What the hell stop it!” He shouted jumping back up a little bruised.

“Come on already bring out your weapon I want to beat you at full strength,” Vincent said to Raleigh. “Grgh I couldn't even if I wanted to, but I clearly don't need it to beat your ass.” She growls as the fight resumes. Vincent is more on the ropes now out of breath he might be strong, but he isn't going to win this fight. “I thought this might happen.” A woman said rushing in and punching Raleigh off of him everyone paused unsure what to think about the new person, but considering she also had the same sort of getup and mechanical arms only red it was likely not a friend. “What the hell are you doing here

Akane this is my mission!" He said grabbing her by the collar as they both had a stare down almost like they were going to fight instead.

"My job saving your ass." She said to him just as angry. "Oh great another one." Raleigh said annoyed "I never thought I missed Rebbecca." "I can't tell if they are about to beat the shit out of each other or make out," Clyde said. Both of them turn to Clyde in answer. "Stay out of this!" They both say in unison. Both of them stand awkwardly as the two hackers calm down facing them again. "I'm known as The Firewall and this little tussle is over." She said with a sigh. "It's not over until you give us the damn map back!" Raleigh said in protest. "Sorry to disappoint you sister, but it ain't happening not if you want your little Voyager Friends on the ship to be alright." She said not sounding happy about the threat.

"You're taking them hostage?" Clyde asked. "Well no I don't like to sink to such lows personally. Hostages? No, but I did have a run-in with them on the way, and well. Let's say the ship isn't going to be in the air for very much longer. I don't need to threaten anyone. The damage is done if you care about them, you'll save them. That's your choice, not mine. " She started to explain. "You say that like crashing their ship is better." Vincent mocked as she delivered a punch to the back of his head swiftly. He looked like he wanted to fight her after that but held back. "Come on." She said walking away with him. "Wait where are you going?" Clyde asked nervously. "You better hope you never find out. Now go save those guys before they get themselves killed." She said still walking confident they would choose that over pressuring them.

Raleigh clenched her fists, glaring after Akane and Vincent as they disappeared into the shadows. 'This isn't over,' she growled. Clyde placed a hand on her shoulder, his expression grim. 'It'll have to be, for now. Let's save those idiots before they end up on a memorial plaque. Percival and the others peeked out from their hiding place seemingly untouched by them. "Good they didn't hurt you, but I assume you heard what they said?" Raleigh asked. "Yes quite dreadful have haven't been able to contact them since we entered. Percival said worried. All of them started to rush outside. "How are we

even going to get up there," Barnaby said just as worried. "Percival come in." Some said on the radio.

"Oh thank heavens are you alright?" He said picking it up to answer right away as they kept running. "This lady showed up and destroyed our ship like it was nothing, sir. Most of us have evacuated, but some of the ships were destroyed in the crash so not everyone was able to make it out in time." They said all of them reaching outside the temple and looking up to see the flaming ship slowly falling from the sky toward them. As smaller vessels flew out safely. "Oh crap can we even avoid getting hit," Clyde said now worried they might not even make it.

"What about The Hopper?" Raleigh asked over the Radio. "I thought only you could pilot it?" Clyde asked. "Well yeah but it's still super durable now remember if they all crammed in there they might survive the impact." She said nervously. "Will do ma'am." The man said as the radio message ended. "That still doesn't save us." Barnaby groans the ship is getting closer, and closer. Clyde looks over at some of the unstable ice. "I have a really dumb idea." All of them look at him with both fear and interest. "Raleigh help me drag one of these doors over there, you still have some explosives don't you?" He asked as she started to help him in confusion. "Yeah but... Clyde that really is stupid. I love it." She said with a smirk as they dragged it closer to the sheet of ice placing the explosives below. "Everyone gets on." He tells them urging them to hurry. "Are you quite sure about this?" Percival asked nervously. "Got a better plan?" Clyde asked as he gave in getting on.

The explosives went off causing a reaction in the lava making it rocket out and launch them high into the air. "This kinda reminds me of that time we road the nuke in the Ravage Lands," Clyde said laughing as Raleigh just nodded he was a lot less into it then. They managed to reach the high they needed just before they stopped gaining anymore Clyde, and Raleigh quickly grabbed onto the others and leaped into the burning hanger. Rushing straight for The Hopper which was crammed fuller than it probably ever had been with people. She quickly plugged in and rocketed away from the ship as it exploded.

Out of danger, they float through space shoulder to shoulder starting to get on her nerves. "So is

there somewhere you'd like to be dropped off or, Hey stay out of my room! Don't touch that!" She said yelling at one of the voyagers that thought it might give more space if they shuffled into the back rooms. "Anywhere is fine really," Percival said. Raleigh's glowing eyes raised. "You sure? You don't want to try and get a new ship at Porta Nexus or something? "That won't be necessary, but it is rather cramped I'd rather explain with a bit more dignity if you don't mind." He pleaded.

Without another word, she landed on the nearest hospitable planet as they all filled out all of them jumping for joy that they were alive. Percival and Barnaby both walk up to them with a smile. "Thank you for everything." Both Clyde and Raleigh looked confused. "Everything, but you lost your ship, and we didn't even get the map," Clyde said. "Yes, yes, that is rather unfortunate who knows what those ghastly individuals will do with it? Something to keep an eye on for sure." Percival says. "That doesn't really make us feel any more accomplished," Raleigh said looking down knowing she failed.

"You gave us an even greater gift. Closure and a new path." Barnaby said. "We had no idea our Leader felt the way she did about exploration it would seem we have been going about everything the wrong way. We don't write the book; we live it." He said quoting her. Both Clyde and Raleigh smile seeming to like that. "But aren't you still worried?" Clyde asked. "What good is worrying dear boy, I'm sure you both will get it back one way or another, I doubt you've seen the last of them," Percival said with confidence. "So what will you guys do?" Raleigh asked.

"Well, we are going to explore of course! Everywhere, and everything." Percival explains. "We'll send postcards, you are practically members at this point." He said with a cheeky grin. "In fact let's go one further. Assuming you'll accept that is." Percival said handing them both badges with the Voyager symbol on them. "We are honored." Raleigh turned the badge over in her hands, its smooth surface catching the light. She'd never wanted to belong to a group—not after everything. But this? This felt different. She tucked the badge into her jacket pocket, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Then all we ask is that you explore your own lives to the fullest. I'm glad we met Raleigh, and oh dear what was your real name Clyde Smore?" Percival asked as he sighed. "Moore but closer than

others, and of course we will.” He said only half annoyed. “Very well good luck to you both we shall take our leave. So long explorers.” He said as all of them waved kinda just scattering in every direction.

With wide grins and arms flung high in farewell, the Voyagers ran toward their new horizons. Percival and Barnaby turned back once, tipping their hats before disappearing into the wilds. They didn’t need a map they had each other and the spirit of adventure to guide them. They wave at them till they are no longer in sight. “Are you sure it's alright to just leave them on some random world?” Clyde asked. Raleigh laughed. “They are a bunch of goof balls, and not the strongest, but they'll be fine they are explorers. Now let's go home I'm beat.

Vincent and Akane return to the boss he seems to acknowledge them but keeps working on whatever it is that he is. “Good, you have arrived back, hand over the map Backdoor.” He said not even bothering to face them. “What's the big idea sending Akane in I had that. Those two punks were toast!” Vincent argued as Akane tried to hold him back. He sighed stopping his work and turning to face them finally. “It is far too late in the game to be underestimating them, even if you could, their presence itself was a factor I didn't want to gamble with, That's why Firewall was necessary.” He said as he took the map from him.

After opening it up and studying it he pauses looking disappointed, but like he expected as much. “So where is the first location? Send me there I get it right away.” Vincent said. The Boss paused closing the map. It was silent like in his head he was laughing at the absurdity but kept it to himself. “None of you will be doing so, I can't trust any of you to properly handle it.” He places the map with some other artifacts on his desk turning to face him once more. “For you two I have another mission.” He started to say as another portal opened. At first, it looked like no one was there but slowly Rebbecca started to drag herself through.

Her hair had grown longer and untamed, her body covered in scars are bruises, are arms were comprised of some unknown makeshift material barely holding itself together. Her eyes, once full of life and mischief, were now dull and sunken. Every movement she made seemed calculated, and

deliberate, as if she had to ration her strength. She wasn't just scarred—she was rebuilt, piece by piece, into something unrecognizable. The boss looked at her with what looked almost like pride, but also as though this outcome was always going to happen. "Impeccable timing my child. I assume this clears any doubt about her skills? This next mission will be a collaboration between the three of you." He explained as both Akane and Vincent were still in shock.

"How did you... well shit, I can't deny that's really something." Vincent said adjusting his sunglasses. "But there ain't no chance, in hell I can work with her." He further explains. "You won't work alongside each other. Trojan will resume her role, and you two will act as more... direct antagonists. Testing their weak spots and breaking them down. If one of you fails it leaves room for the others to succeed." "You got it, boss," Rebbecca said coldly walking off unwilling to entertain anything right now. Akane's usual confidence faltered as she watched Rebbecca limp away. For the first time, she wasn't sure if the Boss's faith in her was a blessing or a curse this is what it means to be useful to him.

Chapter 8: Loki Moves In

Clyde sits next to Raleigh as she takes them home. “Hot springs? Some sort of recreational building like a gym?” Clyde suggests to her. “I'm not sure. Those hot springs we had together that one time were nice, but I'm not sure I want to do it all the time, our bath is nice, but it seems like a waste not to use it. A gym though well... I'll be honest I've never played that many sports, but I'm down.” She said with excitement. “I'm pretty sure you're a jock in like fifty other timelines. We can ask Russel about when we get back.” He joked. She nodded as they entered the world something was off there

were significantly more buildings than before.

Clyde peeked out the window to get a better look. “I thought he said he didn't want to make empty buildings.” He asked in confusion. Raleigh didn't say anything just quickly landing in their hangar to go investigate. They wasted no time going to his shop to see what was up. “I see that you found something to do,” Clyde said to him in the form of a question almost. “Yes. Your friend arrived and said he would like to live here with a few others. We completed lodging not that long ago and are putting the finishing touches on his... shop as we speak.” He said hesitantly. “And you just let them? How do you know he's even our friend?” Raleigh yelled in anger. “Well there was no doubt about that he had a ton of pictures, and well maybe I should've had but he was pretty insistent you wouldn't mind, and that you owed him?” Russel said less sure of himself now. Both of them look at each other frowning thinking they already know who it is. “Where is he.” They both say together. “Overseeing the project. I was with them only moments ago.” He explained as they both rushed off to see if it was.

Loki stood outside an elaborate building with many stories smiling as he oversaw the construction. “It's coming out wonderful! More than I could have dreamed.” He said stretching his arms out with joy. “Loki!” both of them said as they ran towards them. His eyes lit up. “You've finally returned just in time for my surprise, surely it will be a momentous reunion!” He said with a smile only for Raleigh to close line him onto the floor. Loki frowned dusting himself off and standing again. “Well, that's no way to treat a friend after not seeing each other for half a year.”

“Most friends don't build houses on their friend's land without permission,” Clyde remarks. “Well, I thought we could be neighbors now since you are going to be sticking around in one location more often.” The lion man said adjusting his clothing. “Then why didn't you ask,” Raleigh growled. “Well I didn't know when you two were coming back, and I thought you would rather enjoy a good surprise,” Loki said pouting.

Clyde glances over to the workers as they are raising a neon sign that says Lion Club. “Loki please tell me that's not what I think it is. We aren't letting you open a strip club in our world. Who

would even come barely anyone lives here." He said sighing facepalming. "Oh no, no, of course not this is not anything of that sort. It is a host club with other luxurious amenities such as a cafe section of course!" Both of them raise an eyebrow at the explanation. "Even if we just allow you to do this." Clyde started to say. "Which we haven't!" Raleigh buts in. "That doesn't change the fact that barely anyone lives here."

Loki circles them putting his hands behind both of their shoulders. "Friends you fail to see the potential I'm sure in the future people will be lining up to live here. But I'll admit the club is a means to an end. I'm lonely ok? All of you are busy with Wishing doors and blah blah whatever. I just want to be closer to my best friends in the whole multiverse. Is that so wrong?" He said dramatically but meant it. "Don't you have like a ton of friends in Valhalla?" Clyde said as they both removed themselves from his arms.

"Well yes but none share the bond we do, and well some of them are a little too... agreeable... It's a nice change in pace... Please I helped you out a lot all these years will you do this one thing for me?" He said getting on his knees. Both of them pause walking slightly away to think it over. "I mean he has a point he has helped us a lot in the past, and mostly for free aside from his... whims," Clyde said. "Don't get me wrong I don't hate Loki he is even pretty entertaining sometimes, but well... he's Loki... there is no telling what weird degenerate stuff he will do here." Raleigh sighs.

Both of them turn to look at him again he is still just out of presumed earshot on his knees smiling. Both of them sigh. "I think I'm ok with him being here if we maybe restrict some of that," Clyde said as Raleigh approached him coming to a decision. "Alright, fine you can stay." She started to say as he rocketed to his feet. "Wa hoooo!" He shouted. "But! You need to tame your pervy mischief to nonpublic areas." She further said knocking the wind out of his sails.

"Alright fine, I understand. I think I can do that." He said with a smile both of them looked at him with skeptical eyes. Russel rejoins them. "Hey, Mr. Loki or whatever I'm supposed to call y'all. The foundation is laid for that other thing, do you need just that?" He asked only for Clyde, and

Raleigh to glare at him Loki got back onto his knees parroting his speech from before. “Please I helped you out a lot all these years will you do this one thing for me?” “How many things are we going to end up doing for you,” Clyde grumbled as they both followed Russel to the site to see what was up.

On the way, they see the collection of houses that also now exist with people already occupying them. “Who the hell are they?” Raleigh demanded to know. “Oh them. Those are the staff, and a few people I met along the way that wanted to come.” He said calmly until he saw her face. “Listen they didn't have a home. I thought you would empathize.” He said defending himself causing her to pause. “Really? Oh ok, but you better not just invite any more people randomly!” She argued. It seemed their little world had grown a lot in their absence. “Assure you this coming project will be the last I promise.” He said. “Ugh, you already took a mile before we even gave you an inch.” She said in frustration. “The world didn't like, react to you when you first got here?” Clyde asked.

“It most certainly did, but we had already been clued in just a brief shake or two,” Loki answered as they reached the location it was just an empty foundation with a familiar-looking machine below being worked on by none other than Crucible. “I didn't think that guy ever left the hospital,” Clyde said to Raleigh. “Yeah, what do you think he's doing here?” She asked as they both looked a Loki for answers. “I can hear you up there. Nice to see you too.” Crucible groans still working. “You remember that machine you used in the hospital during the siege? Well, Lucy wanted to try and use it the way it was intended. I suggested this was the perfect place to test it, I get to see her every day, and you two get free health care!” Loki explained but it was more about seeing Lucy.

“Porta Nexus has free health care?” Clyde asked. “It's complicated, as far as you are concerned he's right though,” Crucible said climbing out of the basement. “So if I remember correctly it's supposed to let the hospital exist in two places at once right?” Raleigh asked. “Precisely, now stand back the subspace device is about to activate.” He said as they all watched a flash of light envelop the area, and suddenly the same hospital from Porta Nexus appeared before them amazing them both.

Lucy, AID-E, and Iris all walk out to look at their new surroundings Lucy jumps in Loki's arms.

“It worked I'm so happy They permitted us to try it. Thank you.” She said to them both. “Well, we didn't really,” Clyde said rubbing his hand behind his head awkwardly. Lucy glared at Loki pinching his cheek. “You know better than to do something like that your a groan man.” She said minorly annoyed with him now. “It was a surprise! Ow ow.” Loki said in protest as she pulled harder

After things had calmed down a little they all sat down together Loki in the corner like he was in time out. “We are sorry about him, but the test seems to be working, so if you would allow us to continue, we would be grateful.” Lucy pleaded understanding if they said no. “Well it is pretty big of a hospital for our community kinda stands out,” Clyde says thinking. “What about power, it must take an immersible amount to link a world in the center of the multi-verse to one on the edge. I wouldn't think it would even be worth it.” Raleigh asked interested.

“Well, it wouldn't be, if it weren't for this world's raw power. Drawing on even a fraction makes the process no issue at all.” Crucible explained. “I hope you don't mind. See my goal is to test things out here, and if they work out expand all over the multiverse, of course, if we did that we would have to expand our operations significantly too.” Lucy explained getting lost in thought around the end. “I don't have much of a problem with you guys doing that, but I am a little worried about the wrong people finding out about it,” Raleigh said. “Thankfully Porta Nexus is a neutral world,” Clyde adds.

“I promise the traversal will only be used for medical reasons, and of course for staff to move between our two worlds. I am the administrator of the health division after all.” Lucy said with a smile. “Oh alright, I think it's fine.” Raleigh sighs giving in. “Perfect. Thank you so much both of you. By the way what exactly is this world called anyway. Loki said it was Valhalla 2 but well I somehow doubt that.” Lucy asked. “Why not it's a great name!” Loki protested from the corner. Clyde, and Raleigh both look at each other they haven't thought about it.

“Well we could come up with some fancy name for it, but one thing comes to mind regardless of how hard I think,” Raleigh said Clyde nodding. “This world is simply HOME.” They both say together. Lucy chuckles in delight. “What a simple name, it's perfect. Well, boyo... no rulers of HOME.

I hope we can live harmoniously from now now.” She said holding out her hand to shake. Raleigh and Clyde took it sealing their deal.

Rebbecca makes it back to her base where Proxy and Mother are. “Rebbecca? You look like hell. Where have you been we have been looking all over for you why did you disable your tracker?” Proxy said sounding much more worried than normal. Rebbecca discarded her half-haphazardly put-together arms and walked to the corner of the room to put on a proper spare set of arms. “I'm pretty sure I told you not to do that.” She said with a sigh no joy or bravado in her voice. “What happened to you?” Proxy frowned he could tell it wasn't just her different appearance. “It doesn't concern you. I'm taking a bath, and when I finish I'm heading off again.” She said calmly removing her clothes which were basically rags now.

She kept walking paying him no mind. “Is pleasing this... System Administrator worth all this?” Proxy asked causing her to pause, and face him. “I don't know how you found out about that Proxy, but stop the more you know about him the more danger you are in. Stay out of it.” She said as seriously as she could. “Why do you follow someone that treats you like this?” Proxy asked but didn't expect an answer. “My reasons are my own. Hope that you never have to know.” She said turning around to resume her duties.

Chapter 9: No Life? Yes Game! Season 2!

Raleigh looks over the long list she was given again a little annoyed as they walk the streets of Porta Nexus. “You know our new residents are kinda demanding.” He groans. “It's just a simple supply run HOME just doesn't have some of this stuff yet.” Clyde answered back. “That doesn't make me any happier about it, I mean why us why can't Loki do it or something.” She whines. “You were the one that said you wanted to try and find a new weapon to wield did you forget.” He sighs.

“Oh right! What are we waiting for then.” She said rushing ahead. Clyde sighs ready to catch up

with her until something in the window of a shop catches his eye. It's a copy of a show called Life No? Yes Game! Season 2. It first it ignored it but a sudden revelation hit him making his face drawn to it like a magnet in shock, like he almost didn't believe it was real. He looked next to it seeing multiple other shows that were also second seasons. Seasons of shows that never came out in his world. He rushed into the shop right away forgetting everything else.

The person at the counter was a rather attractive and busty woman who didn't even ankollege his exsistance just choosing to play some sort of game on her computer instead. “Hey! What's going on with this place how do you have so much anime that didn't ever get a second season!” He said in shock and wonder. The woman sighed and adjusted her glasses. “Heh? Oh you must be from one of those loser worlds were all the good shows get canceled. Well actually in most universes Life No? Yes Game! Gets multiple seasons.” She said turning up her nose.

“Oh ok... can I... buy them?” He asked. “Such a casual. A real anime fan would know about Beard Lust Academy, or Sugoi Senpai XL: Too Big to Fail.” She said turning her nose up at him. He was a little surprised he thought he was pretty well cultured when it came to anime and yet he didn't recognize either of those names. She snorted. “Of course you didn't know. People like you are ruining everything thinking you know all there is to know about the fandom. Newsflash you don't know shit. You'll never be as handsome or as smart as Sausesake.” She said as she pulled a body pillow of the floor of a very fat and greasy looking man who was tipping his fedora. It smelled like an unholy mix of Cheesytos dust and sadness.

“Oh... I think I get whats going on now.” He said awkwardly hoping to never visit the world this woman came from. In fact, he’d sooner face another Aspect War than set foot in her world. “Alright It clear that I'll never be on your level, but is there perhaps a way I could try starting by buying season 2?” He said hoping that would be enough to get her to drop it. “Ugh fine I guess. But your acting like its available on every multiverse streaming service. It's not rare at all plep.” She said smirking as she grabs a handful of toritos stuffing them in her mouth. Clyde gasps. “There are Multiverse streaming

services?” He looked to be a mix of excitement and anger that Raleigh never told him despite her probably never having time or caring enough to inform him of that.

“Of course you don't know about that either. I thought you said you were a can. Fucking Casual. It works just like any worlds would but on the mutiverse's internet with multiple different versions. The more higher rated ones are usauly the ones up top, but most of the mulitverse has bad taste so you might want to sort it from critics like me.” She explains as she turns on a tv behind her showing just that on a streaming service called Multipix. “Great I'll take that two if your selling.” Clyde said with more visiable excitement. “That will be two thousand central credits.” She said as his jaw dropped, but for once he was ready to be impulsive with the money and Raleigh wasn't here to stop him. He pulled the multi-cube out that held all their credits ready to pay her just as she burst in. “There you are Clyde I thought I lost you!” Her head tilts as she sees him about to hand over the coins.

“Clyde what are you doing!” She shouted in shock not expecting him to be that way when he normaly wouldn't. “You don't understand Raleigh It's Life No? Yes Game! Season 2. I need this and the service. It been literal years since I've watched any.” He said pleading. “So the stupid pretty body needs his mommy to decide for him huh. Wait... let me guess. The badass captain with orange hair, a tragic backstory, and the galaxy’s most obnoxious ego? Ugh, typical. You’re basically a walking anime trope from every third-rate multiversal adventure story. ‘Oooh, look at me, I’m a rogue with a heart of gold and secret trauma who gets to boss around everyone else because I’m special.’”

“Hey that's...” Clyde started to say. “Shh, I’m not done! And don’t even get me started on you, Generic Protagonist #307. You’re here to play the ‘relatable everyman,’ but let’s be real: you’re just an excuse for the writer to revel super obvious things that everyone already knows to the reader. Honestly, the only reason you two are remotely interesting is because the multiverse is carrying you like a free-to-play gamer in a pay-to-win lobby.”

Raleigh looks like she going to blow a gasket. “Oh, and this multiverse nonsense? Classic! A big, shiny excuse for lazy writing so you can slap random genres together without having to pick one.

One second it’s sci-fi, next second it’s fantasy, then BAM! Toon world, because why the hell not? And don’t even get me started on all those world-ending stakes. ‘Wahhh, the multiverse is collapsing, again.’ Booooring. Call me when you’ve got something original!” “You don't have a lot of friends do you.” Raleigh said calming down almost feeling sorry for her now.

The woman lowers her head not saying anything looking like she might cry from just that to both of there surprise. “Hey I'm sure you'll find your... fat neck beard king one day. There were plenty of guys like like in my world.” Clyde said halfheartedly trying to console her. “You mean it?” The woman asked still pouting. Both of them look at her nod as she calms down. “Your right I was trying to up sale them because you are dumb and didn't understand their value. It would old be worth 200 credits. “Now that's much more reasonable.” Raleigh said with a smile.

They leave the shop Clyde happy with his bounty while Raleigh just looks annoyed. “I can't believe I had to do that. Your suppose to be the frugal one. I took care of all the other shopping there's just the matter of my new weapon.” Raleigh said. “Alright sorry sorry. I got carried away go ahead I'm following.” He reassured her as they entered a weapon shop. Raleigh started to try out several different weapons. She swings a sword around seeming to like the way it moves. “It's cool in all but what if I need it to transform into tommy gun mid battle. Can it do that?” She asked only for the shop keeper to raise his eyebrow in confusion. “Ok what about a hammer, a different kind of sword?” She asks only for him to shake his head like she is crazy.

She sighs, but seems to expect it. “I guess I'll pass after all.” Raleigh said upset. “Wait it might not be ideal, but what if you get yourself a temporary weapon at least.” Clyde suggest. “Oh good idea, and why stop at one when I can have them all.” Raleigh started to say fully intending on buying out the store. “No! Pick like one or two.” Clyde said in protest! She groans looking over in the corner at a cylinder on the wall. She picks it up as it grows into a larger weapon. A hammer. “Oh that. Someone said its an old prototype of a multi-tool.” The shopkeeper said. Raleigh smiled. “This one I want this one.”

With that they finished their shopping loading it all up in The Hopper and heading back home. Eager to give everyone there items, but once they got their something was off the buildings near the center, they were on fire. They quickly landed in a panic seeing everyone all over desperately trying to put it out as Loki sat there looking a bit scuffed up. “What happened?” Clyde asked. “Looks like your worlds not much of a secret anymore.” He answered.

Chapter 10: HOME Needs Defenders

“What do you mean?” Clyde asked Loki as he stood up dusting himself off. “Exactly what I said, it appears we have been noticed by a group of individuals... pirates.” He explained. “Pirates! Not again I don't want to deal with that. Ugh, how did they ever find out?” Raleigh said in annoyance. “Is everyone OK?” Clyde asked. “Luckily I jumped in before things got dire and scared them away. As for how I can't say I know they ran once they realized who they were dealing with.” He further explained. “Isn't it common knowledge to most that you aren't a huge fan of fighting though?” Clyde asked. “Well yes but perhaps facing a god itself is too much of a daunting task. All I did was offer them a free visit to my club.” Loki said pouting.

“There's... implications there,” Raleigh mumbled. “Whatever do you mean?” The Lion asked just as confused. “Whatever the cause... we can't expect Loki to defend this place when we aren't

around," Clyde said pacing around watching as Mr. Wainwright and his boys put out the fire along with some of Loki's men. It's minimal damage. "I appreciate your consideration... perhaps HOME needs dedicated defenders?" Loki suggested. "Who could we possibly trust to take on that role, anyone even close to that is already dedicated to defending something else," Raleigh said. "Simply find someone new. There are plenty of options. Perhaps mercenaries from the guild like yourselves?" Loki again suggests. "Most of them are loyal to money only, I don't think I'd be able to trust someone like that once they know about this world," Raleigh explains.

"Hmmm, perhaps you're right... though it feels as though you're insulting yourselves by saying that much..." Loki said as he paced deep in thought. "Someone you can trust... someone with honor... Ah, I got it!" Loki said excitedly. "Got what exactly?" Clyde asked. "Have you ever heard of the Rookline Commandos?" He asked them both only for them to shake their heads. "I thought not. Once they were well renowned but now... you hardly hear anything about them." "Your point?" Clyde asked. "They are a former Union Commando Unit tough as nails and Loyal to the end." He said smiling.

"Former Union? That doesn't sound like Loyalty, not that we like the Union." Raleigh said not convinced. "I don't know the details, but trust me the more I think about it they are perfect." Loki insists. "What makes you so sure?" Clyde asks. Loki pauses looking forward with nostalgia. "When I was but a boy... I was much more...scandalous... stealing hearts... I just couldn't help it... and well it put me in a bit of a bind. I had spent a wonderful night with a queen one of my better times if I'm honest." He started to explain only for them to glare wanting him to get to the point.

"Right, right. So the king didn't like that very much and well I barely got away with my life and that's where I met them. Hidden in the mountains they saved me. They didn't know who I was, didn't care. All they saw was a half-dead idiot in velvet pants getting hunted, and after I was all better they refused to take any of my vast riches, or anything else I offered like true noble warriors. Though they did give me a swift kick in the ass as soon as I was better and told me to get lost." He said laughing.

"I don't see it. Even if they did all that for you... why would they help us let alone trust us? How

can I trust them?" Raleigh said looking down. "I think I see what you're getting at, but I agree with Raleigh," Clyde said. "Don't you see... you can learn to trust each other for practical reasons, but also because you can understand each other." Loki pleaded seeming to stir something in Clyde from saying that last part. "Understanding huh..." Raleigh speaks up thinking about her past once again. Even if she didn't know the full story she could at least relate to hiding from a powerful empire like they seemed to be doing. "Alright let's give them a shot." She relents. "Wonderful I send the location to The Hopper post haste, and don't worry I am now prepared to fend off the attackers."

"You going to fight them?" Clyde asked. "Oh Clyde you lack creativity. One does not always have to use one's fist even for such a task as this." Mr. Wainwright perks up only hearing bits and pieces of the conversation. "Oh lords… for the sake of my blood pressure and this town, try to hurry back with them, alright? We will deal with the damage. I was already planning to roll out some defensive measures myself." He said sighing. "Thank you, Russel. We will do that." Clyde answered nodding apologetically before they stepped back in The Hopper only taking a minor breath before heading off again.

They enter the world without issues seeing a small mountain town in the distance seeing it as their best bet they land just outside town and head in. "So where do you think we should start should we just ask around or..." Clyde said realizing Loki didn't give them an exact location this time. "I kinda thought it would be right here, but I don't think they are hiding in the middle of town." She sighs. Nothing sticks out about the place it looks normal, and peaceful even though it's not often people come here or cause problems.

In the distance they see an old man in a police uniform patrolling the town causally as he draws nearer he plans to ask him, but doesn't get the opportunity. A rumble is heard In the sky. They all look up to see a Union ship looming over them as soldiers start to touch down right away. "The Union? What the hell why are they attacking some random town in the middle of nowhere? Natasha would never do something like that." Raleigh said ready to fight them as they approached. "Well, this is

clearly someone else," Clyde answers.

The policeman from before rushes over to them. "Stand back I'll defend you folks... man of all days aliens could have invaded it had to be one day before retirement. He pulls out a lock with a picture of his family. Don't worry I promised my wife I'd be home in time for our anniversary. Thirty years today, and just found out I'm going to be a grandfather. I may be old but I'm still scrappy I'll protect you even if it kills me." He takes off his hat letting his hair flow out styled like the moms in many anime that die in the first episode.

Clyde's eyes widen as he jumps in front of the man instead looking at Raleigh completely serious. "Raleigh forget the commandos, we have to devote everything we have to keeping this old man alive." "What why." She asked confused. "Because he just said like five death flags, he might die from breathing wrong. "I appreciate the concern young man but I can handle myself, my name's Kenny, but my friends call me Lucky." He said Clyde quickly shushing him as he pushed him out of the incoming gunfire The Union forces were now swarming the place attacking indiscriminately. "Shut up, shut up. Stop talking." Clyde insists. Raleigh doesn't seem to understand but wasn't planning on letting him die anyway attacking all the nearby soldiers with her multi-tool.

Clyde transforms leaping into the air with Lucky to a rooftop. "Good thinking kid. We are invincible with the high ground. Now stand back and let me take these punks out. I promised my daughter I'd take her to see the ocean, never seen it." He laughed as he started firing his handgun down as some of the men as Clyde seethed barely able to block their return attacks that he didn't even seem to notice. The ship looming above shot a missile right down into them he only had seconds to move the old man out of the way the building burst into flames. "That was a close one good going. How about you and me get a drink after this?" The man goes on weirdly calm with all the danger.

A grunt near them lifts one of the townsfolk slamming him into the wall. "Where are they we know they are around here!" He demanded to know as Raleigh leaped in knocking him away. "I don't know what he's talking about!" The man said running to safety. The Forces seem to only increase as

they duck down an alley catching their breath. “Man these guys aren't even that strong, but there are so many of them. I don't think we can fight them all off alone.” Raleigh said reluctantly as they closed in around them. “It's Orion Vesper, what are they doing here?” One of them said pointing a gun at him they prepared to resume the fight only for the man to lower his weapon looking confused as well as all the other attackers. “What are we doing here?” All of them looked at each other confused like they didn't understand what was going on.

They seem to have gotten a call on their earpiece ordering them back as all of them started to leave right away almost like they were pretending they never attacked to begin with. Clyde, Raleigh, and the man look up as the ships disappear leaving the world. “The hell was that they just kinda left? Why were they here to begin with.” Clyde asked. “They acted like they completely forgot... that can't be a coincidence some weird power must be at play. Still...” She said looking around at all the destruction caused by them they went full force on this town for seemingly no reason.

“Don't worry we will rebuild in no time you'll see. Thanks for your help, but I should be getting back before my wife kills me.” Kenny said looking unbothered. “Does this sorta thing happen often?” Clyde asked. “Well the aliens have shown up before but they never came down, and attacked like that, or have they?” The man said almost like he was having memory issues of his own. “Would you happen to know anything about an old military unit hiding out somewhere around here?” Raleigh asked figuring if anyone knew anything about that it would be him. “Hmm, can't say I have... unless you mean the mountain men... well I guess they aren't all men either.” He seemed to be having a particularly hard time remembering them like everything was all hazy.

“Well... it's not the best info, but it's something. That one over there?” Clyde asked pointing to the mountain. The man nodded starting to walk off. Only to almost get crushed by a collapsing wall they had only seconds to push him out of the way. “Maybe we should at least... walk this guy home,” Raleigh said starting to get what Clyde was worried about now. Both of them stand on both sides of him like bodyguards as he leads the way.

Chapter 11: The Rookline Commandos

Raleigh shivers as they venture closer to the mountain. “Ugh, this is the second time in recent history we have gone someplace cold, after this we are going to a volcano or something.” She said clearly not a huge fan of the cold. “I mean Gamalon-8 kinda had volcanoes,” Clyde said in response. “You know what I mean, somewhere warm, somewhere...” She started to say only stopping when she nearly tripped on something hidden in the snow. She looks down seeing a dead body that looks like it had been there for a very long time only visible now thanks to the sudden impact freeing it from the snow.

Upon further inspection, they can see it wearing a black in red uniform clutching a transformed multi-tool tight in its bony hand. “An empire soldier? But why?” Clyde pondered. Looking further seeming specials of black, and green all around. He moved closer seeing that there were decaying bodies of Union soldiers as well. “What happened here?” He wondered aloud. “I don't know this must

have been some sort of battlefield long ago.” She said not so sure herself.

They kept walking forward more cautiously now not wanting to disturb the countless bodies that lay around their feet. “I didn't think they openly fought like this. Cyrus made it seem like they were more subtle in their attacks.” He said as they walked. “I think they did at one point, but they were pretty evenly matched, and agreed not to get in each other's way. As much as a bunch of liars and warmongers can at least.” Raleigh explained. They both stayed silent for a while not sure what else to say on the matter.

As they approached the foot of the mountain they could see a base leading inside the mountain with no one around, but before they could proceed the nearby corps sprung up surrounding them weapons already drawn. “Freeze!” One of them demanded. “Ah, zombie!” Raleigh said reflexively attacking the nearest one with a kick. Clyde got ready to fight but didn't attack just yet the men surrounding them did the same, but fingers rested on the trigger. “Sorry. We didn't come here to fight.” Clyde pleaded.

“Then why exactly are you here son?” A man said stepping into view from a platform above with a few others. All of them seemed to be middle-aged wearing Union armor that was well worn all the green paint chipped away with age leaving nothing but a silvery gray coloring. “Well put down your weapons, and we can talk about it,” Clyde said to him looking over at Raleigh who now has the man she kicked pinned. She let him go after seeing him.

“That ain't gonna fly with me. You and the little Ms. Need to skedaddle on out of here.” He said putting a toothpick in his mouth. “I'm not little!” Raleigh said back angry as always someone called her that. “Look your the Rookline Commandos right? Our friend sent us here we thought we could make some sort of deal.” Clyde pleaded. The man raises an eyebrow like he is surprised by his words. He jumped down from his vantage point getting a closer look at Clyde. “Doesn't seem like most folk know that name anymore, how do you... wait a moment I've seen y'all. That big-shot newsman was reporting on you, never did get to see how that ended. He up and stopped sending those reports.”

“Aion? Well, he kinda lost that power.” He explained. “Shame I figured one day all that bold talk would get him in a pickle, but that was the only way we got news out here in the sticks.” He looked away chewing on his toothpick with thought. “Well... start yapping tell us what you're cooking up.” “Do you remember a Lion man named Loki Thundermane? He was pretty insistent that you could help us.” Clyde asked. The leader snorted trying to hold in his laughter. All the men lower their weapons. “Mr. Velvet Pants sent you? Kinda hard to forget someone like that never thought I'd hear from him again. What could y'all possibly want from us?”

“We’re building something. A place… away from all of this.” Clyde gestured vaguely at the battlefield, the ruined remnants of past wars. “We’re looking for people we can count on to protect it when we’re not there. Loki said you saved his life once. Why not do it for a whole community?” He paused again, longer this time. “And you think we'd wanna stick our necks out for strangers just ‘cause some flamboyant fuzzball said so?” “No, but I did think we could talk about it.”

He sighs seeming to know something that they didn't. “It ain't so simple son...” He said looking at his face more. “Say... you two are people of means aren't you, and you know our names?” He further said. “Well mostly only what Loki told us,” Raleigh answers. “And yet he and y'all remember...” The man said deep in thought. “Is there something going on around here with memory? The town we landed at seemed to have a problem with that as well, and The Union...” Clyde started to say. “The Union was here?” The man said cutting them off. “Well yeah, but they left almost as soon as they attacked that poor town, almost like they couldn't remember why they attacked it.”

“Damn it, Vladimir. If I had known... Alright, you two come along. There is something I need to show y'all.” He walks toward the massive metal door as it creeks open a man with longer brown hair standing on the other side as they all file in still watchful of Raleigh, and Clyde. “Are you sure about this?” The man says to the leader. “Well no but... they remember.” He answered seeming to concern the man like he was equally confused about what they were talking about. “This here is Rigg. Couldn't ask for a better right hand, and I suppose I should name myself too. Names Grant, Grant Dorne put her

there.” He said as he put his hand out for Clyde to shake following it up with the same thing for Raleigh. “Well met in all, but does that mean you're headed there?” Rigg asked still cautious of them being here.

“That's Right.” He said not explaining further just walking past. Rigg grabbed his arm stopping him. “Be careful, if something happened to you. The Commandos might be finished.” Grant brushed him off. “Give yourselves a little more credit Lieutenant. We didn't survive this long off of my back alone. I got a feeling, deep in my gut, I reckon this might be the answer to all our problems. “Alright, I won't press further. Good luck.” He said walking off in the other direction.

All of the men stay behind as he leads them through the base everyone who sees them looks at them suspiciously, but keeps their distance. “They aren't used to outsiders, aren't too trusting after everything that happened.” He explained. “What exactly happened?” Clyde asked. “It's a long boring story,” Grant said hesitantly. “Nah old guy, I bet you had lots of cool adventures in the past,” Raleigh said more interested than normal in learning from it. He pauses for a moment still hesitant to say anything like he was debating whether or not to say.

“Back in the day, I suppose we were hot shit. Rising stars in The Union. The battle of Rookline that's where it all started for us.” He started to explain. “Rookline?” Clyde asked curiously. “Yeah during the great war... well I suppose you youngins would know it as the Five Year War. It was a valuable strategic location imps wanted it bad, and they almost got it they threw everything they had at us, and The Union? They already considered it a loss so we were on our own, but we held that line, and in the end far past our last stand those bastards never had claim to it. They started calling us heroes of The Union after that sending us on Pr tours and all that nonsense, but we didn't do it for any of that. Not like it matters now.”

“So how did you end up here?” Raleigh asked curiously. “Round the end of the war, there were talks of peace. All military assaults were halted, but our commanding officer, didn't care The Empire had something he wanted, and he wanted it bad that led us to this very base, and well... well the rest...

its better if I just show y'all." The lights flickered a little as he said that and the ground shook causing them all to pause looking around. "So this is an empire base you took huh?" Raleigh said interested but before he could say anything a voice yelled out. "What do you think you are doing old man, letting outsiders into our base, giving them a tour, and everything? This memory thing you're always going on about must be getting to you..." A younger woman said charging in pressing her finger into his chest. She was wearing armor like the others but it seemed much newer like she had joined more recently, and her armor was painted grey almost like she was trying to emulate them.

"Listen here young lady, you know better than to talk to your pa like that," Grant said with calm anger moving her finger away. "No pa of mine would do this you hack. Did you forget everything they did?" She said clearly referring to a certain group of people. "I can never forget... I remember everything, but these folks..." He started to explain. "Shut up, shut up... you know what happens down there. I don't want to... I don't want that to happen to you." She said tearing up a little. "Mara... listen I know how stubborn you are... hell you probably get that from me... but are you really satisfied with the way things are? I never wanted you to be held up in the mountains with me like this."

"But I choose to come here anyway because what they did to you wasn't right." Mara shot back. He sighed looking back at them. "Sorry bout my daughter, soon as she was old enough she tracked me down here, and I never could get her to leave..." He explained. "And you think these people will change anything?" She said not convinced. "They just might, what's the harm in trying." He said calmly. She doesn't say anything for a while like she isn't ok with it but knows he's going to keep being stubborn about it. "Alright, then I'm going down there with you." She demands. "The hell you are!" He said in protest. "Um," Clyde said raising his hand. "What's down there that's so dangerous?" "You didn't tell them yet?" Mara said with anger. "I was getting to it... down there is a power a dangerous power."

Chapter 12: The Void Generator

A younger Grant looks down at the ground below from their ship it's crawling with Empire soldiers. “Are you sure we should be doing this general?” He asks the man next to him adorned with countless medals. “This is necessary, and that is all you need to know. I won't be questioned on this.” The man said. “But Vladimir. The peace talks... this war has gone on for...” Grant says even still. “Silence. Do your duty and bring the item they are guarding to me.” The man said walking off leaving no further room for argument.

Grants sigh joining the rest of the commandos in the hangar standing next to Rigg. “Alright listen folks. I don't know the details, but the empire's cooked up something real bad down there and we need to secure it even if it threatens negotiations.” He sighed not looking happy about it, even still his men all nodded gearing up right away, and they all jumped out of the ship with all the necessities

narrowly diving past gunfire and aiming at The Union ship above. He could see regular ground forces already mobilizing around the base surrounding them. The Union was sparing no resources on this operation.

Just as they neared the ground they activated a small jet on their backs. It wasn't good enough for a full flight, but they could easily land safely with a kick burst or two. They started to fire on all the Empire soldiers who weren't expecting it already too focused on the invading forces outside the base. They took everyone in the area down with ease. “The Enemy has breached into section 12.” Someone said on the intercom. “Well, their goes are surprise,” Rigg said as they were prepared for the coming army setting up defensively outside the entrances.

A huge swarm poured out of the hallways toward them. They were outnumbered easily only 100 or so strong to begin with. They evened the odds a little with grenades but it wasn't enough they were everywhere. “How do they always have some many goddamn soldiers,” Grant said as he leap from his cover firing on them using the bayonet at the end of his gun to slash into a few of them before jumping back behind another wall. They were making progress but similarly losing men. It would seem the empire was just as desperate to keep whatever it was that they had.

“Hogtie?” Rigg asked from his cover smirking at him. He nodded “Let's tie some pigs.” Half of the commandos turn tail and run down a narrow hallway while the others hide drawing the large army away Once they reach the end they plant bombs at the end and rush out of the way collapsing the entrance. The army quickly turns around the other way only to see Grant and Rigg placing bombs onto the other side detonating them right away and taking care of all of them.

Both of them catch their breath with the other half of the commandos getting on coms right away. “Y'all good?” He asked. “Minimal casualties but... we lost buck, stray shot before the bombs went off.” The man answered as Grant's face darkened. “We got a few over here too, this better be worth it. For everyone we lost, not just today.” Rigg placed his hand on the man's shoulder nodding in solidarity. After taking a moment to honor them he gets back on coms. “The object is in the lower

levels make your way there we will rejoin the fold as soon as we can.” He orders as they rush off down the other hallway, glancing at the raging battle outside the base for a moment to see how they are doing.

It seems pretty even, a problem that had been prevalent during the whole war. There weren't talks of piece because it was the right thing to do, no it was simply because they couldn't wipe each other out. He sighs resuming his advancement. It would seem the forces they already defeated were the bulk of the forces in the base they had little trouble making their way down to the bottom. The lower they got the darker, the more warped the infrastructure looked. Until they reached a giant vault door already opened with a group of empire grunts outside but they seemed far more concerned with what was going on inside to notice.

“Please sir, stop this... you'll kill us all!” One of them urges someone inside. Grant does a signal to halt their advance as he alone moves forward to see what's up. Inside the room is a massive machine just looking at it gives him a headache, like his mind doesn't even understand what it's looking at. Its form doesn't seem to stay the same even for a moment. The only thing separating them is a thick level of glass. “We are already dead, with this we might have a chance. An empire officer said hand on a lever that seemed to be the activation mechanism to it. With this, we can rewrite the battlefield. Maybe even time itself.” Without another word Grant fires at the man through the open door aiming to kill him before he fires. The Empire soldiers seem surprised, but almost grateful that he did.

“Se... see I told you... this is... the only way.” The man said using all his remaining energy to pull it down as the life drained from his eyes. The Empire soldiers look terrified. “We have to get out of here there's no telling ho...” He said only for him to vanish before he could even finish the sentence. Empire and Union men alike drop everything running for their lives not hindering each others escape though most of the empires end up vanishing as they are closer to the machine. The ground around them quakes, and almost screams like the world itself is crying out in pain. The hallways crack and crumble collapsing giving them all barely enough time to get away.

Grant grabs the Empire Grunt's the shoulder shaking him. “What the hell is that thing? How do we stop it?” The man just looks confused. “Stop what, wait for your The Union. I'm not telling you anything.” Before Grant could give him a piece of his mind the ground shook again and the man looked in shock and realization. “They called it... they called its Void Generator. One of Dr. Corvus's side projects I think, I don't know my head hurts why can't I...” The man answers. “Focus. Tell us how to shut it down before we all die.” Grant said urging him to tell him.

The grunt rubs his head trying his best to remember, but he seems to be struggling. “There was a fail-safe, but I'm not sure if it still exists.” The ground rumbles again as they look over all the collapsed hallways disappear leaving nothing as the ground settles again. “I... what was it... why can't I remember.” The grunt said. Grant rubbed his head too having problems trying to remember what they were doing here, but they heard a loud slam bringing them back to their senses.

Looking inside they could all see the machine in the middle of the nothing is made vanish seemingly now turned off. “Before I forget. The fail-safe is activated through the glass-encased button on the left-hand side.” The man quickly blurts out. “I don't know what it does though.” He further explains. Grant looks inside as the machine seems to be starting to spring to life once more. “Alright, I'm going in.” He said stripping the things from his person that would slow him down. “Wait there is no telling when it will turn back on you'll end up like the rest of them!” The Grunt said making Grant chuckle. “Whoever thought an empire grunt would be worried for my safety. Someone's gotta take that risk or we might all be done for.” He rushes in before anyone can stop him staying back out of fear of erasure.

He runs as fast as he can halfway there as the machine powers on completely beginning to float in the air. Grant could feel his head fading, everything that he knew slipping, and what's more the skin was starting to fly off like it was sand in the wind. It got harder for him to push forward every step took an impossible amount of effort. “What was I... doing... who am I...” He said to himself, but even still his body was pushing forward. “No, I'm... I'm Grant Dorne Leader of the Rookline commandos, and I

need to shut down this machine.” He said getting closer, and closer repeating the words as his body faded more and more.

He barely made it pressing the button and collapsing to the floor. The Machine shook violently as rods that were built in shot out of it forming into a cube. They took form consolidating into a slightly bigger multi-cube. All his men cheered rushing down to meet him as his body seemed to return to normal. Even the grunt, but they didn't have long to celebrate as the coms started to crack with activity. “Dorne report, what happened down there. Did you secure the object?” Vladimir asked.

He paused unsure what he should say to him looking at his men for input. “Something like this... belongs in no one's hands,” Rigg said as they all nodded. Grant answered the call. “No sir... there are no signs of the object you described, they must have moved it elsewhere.” He answered. Vladimir growled in frustration. “Listen here corporal. We lost countless soldiers on this mission all for that object, are you seriously going with that story, answer carefully.” He said in a threatening tone like he already guessed the truth. “I mean it sir there is nothing here.”

Vladimir screamed with rage. “I'll bury you for this, your legacy dead you hear me. We've whipped out the opposition already. I'm sending a squad down now you better....” He started to say as the multi-cube shook to life floating into the air and forming cracks all of them rushed away from it but that's as far as it went. It would seem it was still partly holding it back but some of the power was still leaking out. “Where am I, what is going on,” Vladimir said confused on the coms. There was silence at the other end as the remaining troops all over the battlefield questioned the same. “All forces return to ship we are getting out of here.” The general said as they all obeyed.

All his men rubbed their heads losing their memories as well. “No... won't forget... I refuse to forget.” Grant said defiantly. “Maybe we can repair it.” One of his men said touching the cube only to be erased right away. “No! That was my...” Rigg started to break up about it only to forget who he was. “He was your brother, John... you have to remember.” He urged only for Rigg to look at him confused. All of them just stood confused as Grant's head glowed briefly light shooting out of his eyes. “Jeremy,

John, Terry, Kevin... I won't forget them. I won't forget this!” He screamed as the energy dissipated. “I... remember.”

“After that... I was the only one who seemed to remember... The rest of them could remember pieces like their mind were trying to make sense of it. They remember coming here, fighting here, but nothing about that damn machine. They probably think I'm crazy talking about it.” Grant explained to Clyde, and Raleigh back in the present. “Hmm, The Void Generator huh... seems like it causes everything around it to vanish from existence like you said, and yet its very existence is a contradiction it creates nothingness, but it is something. Probably why it's so unstable, I don't love the idea that Corvus was behind it though. This... is probably a transcendent power.” Raleigh said with both interest and wariness.

“I didn't think you could just make one like that,” Clyde asked. “You shouldn't be able to, but that leads us to him.” She said pointing to Grant's forehead. “I think it's pretty safe to say in most cases, the only way to counter a transcendent power is with another, you know like the two-arm aspects.” She explained. “I don't have anything special like that darlin,” Grant said unsure. “It sounds like you developed one, almost of sheer willpower, I didn't think that was possible, but that's... well incredible,” Raleigh said with excitement. “Daw, you'll make an old man blush. Maybe you're right, maybe that's why I'm the only one that remembers.”

Mara glares at him seemingly angry he was saying that about a woman. “Well back to the point of my little story. You might be the only person who can stop it with your similar powers, but it's possible you could vanish just by getting near it. I just want to make sure you know what you're getting into.” Grant explained. “Wait that doesn't explain The Union attack on that town, and you said yourself that your men remember bits of the events. Shouldn't they know where you are at least?” He asked as Mara shook her head. “History remembers them differently as much as I hate it. They have a vague memory of the attack, but not the location, They basically threw the commandos under the bus and moved on. It took me forever to find this place.”

“But that brings up another good point. Attacking that town is the closest I think they have gotten that must mean the machine is starting to power off for longer, and if we somehow manage to completely resolve it they might rush on over.” The old man said sighing. “Who cares about that? We have faced plenty of armies, and this thing is dangerous, we need to find a more permanent solution.” Raleigh says. “Maybe I was right about y'all after all,” Grant said tossing his toothpick aside and smirking at his daughter who did not look amused. “I'm still going with you.” She said causing him to frown.

Chapter 13: No one remembers why

Vladimir Paces around the deck of his ship just outside of the world they invaded for seemingly no reason he seemed distraught some might find his morals questionable at times, but even something like this seem unlike him. Vance stepped out of the shadows with a smirk he leaned in closer whispering in the man's ears. “Remember... remember how they humiliated you. They took your rank... Your notoriety... everything.” Vladimir's fist clenched, and his face contorted, but acted almost like he didn't realize he was there.

Vance paced to the other side of his body whispering in the other ear. “You need to get them back, get them back, and bring that item to me. It's the only way to restore your lost glory.” Vance

handed something to him and vanished just as quickly. “I need to get back at those bastards... That item belongs to me!” He growled looking down at his hand. A note with the base's exact coordinates. “All troops prepare for battle. I finally found them.” He said on coms. “Who sir?” Someone asked. “Them.” That is all he said. The man is afraid to probe further.

Clyde, Raleigh, and the others were led to the very bottom of the base where the floating multi-cube was floating. The Cracks seemed to have multiplied but it was holding strong. “That's not good, it looks much worse than the last time I was down here we have to do something fast before...” He started to say only for Raleigh to walk over casually, and open another multi-cube around it, and close it inside. She holds it in her hands tilting her head as they all look at her gobsmacked. “Are you insane!” Grant asked.

“Well, It's kinda par for the course for her, unfortunately. Isn't it dangerous to put a multi-cube inside another multi-cube though?” Clyde asked. “Oh yeah it's super dangerous, but it seems to have...” Raleigh started to say only for the one she was holding to violently rip apart leaving the other one again in the air just floating. “Hey, it was worth a shot ok. Sometimes the simplest choice is the best.” Raleigh said shrugging. “How have you... survived this long?” Mara asked.

“Hmm, now that I take a better look at this multi-cube. It looks like a higher grade, I'm talking like the best of the best, most people don't bother with those because the lower ones contain things just as well, but they don't cost an arm, and a leg.” Raleigh explains ignoring the question. “Do you have one like that?” Clyde asked. “Nope, we are going to have to find a different way.” She said to all their annoyances. “Let's think then. We have all the resources at this base, but importantly. Four transcendent powers, well maybe more like three.” Clyde says. “Three? Where are you getting these numbers?” She asked. “Well we have your mind, his memory power, and the arms but it's only like a lingering power right so half or less.” He explains.

“Hmm guess your right.” She thinks for a moment reaching out her hand toward the cube just shy of actually touching it the black tattoo on her arm starts glowing like it kicked into overdrive to

keep her alive. “I see.” She said as Clyde yanked her hand down. “Stop doing that.” He growls. “But it's doing something I think we can touch it.” She protests. “Doesn't mean we should.” He said in protest. “Oh I know we open this back boy up, and you pull out your middle finger and make the machine break,” Raleigh suggests. “What? Are you serious I don't even know if this thing has enough juice to do that anymore try again.” He sighs.

Before they could say anything else the ground started to shake like the earth above them was being bombarded. “Is that the machine?” Mara asked. “No that's something else. Rigg, what's going on up there?” Grant gets on his comes and asks. “It's The Union. They finally found us.” He answers. “How many?” He asked. “It's a single ship, but it seems to have a decent amount of soldiers dropping from it,” Rigg explains. “Damn it... of all times,” Grant said in frustration.

Raleigh sighs. “I'll be honest. We might be able to fix this, but not here, and not like this.” “What are you suggesting darlin?” He asked frustrated. “You said this was an old empire base right they must have some sort of war chest right?” She asked. “Well yeah, but we left most of it alone, aside from some weapons most of it wasn't that useful to us. “It's possible they have a higher grade Multi-cube in there, and if they don't the materials there... hopefully will be good enough to jury rig one that will work long enough to take the Void generator somewhere safer. Not a perfect plan but its what I got with the time crunch.” She further explained. “What do you want from us?”

“Time. Fend them off so I can do that, and then we will finish them off for you.” She smirked. He chuckled a little. “Woman. There won't be anyone left to fight once we get a hold of them. Go ahead, Mara show them the way.” He said returning her smirk with his own. “But the whole reason I came here was to be with you guys, to fight with you,” Mara said in protest. “You are fighting with us.” He said rushing off to join the others above. She frowned but did as he said.

Grant rejoins the others who are all ready to fight, but none have started to attack. “Can't say I'm happy we have to fight our former comrades,” Rigg said sighing. “Set weapons to stun, they might not even know what they are doing here,” Grant said as a way to reassure him. Both of them nodded as

well as the rest of the group there were down to forty men now but each and every one of them was ready to fight, one of them was even the grunt that was part of the empire he must have survived all this time, and decided to join up with them.

The Union broke through the front gate rushing in as the Commandos started to fire rounds at them taking them down with precise shots. Raleigh and the others glanced at the battle from afar as Mara led them to the war chest. “Man, the old man was right he really might not need us,” Raleigh remarked. “Of course, he doesn't He is the strongest man that ever came out of The Union,” Mara said with pride as they kept going. When they reached the room she searched around at all the different things.

“Holy shit a CRZ-34 I haven't seen one of these in ages.” She said as she transformed one of the cubes into a massive gun. “but not a multi-cube” Clyde said sighing. Raleigh frowns morphing it back into a cube and stuffing it into a pocket. “Ugh damn it some of this stuff is gold, but not what we need. I was afraid of that.” She groaned. “Do you have enough to make one?” Mara asked. “Just barely, but it might take a second.” She said.

Back outside they had held the line but some were starting to break past them and overwhelm them. “Fall back to position two.” Grant orders assessing the situation. “Only a couple hundred left,” Rigg said. “Hogtie?” Grant said smirking. “Hogtie.” He said back with a smile. They ran back down the same hallway that they had done so years ago. It had long been restored, and just like the empire most of them followed them through, however this time wasn't nearly as lethal. When they reached the end of the hallway they pressed a button closing thick doors around them. “Packed together like a can of tuna. It ain't gonna be comfortable in there.” Grant said chuckling, but it seemed they still had a few more stragglers running it that took their focus.

Back down in the basement Raleigh was on the floor Frankensteining a cube together. “Hmm, I think that's supposed to go there. Oh fuck no... it's the second node.” She said as she was shocked. “Are you sure she can pull this off?” Mara asked getting more nervous. “Probably. She's smarter than she

looks at least, and we've been put in plenty of binds like this." He said as she rose to her feet. "All done, and I love you too." She said kissing him on the cheek happy for the praise for once even if it was a little backhanded. Without further ado, she places her creation around the cube like before all of them look at it with shaky optimism. It closes around it as they watch hoping it will hold.

After a moment of nothing happening, they all take a deep sigh of relief. "Ok, we have to get a move on. I honestly have no idea how long this will hold." She said stuffing it into her pocket all the same. They rush upstairs to join the fight seeing that it's still going on, but already mostly wrapped up. Grant shoots down the last one as the rest of the team goes around tying them all up. "Guess you were right no wonder Loki recommended you," Raleigh said praising him.

"Well, we do our best anyway." He said with a smile. "Grant Dorne!" A man shouts from the distance. It was Vladimir walking in with the small remaining members of his forces. "I remember everything now. You... you ruined everything. I lost everything because of you." He said in rage. "Evening General. Can't say I agree. All I did was stop a mistake waiting to happen." He said unimpressed with the man. "I lost all my stars I can barely be considered a general anymore, and through no fault of my own. Where is it? Give it to me now!" He demands.

"Don't know what you're referring to sir." He said calmly. "Still playing dumb. "I know it's still here they told me." He said slowly starting to sound more deranged. "They?" He asked. "Yes... if it weren't for them I'd be even worse off." The General said. "Sound's like you got played to me," Dorne said staying calm. "How dare you. I'll destroy you!" He said as he rushed forward without even drawing a weapon his punch was easily telegraphed and dodged by him as they put him in a hold, and tied him up.

He turned to face his comrades disregarding his former commander as he kept raging insisting he paid attention to him. "Did you handle it?" He asked Raleigh only for her to nod and throw up a peace sign. "Well, what are we still doing here then? You boys are tired of living in this hole in the wall right?"

He asked all his men as they looked at him confused. “But sir is it ok for us to leave?” The grunt from before asked. “Course it is. The whole reason we stuck around was to guard that stupid thing anyway, and it's not like we can stick around here now that they know where it is again.”

“Wow I never thought I'd see the day, but you know... you do something for so long, and you can't see yourselves doing anything else.” Rigg said uncertainly. “Well, that's sorta the deal we wanted to offer you all. Come help us protect our world. A fresh start.” Clyde suggested. “Well if the Colonel is going I am as well.” Rigg proclaims all the men follow after cheering it on. “Alright, then men pack up your things and the little Ms. Will take us to her ship.” Grant orders as they all run off to do just that. “Wait what we are doing that again? You guys don't have one lying around?” Raleigh said not liking the idea of everyone packed tightly together in The Hopper again. “Fraid not. All that was destroyed in the attack years ago.” He said apologetically.

“Ok no we are not doing that again I refuse.” She said defiantly as she looked up in the sky seeing The Union ship still floating there. “We are taking that.” She declares. “The Hell you are” Vladimir said. “Zip it no one cares what you think.” She said walking away. “Damn, you... I swear I will have my revenge just you wait... I'll find you again!” He kept going on as they all walked away. “Um... Raleigh I'm sure our new friends won't mind stealing it since they attacked us in all, but were are still going to have to take them up there probably.” Clyde points out seeing that Only a small cruiser that Vladimir came in landed on the ground.

Raleigh groans. “Alright let's get this over with.” She said as they all reached the hopper packing all forty of them in somehow and flying up to the ship easily taking out the skeleton crew left to man it, and taking it back home. Mara and Rigg look at the window at home looking at its pink glow a weird feeling washing over them like they didn't believe it. “So this is going to be our home now huh.” She said to him. “A fitting name, you know kid. I think this is going to work out just fine just wait.”

Elsewhere the Pirates return from another defeat trying to invade home. “What the hell is wrong

with that guy we shoot our guns at him, and somehow he makes them confetti. We threaten him, and he's into it. How do you even fight a guy like that? One of the Pirates say in frustration. “Maybe we should just give up on that place. “It might be profitable, but they got too many weirdos guarding it.” Another one said. “Man I miss Captain Dawnstaarr she'd know what to do, or at least be able to match their crazy.” A brutish man said.

A cabin boy bumps into him causing him to growl with rage watch where you are going recruit, or you'll end up like Jeremy.” He threatened. The Cabin boy nervously stood up Revealing himself as Clyde's self-proclaimed rival now wearing an eye patch. “Wh... what happened to Jeremy.” He asked very afraid. As they all laughed. “Anyway, I think we should just cut our losses. I hear The Unions looking pretty dire lately. Maybe we could try, and raid them.” One of the men suggested sparing The Rival as he took a deep sigh of relief.

“I think I have a better idea.” A voice said from the darkness. “Who said that?” The brute said looking around the room. Vincent and Akane jump down from above as he smirks taking the lead. “This little outfit is under our control now, and I say we are going to keep attacking those little piss ants, got it?” He said confidently. “Like hell we are boys...” He started to say only for Vincent to swiftly end him with a swipe of his hand and a flash of light. “Anyone else got something to say? No? Good get ready.” He said walking out just as quickly as they entered.

Chapter 14: Rebbecca’s Return

The Newly acquired union ship reaches home in moments with the help of Raleigh's abilities. “Well I'll be damned, you're telling me we are clear on the other side of the Multiverse now?” Grant said in amazement. “Sure, you are welcome to your new home... HOME.” Raleigh said smirking, but feeling a little awkward after realizing the name might be confusing. “You missed a lot. Everyone and their dog was after her power for a long time.” Clyde explained yet again being reminded that normal people don't have such a luxury. “I can see why.” He said chuckling. “So what do you want to do now that you're back?” Raleigh asked more curious than she normally would.

“Hmm, I could really go for a good ol cheeseburger If I'm honest, been too long since we had

anything other than rations, and Margos meat.” He said seeming to salivate just thinking about it. “Margos meat?” Clyde asked. “Y'all didn't see any on the way? Margo's are these big ol slug things taste awful, but they were the only thing round base that was edible.” Grant explained. Both of them looked a bit grossed out just thinking about it. “My friends you have returned,” Loki said popping onto the deck. “Well if it isn't Mr. Velvet Pants himself. Never thought I'd see your sorry face again.” Grant said holding out his hand to shake with a grin.

Loki took it enthusiastically with both hands. “And I never doubted it for a moment, haha!” Loki said making Grant look like he regretted doing it. “Loki how did you even get up here?” Clyde asked. “In the Loki mobile of course. Some of the others down below were afraid we might be under attack again with the Big Scary Union ship in the sky.” He further explains. “I guess we should've given them a heads up,” Raleigh said. “What is done is done, come you must see what our Amazing Architect has built while you were away!” Loki's shouted running out of the bridge.

They Take both The Hopper and a few shuttles down below. It would seem Mr. Wainwright had accomplished a lot in the short while they were gone. More buildings had gone up as well as an outer wall no doubt to keep the more dangerous of monsters from wandering in. Not everything was complete, but it was still amazing that they did so much. “Russel must have really found his footing,” Clyde said noticing that somehow some of the trees had cleared out as well. “It seems more... colorful,” Raleigh remarked noticing it looked almost like some of the white had been colored in like a coloring book. Raleigh docked them in their hanger hanging up her coat as she rushed out without a word eager to get a closer eye on it herself. Clyde followed behind at a more relaxed pace.

By the time they had met back up with them, Mr. Wainwright was already with Loki showing them around. “This is the bunkhouse we set up for you guys, it might be a little tight of a fit though, I didn't think they'd be coming back with so many people. Don't worry we'll get plans drawn up for a proper barracks as soon as you're ready.” Russel said apologetically as all the commandos looked up in wonder. “That's mighty kind of you my Nexain friend, but this is like a mansion to us, used to sharing

bunk beds," Grant said with a laugh only for him to do the same. "Even still I'd like to get you something more personal, something that suits you, and your men well." The builder urged.

"Well since you are so insistent, I suppose I can't say no put er their partner." He said as he reached out his hand both of them shook it looking at each other with respect, They may lead different lives and roles, but it was clear they already formed a good deal of respect for one another. Russel looks over and sees Clyde and Raleigh. "Ah. Well now that we are all here let's do a little tour." He said seemingly eager to show off everything. "Wait before that. How did you clear out of the trees?" Clyde asked curiously.

"Well I suppose you could say the land, and I came to an understanding." He said with a chuckle. "An understanding?" Raleigh asked. "Indeed. You see we tried a few things control burns for one, but what it really came down to is intent. This place understands it we uprooted the trees, and put them elsewhere, and the land seemed to yield almost like it was acknowledging it. You don't just build on a place like this, you build with it." He explained fascinated by the idea. "This place... it ain't your average roost huh?" Grant asked curiously. "Oh right, we haven't explained all that yet pretty soon something might..." Raleigh started to say only for the world to start to rumble like before all of them trying their best not to lose their footing.

The island expands like before giving them even more mass to work with. "Well, something like that." "Hold on, is this place safe? I don't want to fall off the side because the ground fell apart." Rigg said nervously. "Don't worry it's just the world's way of acclimating to new people," Clyde explained. "Yes yes, truly the world is a wondrous place! There is no danger pertaining to this." Loki adds. "Enough of this come on show them all the stuff," Raleigh said tapping her foot impatiently.

Russel sighs but does as she asks giving them a tour of everything so far stopping right outside the Lion Club still under construction. "I'd say most structures are complete we are still working on a few defensive measures, and well the Lion's... place of business. The man just can't make up his mind." Russel groans. "These things are important. Every customer needs to have that instant wow on their

face when they enter!” Loki said in defense. “I don't think they are going to care that much if the wallpaper is navy blue or slightly darker navy blue.” He said annoyed.

“Any way that about does it if you have any questions or need something done just holler.” He said with a smile. “This is more than we could ask for, we'll thank you for the run of the place, me and the boys are going to go get our bearings alright,” Grant said "Wait, I overheard you earlier I would be happy to provide you strong men with a cheeseburger! My chiefs can get to work on it at once!" Loki said as they walked away. "Well we would be grateful, but do you have to say it like that," Grant said as he followed him. Raleigh glanced over at the buildings now surrounding Loki's club, everything from houses to unused storefronts yet to be claimed, but one stood out, tucked away in the corner was a small shack with a neon sign that said Hack Shack on it.

She pointed over at it curiously. “What's that place?” She asked. “That place?” Russel asked turning his head to see only to raise an eyebrow in confusion. “I um... I didn't build that.” He said nervously as they all crept closer. A light in the window flashes on with the words open like it wants them to come inside. “Well um... frankly I'm afraid to even go near that now, It's probably some haunted nightmare,” Russel said shivering. “It's probably fine. We'll check it out don't worry.” Raleigh said as she went toward it will Clyde.

They entered to see nothing really out of the ordinary. It appeared to be a tech shop of sorts with parts being displayed all over. Everything from extra robotic limbs to phone chargers. Behind the desk was none other than Proxy looking a little dressed down compared to normal an outfit that almost looked like Clyde's old work uniform without the tie. “Welcome to the Hack Shack. How may we help you?” He said almost like it was completely normal that they were there. “Proxy what are you doing here? Who's We? Did Rebbec...” Clyde started to ask only for a voice to answer from above.

“I am here to help as well human known as Clyde.” The voice said as they both looked up being jump scared by mothers giant head peering in like a little girl playing with a doll house. After recovering from their near heart attack Clyde spoke up. “So Mother is here too can't say I'm surprised,

but maybe she shouldn't just be peeking in like that, it's kinda scary.” He said wondering just how she fit inside such a small shop, to begin with. The Roof seemed to be impossibly high giving her plenty of room above to look down at them.

Proxy sighs. “She doesn't want to be called that anymore, it was making romance a little awkward.” “This Unit is not Proxy's manufacturer.” The robot formerly known as Mother said. “Well then what do we call you?” Raleigh asked annoyed. “This unit now wishes to be called... Penny.” The giant robot answered seeming to be satisfied with that choice of a name. “Well great name and all, but you didn't really explain what you were doing here,” Clyde said a little over it now.

“Oh well, we work here now. Selling new, and used tech of all kinds to the masses, we even provide tech support!” Proxy said Cheerfully. “No, not that why are you here? Rebbecca is clearly behind this.” Clyde said more annoyed. “Oh, you mean existentially. I often wonder whether are we truly alive as robots or simply mimicking human behavior so closely we have fooled even ourselves into believing it. What does it truly mean to be alive? I'll have to get back to you.” His face glitched out in confusion. “Unless you mean that... She's in the back.” He further explained pressing a button that opened the door behind him.

They entered it without another word it opened to a messy workstation Rebbecca had feet propped up against the desk as she sat there not doing anything. He leaned back to see them. “Oh hey, it's you guys welcome back.” She said casually like nothing was wrong. Clyde noticed a hint of something on her face that he hadn't before, but couldn't explain. “You're really just going to act like this is no big deal,” Raleigh said crossing her arms. Rebbecca spun around to face them in her chair standing up. “Is it? Thought I'd set up here for a while, Mr. god of pervy mischief is already doing it why not.” She said with a shrug. “We have so many questions!

Where did you go, why did you give one of your wings to Noir? And why are you here now acting like none of that happened.” Raleigh blurted out with anger. “Oh, you mean that. She cornered me and took it before I could poof away, and why am I here I think I'm entitled to it considering all the

help I gave you two. “Oh, really Noir cornered you,” Raleigh said crossing her arms with a raised eyebrow. “And it's never that simple with you. I find it unlikely you just came here because you felt like it. What is your real goal here? Why did you help her?” Clyde added.

“Maybe I just didn't want any of you to die!” Rebbecca said completely seriously face full of unusual anguish, but it was quickly replaced with her happy flirty face. “I thought I'd try something new alongside you. We've been running around the Multiverse for a long time. It's time to kick our feet up and relax a little. Besides you need me.” She said with a smile. “Need you for what?” Clyde asked still a little unsure what to say after that outburst she was pretending didn't happen.

“Well that little builder you got, he's great, but he lacks the expertise on more advanced technology. Think of it this way. I'm now your new R&D and tech support for the whole community. You're welcome.” She said with a mock bow like it was already set in stone. Raleigh wasn't convinced, but attention was drawn to the corner where the broken Novabreaker and Noir's version were sitting looking like they had been taken apart. “Hey, what are you doing to Nova...” Rebbecca stopped her covering them up. “You weren't supposed to see that yet. It's a spoiler to what's to come. Now, let me show you the coolest feature of the Hack Shack.” She said as another door opened and they pushed them through.

They entered a massive room that seemed to have no end it had all sorts of randomly placed things seeming being used to test the boundaries of the laws of physics like you would see in a video game developers' testing room. “Thanks to the wonders of Subspace technology, I am pleased to bring you this. The Development room. A perfect place to test your skills.” She said stretching her arms out in both directions.”It's... so much bigger on the inside.” Raleigh said in amazement forgetting everything else. “Wait how did you build this all so fast? You're not like... god in here are you?” Clyde asked nervously.

“I'd like to think I'm always god. Feel free to pray to me if you like. But no I do not hold the code, but this is a pseudo-virtual space so I and others can make some adjustments.” She said smugly

as she pressed something in her arms causing the space to glitch out and transform into a lush green forest. “Wow... this place is incredible... too bad I can't trust Rebbecca enough to use it,” Raleigh said. “You'll come around. And maybe even forget any notions of Clyde and fall for me instead.” She said getting closer to Raleigh who backed away in fear hiding behind Clyde.

Rebbecca laughs. “Well anyway, I do have one other thing I'd like to show you.” She said leaving the room expecting them to follow. She left the store leaving the still-waiting Wainwright to look even more confused. “Oh um... this is Rebbecca... I guess you could say she is going to help us out now.” Clyde said reluctantly. “Just like that.” He asked. “She is annoyingly useful, and don't tell her this but... we kinda do owe her.” Clyde sighs rejoining them as Rebbecca leads them to a more forest area where some of the construction workers are clearing trees.

The Fox from before rushed past them but left before Raleigh could do anything to disappoint her. They stopped at a door just standing there in the middle of a forest. “Oh great another door,” Clyde said nervously. “Hey, cutie! Can you tell me what you see over here?” Rebbecca said winking at one of the men. “Well um... Ma'am, I don't believe I see anything, but a few trees we haven't cleared out yet.” She nodded turning back to them. “Not everyone can see it.” She explained as she turned the nob showing them all through.

Inside is a large circular room. Faint lights scatter around to light the path. It mostly seemed to be barren of anything, but on the center wall was a larger cluster of Lights. The biggest was Orange, followed by a few others. “As a hacker, it's only natural that I looked for this world's code, but this world is different.” She explained. “Different how,” Clyde asked already knowing it was in some respects. “I'm still investigating, but long story short... this world is a different type. It can't just be hacked into it's almost alive.” She said excitedly.

“You see the lights? Each one of them is a person. The larger the more influence over the world. The orange one seems to be collectively both of you. That blue one there is Mr. Russel. Green Loki, and well I'm still trying to figure out who that is.” She said pointing to Lights of comparable size to the

orange one, that were not as big as well as another one from a mysterious third party. It was a bit worrisome for all of them that an unknown person had any influence over the world. “And of course the pink one over there is me. You see hackers aren't just known for breaking into things. We also defend them. Let me do that for you alright.” She said sounding almost genuine, but clearly not going to leave if they said no.

“Alright fine... but you better not have some other angle,” Raleigh warns. “Thank you for showing this to us. Maybe we should have her help us with that other thing.” Clyde said still unsure if they should mention it. “What other thing... Oh you mean that. Relax it's still fine look.” She said pulling out the multi-cube containing the void generator as it suddenly started to crack letting light out but holding. All of their eyes widen in concern. Rebbecca stared at it seemingly already getting a good idea of the danger. “I'll set up a vault in the deep, deep basement of the Hack Shack for now. Should hold it at least better than a simple multi-cube for a good while.” She said walking off to do just that.

Chapter 15: The First Real Test

Things have finally seemed to calm down at HOME. The outer walls were finished off and Mr. Wainwright was well on his way into building the Commandos a proper barracks. Of course, Loki's Club was still incomplete. Rebbecca like she said helped him with the more advanced Tech, but mostly kept to herself more than she had in the past. Everyone had gotten into a groove of sorts was this how things would be from now on? Clyde wondered looking down from the balcony of their shared home.

He shook his head glancing back at the still-sleeping Raleigh. He made sure to never venture too far he had to help her a few times after waking from bad memories. He stuck out his hand forming a gauntlet and holding it for a few seconds before releasing it and repeating the process. He had been

doing this for a while in hopes it might increase his stamina and capacity to use his power. Not long after Raleigh started to wake stretching out briefly freaking out Clyde wasn't there before noticing he was outside. She walked outside to join him curiously not saying anything.

It didn't take long for him to notice and stop doing it. “Oh well. I've been training a little. You know like a samurai would with a sword.” He explained. “And why didn't you think I'd want to see you get all sweaty.” Raleigh lightly flirted only to stop standing next to him as they both looked out at their fledgling community. “You're scared a little too huh?” She asked only for him to silently agree. “Oh screw it, let's show them who's boss.” Raleigh declared dragging Clyde back to the bedroom defiantly.

Even with her pushing for it like this her arm shook with nervousness they hadn't gone much farther than this. As they got into bed she climbed on top of him much more hesitant now was this what she wanted? After a moment she decided it was, leaning him still reluctantly only seconds away from fully initiating it as Clyde waited fine however it ended only to be interrupted by a loud boom in the distance. Not like the ground adapting to new people. No, this was something else. Raleigh growled getting off him as she ran back to the balcony seeing a fleet of ships in the sky already attacking the ground below. “God damn it!” She screamed.

After a moment of preparation, they rush onto the street where things are in chaos. All the noncombatants are rushing to a shelter. The Union Ship seemed to be holding the other ships back but only superficially. The commandos didn't have the manpower to operate it. Mr. Wainwright was rushing toward the shelter stopping when he noticed them. “This is bigger than before they didn't have more than one ship like this.” He explained out of breath. “Don't worry we will take care of it,” Clyde said trying to reassure him. He just nodded heading toward the shelter.

Even with The Union ship lacking bite it was a deterrent. The Pirate's started to land their ground forces just outside the wall where the Commandos were already taking positions. Loki was there just watching with a bit of worry. “Oh good you're here,” Grant said looking out at all the forces getting closer. “Velvet says these are rival Pirate crews. Bit strange they are working together.” He

further explains. “A bigger power at play?” Clyde speculated. “Most assuredly, the question being who,” Loki answered. “Well, either way, these lowlifes ain't more than a couple of thugs. Their no empire, or Union that's for sure. Let's get out there and show everyone what we can do.” Grant said to everyone as his men cheered including Mara and the others. He winked at Clyde and Raleigh as they leaped from the wall to the ground below starting their attack.

The pirates met their charge with one of their own as HOME's first real battle began. Some of the wildlife spooked from it all started to attack as well leading to a sorta three-way conflict The Commandos only had a slight edge in the Chaos. “Well, what are we waiting for Let's go help,” Raleigh said only for Clyde to stop her. “No, not yet.” He said. “The hell you mean not yet I'm pissed!” She growled at him. “The Commandos... They need to prove themselves... and I'm not saying to us. I think they are doing more than we could've asked already.” He explained causing Raleigh to sigh relenting to his request but antsy.

Vincent and Akane sat on top of one of the ships above watching the battle. “Ugh, why are we even bothering with this these punks are useless.” He said in frustration as Akane seemed to be taking notes. “You know why this isn't about winning right now.” She said with a sigh. “Why does any of all this planin matter if we can crush them right now.” He argued back. “You are forgetting how many times our records say those two defied everyone's expectations we have to be careful with how we attack them. But I agree. It's a shame we can't just kill them.” Akane said placing aside her notes just as annoyed but in her way.

“Why is that again.” He asked. “Trojan said they are tied to the world now killing them might cause it to drastically shift, and alter the world in a way we can't use it anymore.” She sighed. “Fucking stupid.” He said groaning, attention drawn to the rival who had come onto the deck to clean it. “Hey, you're that cabin boy that's always talking big right.” He asked with interest. “Who me? Oh yeah, I used to be someone really important.” The Rival bragged. Vincent laughs “Right big shot here's your chance then.” Vincent grabs the man stands up and jumps down to the battlefield below. “Wait not...”

Akane started to say only to sigh following after him.”

Back at the conflict below The Commandos have gained the upper hand pushing them back to the shuttles they came down in only for Vincent to come crashing down from above, wiping out the front line with a brilliant slash of light. From a safe distance behind him, The Rival laughed triumphantly, puffing out his chest as if he had done it. “That’s right! Fear the wrath of my... uh... Invisible Cannon Strike!” he shouted, basking in the confused but oddly impressed pirate cheers. “Clyde it's that asshole from Gamalon-8!” Raleigh said in shock. “It must have been him behind all this, maybe we should jump in now with a...” He started to say only to see that Raleigh had already rushed off similarly to Vincent.

Vincent, and Raleigh both made Eye contact rushing toward each other. Raleigh formed her proto-hammer knocking Pirates out of her path like was nothing. “Still not taking me seriously eh? I'll melt that little trinket.” Vincent said in a rage as he started slashing at it with a wave of Light. She hit them away like a baseball as they both got closer. “You ruined everything. I was going to... Grgh.” She said able to slam her hammer into him knocking him down for a moment. He quickly rose to his feet again. “I guess that thing packs a punch after all, but it won't be enough to take me down.

They began to clash furiously with each other as the battle continued around them. The Rival had followed catching up just as Clyde did. The Rival’s one remaining eye lighting up with excitement. Like his friend whom he hadn't seen in ages finally came to visit. "Orion! Is that you?! I mean..." He coughed, trying to sound cooler, "So we meet again for another destined battle! I've gotten a hundred times stronger since last time! I will not lose!" He pointed dramatically at Clyde like they were about to start an epic duel. Clyde just raised an eyebrow. “How are you even alive? I thought the fake Reaper killed you.” Annoyed that he still had to deal with him.

The Rival puffed out his chest proudly. "Well, you see. I may have lost an eye, but thanks to my compact, super-intelligent brain, he missed the important bits!" He laughed like it was the only obvious answer. Some of the pirates turn their attention to them only now noticing the

destruction misunderstanding it as something he did. “Wait is that... that cabin boy was he always this strong?” One of them asked nervously. “And he's Orion's Rival?” One of them questioned a little scared. Clyde just sighed. “Man... I always kinda wanted to role-play the whole Rival thing with someone but... Why did it have to be you,” he said lamenting how lame he was only for the Pirates to misinterpret that as Orion being no match.

Raleigh once again managed to get the upper hand slamming the hammer down into him but this time a red hologram-like force field appeared protecting him and shattering the prototype into bits causing her eyes to widen in shock. Akane was now behind him providing support. “Hey! That's cheating!” She growled only for them to shrug. Vincent charged, forming a brilliant hammer made of pure light and swinging it straight at her. Raleigh barely managed to dodge, rolling to the side, now forced onto the defensive. Clyde cursed under his breath and sprinted forward to help, activating the full armor he could summon. He smashed into Vincent mid-swing, cracking his light weapon and staggering him backward. But before Clyde could follow up, Akane zipped around, moving almost too fast to track, and delivered a brutal sucker punch to the side of his helmet.

The armor over Clyde’s face shattered like glass, revealing his stunned expression underneath. Maybe Clyde, and Raleigh had done the underestimating for once. Raleigh managed to keep dodging his blows as Clyde was barely able to withstand Akane's. She shredded all that remained of his armor with each strike. Their side might have been winning the overall battle, the pirates being pushed back, the commandos holding strong, but they were losing this crucial fight. And if they fell, the tide could easily turn. Raleigh growled in frustration looking around for anything she might be able to use as a weapon pushed back to the wall by him. “Hey Raleigh heads up!” Someone said from above.

Raleigh looked up only to see Rebecca standing casually atop a collapsed guard tower, twirling something in her hand. A glove, black and silver with a hit of orange, covered in faint shimmering nodes. She tossed it down as she caught it. “Rebbecca? Don't you dare interfere with our fight you little punk!” Vincent said in anger only for her to not even acknowledge him. She looked down at the glove

curiously it felt strange in her hands. “Well, what are you waiting for put it on.” She urged. Raleigh slowly wrapped it over her hand feeling an instant surge of power and information. The Glove tightened around her almost like it belonged there like it was meant to be there.

“Don't think just because you got some fancy new toy you can beat me!” Vincent said forming the photons around his arm into a spear punching towards her. Raleigh just smiled catching his fist in her hand as the glove absorbed it. “No hold on there. No need to be.” Vincent said nervously sweating as she uppercuts him with her other fist. She stretches her hand out like she had many times in the past with Novabreaker as a weapon form in her hand made of metal. “Alright, it's time for round two.” She says with glee as she swings around a freshly made sword slashing at him before he can recover.

The first few attacks landed but after that, he had enough time to block them with his mechanical arms and back away with it. “How can you... forget it fuck this. Let's see if you can absorb this bitch!” He screamed as he reached out his hand toward her, a ball of light appeared before his palm as the arm shook, and fell apart he was putting everything he had into an all-out final attack. Without much more build a giant laser shot out of his arm big enough to cause a massive amount of damage more than a person or thing could normally take, but Raleigh just raised the glove toward it soaking it all in like it was nothing slowly pushing forward.

Vincent caught his breath his arm falling to pieces steaming from the major amount of heat that was outputted from it leaving it completely inoperable for now. “What... the hell... they were right about you...” He said voice shaking. “I don't know who they are, but why do you, and your little friends kindly fuck off, and leave us alone! Oh, and you can have your attack back.” Raleigh said pushing the glove to his chest and releasing all the power she absorbed. The hacker was launched into the sky slamming into one of the ships that then caused it to slowly fall and crash into another ship.

Three of the pirate vessels started to crash down onto other islands off in the distance giving The Union ship an opening to take out the other two. Akane had pummeled Clyde to the ground, stepping closer wondering just what she should do with him only for both Loki and Rebecca to step

between them. “You lost the battle Akane, I think you've done enough here,” Rebbecca suggested as Akane looked around at the results. “Tch. Relying on pirates... was a mistake," she muttered. Without another word, she vanished in a flicker of red light, racing off to salvage Vincent’s broken body.

The pirates, now without their scary hacker handlers, looked around in fear and confusion. Their gazes locked onto the Rival, who stood proudly atop a crate, puffing out his chest like a conquering hero. “Wow, look at him!" one pirate whispered. "The cabin boy took down Orion and scared the hackers away!" another gasped. The crowd roared in adoration, completely misunderstanding everything. The Rival placed his hands on his hips triumphantly. "Heh. Of course, I did. Witness my power!” He said laughing. “If you were so powerful why didn't you say anything?” Another one asked.

“Well, I... I just didn't want to make any of you guys look bad.” He said nervously. “Wow, not only is he super strong... he's humble.” One of them said. “That's right I'm super humble.” He said almost buying into the bullshit himself. There was a silence as everyone all the battlefield had stopped fighting drawing their attention to him with caution. “Three cheers for our New Captain!” a random Pirate blurted out only for the others to start chanting “Captain, Captain!” The Rival seems just as confused, but his pride doesn't allow him to do anything other than accept it like he believes he deserves.

“Well if you insist I'll take command of this little group. As my first order.” He started to say as He saw the Commandos quietly surrounding them, most of the wildlife had calmed down, and left. “I um... A strategic retreat! But mark my words we will return!” He declares as they all cheer running back to the shuttles and flying off towards the wreckage that had landed on a sky island far off in the distance.

Clyde groaned hearing the tail end of what happened a little disappointed he had been the only one to go down really. “Well something tells me under his new leadership we won't have to worry about them much anymore, even still, I wish I could've contributed more.” He sighs as Loki helps him

up. “Firewall is one of the strongest Hackers in the Multiverse Clyde. The fact that you fought as well as you did against her is incredible.” Rebbecca explained. “What exactly is your relationship with those two? They don't seem to like you very much at least.” Clyde said mostly recovering. His bruises are superficial.

“Not, much passed a professional level, but hackers keep tabs on each other,” Rebbecca explained further. Before they could talk more, Raleigh had rushed over. “Clyde! Are you hurt? Oh no, your face? Was it that lady I'll destroy her.” She said sounding overly protective. “I'm fine I'll keep training... and maybe one day... One day I'll be a match for them.” He said unsure of himself. Raleigh bites her lip looking like she is both about to cry and something else. “I love you Clyde, but you know I don't care about that, you're perfect weak or strong to me... but I think it's about time we get back to it.” She said seemingly determined as she dragged him back to their house.

Loki turns to Rebbecca looking a little more grim than normal. “Even still your relationship seemed a little too familiar... even if adversarial.” He questioned. She smirked getting closer to him as she placed her hand on his chin. “And what would you know about that Lion boy?” She asked. “Careful... might get the wrong idea. I meant no offense... only that I'm watching.” Loki turned to leave still acting much more serious than normal. Rebbecca simply frowned walking the other way.

Chapter 16: Clyde’s Very Serious Crisis

Clyde was stoked. Things had finally calmed down for real all the work, and his responsibilities were taken care of. It was time after a month or two of waiting he could finally watch No Life Yes Game season two. He gleefully pulled out the disk only now noticing it says Greenray Disk, and that the box hooked up to their tv says Redray player. He shrugged hoping that it didn't matter, but like he feared as soon as it was placed on the screen said it could not be played. He sighed disappointed it wasn't compatible but knew he had other options in the box with the Multiverse Streaming service.

But as he acted it we met with another problem. A symbol flashed on the screen indicating that there was no Wifi. Clyde fell to his knees crying out. “No!” Raleigh popped her head out from the

stairs in confusion. “Clyde? “It's awful Raleigh... we don't have Wifi. These boxes are just heavy... useless paperweights.” He said with zero emotion like this was the lowest moment in his life. “Well yeah, I could've told you that. Russel said he wasn't sure how to do that considering our location, and well if we even should if we are trying to avoid attention like that.”

“But No Life Yes Game.” Clyde pouted like she had never seen causing her to both smirk in amusement but also a bit of shame. “I mean if it's really that big of a deal I'm sure we can work something out with him. For now, let's forget about those silly cartoons, you have a really sexy real-life wayfu right here.” She said smugly posing as provocatively as she was capable. “Oh, Rebbecca! I bet she can do something about it.” Clyde said still distracted by trying to fix the problem to notice what she said. She looked at him like he just stabbed her in shock.

"...Excuse me?" Clyde blinked, finally registering the look on her face. "No, not like that! I meant for the Wi-Fi! Not!" He flailed his arms trying to backpedal, but it was already too late. Raleigh turned her back to him with an exaggerated huff. "Go ahead. See if your precious Rebbecca can get you MultiPix or whatever." She said with anger. “Clyde panicked, grabbing her by the shoulders. "No, no, no! You're my number one waifu! You're like, you're the ultra-rare secret character you can only unlock by finishing all the true routes!" Raleigh peeked over her shoulder, squinting at him."...Go on."

"And, and if there were trading cards you'd be holographic," he added desperately. She finally cracked a grin, giving him a playful shove. "I don't know what any of that stuff means, but it sounds good. That's what I thought, nerd." She said proudly. “Now come upstairs, and let me show you how legendary I really am... as long as you're throwing out praise that is.” She said smugly tugging on his arm. “But the wifi,” he said timidly only for her to glare. “Right.” He said relenting. "I swear, Clyde," she muttered, dragging him up the stairs, "we’ve fought empires, survived gods, saved the damn multiverse... and you're acting like this is the bigger tragedy." She commented after pulling him upstairs.

After an hour or two they lay in bed recovering. “I think we are getting pretty good at it,” Clyde said nervously. “Pft you weirdo, we are obviously the best at it, well mostly me anyway. You are like not even close to worthy of me.” She teased clinging to him and kissing his cheek. “Yeah sure you're the best,” Clyde said still catching his breath. "Alright, fine. We can go talk to Rebbecca now. I've been meaning to bug her about my new weapon anyway," she said, getting dressed.

They open the door to the hack shack only to see Proxy, arguing with a Knight ripped straight out of the Crusades. “What sort of blastflamy is this? Gollems are the work of the devil, and must be purged!” He said in anger ready to attack Proxy only for Mother to pick up the man stopping his advance while he kept swinging. “Sir for the last time. This is a tech store, not the demon Realm. We are Androids got it? Robots.” Proxy said in annoyance.

“I don't think that guy lives here,” Clyde said confused as they both walked closer. Mother puts the man down as he runs out of breath. “By the lord's name. Finally humans. Thou are human yes?” The Knight asked confused. “Who is this guy?” Clyde asks Proxy. “Oh, just a subspace wanderer. No big deal, sometimes they buy stuff here.” The Robot explained nonsensically. “That kinda sounds like a big deal,” Raleigh said concerned. “Sub what? Are Thou mad? I simply entered the town blacksmith to get my weapons refined, as I was brought here by sorcery instead.” The man said in protest.
“Think of him as a wandering spirit,” Proxy said still shrugging. “How dare you I still live in breath do not compare me to such abominations. I was tasked by god himself to purge the blight on our world. See I'm human.” The Knight said defiantly pulling off his gauntlet to show his hand, only to see that it was nothing but bone now shocking himself. “I've... been forsaken... Nay, the marrow of my faith... gone.” The knight said now distraught as he slinked into the corner. Proxy walked over patting him on the back. “There there is alright. I'm sure god still loves you, you probably just misunderstood him or something. You can still purge the... Abominations.”

The knight looks up still questioning everything now. “You know god?” He asked. “We'll ugh... I know many gods... say you came here to get your weapons upgraded right? Well, let's do that for you.

We will even throw in a discount.” Proxy said dodging the complicated question. In mere moments the Knight is equipped with similar armor, but now much more high-tech. “With this, you'll be the envy of all the other crusaders. That can be yours for a low price.” He said like he was calculating to whatever currency he likely used. “100 gold.” “100 gold that's highway robbery... but I cannot deny this armor does suit me... it even goes well with my eyes.” He said despite not having eyes anymore. He hands him a bag of gold and rushes out the door which now has a vortex of sorts of the other side waving as he shuts the door.

Clyde, and Raleigh both start to question the implications. “So like is he dead or...” Clyde asked. “I don't fucking know... This is a new technology. He might just end up right where he left off, might reincarnate. Maybe he is just really stupid and never realized he was always a skeleton. Either way, he is now a valued Hack Shack customer” Proxy explained. “Anyway, how can I help you two today? In the market for some cool new gear?” He asked turning his face into a smiling emote.

“We came to talk to Rebbecca about a couple of things, like maybe setting up some WiFi here,” Clyde explained. Proxy's emotes charged to a pouting face as he sighed. “Of course, no one cares to catch up with good ol proxy, it's always Rebbecca this Rebbecca that. Where are by car keys Proxy?” He ranted. “Did you steal someone's car?” Clyde asked. “That's not important!” He said defending himself. “This unit will always love, and listen to Proxy Model seven.” Penny chimed in from above.

“Oh, Penny you're the only one in the Multiverse I truly care about,” Proxy said as she picked him up carrying him into the void without answering their questions. “Relationship goals?” Clyde said half joking. The Door opens to Rebbecca's workshop as she sticks her head out. What's with all the meandering get in here already? She said walking back in like she was in a rush. They follow her in about to explain. Only for her to answer right away. “The wifi thing I have all the parts, but setting it up would be a pain don't feel like it.” She answered.

“How did you?” Clyde asked. “Know what you were going to say. Don't be silly Clyde this is my place I have cameras, and stuff everywhere. Even some from below shots.” She said smirking at

Raleigh. She blushes covering herself. “I expect that sort of thing from Loki I don't need them from you too!” She shouted. “Yeah yeah... Look I don't really have time to play with you right now. I already have a lot of boring work to do for Russel. If you want help with something make it interesting.” She demands. Now that they have a better look at her it seems she might not have slept for a while.

Raleigh Raised her gloved weapon in the air. “Oh that I was hoping you would ask.” She said gleefully adopting her cheerful persona once more. “You see it's a bit of an amalgam of your old weapon and Noir's. With a few added benefits.” She smiled seemingly much more excited to talk about it. “Why is it a glove though? It kinda limits it to one hand unlike before.” Raleigh asked. “Better integration. It links with your brain a lot better than the original right?” She explained. “Well yeah but...”She started to say.

“Alright you got me, I just kinda wanted it to be a glove and thought it would look cool.” She said sticking out her tongue. “Seriously Rebbecca... Come on I appreciate the effort, but can't you make it more versatile.” Raleigh sighs. “It's plenty versatile even limited to one arm, It can still do everything your old one can do with the bonus of absorbing energy, it can even mimic elemental weapons now provided you charge it up first. Oh, you have no idea what I have planned. I...” She started to say but stopped herself like she wasn't sure if she should say. Bracing her feelings, and being more measured.

“Come on you can say it, we won't make fun of you,” Clyde said reassuring her. “Well... You see a while back I saw something terrifying. At first, all I could feel was dread, but over time there was something else. I felt inspired. If something like that really could be created I want to make one myself. I want to make a transcendent Class Item, and well Novabreaker was already halfway there... They aren't ready yet, but I'd like to keep upgrading it for you.” She said with more sincerity than they normally see from her as she thought back to the one her boss had used to absorb a universe.

“You want to make one just like that? No catch?” Raleigh said confused. “Well and your hand in marriage.” She said blowing a kiss at Raleigh who shrugged it off. “Ok, no deal then,” Raleigh said handing it back to her. “Wait, wait I kid.” She nervously said pushing it back into her hand. “Don't

worry as soon as I can procure the parts, which are.... exceedingly rare... invent a few things that technically don't exist yet... and, you know, bend a few universal rules... it'll be unstoppable!"

"I can see that you are passionate about this... but assuming it's even possible is it really a good idea to build something like that?" Clyde nervously said not trying to crush her dreams just being cautious. "Power's not dangerous... people are dangerous... You know there are all sorts of things out there, best to be ready for them. Feel free to test out the glove in The Dev Room, I guess I should name it huh? Novastriker, Glovebreaker... no no none of that works... I'll keep workshopping that." She said mostly dismissing his concerns like she knew more than she was willing to say. Walking off toward what looked like a bedroom. "Wait what about the Wifi?" He asked still really wanting it as she groaned clearly not wanting to deal with it.

"If you want it that badly build it yourselves all the materials for the tower are already on the roof." She closed the door without another word. They both climb up to the roof via a trap door seeing the parts in a massive box. With the instructions stabled to it. Clyde walks over looking at them shocked. "Oh gods this thing is like 20 feet tall." He groans in disbelief unsure they can do it. "Well, we better get to work then. I'll do all the heavy lifting." She said pulling the box open to get started. "Wait really? You still want to do this?" He asked confused. "Well yeah... I mean don't get me wrong I don't get your affection for the cartoons, but it's what you love, and I love you." She said with a smile.

"You're the best Raleigh." He said returning the smile. Thanks to her superhuman strength she didn't have much trouble lifting the huge, and heavy parts, but it was a little difficult once they put them together with how big it was. Once it was all assembled they looked up feeling like something was wrong. "Um... Clyde... I think it's upside down." She said looking up at the wires sticking out of the top. He opens the manual making sure it's the right way holding it up to it seeing that it's right. "Was this stapled together wrong or something?" He groans tossing the book over his shoulder as they try again. This time they set it up right but seemed to be missing a key piece that held it together at the bottom causing it to fall onto the street below hitting Loki who was just casually walking by. "What did

I do to deserve this... like what specifically?" He shouted pleading guilty to something at least.

"Proxy made his way to the roof using the same method as they did while Mother seemed to come out the back door that was much smaller than her giant frame. She loomed over the building picking up the fallen tower like it was a toothpick and holding it in place while Proxy turned one of his fingers into a blow torch welding it together. "We had enough fun watching you struggle to put this thing together. Let the experts handle it." Proxy declared. "Thank you!" Loki said below still lying on the ground.

"You could've helped us this whole time?" Clyde said annoyed. "I'm sorry, but I don't believe you asked me for help. Only Rebbecca." He said as his face flashed with an angry emote. "Alright alright sorry Proxy your plenty capable, or Penny is at least. "Hmnp. That will be one thousand central credits." The Robot said annoyed by that remark. Clyde just sighs reaching into his pocket and handing him some coins. "The price of good anime." He said. "Thank you for your business. Please come again. " He said his emote changing back to a happy one as they both quickly returned inside. "Well let's go home and watch it already," Clyde said excitedly.

Both of them jumped down without issues walking passed Loki who was still lying there. "I'll watch too. See what all the hype was about." Raleigh said. "Wait really.... I didn't think you would want to, we can go back to the first season and re-watch that first then. They both said walking back to their house. Loki groaned. "Don't worry everyone I'm ok." Even though no one was around.

Chapter 17: Yakuza and Yakisoba

Clyde paced around the living room worried about something. Raleigh and his first official anniversary was coming, and he wasn't sure what to do about it, or if she even cared. He thought about having Loki throw them a huge party, or perhaps another big thing, but in the end, he was uncertain about any of it and now it crept up on him only a day away. “Clyde, Clyde! Are you listening to me?” Raleigh said waving her hand in front of her face. He was brought back to reality not even knowing she was there. “Sorry, no. What did you say?” He said apologetically.

“I'm hungry let's have lunch early.” She Pleaded. “Alright fine, what do you want?” He asked only for someone to knock at the door. They didn't get visitors that often. If someone needed something

they usually just asked on coms. They opened it seeing Mr. Wainwright was there looking nervous. “I um... I'm sorry...” He said without explaining. “Sorry about what?” Clyde asked. “Well, I...” He started to say looking around to see if anyone was watching. “I didn't want to but...” He further said puzzling them both. “Are you good Russel?” Raleigh asked as he sheepishly pushed his way inside and shut the door. “They are here.” He said in a whisper. “Who Russel? Who?” Clyde said feeling like he was pulling teeth.

“The Freaking Kinryū Kai.” He said with fear. “Are they like... pirates or something?” Raleigh asked not getting it. “You don't know? They are the most infamous group of criminals in Porta Nexus. Yakuza!” He said seeming to know them well. “Yakuza? What do they want here?” Clyde asked confused wondering if it was the same ones they ran into during the siege. “I um... I don't know they said they wanted to live here and made me build some things for them. I would've told you earlier but well... they were watching me, you can't just say no to the Kinryu Kai.” He said spooked.

“Well let's go beat them up then,” Raleigh said cracking her knuckles. “I mean have they really done anything wrong though? We don't have to solve all our problems with violence. Besides I don't know if that would even work against an enemy like that.” Clyde suggests. She sighs but nods her head in agreement. “I suppose we should check things out first, but if they try anything funny... After lunch.” She said drooling. “I think it might be better just to get it over with let's go now,” Clyde said to her despair, but Mr. Wainwright reassured. “They are south of the hospital, they practically had me build a little district for them,” Russel explained with thankful eyes.

They walk down the roads leading towards it seeing the buildings start to change in style to something more Eastern they had taken a small section of HOME for themselves in just a week or two. Everyone was looking at them but none approached all looking a bit thuggish. “I wonder if the Commandos know about this,” Clyde said only for Raleigh not to answer. There were a few shops set up mostly food related including a small diner. Raleigh's hunger got the better of her running inside one he followed after her sighing.

Surprisingly Grant was already there at the bar eating some ramen as a man wearing shades stood behind the counter cleaning a glass. They sat down next to him wondering what he was doing. “Oh, you caught wind of this place too.” He said as he ate. “Never been much of a fan of foods like this, but it's mighty fine.” He said enjoying it. “What can I get you two.” The Man behind the counter said like it was completely normal. Now that they got a better look at him he was covered in scars. Clyde looked at all of them conflicted on what they should do only for Raleigh to start Ordering. “I'll have the Yakisabo? And the pork cutlet, and throw in some rice, oh and the house special looks pretty good too I'll have that as well.” She said to the man looking at a menu.

“Alright, we'll prepare it right away ms... what about you sir?” The man asked. “I um... The chicken...” He said unsure. “Clyde you can't come to a restaurant like this and order that. You have to order what they are known for. He will have the special as well.” Raleigh said shaming him as the man nodded briefly heading towards the back to prepare all the food. “Both of you are acting way too casual about this. What if they poison the food or something.” He sighs.

“The only thing I'm dying of is flavor. I'll have to bring the boys round soon.” Grant said continuing to eat not seeming to be bothered. “Loosen up Clyde food is food,” Raleigh said getting more impatient the longer she waited. Not long after the man returned having all the stuff they ordered somehow. He placed it all down for them right away. “I hope you enjoy.” He said with a smile that looked a little scarier than he probably meant for it to be.

Grant finishes the food placing the sticks down. "Mighty fine grub... reminds me of some places back on the front. Good food... rough people. Respect is a two-way street. But it’s a dead-end if only one side’s paving it." The man smiles but in a tense sort of way like he understood the meaning. He placed some credits on the counter leaving without another word. He would be watching them but had ultimately passed off the decision to let them stay with Clyde and Raleigh.

“Oh my gods it's so good,” Raleigh said with delight as she scarfed it all down. Clyde followed suit at a much slower pace. “I have to admit. It's not bad.” Clyde said savoring it fully. “It was always

my dream to open a shop like this. I'm happy you enjoy it, bro." The man said returning to cleaning the dishes. Both of them share a look like that line enough shook their opinion of them. They finished the food without much more fanfare paying the bill and stepping out. There seemed to be more Yakuza walking around now their eyes resting on them, but all of them still kept their distance. "Hey, bro!" A short scrappy one said running up to them. "The boss sends their regards." He said as he handed them a bag.

Clyde took it from him as he ran off down an alley. He was a little worried it would be a severed head, but he dismissed it they hadn't done anything to make him think that he shouldn't be biased. "Well, what are you waiting for open it," Raleigh said impatiently taking it from him. Inside was a bottle of Sake, a Mellon, and a Letter with a fancy stamp over it. "Hmm Is this their way of saying hello?" He questioned as she ripped the letter open. "Leaders of HOME. Orion Vesper, and Captain Raleigh. We would formally like to invite you to our home, to discuss terms of coexistence. Mikako Kinryū." Raleigh read aloud as she raised an eyebrow. At the bottom was an address of sorts.

"Seems overly polite. I expected more..." He said struggling to find the words. "Scum and villainy?" She asked. "Well... yeah. So do you think this is a trap?" He asked. "Could be, but well... I don't know. These guys feel different somehow... but for the love of the Multiverse would you all stop staring at us it's creepy." She said yelling the last part at the crowd as they dispersed.

They keep walking down the street until they reach a manor. A group of thugs outside were squatting not paying much attention, but one of them noticed. "Oh shit it's the bosses of this place go tell big sis." One of them said as another rushed off. They stiffened up looking like they were trying their best to act more formally, now opening the gate for them. "Hey, bro thanks for coming let me show you the way." Another one said leading them in without saying anything else. "Well if anything they are pretty tight-nit," Clyde mumbled to Raleigh as they followed him.

He led them to a room opening the door to another room and closing it behind them. A woman in a suit showing a bit of cleavage sat at the table keeping to herself but keeping her eye focused on

them. Just as they were about to say something the outside door on the opposite side opened up revealing a young woman with silver hair, in a black kimono with golden dragon designs. She raised her head high showing an air of superiority as she smoked from a pipe. “Ah, so you have arrived. Welcome to our home. I am the great, and powerful boss of the Kinryu Kai. It's a pleasure to meet with young upstarts such as yourselves. Even if your strength appears to be... exaggerated.” She said calmly face filled with superiority.

“You don't look that old. Are you like... one of those thousand-year-old vampires or something?” Clyde said confused. All her bluster and bravado vanished right away as she looked completely confused. “A thousand-year-old what? Wait no... I'm very grown up!” Before she could say anything else a small old lady appeared from nowhere and clung to Clyde. “There you are Ryugi I was wondering where you ran off to.” The old lady said to Clyde clearly mistakenly thinking he was someone else. “Great now I got to fight against old ladies too.” Raleigh groans. The Lady sitting down started to laugh like crazy. “Hahaha.”

The woman keeps laughing struggling to stop herself. “Mom you're ruining everything.” The woman and the kimono whines. “No sweetie you already did that yourself. Sorry for the little play I put on, but well my Daughter here was being insistent about it.” She said calmly not getting up. “And you are?” Raleigh asked. “Right forgive me. I am Mikako Kinryū boss of the Kinryū Kai pleased to meet you.” She said bowing slightly. The daughter clears her throat trying to regain her persona. “I am Kaguya Kinryū surely you have heard of it. I'm a legend all over Porta Nexus.” She said smugly.

Mikako just giggles. “She likes to cosplay as the big boss, but she's just a little cinnamon roll deep down. Looks up to her grandmother. Unfortunately, Mother is not all there anymore sorry about that.” She explains motioning to the old lady. “I am not a Cinnamon roll! I'm super strong and powerful.” Kaguya said in protest. “Sure you are darling. I think we've had enough fun though it's time to get down to business. Please take Grandma and go.” She ordered. Her daughter looked like she wanted to argue, but ended up doing as she asked.

“Enough skirting, I want a simple answer from you. Why are you here?” Raleigh said more seriously. Mikako sighs standing up at walking over to a cabinet filled with bottles of Sake. “Understandable, but when you break it down it's simple. We want to live, to thrive.” She said taking the bottle with her to the outside area and sitting on the porch. They both follow her Raleigh's eye catching onto a shrine right next to the door seeming to honor the dead none of the pictures seem to stand out to her except one of what looks like a younger Mikako in a school uniform standing next to a blood red-haired girl. Something about her looked familiar, but she dismissed it.

“You couldn't do that on Porta Nexus? The people that know you say that you are quite well known there.” Clyde asked as they both sat down with her and she handed them a cup to drink. The woman takes a while to answer like she is trying to answer more thoughtfully. “Do you remember running into a couple of my guys during that whole fight against the Remnant?” She said more sorrowfully. “Well yeah... didn't know much about them, but they helped us take down one of the honor guards. Shame that not all of them made it.” Clyde said.

“That man was my husband.” She said as both their eyes widened. “I'm so sorry I wish I could've stopped her from killing him,” Clyde said much more sympathetic now. “No none of that. It wasn't anyone's fault but the bitch who killed him. You see... he wasn't much of a fighter to begin with. But he loved me he wanted to be a part of my world, and he did everything he could to acclimate. But in the end, he was just a normal guy. I loved him.” She started to say about to explain further only for Raleigh to cut her off. “No, I'm sorry I... ran off to fight someone else. If I had stayed maybe he would still be alive.” Raleigh said looking extremely guilty of her past actions.

Clyde looked down and thought. In a lot of ways he felt he was the same as him. “My husband was a lot of things, but a fool was not one of them. He knew what he was getting into. I won't hear anything else alright? Listen I don't bring this up to make you feel responsible. Or guilt you into letting us stay just to explain a few things. After he died I started to question things more. To the Kinryū Kai nothing is more important than family, the bonds we share, and yet it felt like we had lost our way. For

ages, we had looked out for the downtrodden of Porta Nexus and gave them a second chance of sorts." She further explained.

"And what did you come up with?" Clyde asked. "I'm tired... Claimed that everything was done for for family and yet... My family is gone. That's why we are here. Yeah, we have committed sins, and done bad things, but we want to be better. To follow the code we always claimed to. So as the Leader Of the Kinryū Kai, I humbly ask for you to allow us to stay here. Not for free of course. Our passion is front and center for everyone to enjoy, but also when it comes to other things we will defend this place."

"We already have a defense force," Clyde said confused. "I'm well aware... I mean a different kind of defense. The underworld kind. For starters a little tidbit of information for you. I don't know where it came from, but people know about this place that's how we learned, they know of its resources." She said more wary. "Well, we kinda assumed something like that happened with the Pirates," Raleigh said mostly calmed down. "If you would like I can press further." The boss said.

Clyde thought for a moment wondering what they should do. "Why us? Why here?" He asked. "well because of you two, what you are doing here. This place is slowly becoming a second chance for all types, and who better to follow than someone like you." She said seriously. "A second chance huh... someone like us." He said still in thought looking over at Raleigh as they both agreed without saying anything. "Alright you can stay... but if you try anything funny..." She said as she put her fingers up to her eyes showing she was watching.

"I promise I'll be on my best behavior you won't even know we were criminals. So happy we could come to an agreement. Now the bird's told me its almost the young couple's anniversary I could throw some things together for you if you would like." She said cheerfully. "Wait how did you... Loki?" Clyde questions even though he only told a select few people she nods in response. "Oh who's anniversary?" Raleigh asked completely clueless.

"Oh wait... ours?" She asked nervously as Clyde lowered his head taking a sigh of relief.

“Guess I was worried over nothing.” He said. “Yeah... I'm sorry I honestly had no idea, but it makes me happy you remembered. Let's just do something quiet tonight you and me. I'll make it up to you.” She said earnestly. “Alright.” He said with a smile. Mikako looks at him with a bit of envy, but then back at the shrine not saying anything just thinking thoughtfully of the past, and their coming future.

Chapter 18: The Lion Club's Grand Opening!

Early in the morning Raleigh and Clyde are still sleeping peacefully in their beds the sun not even up yet. Suddenly Loki jumped through the balcony standing at the foot of their beds. “It's time!” He happily declares jolting both of them awake. Raleigh reflexively puts on the glove transforming it into a knife tackling him to the ground before her brain catches up to her. “Loki? What the hell you can't just burst into our house like that.” She growls putting her weapon away as she sits back on the bed. “Loki it's like five in the morning what do you want?” Clyde groans.

“Apologies I was just so excited. Today is the day! The day HOME truly rockets into the sky as the greatest place in the multiverse!” She proudly declares. Both of them raise an eyebrow still half

asleep. “And why is that?” Raleigh asked. “Well because today is the grand opening of the Lion Club of course!” He said proudly. “Oh cool,” Clyde said as they both got back into bed going back to sleep. Loki just stands there posing like he expected more of a reaction. “The Lion Club!” He says again like he thought they misheard. “Good for you Loki now fuck off we are trying to sleep.”

“We will be providing free alcohol and food,” Loki said in a last attempt to get them to even show light interest. Raleigh just sighs throwing a pillow at him. “We didn't even say we wouldn't come just not now,” Raleigh said angry he was still there. “Wonderful. It starts at Eight!” He said excitedly. “Then why are you bothering us about it now?” Clyde growls. “So you can properly prepare for it of course.” He explains. “Just go away Loki.” Both of them say together. “Alright... fine fine. See you there.” He said leaving without another word.

Later that day they do come up a little fashionably late looking at the Club in its complete form. Loki is waiting outside with a few other men and women who look extremely attractive. A small banner draped over the top with the words grand opening. “Clyde, Raleigh you made it!” He said excitedly. “Just wait people will start swarming in any second dying to get in.” He said as the wind blew by with a random tumbleweed. “Don't worry they are probably just running a little late.” The man said trying to convince himself.

“Loki... I don't think the people at live here even understand what this place is supposed to be hell I'm not sure if I do either.” Clyde said starting to feel bad. “That, and the community still isn't huge... or full of people that would care if they did,” Raleigh adds. “I told you... it's a host club.” Loki said as his ears drooped. A single commando walked up seeming to be excited for the opening reigniting his excitement. “Ah, a customer and just in time to cut the ribbon! Haha!” He enthusiastically and dramatically pulls out a giant pair of scissors and cuts the giant ribbon as the lone Commando Claps. “Come come let me show you inside!” He beacons them all.

Inside is huge, and decorated with elaborate and over-the-top designs all over, about as grand as one can get, very expected of Loki. “Welcome to the Loki Club! To your right is the party floor with all

the nonstop raves you could ask for.” He said showing off a darker room with flashing lights and blaring music. “For more casual conversations we have our hang-out spot where you can talk with our many hosts. One of them is sure to match your style!” He said showing an area that looks more like a traditional host club the main difference being that it's co-ed. All of the pretty boys, and girls bow with charming faces that seem to sparkle somehow. “Upstairs is for more private gatherings!” Loki starts to say only for them to cut him off.

“What did we say about public pervy mischief!” Both of them say. “No no like private parties, and the like... though I do have a few spare beds for that,” Loki explained the last part under his breath. At the front we have a cozy little maid cafe with both male and Female Maids see if you can spot the difference.” Loki winked. Clyde peaked in nervously seeing a few maids preparing for the opening and was a little freaked out when he indeed couldn't tell. “And lastly the Gift shop so you can always remember your visit to the Lion Club! Oh, and I almost forgot our centerpiece.” He said presenting the fountain behind him. “A champagne fountain!”

“Wow, I gotta say this place is actually kinda cool. It's kinda a shame no one really knows about it.” Raleigh painfully admits to wounding Loki's Pride. “It's only a matter of time. Soon this place will be booming with activity mark my words! Now as for our current guest what would you like to partake in this find grand opening everything is on the house today!” He asked the commando. He tilts his head looking more confused. “I kinda thought this was a fight club.” He said hesitantly causing Loki to fall on his ass in disbelief. “Wait so I can just talk to any of these pretty young ladies?” The Commando asked feeling bad now. “Well yes... the men as well,” Loki said a little less enthused.

The Commando much more timidly points at one of the women blushing nervously. “Even her she is really pretty?” The woman smiles at him holding out her hand as he nervously takes it leading him away. “That's the spirit. What about you two?” Loki asked. “Well um... I guess we could...” Clyde started to say only to be cut off by a loud noise outside.

Tristan and Crow jump out of a portal. It had taken a while, but thanks mostly to Crow they had

found out where Clyde and Raleigh were. Tristan took a deep breath mentally preparing himself. “Ok let's do this all we have to do is ask If they say no we try to convince them otherwise.” He said mostly trying to reassure himself but looking at Crow for reassurance. Crow doesn't say anything just giving him a thumbs up. Before they can do anything though portals start to Open all over the sky as ships, and people appear. By the time Loki and the other's come out to investigate they had been swept away in the crowd. “What the? Who are all these people?

“They made it after all! I also sent invites out to my friends all over the Multiverse. Mostly Valhalla though.” Loki said as the Crowd started rushing to the Club. “You did what? We told you not to do that!” Raleigh growled. “Relax captain they aren't sticking around. They are simply here for the opening.” Loki explained not entirely convincing her. Lucy, and her crew all pop up as Lucy embraces him. “Sorry, we are late Lion boy. Had to take care of a few things.” The doctor explained. Crucible sighed. “Did we need to come too, what if there is an emergency.” The man said not seeming to be thrilled to be there. “We are here to support our favorite Lion man. Besides AID-E has it taken care of she'll tell us if she needs us to go back.” Lucy brushed him off.

“Don't be a stick in the mud Cruise! It's time to let loose and party!” He said leading them all in Crucible hesitating. “Humans waste too much time on pointless things like this. I wish I could remove the dopamine in my human brain excited by the prospect of... partying right now. Alas.” He said with a hint of hidden excitement as he entered with them.

They look over seeing that Theron has arrived with some of the other Warriors from the war world. “Great I hope this doesn't get too out of hand. As much as I don't want to I think we need to stick around and make sure.” Clyde sighs. “Come on it won't be that bad let's live a little,” Raleigh said as she took his hand back inside. Tristan and Crow seem to have escaped the wave of people seeing them just as they do. “There they are we just have to.” He started to say only for another large group to appear overwhelming them again.

Inside Clyde looks around seeing a lot of faces he recognizes. The Announcer from Colleseuma,

three different versions of the mechanic girl that had fixed the Hopper in the past, even out of left field ones like the Mecha Commander who was just kinda there break dancing and he was really good. “Man, he must have invited like everyone in the damn multiverse,” Clyde said fascinated. “I think you guys forget he's pretty popular. A celebrity of sorts.” Rebbecca said sitting down with them as the chaos surrounded them she must have been drawn in by the commotion. They look around seeing that many of the members of HOME had also been drawn in.

It looked like Russel had come in to complain about the noise only to be pulled into a game of pong completely forgetting he was upset. Grant was standing in the corner watching everything with Mara. Even their new Yakuza friends were scattered about the dance floor now, but there was no sign of the bosses. “Like moths to a flame,” Clyde said with a sudden sense of dread. “This place is getting a little full...” Raleigh said suggesting without words it might be time to move. All three of them nod making their way to the other side of the club.

They pass AID-E who is shouting loudly shaking around. “Wooo! I... love you guys 89 percent chance.... spingledorf.” The robot said slurring her words. “How did you manage to get a robot drunk?” Crucible asked in confusion. They had never seen her with so much expression on her face even if it was completely unhinged. “I would like some as well.” He whispered to the bartender. All three of them laughed leaving to the host side. Tristan and Crow again saw them leave now Trapped in the middle of a konga line. “How the hell did we end up like this?” He asked in confusion.

The Host side is less busy but there are still people talking amongst the hosts Strangely Kaguya has claimed multiple for herself. “There I was surrounded by an impossible amount of ruffians.” She said trying to sound cool as the Host all looked at her with interest, it was unclear if they really cared or were just faking. “What happened next?” One of them asked. “We'll I left the family sword at home, so I had no choice but to rely on nothing but my trusty pipe, and my powerful fist. While still looking elegant of course. I felled them all in half an hour.” She said smugly. They all gasped in amazement.

“Kinda reminds me of you, back in the day,” Clyde said to Raleigh as Rebbecca laughed in

agreement. “Whatever when I say stuff like that's the truth. I've done tons of stuff like that!” She said in protest. They settle down in one of the booths taking a moment to recover from the chaos Rebbecca sits down with two of the Female hosts wrapping an arm around each of them. As both of them look at her asking if she is serious. “What? When in Rome right.” She said unapologetically as both of the hosts laughed.

Tristan and Crow finally catch up, but he trips and falls on his face right before he reaches them. All they see is Crow casually walking closer. “Wait that's that one person... The Chimera Legions Scout!” Clyde said as both jumped up onto the booth like startled cats, ready to brawl. Rebbecca didn't move indifferent to their prescience. “Guys... guys it's ok Crow is one of us now,” Tristan said dusting himself off. “Tristan? What are you doing here? One of us?” Clyde asked.

“Oh um right...” Tristan fished out a press badge, proudly at first, until it flopped forward awkwardly, clearly laminated at home with uneven edges. “I guess we haven't talked in a while. We are reporters now, For Aion Anderson!” He said with a hint of Excitement as Crow just nodded. “How exactly did that happen?” Raleigh said in surprise. “Well... I honestly don't know Aion, and Mia just showed up one day saying they were working with us now. Don't worry they are pretty good at it.” He explained. “Well, how about that... good for you too I guess. Happy you found a path.” Clyde said truly meaning it with all the time he struggled to find one.

“Right so... now to bring up our proposal,” Tristan said nervously Crow Reassuring him without doing anything more than a stare. “Mr. Anderson would like to interview with you guys now.” He further explained. “An interview? I remember him saying as much way back when, but... For what exactly?” Raleigh asked. “Well about you... and guess also you new home too.” All of them look down thinking about it more. “Something like that is bound to draw even more attention to this place, even if most of the important information is obscured from the public.” Rebbecca comments having multiple reasons to keep HOME out of the public eye.

“And what's so bad about that,” Loki said sitting down with them he had managed to leave the

chaos for a while and join them as well. “It's not that I don't mind attention... But people like the old Empire finding out...” Raleigh said unsure. Crow finally speaks up. “The information is already out there in some capacity, and it will only get worse. Best to frame it more favorably for yourselves.” They suggest. “Aion said he wouldn't talk about anything you don't want to, and keep information vague about this place. You've met the guy, you know how he is. He won't go back on his word.” Tristan adds. “Even if that's the case right now a small select group of people knows, and we can control who stays, and goes. But this, that's not a gate you can close. The more people that come here the less influence you have... the less home, Home is. Aren't you afraid it might become something unrecognizable to you?” Rebbecca pushed back. Raleigh looked down unsure of what to do at the end of the day it was really up to her over anyone else. “You know... in the past few months... I just wanted someone to build us a physical house, but it kept snowballing. It's already not exactly what I imagined... but I think... I'm ok with that. I like what it's turned into so far even if it's not what I expected.”

“Alright let's do it then,” Clyde said standing up. “We should still probably consult the others though.” He adds. All of them smile seeming to have more or less decided on it other than Rebbecca who frowns knowing this will complicate things more for her. “Wait really? I kinda thought we would have to camp out here or something. Aion was like I don't care what you do, but don't come back until you seal the deal.” Tristan said trying to make an impression of him. “Well, I'll write our info down for you and contact you when we get it scheduled sound like a plan?” He asked as they all nodded.

Crow elbowed them like they were forgetting something. “Oh right. Do you mind if we take a few pictures around town too?” Crow is writing an article about it.” “I mean I don't see why not as long as it's not a hit piece,” Raleigh said still a little suspicious of Crow. They raise their hand throwing up an ok sign assuring her otherwise.

Chapter 19: The Interview

The Hopper enters Porta Nexus air space being stopped just outside the force field until the proper checks can be made. Aion had not taken that long to get back to them and set up a date. Everyone seeing the writing on the wall unanimously agreed they should get ahead of the potential threat, but something was wrong it usually didn't take this long to get through the security. They remained just outside the shield as they were Hailed by the Aviation division. “We see that you have a priority access key given to you by Aion Anderson, but well. We are under a level 4 lockdown right now please proceed to the gate if you wish to enter.” The man explained.

“Did something happen?” Clyde asked curiously but figured it was probably a good thing they

were taking security more seriously. “Afraid so. Terrorist bombing or something. They are still trying to track down the culprits. My apologies. You may enter when ready.” The man said ending the call. “I guess things are still a little crazy here after all even after a year.” Clyde sighs not sure what else to say about it as they make their way to checkpoint of sorts. Many different members of the Port Authority are stationed there scanning ships in slowly, and allowing them down below.

“Whatever happened I'm sure the Port can handle it. They survived worse.” Raleigh said as they flew down toward Aion's news tower. Clyde nodded to himself they had their own problems to deal with. They landed right on a platform above where Aion and Mia were waiting with smiles. “Haha... you made it! Welcome welcome!” Aion said with excitement. Aion's lack of concern seemed to pull them more in the direction of not worrying about it. “I honestly was starting to think you were avoiding me, but that silly who would want to do a thing like that,” Aion said with a hint of passive aggression.

“Well, we are here now,” Clyde said shrugging. “Say you're not still mad about the whole broadcasting you and the others during the Aspect war are you?” He asked sheepishly. Raleigh shot him a look saying do you have to ask. “Ah, I see... well perhaps this can be my... peace offering of sorts. Now I'm still going to let the facts speak for themselves I have a reputation to keep, but come on you guys are the heroes I don't think we will have to worry about that. “Aion,” Mia said clearing her throat. “Right let's get off this dusty old roof and go inside already. Show time is in an hour.” He said walking back inside the tower without another word.

They enter the main set Aion sitting down in his chair like he is already excited to begin. Tristan and Crow are in the corner working on something. “So um... I'm a little curious how that happened.” Raleigh said referring to Crow. The last time they saw them they weren't friends. “Oh you mean Crow? Well, it's a long story, but well to keep things brief. They helped dear Mia out in a bind, and she asked me to give them a chance, I can't say no to Mia of course so I did so even with my misgivings.” Aion said with a laugh.

Mia's face became a little flush from his words. “And it was a surprisingly smart play. The kid is

a natural at gathering information. Scary good.” Aion said leaning back and rubbing his chin. “Come to think of it, I've never asked what are you exactly Crow?” Aion said. It was a lot harder to tell with them always being fully covered up. “I'm a bird.” They answered bluntly. “No, no like... what gender are you.” Crow turned to face them tilting their head like they didn't understand the question. “Astral Raven.” They answered. “Hmm alright. If that's what you want I'll roll with it.” Aion said accepting that was the only thing they were going to get out of them.

“Back to business. The interview will be formatted more or less off the cuff on your end, but I wanted to ask before we began how personal you wanted to be as far as the questions?” He asked. Raleigh seemed to misunderstand. “Why is this Multiverse full of degenerates no you can't ask me that stuff.” Assuming he meant something Loki might ask. “No, no, no, like your past history, sorry for the miscommunication.” He said defending himself and confusing Mia who could only hear his voice puzzled about what Raleigh might have said to him.

“Oh... Yeah, that's fine I guess...” Raleigh said awkwardly. All of them sat down as the other three members of the news Crew did some final checks the cameras floating around them ready to capture it all. “Alright we are live in three... two...” Tristan said counting down. “Hello, multiverse! Welcome back to our late show! Today we have a special treat. Yes, your eyes do not deceive you, The infamous Captain Raleigh, and Orion Vesper, Heroes of the Siege, Scourge of the Remnant, and Winners of the Aspect war are here for an interview today. “Wait do people call us that?” Raleigh asked unsure how the format worked.

“Why yes, among other things, with that let's get right down to it. Both of you went from relatively unknown figures to household names in the past years, but after a certain interview I had in the past I've been dying to know. Where did it all begin, how did the two of you meet, and well were you truly the ones who took down The Multiversal Empires Ruler?” He asked with a smile.

“Well she kinda crashed into my house,” Clyde said bluntly. “Really? By golly, you can't be serious.” Aion said in complete disbelief as Raleigh jabbed his side. “It wasn't that bad.” She muttered.

“There wasn't anything left but a baseball bat,” Clyde argued. “Alright fair.” She said giving in. “and how did you go from that to traveling together.” Aion asked much more interested now. “I wasn't going to just let her get away with it, and I wanted off my dumb world anyway so I kinda forced myself aboard.” Clyde further explained. “Yeah, and I let him because I'm cool like that,” Raleigh said smugly. Aion laughed still listening. “So whole thing with the Empire. They wanted me like they would not leave me alone. I was the whole key to their dumb plan to destroy The Caretaker or whatever, me and my sisters that is.” She further explained.

“Your sisters?” He asked only for her to feel like she had made a mistake by saying that. “Well um... I'd rather not get into that part honestly.” She said backing off. “We caught wind of Project Deforestation a little before everyone else and tried to warn everyone we realistically could including The Union, who other than Natasha, didn't take it very seriously. It was a struggle but we managed to organize a small enough force to stop him, and well we did, but not alone.” Clyde said jumping in for her.

Aion leans back in his chair thinking for a moment. “General Natasha Starcrafter and The Union are widely believed to be the heroes of that whole debacle, and yet you claim a counter-narrative not unlike one of our previous guests. Care to elaborate.” Aion asked. “The Union didn't do crap, at least not anyone outside Natasha's army. She Technically went AWOL.” Raleigh blurted out before covering her mouth unsure if she should've said that. “Natasha was the only person that took it seriously. Sure The Union may not have helped, but we wouldn't be here today if she didn't step in.” Clyde further adds.

“Fascinating. You speak highly of her... but surely it wasn’t so clear-cut during the Aspect War. She went after you both like any other contender. Some say she came closer to claiming those Aspects than anyone else. How do you square that with your loyalty to her?” Aion asked leaning forward once again. Both of them look down deep in thought not fully coming to terms with how they felt. “I want to kick her ass...” Raleigh said stopping herself once more she seemed to be struggling to remember they

were on TV and confused about what they should or shouldn't say.

There is an awkward pause before Clyde speaks up again helping her out. “I think in a way I get it. Everyone was sorta stuck in a difficult situation but for us... it sucked. I don't know if a bridge can be so easily fixed after that.” He said as Raleigh nodded. “Understandable. No one walked away from the Aspect War unchanged. But before it even ended, the Remnant made their move; The Siege of Porta Nexus. You two were at the center of that, fighting not just to survive, but to protect what was left. I lost something that day… a lot of people did. And then, not long after, you made your wish.”

Aion said seeming to have softened. “Some called it reckless. Others say it saved the multiverse. So let me ask you plainly, do you believe you made the right wish?” He asked. Raleigh already knew the answer she had anguished over it the entire war all she had to do was say it. “The Aspects of the Multiverse. The Wishing Door. We didn't ask for any of that, but we were pushed into it anyway. It's not something you can just back out of once you are in. Even if we gave them away people would still come for us thinking we had it, and who can be trusted with something so powerful.”

“My wish was selfish... At first, I didn't even know what I would wish for I just wanted the stupid war to end, but in the end, I decided what I truly wanted, but wish or no wish I was going to make it happen.” She said confidently. “In a way, the wish didn't even matter it was a means to an end to end the conflict.” Aion nodded slowly. “You’re right… it was never just about the wish. Not really. The Remnant, The Coalition, and Union, and others. Everyone was caught in this race for power. And in the middle of it all were you two. I suppose that’s what made your decision so… different. Why I bet my chips all on you personally.” Aion said.

Aion took a deep breath like he was trying to hold something in and keep his professional persona. “But for the love of the Multiverse, what did you actually wish for!” He blurted out before taking a deep breath and straightening his tie. “Sorry, I got a little too excited there. Both Clyde and Raleigh started to laugh. “I think we assumed everyone knew,” Clyde said with a smile now realizing this whole time no one did and they were clamoring to know. “We wished for a place of our own.

Somewhere we wouldn’t be hunted, chased, or used. A place that didn’t belong to anyone else. We wished for a Home.” Clyde answered.

“Wait... that place... that was the wish?” Aion said in disbelief as he began laughing throwing all his papers containing questions into the air like they were completely useless rubbing his eyes, and calming down. “You had the power to bend the Multiverse, to rewrite the laws of reality, and you asked for a place to rest your heads?” He learned. “I'll tell you what. I've interviewed so many people with so many differing goals, and ambitions, and well... that's a new one. It's brilliant.” He said with another chuckle.

“Sorry for derailing your whole interview,” Clyde said nervously. “No, no, truly it's fine, just a curve ball. Let's see hmm... I was planning to ask about your little community, but I thought it was just where you were hiding out, with this new context let me ask you. What is a home to you, did your wish come true?” He asked much more interested than before now. “Yes... No... I um... I guess I don't really know yet... but a home... its a lot of things, but most of all its a place you can always go to.” She said with a smile.

“I've seen that you have a burgeoning community of all walks of life. From reformed soldiers to androids and... apparently a multiversal lion idol with a nightclub. That kind of diversity doesn’t happen by accident. Whether you meant to or not, you built something people are drawn to. So let me ask what is it your building now?” Aion asked. “Well we didn't set out to build all that, it just kind of happened that way as for what we are building now?” Clyde said only somewhat knowing. “I think for a lot of people it's just a chance to start again and do what they always wanted but couldn't before.”

“So it's less that the world itself is special to you, it's the opportunity that draws, like a New Frontier of sorts?” Aion asks unaware of the nature and resources of the world as Clyde Nods. “Well yeah, I guess that wouldn't be inaccurate,” Clyde stated thinking it better not to correct that part at least. “Delightful... this second chance of yours are you offering it to anyone and everyone?” Aion asked as all of them turned their attention to Raleigh. She didn't answer thinking long and hard about it. This

answer really mattered it might shape their future significantly going forward.

Raleigh leans forward, her usual smirk replaced with something thoughtful—almost heavy. "…I want to say yes," she finally says. "I want to believe that anyone can change, that everyone deserves a second shot. But the truth is… I don't know if that's always true. Some people come to HOME to heal. Some come because they're lost. But others… they're just waiting for a chance to take again." She exhales, eyes narrowing just slightly.

"So no. It's not for everyone. But it is for anyone willing to try. To help build instead of tearing down. You come with open hands, not a blade behind your back, and yeah… maybe you've got a place. But I better not have a bunch of randos showing up all the time after this." Raleigh seems to have lost the plot at the end. Even still Aion nods, the gravity of the moment registering. Rebbecca watches from HOME frowning from her statement. "Spoken like someone who's seen the worst… and decided to hope anyway." He looks like he is about to ask more caught up in it but Tristan starts to wave gently tapping his wrist from off-set reminding him they have time slots to consider.

"Well, all be. Looks like we are almost out of time. A real shame there were so many questions I still wanted to ask, perhaps we can do this again sometime, and get into the real nitty gritty. With that being said do either of you have any closing thoughts?" He asked them both only for them to shake their heads. "Alright well, there you have it folks. A look at two legends, new frames, and humble new beginnings. Good Night everyone see you all next time." Aion said with a huge smile until the cameras stopped live streaming floating back into their docks.

"That was great! Thank you so much for coming on the show we'll have to get you back for sure." He said with a smile Reaching out trying to shake both of their hands at the same time. "Yeah... we will see I like you in all, but I think we have shared enough about our personal lives with the Multiverse," Clyde said sighing in exhaustion. Aion just laughs. "Fair enough, but I won't give up so easily. But either way, no hard feelings? Even still I'm rooting for you both." Aion said as Mia and the others got closer nodding in agreement even Crow.

“Well then maybe don't send the Multiverse on a hunt for us again. For any reason.” Raleigh said slightly annoyed. Aion started to sweat a little putting his hand behind his back embarrassed. “What can I say I'm a newsman through, and through... but I'll try my best.” With that the interview and their dealings with the man were over, but who knows how this will affect their lives going forward. Natasha watches the broadcast end with Marcy, and Tyler from a dark location not saying a word just gritting her teeth face full of conflict. The entire Multiverse seemed to have mixed reactions. Some are indifferent, but others are ready to move already even though they don't exactly Share the location of the world on the Edge of the Multiverse much harder for an average person to get to.

Cyrus watched with a similar stern face as he knew better than most what to expect as he looked over at Tess Varden. “Look after Command. I'm heading out.” He said as he put on his uniform coat buttoning it up. She just sighs. “Please tell me it's not about the interview. Are you really going to interfere?” She asked. “The Multiverse might not know the secrets of that world, but The Underworld does, who knows who is aware of that information now we weren't even looking for it.” Cyrus sighs about to walk out the door. “I hope you're wrong.” She said turning away to look out the window. “As do I.” He said leaving.

Chapter 20: Natasha Vs. Raleigh

Another day arrived on HOME everyone was going about their day like normal. Loki entertains a small number of guests. Much less than before, but more than you would expect. The Commandos once again fended off against the Pirates but it had become a part of their routine to the point it was casual and no big deal. Mr. Wainwright continued to make improvements to the town, and the Yakuza mostly just kept to themselves but welcomed anyone who entered their section of the town.

Raleigh, and Clyde both walked the streets seeing how far they had come. “It's incredible isn't it, but it feels like we are over due,” Clyde said hesitantly. “For something to go wrong? Yeah, I kinda feel the same way.” She agreed already understanding his fear. “Hey forget all that lets head down to

Don Buri and get something to eat.” He said talking about the Kinryu Kai diner from before. They had both grown to enjoy eating there often.

“I thought you would never...” She started to say only for them to hear a rumble in the sky and the familiar hum of large ships appearing in the sky. They looked up to see a whole Fleet of Union ships in the sky surrounding at least half the land and their lone stolen one with ease. Raleigh sighed not getting angry this time, it was expected that this would happen on some level. “Why did it have to be The Union though.”

The Commandos rush to defensive positions all along key points of the town everyone waiting for them to open fire to do something, but that doesn't happen. Grant looks at a Holographic map inside the Barracks with worry wondering if this was where it all came to an end. They were strong, but These many forces were too much for them. The monitor next to him started to beep as if it was getting a call which he quickly answered seeing it was Natasha Starcrafter herself.

“Well hello, General. I'd say it was nice to see you, but well. Under the circumstances, I'm not so sure.” He said crossing his arms still skeptical of her goal. “Wait your... Grant Dorne... What are you...” She started to say in confusion surprising him as well. “So you remember me, You know me and your father worked together a bit back in the day. He was a hard man, made by a hard time, but fair. He understood that war didn’t always mean justice… just necessity. ” Grant asked. Vaguely remembered seeing her a few times when she was a child, watching the soldiers, soaking it all in from behind her father's leg.

Her voice wavered like she didn't want to be there at all as she answered. “I didn't come here to fight. I came here to talk. To them.” She sighed as he soaked in their words. He nods at her. “Alright missy, Come down and say your piece.” With that, he ended the call, turning toward the others. “Let’s see what she really wants.”

They all watched in tense silence as the lone Union shuttle descended from the sky, landing just outside the urban edge of HOME where the ground was flat and unobstructed. The engines had barely

powered down when the shuttle doors opened, and Natasha was already outside, having dropped from the ramp before it even finished lowering. Clyde, Raleigh, and several others rushed out to meet her, unease rippling through the group like a shared breath no one wanted to take. The air felt thick. Heavy. No one quite knew how this was about to play out. There was a long, standoffish silence as Natasha's eyes locked with Raleigh's. They didn't move. Didn't speak. Just watched each other with the kind of tension that only came from history, some of it shared, most of it unresolved. Neither of them trusted the other. Marcy, and Tyler both exited the shuttle joining her as it landed.

"Why are you here?" Raleigh asked seriously. "I'm here as a warning. Is there a place we can... talk about this more privately?" She asked. Raleigh thought of all the locations in town there wasn't a good one for what she was asking just yet, she mulled over the best option raising her finger in the air with an answer. "Don Buri!" she declared with sudden enthusiasm. Everyone including Natasha, frowned in unison. There was a pause. "…You just want lunch, don't you," Clyde muttered. "What? No! Maybe! Look, it's quiet, it's neutral, and they have booths," Raleigh said defensively. "It's perfect." No one had a better suggestion. Natasha sighed. "Fine." And with that, the uneasy party began walking toward the Kinryu-Kai's modest but stylish diner, unknowingly setting the stage for a conversation that could shape the future of HOME.

Natasha joined with Marcy, and Tyler sat with Clyde, and Raleigh at a booth everyone ordering something. As some of the others sat down all around the diner. They weren't part of the conversation, but they were prescient ready to jump in at any time. The general bit into her food her cheeks getting red from the flavor, but trying to stay composed. "I understand why you wanted to meet in a place like this. It has charm, but you should consider an official meeting area for things like this in the future." Natasha said to them both.

"In the future?" Clyde asked raising an eyebrow. "Not something you would expect someone about to invade would say." He further adds. She sighs taking another bite before explaining. "You're right, that is what The Union sent me here to do... I had no choice but to come here." She said with

silent anger. “Things have been tense lately. We are close to...” Marcy started to explain stopping herself. “The Union is becoming more divided I had to placate them somehow. They know the true value of this world.” She said finishing her thoughts.

Raleigh leaned back in the booth, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. “So you brought a fleet to placate them?” she asked coolly. “Kind of a loud gesture for a peace offering.” Natasha set down her utensils with precision. “I didn’t say it was just a gesture,” she replied. “I said it was the only way I could keep control. If I hadn’t taken point on this, someone else would’ve. Someone worse.” Clyde frowned. “Define ‘worse.’”

“Someone who wouldn’t bother asking to talk first,” Marcy said, looking uncomfortable. Natasha nodded. “The Multiverse knows about HOME now. Word is spreading. You made a splash, like it or not. Between the resources, the wish rumors, and the fact you’re harboring ex-Empire, ex-Union, and god knows what else.

Raleigh looked down at her bowl, chewing slowly. “So what? You came here to tell us to shut it down? Kick people out?” “No,” Natasha replied. “I came both as a warning to what's to come and to buy time with a little theater.” That turned a few heads. Even the background chatter in the diner dimmed. “Explain,” Raleigh said warily. Natasha steepled her fingers. “I’ve declared martial oversight back home. It’s temporary, unofficial... and extremely unpopular. I’m cleaning the house, but I’m walking a tightrope, but I was forced to move on this. The Union wants this world... Badly. I needed to show them I was willing to take it, but I'm not going to do that. As far as the Multiverse is concerned we did fight, but to a draw, and I was forced to turn back for now.” She sighs

“Wait? You're going to lie? I mean that benefits us in all, but isn't your whole thing integrity and grit?” Raleigh asked. “And won't failing also hurt you?” He asked. “You're right... I don't like that I have to lie, but well it's the only way I can stop all of this.” She said looking down. “So we’re all pretending to fight… until we figure out how to avoid the real one,” Clyde asked as all three of The Union Members nodded more solemnly.

“Maybe I should explain it another way... something I've been meaning to explain to you for a while.”She pulled out a thick, sealed set of documents and placed them on the table. Her hands lingered on them for a moment longer before she slid them forward. “Just know, before you read this, it’s over. I ended the program. I destroyed everything and everyone involved. But their supporters… their allies… they’re still out there. And if I don’t stop them, there could be more. Still… I’m sorry. For all of it.” Natasha said genuinely as Raleigh took it with confusion and concern.

The title at the top read: Union Project NAVIGATOR: Memory-Conscious Conversion Trials, Subject Archive: G-SERIES. It detailed everything. Cold, sterile descriptions of dismembered survivors. Of Raleigh’s sisters, reduced to parts, integrated into machines for faster interdimensional travel. Of Medan and the Council’s sanctioning of it. Of successes and failures and the inhumane logic used to justify it.

“How many?” Raleigh asked, her voice a whisper like it was clawing its way out of her throat. She didn’t look up. Her hands trembled, gripping the pages as silent tears fell down her cheeks and onto the table. Natasha lowered her eyes. “Three… confirmed conversions. We stopped them before they could get the rest. The surviving siblings were placed in non-Union worlds. Hidden. Safe, for now.” Clyde clenched his fists. For a moment he stepped forward, but paused, unsure if Raleigh needed to be held or left alone.

Raleigh didn’t speak again. She just kept reading, page after page. As if she had to see every word. Every number. Every scar. After a long silence, she finally stopped slamming her fist on the table. “There is no lie... we... are going to fight... but not HOME or The Union. me, and you!” She pointed at Natasha with anger. Natasha frowned. “Very well I accept your challenge. I won't hold back.” She said not happy about it but respected her choice.

Everyone follows them outside the city to a floating island close by, but far enough to avoid any destruction of the town. Pretty much everyone is there to watch none of them looking happy, or cheering anyone on they can sense the vibe, but still know this fight is important. All except Rebbecca

who is strangely absent. The two women stare each other down as dark clouds swarm around them and lighting flashes, almost like the world responding to their inner turmoil.

Raleigh wasted no more time equipping her glove and transforming it into a sword simple, reckless, a weapon of rage. Natasha didn't dodge, she absorbed. Each of Raleigh's wild swings met arms like reinforced concrete. She didn't flinch, only pivoted slightly, letting force slide off her. She wasn't just a wall, she was a fortress. "Just when I thought I could finally move on." It wasn't enough. She reshaped it into a rocket-boosted gauntlet and slammed it into Natasha's gut, each strike a scream she couldn't voice. "Just when I thought I didn't have to worry about it anymore." Raleigh again said turning it to a hammer and slamming her off her feet, and into the air.

"Everything we did together, every one of my siblings we saved," Raleigh said shooting lasers at her from the glove. "It was all meaningless, we didn't save any of them!" She said in anger. They had spent a lot of time saving them from the empire but now it seems they just traded one horror for another. "You're wrong," Natasha said batting one of the lasers away as she crashed back down punching Raleigh in the face followed by several more surgical-like punches all over her body. "I stopped them, and I will stop all of them. To make The Union something worth fighting for again."

"Maybe it was never worth fighting for at all," Raleigh said transforming her weapon into a spear stabbing at her before she had a chance to get away. It broke through her armor, but her skin was still solid undamaged a little black symbol on it showing like Raleigh she has lingering aspect power. The Power of the Hide."

The fight kept going, for hours neither of them giving up. Natasha is like a brick wall, and Raleigh is like a force that can't be stopped. Even with her armor completely stripped away from her attacks Natasha stood tall, but both of them were growing exhausted Raleigh tossed her glove to the side punching Natasha with her fist that didn't seem to hurt her physically, but emotionally. She felt awful for everything that happened. Even still she had a goal to achieve punching her in the gut hard. But Raleigh kept coming back until they both sunk to the floor in exhaustion. They crumpled to the

ground, not defeated, just drained. The rage had burned through them, what was left was ash, breath, and rain. Raleigh sobbed quietly, her tears indistinguishable from the sky's.

Natasha looked up at the sky as it started to rain down on them not saying a word, everyone watching wasn't sure if that was the end, and if they should interfere. "So... what is it... that you are trying to do?" Raleigh asked panting with heavy breath. She didn't answer similarly out of breath. "The same thing you are... just... there is a lot more baggage involved." She finally answered. "Do you think... one day we will have the same problem," Raleigh asked more worried now. "Maybe. But you… you won't stop fighting. That much, I know." They reached out, two battered hands meeting in the rain.

The clouds opened up shining rays of light down on them both. They both faintly smiled at each other standing back onto their feet still very much in pain are barely able to. "I hope you are able to change The Union." Raleigh said more thoughtfully. "And I hope you are able to make this place a home." She answered back as Clyde jumped over making sure they are OK. "That doesn't really solve the issue long term though." He said with a sigh.

A second rumble was heard. Another fleet of ships flashed into the sky on the opposite side. This time, it was the Coalition's sleek ships cutting through the clouds with intimidating precision, positioning themselves opposite the Union's line like chess pieces being placed for checkmate. Yet again, no shots were fired.

A single gunship broke formation, barreling recklessly toward them. Its engines roared like an approaching storm, clearly meant to arrive before things escalated again. It hovered dangerously close to the floating island before stabilizing. The side hatch hissed open with urgency. Cyrus Steelheart stepped out first, his coat billowing in the wind, followed by Tara, taller now, her expression as sharp as her frame. Her longer hair was tied back, her arms toned, her stance confident and seasoned. The difference in her was striking.

"Cyrus? Why are you here?" Raleigh asked. "What's it look like idiot, to save your sorry ass," Tara said still seeming to hold a lot of resentment towards her despite coming here. "Thanks, but we

already have it handled," Raleigh said glaring. "Well yes, I see that, but not just for today. For the future. I doubt things would have gone like this if it had been any other Union General." He further explained. "What are you proposing?" Clyde asked crossing his arms. "The Coalition is now recognized as a multiversal superpower. We have reach. We have numbers. The Union, by contrast, is fractured. A civil war is on the horizon. They won't risk pushing further."

"Pushing what further... you don't mean..." Raleigh started to say as he nodded. "Yes join the Coalition. Fly our flag nothing more nothing less." He said calmly. "I could never join you like that... not after everything with the empire... and Inari," Raleigh said softly as he sighed. "I understand that, and your reluctance, but please just let me do this for you, my way of trying to make amends. We will be as hands-on or off as you desire. Even if our claim is only in name, that is fine." He pleads as she looks down and then over to Clyde for input.

He leans in. "Listen I know what he's done in the past, but deep down he is trying to be better, and well. I believe he's legit, I think this is the solution we need. Like he said we don't have to actually involve him if you don't want we just have to say we are allied." He says. "And you really want nothing in return?" She asked only half convinced. He just nods. Before Raleigh could speak again, Natasha called out as she started walking away with Marcy and Tyler. "Well, looks like we're encroaching on Coalition territory. We'd better leave before we accidentally start a war."

She paused at the edge of the island, then turned back. "Thank you, Cyrus." Her voice was sincere now if still guarded. Cyrus offered a simple nod. "Good luck with your coming tribulations." Natasha nodded in return, then vanished with her officers into the skies. The Union ships left shortly after. Cyrus stepped back onto his gunship for a moment returning to them shortly with a blue flag. "I don't expect you to fly it, but I'd still like you to have it." He said as he handed it off to Clyde. Raleigh leaning against him almost completely out of gas.

"Thank you, Cyrus. On both of our behalf." Clyde said knowing Raleigh would never. She glared at him but accepted that was necessary. "And about not wanting anything in return. I suppose

there is one thing. I understand why you may not want to talk to me, but maybe call your sister now and then alright.” He said as they once again entered the ship and it started to fly away. “Shut it, old man. Like I'd want to hear anything from her.” Tara argued with a hint of a blush on her face like part of her did want that. Grant sits off to the side with his crew. “I don't know about working with former empire I don't like it.” “Come on Colonel. Switch is former empire.” Rigg fires back. “That's... different.” Grant argues.

Rebbecca sat in HOME's control room looking at all the lights. They had mostly remained unchanged, but a few had been added. Vincent and Akane walked in shortly after staring at them as well. “So this is where all the magic happens huh? It's a shame we can't just hack into it like most worlds and get it over with. Unless you're lying about that.” Vincent said leaning in close to the side of her face with a scowl she didn't even flinch. “He has a point can we not kill them?” Akane questioned.

“She told no lies.” The Boss said stepping out of the shadows. “I inspected the code myself, and while chaotic it did indeed seem that they were immutably tied to this place.” He said intrigued by it. “Sir? You're here?” Akane said in disbelief she had rarely seen him join them on a mission. “Yes. I thought it best to check it personally with how key it is to stop the Foe. But it's been noisy up there.” He said referring to all the action happening on HOME at the moment. “This world now has too many eyes on it. Shift your focus to our other projects.” He ordered them.

“Wait what? But we could end them right now just give us the chance.” Vincent said in anger. “We don't need front-line fighters to test this place any longer, Trojan's infiltration is much more effective. “But won't they only grow more powerful? The combat data we collected won't be as useful then.” Akane countered. “Not a problem. Once we figure out how to remove them Trojan will already have sabotaged all their efforts.” He further explained. “I will now take my leave It may be a while before I contact you again, so be diligent,” he said disappearing without another word.

“God damn it. Who cares if a couple of nations caught on we can still beat them. Why does he underestimate us like that.” Vincent growled. “It's not that he underestimates you, Anyone has the

potential for greatness. He's being careful because this mission matters. More than any of our missions.” Rebbecca explained coldly still not paying attention to them. “Whatever you little shit stain. See you in hell.” He raised his middle finger in the air vanishing too. “Even still the sooner we break the code the better, can you betray them?” Akane asked. Rebbecca turned to her seriously finally acknowledging her presence. “I am The Trojan, it's my purpose to do so, of course I can.”

Chapter 21: The Round Table

A start to another year had begun, and things had grown, people who had the skill, and ability made it to the edge of the Multiverse to settle on Frontier, the name the public had given their hidden world after Aion's big interview. Raleigh corrected anyone who called it that. It's HOME, she'd insist, as if the difference mattered. Maybe it did. Still, the town was growing. Every day brought new buildings, new problems, and new people trying to carve out second chances.

Clyde and Raleigh strolled the main road, watching the world take shape around them. Stalls had opened on both sides, selling everything from interdimensional fruit to scrap-art weapons. Homes lined the hills, spiraling upward like vines on a cliffside. Fresh faces nodded or waved as they passed.

“Wow, I never really expected this. Most of them didn't even know about the resources we have. I guess the idea of starting over again is that appealing.” He said as they passed a group nearby who spotted them and waved her down. A minor dispute had broken out. One of them waved frantically to Raleigh. She sighed and went over, listening, settling it in under a minute with a sharp tone and a pointed finger. “You are like the town sheriff now.” He joked only for her face to tense up in anger from the mention of that.

“The hell you mean. I'm not a cop, never will be I'm a rebel. A rebel you here, fuck the police.” She said very much offended by the label. Before Clyde could respond, shouting erupted near the Lion Club. Two residents had worked up into a full-on fistfight on the steps, drinks in hand. “Hey! Knock it off!” Raleigh yelled, charging over. They ran like hell. Clyde watched them flee, shaking his head. “Yeah. Not a cop,” he chuckled to himself.

The massive doors of the Lion Club swung open with theatrical flair. “Oh, Clyde! Good morning.” Loki stepped out with a martini in hand. “Apologies for the commotion, it seems we’ve had an influx of rowdy ruffians with no sense of decorum. Good thing the girl in blue was here to restore order.” He smirked. “She doesn’t even wear blue,” Clyde fired back, already regretting the mental image of Raleigh in Uniform. Still, the thought lingered a second too long. Loki grinned wickedly.

“My word, Clyde… is that a lustful gaze I spy? Are you… daydreaming? Oh, this is historic. Let me get a camera.” “Don’t be weird. I wasn’t daydreaming. And if I was, which I wasn’t. I think I’m allowed to at this point.” “Sure, sure,” Loki said, unconvinced, retreating into his club. “Have fun with your not fantasies.” The doors closed behind him with the kind of dramatic timing only Loki could pull off. “That guy...”

Clyde groans as he walks off going to try and find where Raleigh went. He wanders into the Yakuza district. Strangely enough, it was the most orderly neighborhood he’d passed through. Clean streets. Polite bows. Structured walkways. Weirdly civilized for a bunch of former gangsters.

That was until he saw Kaguya blocking half the street with some sort of ritual. A man was on

his knees before her. “Boss, please... I'm sorry I didn't mean it.” He begged. “You've committed an unforgivable crime against our family.” She said trying to remain composed. Clyde watched wondering what the man possibly could have done. “I'm sorry for saying Sebastian wasn't as cool as Jacob.” He said begging to be spared. The crowd gasped. Kaguya’s eye twitched. “How could anyone think that? Sebastian is perfection the perfect man! If only he was real.” She said seeming to lose the plot a little but the crowd gasped all the same.

“Is this over a romance novel?” Clyde asked confused. “Yes quiet she is about to deliver judgment.” One of the members said shushing him. “For this crime will deal out the greatest of punishments. One reserved for only the dirtiest of traitors.” She paused. She had not planned this far ahead. “The um... the... The slap of no return!” Gasps rippled through the crowd. Two Dragons dramatically lifted the man to his feet. Kaguya stepped forward and delivered the gentlest backhand Clyde had ever seen.

The man threw himself backward like he’d been struck by lightning, flopping into a perfect pratfall. “Hahaha... that should remind you all of true justice.” She said as she walked away looking accomplished. “Don't you think babying her like that is going to backfire?” He asked sighing only for them all to shake their heads. “Whatever you guys are weird.” He just shrugged wandering off again.

He’d walked to the outer wall and still hadn’t found Raleigh. The place was huge now, what used to be a clearing in a forest was a borderline city-state. At the far edge, Rigg and Mara were stationed, lazily fending off another pirate raid. Both of them were sitting down, sipping steaming mugs of coffee while exchanging the occasional potshot over the battlements. “Oh hey, Orion. What brings you here?” Rigg asked barely even paying attention to the fighting anymore. “Just looking for the Captain she ran off.” He explained. “Haven't seen her, but Grant was called away to help with something in the construction zone maybe they are there.” He suggested.

Before he could respond he heard the sounds of the pirates shouting and charging forward as The Rival appeared thrown over the wall by his men landing on his face. He quickly jumped up

striking a pose. “So you finally have seen the gravity of the threat we pose and decided to Join the battle yourself Orion. Very well I accept your duel, but I will not hold back!” He declares charging forward as Clyde just sighs, None of them look intimidated. He formed a gauntlet and punched the man so hard he flew back to the sky island the Pirates now used as a base hitting the lighthouse's beacon.

“Captain!” One of them shouted as they all got back into their ship's retreating. “Do they think they are posing a challenge?” Clyde asked puzzled. Both of them shrugged taking another sip of their drink like just an average Tuesday. “Right well, you have fun with that.” He said jumping down from the wall and heading toward the new district currently being worked on. Once he arrived he did indeed find Raleigh along with Grant, and Mr. Wainwright. Two large alien men were arguing. “This is my land! I called dibs. It's the perfect location for solar moltation.” He gargled. “Look like we have already explained. There is plenty of land for the both of ya.” Grant sighs rubbing his temples in annoyance.

“No! It must be here!” The other one says stubbornly. “Is it some kind of cultural thing? Is there something about this spot that’s sacred to your people?” Russel asked. “We saw it first!” They both argued confirming it was not. Raleigh clenched her fist over this petty argument she they both kept glaring. “I don't care who...” Suddenly, the ground shuddered. The sky above them flickered like a glitched video frame. Cracks spiderwebbed through the dirt, and the air itself. Before anyone could react, reality fractured. Lines of light split open, and from the gaps came shadows crawling with cosmic distortion. Two astral beasts surged from the rift, shimmering, impossible things, equal parts light, darkness, and static.

“The hell are those things?” Grant asked ready to fight as Raleigh did the same. Instead of hurting any of them, the monsters attacked each other, but each strike seemed to make the ground and area around them more unstable. She leaped in forming a spear and trying to stab into one, and while it appeared to go through it didn't do any damage. She was about to reassess and try something else, but floating drones appeared saying. “Anomaly detected.” They formed a circle around the creatures boxing them in with a force field change as Rebbecca fell out of the sky.

She approached the two creatures who had been crammed together too close to fight with one another as the area returned to normal. “Curious.” She said with a bit of wonder a little too casual about the problem. “What are you doing Rebbecca we need to destroy these things,” Clyde said urgently. “My job as a counter hacker. I agree, but well... I think we should discover their nature before then. We don't want more popping up.” She explained studying them more closely.

“Oh gods, this place is doomed. Going to hell in a handbasket.” Russel said in more of a panic than the others.“They are dangerous who knows how long they can be contained.” Raleigh argued. “The little lady might have a point. Not saying we should let it overstay its welcome, but we should at least figure what we are dealing with.” Grant argued. “I will take them back to the Hack Shack for analysis, but I have a suspicion the code of this world is involved. I think we should call an emergency meeting. Meet you in the control room in an hour” Rebbecca said bluntly as the Drones condensed the field even more and took the monsters off, she left with them.

“The control room? I don't remember building anything like that?” Mr. Wainwright asked confused. “Well... it's sorta the room that houses the Universal Code, we discovered that not everyone can see it.” Clyde explained. “How foreboding.” He said shivering a little. “I'm going to do a quick sweep of the place, Meet you then,” Grant said walking off making sure everything was still ok. They all break away meeting back up just outside the door in an hour.

Russel looks at the door gobsmacked. “I’ll be damned. How have I never noticed this before?” He said in disbelief. Grant gave it a casual knock, testing the frame. “No seams, no scratches. Just... here.” He said. “Maybe you two just couldn't see it before.” Clyde speculated. Before anyone could question it further, the door opened. Loki answered already on the other side. “What are you all waiting for get in here already.” He shouted rushing back inside.

They stepped in, one by one. The Control Room pulsed with a quiet hum, familiar, but noticeably changed. More lights. More nodes. New glowing threads now connected strange floating panels in the air, their symbols constantly shifting. Each of the room’s major structures, central pillars,

hanging lights, and radial displays, seemed drawn toward the main residents of HOME. Clyde noticed several arcs glowing faintly near his position, while a curved band near Raleigh's side pulsed with orange-white flickers.

Rebbecca stood at the main interface, fingers flying across a holographic panel.
But what caught Raleigh's eye were the two unexpected figures beside her. "Mikako? Lucy?" Raleigh blinked. "Hey guys," Lucy said with a warm smile, standing near one of the scanning towers. Mikako gave a silent wave from her seat, legs crossed, observant but calm. "Wait, why are you here, Loki?" Clyde asked. "How do you even know about this place?" Loki pouted, hand on chest. "You keep forgetting I'm a god." "He was already here when I arrived," Rebbecca said, not looking up. "And I asked him to go fetch those two."

"A surprisingly competent errand boy," Lucy teased. "I'll ignore that," Loki said, brushing invisible dust off his sleeve. "Now that you're all here we can get down to business," Rebbecca said calling them all to attention. "First I'll address why everyone that is here, is here." She said pacing over to the light briefly explaining them to the people who didn't know already. "Basically, all of you have the most influence on this place." She further explained. "Gee really? Even me? Feel like I haven't done much here?" Lucy asked.

"Your influence is more subtle I think. You may not be running around making changes, but after every scrape, after every battle, you were there. To heal, Extremely influential." Loki explained as she hugged him kissing his cheek. "Thanks, lion boy." "But that doesn't explain why everyone is here. Tell us what you found out about the monsters already." Raleigh said tapping her foot impatiently. "They are connected aren't they?" Clyde asked as she nodded. "They appeared after two individuals were arguing yes? Think back about everything that happened." Rebbecca said not outright saying anything yet like she wasn't completely sure herself not being there.

"You're not saying those things are going to show up every time someone gets a little heated about something. This world would be far too unstable to live on." Russel said spooked enough to

consider leaving already. “If that was the case they would've shown their ugly mugs a long time ago, every pirate attack, etc,” Grant said crossing his arm's looking down in thought. “And there are two main reasons for that,” Rebbecca explained raising two fingers. “One the world must not recognize the Pirates as residents. And two it's not just about conflict.” She said seeming to get more excited the more she got into it.

“Then what is it about? Why does it involve me... involve us?” Mikako asked. “Because of this world... it’s different,” Rebbecca said, voice almost reverent. “It has the energy density of a multiverse, condensed. Self-replicating. Responsive. It listens. It responds not to logic... but to desire.” A beat of silence. “Desire?” Clyde asked. “The wishes of those who live here,” she continued. “Every building, every expansion, every strange weather change, we assumed it was magic. It’s not. It’s code responding to want.” Raleigh’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I get it now. Those two guys both wanted that exact spot more than anything. So the world didn’t know how to decide, so it made something else decide for them.” She smirked, proud of herself.

“And what if someone sneaks their way in tricks the system... and desires to destroy this place?” Grant asked sternly looking at Rebbecca showing he still had suspicions about her. She frowned pausing for a moment and biting her lip. In the past, something like that wouldn't have affected her. It killed most of her excitement. “As a hacker. I naturally tried to hack into this world. I was unsuccessful... mostly. The code is erratic ... constantly changing, the most I can do is change small things. I made it where things like this wouldn't happen as easily especially if it's not a desire from a core member present here.” She explained.

“But it will still happen,” Clyde asked sighing. “So the question becomes what do we do to avoid it.” He said. “It’s really not that complicated,” Russell snapped. “We need control. Order. We need a damn government, you idiots.” Grant, Mikako, and Lucy nodded solemnly. Loki gasped, loud, dramatic, and deeply offended. He clutched at his chest like he’d been mortally wounded. “Don’t say such dirty words in my presence,” he hissed. Right beside him, Raleigh’s face twisted into a perfect

mirror of revulsion. “Ugh, yeah anarchy for life!” she declared, fist in the air like she was about to rally a riot. The two locked eyes, shocked at their unity for once, as they shook each other's hands. “...Have we finally become friends?” Loki whispered. “Don’t ruin it,” Raleigh muttered.

Rebbecca frowned looking more annoyed for once. “You’ve already been doing it. Just... unofficially. With no structure, no labels, no rules, barely even meetings.” She said as both of them gasped in shock falling to the floor. “We failed to bring chaos,” Loki said silently crying as Raleigh nodded in agreement. “I'm a sell-out.” She cried. All of them just looked down annoyed by their antics. Raleigh sat up looking more serious. “I guess it's just... I don't want to end up like the empire... like her.” She said referring to Raleigh The Explorer.

Clyde got onto one knee grabbing her shoulder. “Listen... Through all our travels, we’ve seen so many systems, and so many people chasing control or freedom like they’re opposites. But they’re not. I think going too far in either direction is a mistake. We need a balance.” He said urging her to think about it. “I guess you're right... just everyone here. I need you to promise me you will do everything you can to avoid that.” She said standing up and looking at everyone around as they all nodded in agreement. “So what is this going to be a ruling council of sorts?” Mikako asked. “Hell no! This isn’t the Union!” Raleigh snapped, then froze. “Ugh. No offense, Grant.”

“None was taken, but then what then?” Grant asked. “Um... um.. the super mega elite cool guys that are super awesome.” She blurted out. “That's a great name!” Loki said clapping. “How about... the Round Table,” Clyde suggested thinking about Camelot. Functionally the same, but sounding cooler. “Wow.... actually that's perfect!” Raleigh said changing her mind right away. Everyone seemed to accept that name. “Great, great now let's lay some ground rules down already and all that other nonsense. The Real Housewives of Balaria is on soon, and well... unfortunately I'm hooked.” Mikako said surprising everyone that a tough woman like her would be into it. The whole room burst into laughter.

After the laughter died down, the room settled into a comfortable focus. They had work to do.

They took time to lay the foundation for their new definitely not a government. Things would shift over time everyone knew that, but for now, it was a start. Rebbecca stood at the console, fingers flying as she encoded the decisions into the system itself, the true laws of the world, etched into the living code of HOME. “Let’s assign roles. Starting with the obvious,” she said, not looking up. “Mr. Wainwright: Head of Urban Development.”He nodded once, solemn as ever.

“Lucy: Head of Health.” “Ahh...” Lucy chuckled nervously. “Not sure how the Port Authorities would react to me taking a role like this, considering I’m still technically an Administrator. But... eh. I guess we don’t have to tell them.” Rebbecca smirked. “Grant: Head of National Security.” “National?” Clyde echoed. “Do we count as a nation now?” “Semantics,” Rebbecca replied. “Moving on. Mikako is... Head of Kinryū-Kai... Big Boss... Sexy Milf Lady...?” She squinted at the screen, uncertain. “Ooh. I kinda like that last one,” Mikako teased, then waved it off. “Nah make it Head of Covert Affairs.”

“Done, for now,” Rebbecca said, typing it in. “And obviously I’m Head of R&D and Code Integrity.” She looked up at the last two. “Which leaves... you two.” “Wait, what about me?!” Loki whined. “You are also here,” Rebbecca replied with a polite smile, immediately going back to typing as Loki pouted and looked betrayed. “I’m just the problem solver,” Raleigh said, arms folded. She was already bracing. “You mean like... a sheriff?” Rebbecca asked sweetly.

Raleigh’s eyes twitched. She stood up and grabbed Rebbecca by the collar. “I’m not a damn cop!” Rebbecca kept smiling. “Oh no, my hand slipped and typed Town Sheriff.” She said smirking with mock shock. “I swear to...” Raleigh groans. “Too late. Locked in.” Rebbecca laughs. “Clyde, back me up here!” Clyde just shrugged. “You did literally chase two men off the Lion Club steps this morning.” He said, “That was different!” Raleigh argued.

“What about you Clyde what are you going to be?” Raleigh asked. He looked conflicted like he didn't feel like he really belonged. “Well. I don't know there are six of you right I guess I'll be the tiebreaker or something.” Clyde. Rebbecca raised an eyebrow but put it in all of them a little surprised by that answer but not pressing it. “Who's the leader then like the one at the tippy top? Our King or

Queen. The Mayor?" Loki asked. "Do we need one of those I think this little group is all we need. Clyde said.

Everyone went quiet and nodded. That was enough. "Okay, so with that out of the way," Rebbecca said, pulling up a fresh panel, "any laws we want to write in real quick? Be precise. Some of these could accidentally change the laws of physics." She explained. "Well... I still think everyone should have free will," Raleigh offered. "So let's not do anything too crazy." Even if that wasn't something they could directly change, it set the tone.

"Disputes within the Lion Club must be settled by karaoke! Or perhaps... a dance battle!" Loki declared proudly. "Loki, we're not writing that into law," Clyde said. "But if you want to enforce it socially, go for it." Loki, shockingly, accepted this without protest. "Healthcare is free," Lucy chimed in. "That includes therapy. And snacks." She said. "No stranger walks around with weapons of mass destruction. No nukes, no nothing," Grant said, stern and firm.

"Are you wording it that way so you can still use them?" Rebbecca smirked. "Talk about monopolizing violence." She said. "I just don't want anyone bringing something like the Void Generator back here," he grumbled. "Fair enough," Rebbecca said, typing everything in, minus Loki's. They tossed around a few more practical, but boring laws, zoning restrictions, noise limits, and agricultural safety. Then Rebbecca turned back to them, hand hovering over the confirmation key.

"Alright. I think we're good. Any last-minute rules before I lock this in?" Silence. Until Raleigh, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet, finally spoke. "Okay... don't laugh." Everyone turned. "I want a law about death." The room tensed slightly. "I don't mean stopping it. I'm not trying to be immortal. Death sucks sure, but it's part of what makes life matter, right? What I want to change is how people die." She said softly but confidently. "How they die?" Clyde asked gently.

Raleigh nodded, staring down at the floor. "Yeah. People die from the dumbest things. Choking on toast. Slipping in the shower. Tripping over their shoelace. If we're rewriting things here... I don't want death to be accidental. I want it to mean something. Either you go out in battle, or bed,

surrounded by people who love you. That's it." No one laughed. Clyde stepped closer, voice soft. "That's... thoughtful." The others all nodded in quiet agreement. Rebbecca blinked at the code screen, genuinely unsure. "Honestly? I don't know if I can manipulate the world's systems that deeply. But if you're sure... I can try. We'll see what the world decides."

"I'm sure," Raleigh said, standing a little straighter. Rebbecca's fingers hovered for a moment longer, then typed. A few silent keystrokes later, she hit confirm. The lights in the Control Room dimmed. The world shook. And somewhere, unseen, the code shifted gently, quietly, but profoundly. Whatever had changed... only time would explain.

Chapter 22: Vote for Loki

After a few weeks, a massive building had been constructed around the door that led to the Universal Code. It was sleek, strange, and imposing, a mix of old-world stone and futuristic panels. Inside, it housed everything from a courtroom to a meeting chamber for foreign guests, as Natasha suggested, and, of course, a large circular room centered around an ornate, oversized table. Seven chairs, one for each member of the so-called Round Table. Somehow even Loki had one despite never being given a title. Mr. Wainwright, proud as ever, finished showing Clyde and Raleigh around, leading them to the central chamber.

“Well, there you have it, our new gover... not a government office. I was thinking of calling it The Chamber of Influence.” He said with a smile. “I like that name. I think it will do just fine, but what about that?” Clyde asked, pointing to some stairs leading upward. “Oh, that well, it's an office, a really nice one, might I add, just for... well... in case you change your mind.” He said confusing him. “Change my mind about what?” He asked, but before he could answer, Grant burst in. “You two.... that idiot he...” He started to say, catching his breath. “What happened?” Raleigh asked.

“It would be easier just to show you all. Just follow me.” He said, running back out again as they followed him outside. The skies were filled with fluttering red and blue paper, flyers, posters, and pamphlets. They drifted like Multiversal snow, sticking to walls, signs, and even buildings. Clyde caught one and read aloud, “Loki for Mayor.” The image was unmistakable: Loki, mid-wink, finger guns out, dressed in a shimmering suit, and sitting backward on a chair like he was teaching a very cool civics class. They looked over at the wall, seeing they were all variations of the same thing, but instead of mayor, some of them read king, prime minister, or president, and some are even as ridiculous, as Galactic regent of the Home Empire.

“This one says ‘emperor,’” Raleigh said, more offended by that one. “Vote for Loki. What in the world can happen? Is that his slogan?” Clyde asked only to see that each one he saw was different, like he couldn't commit to one. “How did he even do this so fast and without anyone seeing?” He asked. “Who cares about that? Where is he? I'm going to give him a piece of my mind,” Raleigh said, steaming. “He's at his club like always,” Grant said with a groan as Raleigh rushed off.

She rushed all the way there to the main downtown area. A huge crowd had formed around a platform with Loki on top giving a speech. “And that's why, if elected, I promise to always provide free chimichangas every Friday.” He stated as the crowd erupted into roars, cheering for him. Raleigh pushed through the crowd, perplexed about why they were all so enthusiastic as he kept going.

“Friends, citizens, beautiful outlaws of HOME! I didn’t choose this destiny... I simply woke up this morning, looked in the mirror, and realized, This face belongs on currency.” He said, Starting up again. “Like hell it does!” Raleigh yelled, Close enough now. The crowd gasped as they cleared away from her, drawing attention to her. “Oh, well, look who it is, everyone. Our sheriff is here to endorse me herself.” Loki said confidently. “I am... not a cop... but more importantly... what the hell? We already decided how we were doing things! You made hundreds of posters! In multiple formats. Some of them are holographic.” She growled. “Brand cohesion is important,” Loki said, smiling. “I'll kill you.” She hissed.

“Now, now, darling. You can't just assault a public figure running for office.” Loki corrected, adjusting his tie. “The people have spoken. Or at least cheered very loudly while I offered free cocktails.” The crowd cheered again. Somewhere, a T-shirt cannon went off with Loki printed 1247 shirts. He smirked at her, knowing it was now out of her hands, even if the people were not really there for him and only for the free drinks. “Ok, well then... I'm running too!” She loudly declared. The crowd went silent. “Wait, this is a real election?” One of them asked. “Oh, I will run as well,” Rebbecca said, appearing on stage out of nowhere. “Proxy can be the moderator; he's great at... moderating.” She said.

“That sounds like insider… uh… stock… manipulation,” Loki replied, visibly floundering. “Tax crimes!” He clearly didn't know what he was talking about. “I will assure you,” Proxy said dryly, his glowing screen face pushing through the crowd, “that I will not favor her. She’s... deeply annoying.” Proxy was drawn out of the Hack Shack by all the commotion. The crowd murmured, confused, not sure what to do now, as one just blurted out. “I'm running too, then.” Then another said. “No, I am.” It became complete chaos as they all argued. Clyde and Grant are only now catching up to it all. “Oh gods... this is going to end terribly,” Clyde said, rubbing his face.

A few days passed before everything settled down and became official. There would be an election; there was no stopping that, but most of the random people proudly declaring their candidacy

never registered. A more proper stage was constructed downtown with seats and podiums for all parties involved. Each candidate actually running would line up and give a brief speech on their policies and plans if elected.

Clyde was with Raleigh, looking conflicted. “Are you sure you want to do this?” He asked her but knew she was the better pick. “Someone has to stop him, Clyde; he's gone mad.” She said with a growl. “Well, either way I'll be here to support you.” He said with a thumbs-up, never thinking he'd live in the world where he becomes her campaign manager. “Awe, you're so sweet, and I didn't even have to use coercion.” She said, lightly flirting with him.

She kissed him before stepping onto the stage, awkwardly about to speak into the mic. “Hey, everyone. Uh... sorry, I’m not really good at this. I don’t have a big speech or anything. Let’s just be real. I’m only up here because someone needs to make sure that idiot doesn’t ruin everything. So vote for me if you don't want that to happen.” The crowd clapped, some politely, some with real support.

Then, from the audience, Loki leaned back in his seat, legs crossed, sunglasses on. “You do realize,” he said loudly, “that if you win, you’ll have to do all the paperwork, right?” He asked. Raleigh blinked. Her expression froze. “Wait. I have to what?” “Budgets. Permits. Tax allocation. Liaison meetings. Weekly minutes. Forms.” Loki smiled like a villain who’d just dropped the murder weapon in her lap. All things that he didn't even intend to do himself if he was elected. She stared into the middle distance. Then back at the microphone. “With a heavy heart... I rescind my candidacy and drop out of the race.” She turned and walked offstage. Clyde stood there, stunned. “...You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Sorry, Clyde, that's a burden I could never bear.” She said apologetically as they both went to join the audience below. Proxy looked down the list, seeing who was next. “Next, welcome to the stage... Rebbecca... yay,” he said, sounding annoyed he was roped into it. The crowd clapped, but no

one ever came on stage. Then, Penny awkwardly emerged from the side, ducking under wires and trying not to crush anyone, failing. She leaned in, somehow whispering even though her speaker system was the size of a car hood.

“It seems... Rebbecca got bored and dropped out.” “Of course she did,” Proxy said flatly. “On to the next candidate... Kaguya Kinryu.” The crowd murmured, some surprised, others just resigned. Mikako sat down next to Clyde, pulling out an old-school handheld camcorder, grinning like a proud mom at a chaotic school play. Dramatic shamisen music blared over portable speakers as Kaguya strode onto the stage, flanked by two sharply dressed Kinryū-Kai enforcers. She struck a pose. The others mirrored it with practiced flair.

“I don't have to explain who I am; you all no doubt already know. But I will anyway! I am the great Kaguya Kinryu, heir to the prestigious Kinryū-Kai bloodline! I have accomplished countless magnificent feats in my long... eighteen-year life.” One of her men coughed loudly. “Thirty-five! I meant thirty-five.” She continued unfazed, twirling and posing with increasing dramatic flourish. “Vote for me, and be part of my flawless ascent to ultimate greatness!” She said, striking a pose as her men did the same.

The crowd clapped but much more quietly, not really understanding who she was. “The hell is wrong with you punks... louder... This is our princess... our god.” One of the Yakuza said to the crowd in anger. Makako seems indifferent, just happy to capture it on film either way. The crowd reluctantly cheered louder, mostly out of fear of the man.

She bowed as it died down again. Loki stood up, clapping as he walked toward the stage. “Ah... such confidence. Such poise. Such utter fabrication.” Kaguya’s eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?” She said. “I simply find it interesting,” Loki said, projecting his voice like a seasoned stage actor, “that a candidate preaching nobility and greatness would have such... questionable behavior on record.” He

said as he climbed onto the stage.

“I'll have you know... I'm the noblest of criminals.” She said, defending herself. “Oh, really? Then what is this?” Loki snapped as a holo display appeared showing a picture of Kaguya biting into a pizza with a pineapple badly photoshopped onto it. The crowd gasped. “This monster would claim she is just when she does something as horrible as this.” He said with mock shock. “Slander! Lies. I would never do that.” She argued, getting more and more embarrassed. “The proof is right here; just look at that face, she is clearly enjoying it.” Loki further adds as the crowd murmurs once more.

“But that's not even the worst thing she does, folks, no, no, no. Through my contacts, I discovered this.” He said, waving toward the display as a video plays of Kaguya preparing cereal. “That's right, she put the milk in before the cereal!” The crowd was in an uproar now. “You monster, how could you?” Someone said in complete shock. “I um... this is clearly a fabrication.” She said much more sheepishly.

“But there is one more thing that she did. Something even worse was provided by one of my contacts once you see it you will not be the same.” He said as he snapped The image began to load. Kaguya’s eyes widened in terror. She recognized it immediately. With a scream of rage, she lunged forward, smashing the projector with her heel and stomping it repeatedly. “I... you haven’t!” She fumbled for a smoke bomb. Threw it. It went off. When the smoke cleared, she was still standing there. There was an awkward pause.

She looked around. Then bolted offstage in a blur of flustered shame. “I wasn’t ready,” she muttered, halfway to tears as her enforcers scrambled after her. Mikako just laughed. “That's going in the compilation for sure.” “Did you... provide that to him?” Clyde asked with a raised eyebrow. She turned to him trying to hold in her laughter as she nodded. He felt a little sorry for her, was this her way of trying to toughen her up a little he thought. The rest of the gang coddled her.

“Right...” Proxy said like nothing just happened as Loki made it back to his seat. “Next is... Regenald Fortenbras? Whoever that is.” There is another awkward silence as no one enters the stage. “Regenald Fortenbras?” Proxy asked again as Rigg finally appeared on stage out of his armor for once in a suit in the wrong size. It seems he either bought one last-minute or borrowed one. “Hi um... I would like to... This was a mistake forget it.” He said walking off before saying more. “Man poor guy...” Raleigh said sympathetically.

“Alright... let's see, next is Mr. Russel Wainwright, but apparently he is too busy to make it. Oh, I know. Running Proxy Protocols.” Proxy said as his face flashed with light before shutting off completely. When it returned, his expression had changed to a stern emoticon face, brows angled with mechanical conviction.

“Hello, everyone,” he said in a deeper tone. “I’m Russel Wainwright.” “I’d like to campaign on two things. You see, as a humble builder, only a few things matter. No need for fancy this or overcomplicated that. We just need to work together. Lay a foundation. Frame a better tomorrow.” The crowd started to listen, actually listen. “I’m not going to promise fireworks or floating castles. But I will say this: we’re all part of building something here. Every person. Every piece matters.”

He pointed across the crowd in what could only be called a dadly gesture. “And let’s be honest. It’s a lot better than the alternative.” He tilted his head toward Loki, who gave a mock-offended gasp as the crowd laughed. “And that’s all I’ve got. Just remember... It ain’t right unless it’s Wainwright.” Proxy stepped back to his original podium, his face returning to its normal blank emoticon state. The crowd clapped enthusiastically.

“Well, he might not be here, but at least they aren't all jokes,” Clyde said more nervously now. “It's sad that the only real choice didn't even show up though,” Raleigh said sadly. “You could've stayed in.” He sighed. Proxy looked at the clipboard for the next person. “Looks like we have one left, Mr....”

He said, but a car alarm went off, blocking the sound. “The hell? Does Home even have cars?” He questioned knowing it mostly didn't.

“Mr....” He tried to say it again only for someone in the crowd to accidentally push one of their noisemakers, blocking it once more, but this time Proxy kept going. “Please welcome him to the stage.” He said as everyone clapped. The Rival walked onto the stage confidently slamming his hands down on the podium. Everyone was confused about how he managed to get in. He raised a finger as he opened his mouth to speak only to get tackled by the Commandos right away and carried out.

“And well... that concludes introductions. Come back later tonight for debates... I'm sure nothing will go wrong.” Proxy said sarcastically as everyone started to leave. “We are doomed,” Clyde said, rubbing his head. “Who else can we possibly get last minute? Why isn't Grant running?” Raleigh asked in a panic. “He said he wasn't cut out for it. I don't know; maybe he'll step in if things get bad.” He sighs. “Well...” Raleigh said, thinking of all the possible choices, skirting around what she wanted to say. “What about you?” She asked,asked and he laughed. “Don't mess with me like that. I could never.” She didn’t answer. Just looked at him. And somewhere offstage, Loki grinned.

Chapter 23: The Accidental Anchor

Night falls as everyone returns to the stage. Proxy's podium is now positioned in the center, as two podiums are on opposite sides. Music plays as everyone files in. Tension seems to be growing by the minute. Raleigh walks backstage, seeing Grant with Loki seeming to be confronting him. “Why are you doing this... you're not even taking it seriously... come on, Velvet, stop this.” Grant sighs.

“Nothing’s stopping you from coming on stage,” he said calmly. “Don’t you see? The Round Table is important; I won’t deny that. But we need a face. No, more than that... a symbol. The fact that none of you realize it is precisely the problem.” He said as he looked at Clyde with a smile.

“Now I must get ready for my close-up.” He said, leaving without another word as Grant rubbed his temples. “I'm too old for this.” He groans. “Do you think he's right? A central whatever?” He asked them after noticing they were there. “I don't know... who can say what the right way to do things is? One thing is for sure, though: it's not with Loki at the top.” Raleigh answered. “Right, well, let's hope Mr. Wainwright wins then. Kinda surprised the old dog is running, though, to be honest.” Grant said as he walked away to find a seat; they followed.

Lights dimmed. A spotlight centered on Proxy. “Welcome back, everyone,” Proxy said as the crowd applauded. “We had a full debate program scheduled tonight... but as you may have heard, all the people running mysteriously dropped out... I wonder why only two candidates remain.” He said, knowing as well as anyone why. Two spotlights snapped on, one stage left and one stage right. “Please welcome Loki Thundermane... and Russel Wainwright.” Loki strutted onstage, waving like royalty, soaking in the claps. Mr. Wainwright, thoroughly confused, looked around like someone had tricked him into joining a circus.

“Now, for opening remarks,” Proxy said, turning to Wainwright. “Mr. Wainwright, the people are very eager to hear what you have to say.” Mr. Wainwright cleared his throat. “Well, uh... see, here’s the thing. There must be some kind of misunderstanding. I never registered to run.” The entire stage went quiet. Clyde's heart stopped, and he just stared, slowly realizing what that meant. “But everyone loved your introductory speech. It was replicated just like you would have said it.” Proxy said with angry emotes on his face. “No idea what you are talking about,” Russel said bluntly, still perplexed.

“Look, I'm just a guy who likes to build things. I can't run a town. I'm sorry.” He said as he walked offstage. Proxy was still enraged, gripping the sides of the podium, trying not to lose it. “You are all insufferable. What are we supposed to do now?” He said. “Worry not, my robotic friend. I have the perfect solution!” Loki exclaims happily. Proxy perked up with excitement, thinking he had

overlooked something. “Yes! I'll simply debate myself. Who better to defeat me than me?” He said, laughing. “Proxy's face glitched out in a way none of them had ever seen, suddenly turning to static before a blue screen appeared saying, 'Error code 2314.

“That's it, I'm done with all you idiots. I am no longer entertaining any of it. Burn the whole place down for all I care.” Proxy walked off stage, kicking the door open and leaving. With Proxy gone, no one knew what was going to happen now. They all sat there in silence as Loki smiled, eyes closed, ready to do just as he promised. “My goal has not changed. I am here for HOME. Who else can truly usher it into the next age better than before? I believe the people deserve art, elegance, and a well-timed confetti cannon.” He explained.

He then walked over to the other side of the stage, acting as though he was a different person. “But what of economic stability?” He asked himself, walking back to the other podium. “Silence, fool! You don’t even believe in public strobe light funding! My economic policy is simple: we print more money... who's stopping us?” Mocking the very concept of a political debate. He rushes to the other side much faster now.

“Oh please, you couldn't lead a parade, let alone a town. The only thing you've ever organized is your wardrobe, and even that’s held together with duct tape and glitter.” He said as he again rushed back now so fast it was almost like he was on both sides at the same time. “How dare you? We both know my fits are fabulous.” He argued back. “My opponent is a liar and a cheat.” The other one said. “Release your damn emails already.” He shouted, vaguely remembering someone talking about that once. “You're disgusting, and your hair doesn't look good at all.” He said as the other one gasped, starting to cry.

“No, I... I shouldn't have said that your hair is fine; that was below the belt.” He said, apologizing. He hugged himself. On stage. Literally. It kept spiraling out of control, getting weirder and

seemingly endless. Everyone was just kind of watching in disbelief it was happening. Clyde looked around, seeing everyone frozen in the moment, just letting it happen and not doing anything to stop it. Not Grant, not Raleigh, and certainly not Rebbecca, who had pulled out an entire tub of popcorn and looked very amused as it all burned down. He took a deep breath, seeing he had no choice; no one was willing. He stood up yelling. “Enough.” Everyone stopped, even Loki, but he didn't look shocked; it was almost like he expected this. He smiled, looking down at Clyde.

“Oh? Got something to say?” He asked. “Why are you doing this? This isn't about being mayor? You know this is not what we stand for.” Clyde shouted. Loki relaxed his arms on the podium. “Well, then. If you feel so strongly about it, why don't you come up here and tell us what we stand for?” Clyde froze, fear creeping back in. He looked at Raleigh, who just silently nodded. He walked onto the stage more calmly, but anger was still boiling over. He took a deep breath, thinking his world was over.

After a long silence, he spoke up. “I met a girl... at first I wasn't so sure about her. She was arrogant and full of herself but a means to an end for me and her, but a lot happened. We did so much...” He said, stopping, realizing that he was meandering a little. “That's not important. Over time we came to really know each other... to really care for each other, and together we created this place through blood, through sweat, and definitely through tears. This girl had seen a lot and been oppressed by powerful people who only wanted more power. This place was supposed to be a place away from all that. A home anyone can feel safe at. We don't need a king; as for a central figure... I don't know. Power for the sake of power is a mistake.” He said, walking off stage without another word as the crowd didn't say a word.

Clyde sat alone, legs dangling over the edge of the island, looking down at the strange swirling sky below. Fireworks started to go off, something Loki had set up for his victory. Raleigh slowly joined, resting herself onto him. “I'm not going to forgive you for saying all that mean stuff about me.”

She pouted but paused, readjusting. “But what you said... it was perfect.” She said, contradicting herself. “What does it matter? It's all over now.” He sighed, looking down. “You still don't get it,, do you?” She sighed but smiled.

“Get what?” He asked, confused. “You’re always so perceptive. You always see people. And yet...” She stops herself from standing up, reaching out her hand for him to grab as she pulls him up. “Come on. I wouldn't give up just yet.” They walked together back downtown. A quiet crowd had gathered. Penny, towering and gentle, had taken over the moderation duties after Proxy’s meltdown. She now stood beside a glowing ballot box, her holographic display shimmering with vote tallies not yet revealed.

“Everyone’s voted,” she said in her deep, robotic voice. “Except you.” Raleigh nudged him. “Go ahead.” Clyde hesitated. “What’s the point? Loki already won.” Still, he took a ballot. Blank. He stared at it. Only one official name on the roster. He looked up at Raleigh. Then he smirked a little and wrote her name down. Penny took the slip, nodded, and turned to the display. “Tally complete. Standby for results...” She stated.

They stood back as the robot processed the information. “Results compiled and will now be displayed,” Penny explained as a hologram appeared, slowly popping up with little white ballots. The first one he saw simply just said, Clyde. “Wait, what...” He said, confused. As more popped up. Some say Clyde Moore, some just his first name. There were a few Orion Vespers. One has his name with hearts around it and a contact number under it. Even one that said Clive Smore.

Even still, all of them were undoubtedly for him other than the Raleigh one he did. “I don't understand.” He said, almost like he couldn't believe it. “Clyde received 30 percent of the results. Clyde Moore, 20 percent. Orion Vesper, 48 percent. Clive Smore 1 percent, and Captain Raleigh received 1 percent. The human known as Clyde has been associated with all these names. Meaning

Clyde has won the race in a landslide victory with 99 percent of the votes.” She explained that she thought that was the issue.

“I mean. I didn't even run; why would anyone? Wait, that means even...” He looked over and saw Loki standing there smiling, saying yes with his eyes. “Of course, I voted for you... anyone who would vote for that Loki character has a screw loose.” He said, laughing. “But why... I'm just me... all of you have something going on.” He said, still not understanding. “Don't you see, Clyde, you're the only real choice? You have been there from the beginning. You don't seek out to rule. You always listen, and you always think of ways to help people. You understand people. What is love without understanding, right?” He said, referencing the line he said in the past.

“Well, you're using that line... very out of context, but... I get what you are saying, but still, I'm not so sure I'm right for it; I'm more selfish than you realize.” He said. “Oh, come on, Clyde, you may be selfish wanting to find meaning and all that, but well. Ironically, your selfishness is selfless in a way... But let’s be real.” She leaned in closer. “We also just really didn’t want to do the paperwork,” Raleigh said, jabbing at his side. All the people around had started to surround them. Even Proxy had returned to reluctantly congratulate him.

“Well, if you are all so insistent...” He started to say, taking a deep breath... “I'll give it my best shot.” “Conveniently, I built an office for you already… total accident.” Russel appeared beside him, already holding a large, old-fashioned key. He reluctantly takes it. “So what are we calling our new official boss? My pick is just plain Mayor.” Grant said. “Nah, Clyde seems more like a prime minister or something.” Rebbecca chimes in. Clyde nervously looks around, seeing that they are all about to get into another debate about something as pointless as that. “No, stop, we aren't fighting about semantics.”

“How about... Anchor? Because, well, that's what you have always been.” Raleigh suggests. “Hmm... I like that it's different but simple and self-explanatory. To avoid any more stupid arguments...

at least for today, let's go with that.” Clyde said as they all nodded in agreement, saying, “Yeah!” As everyone broke off to celebrate, only Clyde and Loki stayed. “This was your plan all along, huh? To push me into this?” He said, finally catching on. “I don't know what you're talking about. Can't you see me grieving over my devastating loss? I will have to spend all night in Lucy's embrace to cure my depression.” He whines.

“Right... forget I asked. I guess have fun with that.” He said, turning to leave. “Head of Culture and Events. I'm still mad at you though, this was a shitshow.” He said with a smile. “Oh Clyde, you mean it? Thank you, Great Anchor!” He praises as Clyde just waves, walking away to join the festivities.

Chapter 24: Becoming Noir

An alarm blared in a small apartment as a hand slammed down, stopping it with a groan. Noir sat up, yawning, struggling to convince herself to get up, but after a while, she finally did. She got ready for her job, equipping a hard hat and vest, and rushed out the door. She briefly stopped looking at the portal gun on the table. She had only been here for a few months, but this was what she wanted. She frowned her anger growing, she took it in her hands anyway, pulling out the components that allowed it to work and ripping them apart. Now she had no choice but to stay here.

She hurried down the street, almost late, passing a man sitting down at a coffee shop glancing at

her with a smile, eventually making it to the job site where everyone was waiting. “Oh, there you are, Nicole. Help the boys out on level five, will yah?” The foreman said as she nodded, walking up to help them out. “Why would a pretty broad like that want to work with a bunch of guys like us?” One of the men asked him. “No clue. But she shows up, does the job, and doesn’t take crap. That’s good enough for me.” He says as his attention is drawn to his brick phone on his belt going off as he answers.

Noir reached the floor where the other men were struggling to hold up a steel beam even with all of them lifting. “Hold on, I'll help.” She declares as one of them just laughs. “What's a tiny thing like you going to do?” He said through the strain. She frowned, walking over to it and plucking it out of their hands like it was nothing and onto her shoulders. “Just tell me where we are taking it.” Half of them looked in shock, while the others just shook their heads, already used to it, pointing in a direction.

The rest of the day went by without much of note happening; it was just a normal, boring day in a not-ideal job, but it was stable and just dangerous enough to keep her restless heart at bay. Grunge rock blaring from a nearby boom box. During lunch, she sat at the edge of the lot, lunch pail unopened. The others stole glances her way but never approached. She couldn’t decide which was worse, being feared or pitied. Still, it beat being hunted. She had tried her best to blend it but was failing pretty hard at it. Just as she was about to clock out, something went amiss. The crane operator wasn't paying attention, slamming against the structure.

The metal shrieked as the crane bucked. Bolts snapped. Shadows fell. Men shouted. One froze, wide-eyed, rooted to the spot. Noir didn’t think; she jumped. Arms wide, she caught the full weight of the falling beam. Dust exploded around her. Silence followed. “Th... thanks...” He sheepishly said as everyone rushed out of the site to safety. After it was confirmed that everyone made it out ok, they were all released to go home. The man that she saved kept staring but never approached, like he was too afraid to, even though she saved him. She just walked off, ready to go home, already dreading that she

would have to do it all again tomorrow.

She passed what looked like a TV store with old tube TVs in the front and a sign in the window saying "brand new" and "state of the art." A faint smile formed on her face in amusement as she watched the display of everything from football to music videos. She could create things that would blow this world away if she really wanted to. All the TVs flickered. One by one, the images warped. On the fourth screen, a cartoonish talk show host bled into static. The words appeared over his teeth: “YOU ARE IN DANGER. DO NOT RETURN HOME.” The text blinked pink once, then the show resumed like nothing had happened. It puzzled her, but she dismissed it, going back home anyway.

She reached for her keys, ready to unlock her door, only to see it was cracked open already. She reached into the back of her pants, pulling out a knife as she entered, but no one was there. She sighs, thinking she was just in too much of a rush in the morning locking the door and settling down in a chair, wondering what she should cook for herself. Once she decides, she gets up and reaches into her fridge as a voice finally speaks up. “Nice place you’ve got here.” He said as she turned around with lightning speed, grabbing her knife again and aiming for his throat.

He stopped it with two mechanical fingers. “Ah, ah, ah, none of that; that wouldn't be very spoopy now, would it?” Vance said confidently. She raises her eyebrows, more confused than threatened, even though he easily stopped her strike. “No, that's not right. Hold on.” He said, pulling out a book that says Modern Lingo of the New Age. Understanding the next generation. “Ah, I mean that would be very kize of you, home slice.” He said confidently that was the correct thing to say.

She narrowed her eyes, studying him more closely. He wasn’t from this world. Too clean. Too aware. Too wrong. “I don't know what universe you got that from, but it's complete nonsense. Who the hell are you, Rebbecca's creepy uncle? Actually, no, I don't care. Tell me how you found me, and then fuck off!” She growls. He laughed, putting the book away, seeing that it was pointless. “Everyone is

always comparing us to her; I suppose it's apt considering it's her role. You aren't far off, but let me ask, did you really think hiding in a low-tech world like this would be enough to get people's eyes off you? I mean, if it's just the '90s aesthetic you're into, I totally get it; those were some good years. I prefer the '80s myself.” He said, turning his back to her and brushing his hands along her personal belongings.

“I'm not telling you a single thing until you explain yourself, if then,” Noir said defiantly. “Oh, silly G-N, or is it Noir? Nicole? Don't you see you're already entrapped?” He said, sitting down. “Don't you dare call me that. I'm not anyone's experiment or weapon anymore.” She growled, looking around the room for the best way out. She could tell he was bad news. “On the contrary. You're the perfect tool for us. We have had our eyes on you ever since you were created, but that Rebbecca.” He said, laughing with mock fondness. “Sometimes she takes creative liberties in her missions, saying silly things like, ‘Oh no, I lost the clone. “The only reason we didn’t follow up is that The Boss found something better. Personally? I think you’re still usable.”

Noir’s eyes darted toward the kitchen window. She didn’t need to fight, just break the line of sight, get out, and get gone. This guy was too dangerous given the circumstances. “Oh, come now don't be so dismissive. I'm offering you a real purpose. With me, you won't have to run anymore, and you will be a part of something big: defeating the Once and Future Foe, and saving the whole multiverse.” He said, waving his arms in the air like he didn't fully buy into that line himself. “The Once and Future? Forget it, I'm not joining your evil organization. Been there and done that; not worth it. At least the Chimera Legion wasn't so shady.” She said only to be reminded of Marcus, who at the very least was.

“You misunderstand. You don't really have a choice in the matter; I'm simply giving you a more comfortable option. I doubt you would enjoy the whole cage and enslavement thing.” He said calmly. She circled him slowly inches from the window. He made no move to stop her, already believing she

had no way out. Someone started banging on the door, catching him off guard. “Police, open up!” They said as they beat on it harder. Vance flinched. His expression soured; this wasn’t in the script. She took the moment to break through the window only for him to already be at the bottom of the small cross-section waiting for her.

“Predictable,” he sighed. With a casual motion, the concrete beneath her feet cracked open, liquid-like, then hardened around her ankles. She was trapped. “What a shame. I thought we could've made a great team, enslavement then.” He started to say as a metallic clink sounded. A small orb landed near his feet, bouncing once before settling. Beeping over and over before flashing. He blinked. “What?” His mechanical arms sparked violently. They seized, then fell limp at his sides as his systems overloaded. “An EMP... inconceivable. Who... who could even?” Noir was already moving.

The moment the bind weakened, she shattered it with a kick. Sparks danced across her coat as she dashed into the shadows. Oddly, she wasn’t affected by the EMP, at least not visibly. Whoever had dropped that device had calibrated it just for him. Vance staggered, smoke curling from his fingertips. He glanced upward just in time to see a silhouette on the rooftop vanish behind a chimney. He didn’t smile. Just narrowed his eyes. “I suppose... someone still has a soft spot for you,” he muttered. His arms whirred back to life with a hiss of pressure and light. He rose to his feet, his coat fluttering in the breeze. And then, he vanished.

Noir rounded a corner, only to see a subway sign flicker on above her, pink letters pulsing: This Way. She reluctantly followed it, knowing now that whoever it was had already tried to warn her. The station was crowded, making it easy for her to blend into the crowd as a pink arrow guided her forward, but Vance was catching up, stepping down the stairs and spotting her in the distance. She reached the platform, unsure what to do now. The train entered as everyone got on. This time there was no signal, but the surrounding light of the stops was pink instead of yellow. She got on that one. The doors closed

and zoomed off just before he could reach them.

She took a seat, still antsy, feeling trapped on the train as it reached outside toward a higher area. She looked outside, seeing a massive billboard outside shifted. A pink holographic message flashed: THIS IS YOUR STOP. It vanished just as fast. Noir groaned. “Seriously?” She moved to the exit. Ripped open the doors. And jumped. Noir sighs, ripping the subway doors open and falling to the city below, straight onto a roof, as Vance frowned, standing on top of the train, gaining on her. She entered the building, seeing a portal gun on the table with coordinates already set. She paused, wondering if she really should do this. Even using her abilities, she could tell it led to some sort of space station, but nothing of the possible danger or who lurked on the other side.

She took a moment to think about it but knew she didn't have a lot of time. Was it worth the risk? In the end, she decided it was making a portal and jumping through just as Vance caught up. “What? No!” he shouted, running over to the portal trying to catch her, but it closed before he could. “How dare you undermine me? I'll get you for this.” He growled but knew he didn't have the evidence to confirm it either way, even though he knew who it was.

Noir dropped, landing in the heart of the space station. It was dark and showed no signs of people. She kept walking, looking around for anything, any indication of the person who helped her. She entered what looked like a control room with someone sitting behind a desk trying to look dramatic, only for the lights to flash on as they turned around in their chair, jumping up. “Surprise!” She shouted.

“Rebbeccca... figured it was you... question is why. Aren't you two buddies?” She said, Still guarded. “Ah, come on, don't be like that... we are more like... coworkers,” Rebbecca said, getting closer and nudging her face against her as she pushed her away. “I don't get it. First with the wings... now this. Be honest with me, why are you helping me? What is Omnihack?” She demands. Rebbecca

frowns, shifting to a more serious tone. “He was that confident, huh... That's not a name we share lightly. Listen, I didn't save you for some grand plan...” She said as she got closer.

She inches as close to her as Noir would allow, taking her hand, her metallic arms trembling, almost begging for her to not leave her. Noir seemed to understand not saying anything, freezing in place, unsure what to do or say. It was clear she had some conflicting feelings about her. She took a deep breath this time, not pushing her away but stopping her. “I need to know. Why are you with these people? Is it because of this Future Foe?” She asked, and Rebbecca blinked in shock that she knew even that; she just nodded.

“I have to do this... you don't understand. Come with me back to HOME; the others will accept you... I will accept you.” Rebbecca said with pleading eyes. “I've heard what they are doing in that place... do you honestly think they would be ok with this... with Omni whatever?” She asked already knowing the answer. “Enough about that; they don't need to know... Let's talk about us... I think I deserve a reward for saving you all these times.” She said with a smirk, leaning in closer as Noir shoved her away. “Enough... I can't return there, and I won't be sloppy seconds for you just because Raleigh rejected you!” She shouts defiantly. Rebbecca's face falls, her arms dropping with it.

“Look, I'm sorry... but I just don't belong there... I need to become my own person... and now I have to worry about all your coworkers. This isn't over...” Noir said, leaving her there in silence. Rebbecca walks over to the corner, slinking down, burying her face in her knees, and not saying a word. Her metallic fingers trembled against her own skin, useless now. No code to run. No mission. Just silence.

Chapter 25: Corporate Takeover

Proxy slowly boots up his face, flashing with a loading screen until his emoticon face is displayed. He sits up, looking around in the massive bed where Penny is also emulating sleep. For Proxy, the bed goes on for miles. Penny, it's a perfect fit for her huge size. He yawns as she picks him up and carries him into the bathroom built to her scale, both look at the mirror together, taking tooth brushes and beginning to brush where their mouths would be if they had them.

Similarly, they walk into a kitchen, but this time it seems more catered to the smaller robot's size; even still, all the rooms almost look more like a movie set. Proxy pretended to sip coffee at the table as she placed a plate with a hologram of food on it down at the table. “Wonderful as always,

darling. You are the best. Now what are we waiting for? Let's open up.” He said seemingly more enthusiastically than normal. They both quickly walk out toward the storefront, switching the sign to open and waiting with a smiley emoticon face. Penny peering in from above. But no one comes for hours, and his face remains the same. Even more time passes, his face turning neutral. Late in the afternoon, still no one had come in, not even a wandering spirit. “Agh, what is this? Where is everyone?” The robot said in a rage, marching toward the front door to look outside, only to be taken aback by what he saw. “What the hell?”

Raleigh groans, banging her head on The Round Table as the others talk. “How much longer do we have to do this? Who cares about the economy, and blah blah whatever...” She complains as the others sigh. “Well, it's certainly not the most exciting thing in the world, but HOME's has a fledgling one at best; we need to figure out how to circulate currency properly,” Clyde explains, only for her to whine once again. “You said it yourself, we don't even need money here... resources are not an issue... and even if that is true, why do I need to be here? This is supposed to be your thing.” She says, annoyed.

“You’re right, but there’s plenty HOME doesn’t have. If we want things from other worlds, we need to buy them or trade. That’s why we need an economy. Something you’d know if you’d listened.” Russel chimes in, muttering the last part under his breath. “Then why aren't they here?” She said, motioning to Grant, Mikako, and Loki's empty chairs. Loki just has a paper attached to it with a peace sign strapped to it.

“I mean, at least one of them is busy; who the hell knows what the Lion's doing. Mikako? Yakuza things best not to pry.” Rebbecca joked. “Can we move on from this, though we got plenty of other stuff to talk about, stuff relevant to me. We've been at this all day.” Rebbecca said, spinning around in her chair. Clearly bored, but having something she needed to propose to them. Before anyone else can speak, Proxy rushes in, slamming the doors open. “Hey, Idiots, come quick. It's awful, truly awful.”

All of them look his way, confused Rebbecca stopping her chair, leaning in with amusement. Raleigh jumps up. “Great! What is it? Giant monster? Siege? Apocalypse? Point the way!” She said excitedly. “Worse,” Proxy said seriously. “Well, spit it out already then.” Clyde sighs. “A threat so insidious it strikes at the heart of civilization itself. My shop profits.” Proxy muttered all of them, groaning, thinking that means it's not serious. “Just come look already before it's too late.” The robot urges rushing back toward the town square. “Oh no, what a shame, looks like we have more pressing matters to attend to,” Raleigh said, rushing out the door before they could stop her. Clyde rubs his face. “I mean, I know she... nothing, never mind. Might as well end this, and see what's up.” He sighs as they all stand up, ready to leave Rebbecca looking a little annoyed she didn't get to mention what she needed to.

“Might want to treat whatever it is with kid gloves.” The hacker said as she walked out, almost like she had a decent idea of what it might be. When Clyde catches up to them, he is shocked to see several of the storefronts on the opposite side of the square have changed overnight. Instead of the numerous and colorful signs, they were all replaced and make more uniform, leaving only one Simplified sign that said Helix Mart. He felt something in the pit of his stomach; it just felt off, and weirdly familiar. Like looking into a past life he had almost forgotten.

“How the hell did this happen? What happened to Charles' record store, and Aunt Mai's Apple pies!” Raleigh said, outraged. “They got bought out. Don't you see this isn't mere competition... Well, it is for me... but that's besides the point. Are you really going to let a massive corporation take over the town like this?” Proxy said, goading her to action. “Of course not, let's go kick their ass!” She said, all fired up, Clyde quickly grabbed her before she rushed off again. “Wait. A massive Corporation?” He asked.

Proxy's metaphorical eyes went flat. “Well, yeah, you've never heard of Helix Corporation?” He asked. “Well, no, but I get the picture just from that, I think. Can't say I love them worming their way in.” He sighs. “Then why are we dragging our feet?” Raleigh said, shrugging him off and rushing

inside, both of them following behind. The inside is huge with all new tech of all kinds, everything from cables to multi-cubes. There is a decent number of people shopping already. “Welcome to Helix...” The cashier started to say, only for Raleigh to grab her by the collar. “What did you do with all the other shopkeepers!” She shouted.

“What are you... I'm just a worker, I don't know what you're talking about... would you like to buy our new Multi-tools? They are the newest model and half off for the grand opening. “Then who does know? Wait, Multi-tools... for only 50 central credits? That's a steal.” She said, momentarily distracted. “Focus, fool... kick them out of town,” Proxy grumbled. “Wait, how do they have Multi-tools. I thought Only The Empire and Coalition had that kinda tech?” Clyde questioned.

“He's right! Who are you working for, the Remnant? Some Chimera Legion Hold out?” She said getting ramped up again scares the timid employee. People were starting to stare. “Well, um... Our founder's father... He was the creator of the Multi-cube and the tool. The Empire stole his designs.” She answered like that was one of the automated responses she was given in training for that exact question. “Nonsense, everyone knows Corvus created it, all the empire's technology, such as myself. Helix is just a crazy old man. I think I would remember who created me,” He scoffed, his face flashing as he briefly searched his files for that exact information. “Huh, there must be a system error. I don't seem to have access to that information right now.”

“Who does know this information then... do you have a supervisor or something we can talk to?” Clyde said, trying to calm everyone down, it was clear this low-level employee didn't know much. “Well, um... Helix Corp sent me here to man this branch by myself, well, me and a few robots, but they wouldn't be able to help you either, they just stock shelves and deliver goods. I'm sorry, I just... I just work here.” She said sheepishly. Clyde sighs, looking at her like he is looking at himself in a past life. He knew this cadence well. Working as a low-level employee, a certain script is developed in the head, one that overwrites the actual personality. They wouldn't be getting anything out of her. Helix Cooperation didn't want them to know. Raleigh wasn't so empathetic.

“Listen here! You can't just come here and try to take over everything! Give back, Aunt Mai!” Raleigh yelled. The girl's face seemed to go blank, her eye glazing over, about to deliver the next line in her script, but before she could, Clyde placed a hand on Raleigh's shoulder. “Enough, you're going after the wrong person here, she doesn't deserve this harshness.” He said, urging her to stop. “You're defending her?” She said in anger, not understanding. “I’m saying she didn’t kidnap anyone. She didn’t do anything wrong. I’ve… been in her shoes. It’s her bosses we need to deal with. Let’s take this back to the table. ” He pleaded. She seemed to calm a little, seeing it was more personal, but was still pretty angry. “Ugh, you want to solve this with more boring meetings? We need to act!” She fires back.

“We will,” Clyde said, steady. “But we need to know what we’re hitting. This isn’t an empire kicking down doors. It's less... tangible... Maybe the others have more experience with them.” Clyde urged. “You're the leaders of this place. Who cares about all that? Just kick them out already,” Proxy said, annoyed. “He's Right! We are the bosses!” She argued back. Clyde takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, searching for the words to better explain it. “Even if this company is rotten, they’ve already got customers. If we throw them out before they actually do anything wrong, how does that make us better than the Empire? Or at least...” he grimaced, “how does it not look the same? This place is supposed to be where people start over. Free of that.”

Raleigh's face drops. “I think I get what you're saying now... not that I like being compared to that...” She said with a frown, upset that he would say that about her. Clyde exhaled, softer. “I’m not saying you’re like them. I’m saying people will say you’re like them if we swing first and ask questions never.” She clicked her tongue, looked away. “…Fine. I hate it. But fine, let's get this over with.” She storms out right away. Clyde turns to the shopkeeper once more. “Sorry about this... Listen, I understand you might have responsibilities and reasons to work for them... just know now that you're here. You have opportunities away from this.” He said, hoping it didn't sound too presumptuous, still very much seeing the person he used to be. The one afraid that one day the script would completely overwrite his being and leave him as nothing but a husk. The woman didn't say a word as the shop went

back to operating like nothing happened.

As an emergency meeting was called, everyone started to file in. This time Proxy tagging along seeming as he is currently the most affected, at least in his processors. “Alright, so everyone got the message right? Let's start with what we know. Have any of you worked with this Company before?” Clyde asked, taking a seat next to the still grumbling Raleigh. “They are a tech company, but I'm sure you already figured that much. What you might not have realized is we are already using some of their hardware.” Rebbecca explained. “They make everything from Toasters to weapons. On Porta Nexus, it's pretty common to find their tech, but Multi-cube technology, while not banned outright, is considered somewhat taboo to use there after everything that happened.” Mikako further explains.

Russel rummaged through some of the tools he had on hand, pulling one out only to see that it did indeed have the Helix label on it. “Well, I'll be. Never noticed.” He said, somewhat embarrassed, he hadn't. “Some of our hospital equipment is Helix as well. It's pretty reliable, actually. They donated a couple completely free, probably just for publicity though.” Lucy says. “You fools are focusing on the wrong thing. Who cares about all that? Their media wing has Eli Vale!” Loki said excitedly, expecting them to know who that is all of them just raised an eyebrow in confusion other then Rebbecca. “The what now?” Clyde asked, wondering if they had missed something important.

Loki gasped, shocked; they had never heard anything about them. “You’re joking... how could this be? Eli Vale is only the greatest idol to ever grace the multiverse!” He unfurled a massive poster: a neon-washed performer with lemon-yellow hair and green accents, mid-pose onstage. “Grant, do you know anything about Helix Corporation?” Clyde asked, already ignoring Loki’s theatrics. “Can’t say I do,” Grant said. “We weren’t exactly browsing catalogs where we hid out. And even if it ain’t stamped Empire, tech that smells like theirs? Hard pass.”

“Hey, don't skip me, I know lots of stuff about Helix...” Loki pouted. “Ugh, you guys are all saying good stuff, what about all the shady things!” Raleigh growls. Mikako folded her arms. “That’s the thing. I dug. I always find dirt. This time… nothing. Not clean... too clean. Records feel scrubbed.”

“You're telling me they don't do anything?” Clyde said, not believing it. “They’re clearly not clean, look at what they’re doing here,” Proxy cut in. “Sure, prices are cheap now, but just wait. Once the competition is gone, those prices skyrocket, and you’ve got nowhere else to go.” Proxy butts in. “Predatory pricing, textbook. But everything they do sits inside the law. Makes an underworlder like me sweat. Even our… benefactors still work with them.”

“Benefactors?” Raleigh asked, confused. “The Coalition,” Mikako answers. “Oh hell no,” Raleigh said, standing up, slamming her hands on the table. “I knew he didn't change. This room has holo coms, right? Call that asshole right now!” Raleigh demanded. “Wait, you actually want to talk to him?” Clyde said, surprised. “Ugh, no, but if he's working with them I'll... Just call him already.” She demands over this whole debacle.

Cyrus is sitting in his office, drowning in paperwork as he sighs. It wasn't what he wanted to be doing, but his eyes being here and not the battlefield meant he did something right. Everything was much more peaceful than before. His com started to go as he groaned, glancing at it briefly, planning to ignore it for now, too busy with all the work he was doing. After a moment of registering who it was that was calling him, his eyes widened like he never expected this day to come. He dropped everything right away, fumbling for the device and answering right away.

A hologram appears on top of the table of Cyrus as he sees it's not just Raleigh who is speaking to him. “See, I told you he'd answer right away,” Raleigh said, slightly annoyed she was right. “Ah, I see... not a social call, I assume.” He asked, a little disappointed. “How could you work with Helix Corp? I knew you were still evil! What's next? Are you going to take over for real?” Raleigh said, pointing her finger at him in an accusing tone. “Should we leave... I'm not sure I want to be part of family drama...” Russel said, only for all of Raleigh's anger to suddenly be directed at him. “We aren't a family!” She denies. “I'm clearly missing a lot of context... care to explain?” Cyrus asked, rubbing his face, already knowing this would be exhausting.

Clyde once again takes over, explaining it to him briefly. “I see. Well, you are correct, we have

contracted them plenty of times. After the fall of the Empire... they are the only ones still supplying the tech we use.” He answered. “And that makes it ok? Even if they are, you must have plenty from the empire still.” Raleigh argues. Cyrus sighs. “Before we go further, may I ask what exactly you're hoping to get from this conversation. Do you want me to justify my choice?” He asked. “Of course we are!” Raleigh said. “But more importantly, why do you trust them, and how do you handle them?” Clyde adds. “I wouldn't say I trust them, but I do trust their work; that is why I contract them. Are they Shady? Yes, but legally sound. They play within the bounds they are given. If I were to advise anything, it would be through legislation.” He explained.

“But what about all the bad they have done...” Raleigh said, still pushing for an answer. “I don't think you understand how the Coalition is run, Raleigh.” He said, sounding tired. “I don't just let anyone join us, but like I have with HOME, I must respect each world's autonomy unless they are doing something truly despicable. Whether it was their intention or not. Helix Corp has helped many people with their technology, but if you believe their truly rotten, prove it to me, and I will cut ties right away, consequences be damned.” Cyrus said, showing sincerity.

“Looks like it's a lot more complicated than I thought. Who knew so much of the tech we used all this time was theirs? I hate to say it, but I think we should do as he says.” Clyde says after deep thought. “Come on, Clyde, I expect that sort of thing from her... nothing forget it. If that's the case, I can send over a contract we already have with them that you can use as a base, or you can choose to make your own. I must be going. Be safe, all of you.” Cyrus said, ending the call. “So are we in agreement?” Clyde asked everyone. Everyone nods except Raleigh and Proxy. “Fine, we will do it your way, guess we have no choice, but if they so much as breathe wrong, I'm kicking them to the curb.” She said, resigned. “Let's get to work,” Clyde said with a sigh.

Chapter 26: Terms and Conditions

The plans had been drawn, and everyone mostly went back to work. All that was left was to get in touch with Helix Corp, which presented another problem. The task seemed almost impossible. While most of them returned to work. Clyde was trying to call someone on coms but kept getting met with automated responses. Raleigh was doing the same, clearly more frustrated. Clyde sighs, looking over to see Proxy also still around. He had set up what looked like an ancient computer, furiously clicking away on the keyboard. “You know, when I asked if you could try emailing them... I thought you would use your own systems or something... not this...” He said, slightly amused.

Proxy turned to him with an annoyed emote. “And as I told you. No one uses email anymore.

My systems have no need for such outdated tech; you're better off trying to text them." He sighs. "But if this even has a slight chance of helping end this nightmare. I'm willing to try." The robot said equally over it. "Did you try texting them?" Clyde asked. "Of course, simpleton. I did that before you even finished the bill." He groaned. Their conversation was cut short by the faint sound of what sounded like elevator music. "What is that..." Clyde asked, peering over the table to see Loki on the other side, just lying on the floor with an old school rotary phone at his side.

"Loki? You're still here?" He asked, confused. "Yes, alas, they put me on hold again... but I think I'm getting close; they said they just transferred me to the head of problem-solving logistics." He said unusually enthusiastic about something more serious. "You seem... motivated. Surprised they have a help line though." He said. "Of course I am motivated! I'd do anything for my Idol!" he said, completely serious. "So you've completely lost the plot as usual... How would they even... Never mind." Clyde groaned. "Hello, how can I help you?" Someone finally answered Loki's excitement. "Yes, I..." Before he can say anything, they but in. "Oh, looks like you're looking for the logistics solving problems head, actually, apologies, we will transfer you right away, please hold." They said as the hold music restarted. The lion looked like he might cry.

Raleigh had drifted off to sleep, her head falling and banging against the table, jerking her awake right away. "Ugh, enough of this. We are getting nowhere. If they aren't going to talk to us like this, I'll shove this stupid contract right in his face where he can't ignore it." She roars. "You might be right... Loki, can you point us to the direction of their headquarters?" He asked. Loki jumped up, still holding onto the phone. "Wait, you're going to try meeting in person? You can't just leave the community. You know it's not like before. I insist I go instead." Loki insisted even though he clearly had other goals. Clyde didn't know what to say. They hadn't needed to go anywhere until now. "Surely the place won't burn down in a day..." Raleigh said. "Naturally, I'll have to step up and take your place.

It was what I was built for." Proxy said. "I'm um... not sure about that..." Clyde said, skeptical of his intentions. "Relax with my Proxy Protocols. I can replicate your actions with absolute accuracy;

the margin of error is minimal. It will be like you never left," He reassured. "They didn't seem that way when you mimicked Mr. Wainwright." She said unimpressed with his performance so far. "I had less data to work with... Clearly, Russel was just being... humble... I'm flawless..." The machine said very insulted.

"Well... I suppose it's worth a shot, but you don't make a decision for either of us. If it really comes down to it, you're just a tiebreaker... not the Anchor..." Raleigh said, digging her finger into his metal frame... "Alright... I get it, just go already..." He said, raising his hands in the air. Clyde and Raleigh leave the room ready to depart. "Wait, I'm coming to!" Loki said, following behind. "Yeah, whatever, come on then," Raleigh said.

They took the secret elevator and went straight to the hangar. Raleigh was long past done with this whole thing, just wanting to get it over with. Loki put in the coordinates, sitting in one of the chairs, buckling up phone still in hand. "You're still bothering with that?" Clyde asked. "Of course." Loki said, full of conviction."Won't it drop service running between worlds or something... seems like a waste of time at this point." He asked, not getting it. "I have a great device provider." He said Bragging. "Ok... if you insist..." He said indifferent, but as the song began to faintly loop for the hundredth time, he was starting to rethink his indifference.

The Hopper flew through the air and into the space between worlds. "Come to think of it, I don't think we've ever taken Loki with us like this, huh, Raleigh." He said, surprised they hadn't. She didn't answer; it wasn't so clear how she took that with her glowing eyes, mostly focused on travel. "Hey... you know I don't think you're wrong, right... I get where you're coming from..." He said he started to think she was upset with him. "You're all being stupid just because it's some company instead of a nation, you're acting like we can't do anything... I know you do... I just... I never thought I'd miss the simplicity of punching a problem away... miss the empire in any form... I get why we have to do this... but I'm still not happy about it." She explained.

"Hopefully, this will be the end of the issue," Clyde said with uncertainty. They leave the

vortex, entering the world of Helix corporation, or rather, a massive space station with no physical world in sight. Clyde started to get a back feeling in his stomach. This whole place seemed off. It was presented as large and imposing, and yet with a hint of warmth. The kind one emits in hopes of being perceived differently than they are. “Oh crap, I didn't think about it till just now, but you don't think they have a god robot like Penny, do you?” He asked, pulling at his scarf even more nervously. “I doubt it. I did some research this site is a new development for them. A grand showing of their success.” Loki explained. He nodded but didn't seem any more reassured.

Drones started to surround them, directing them to land in a hangar. “Well, that was easy enough. They already granted us permission to land. Maybe we should've started with this.” Raleigh said in surprise as they slowly landed. A receptionist with the fakest smile ever approaches them, giving them all a sense of deja vu. “I feel like we did this one already.” She said, sighing. “Hello. Welcome to Helix Corporation Headquarters. We are happy for your visit. May I ask why you have chosen to come here?” She asked. “We are from H... Frontier, we would like to speak with your boss.” Clyde said changing the name last minute just encase as Raleigh gave him the side eye.

“Do you have an appointment?” She asked, not even making eye contact. “Well... we tried...” He said, even motioning to Loki, who was sitting off to the side, still on the phone. “Not a problem. Follow me, you can wait in the waiting room until he is available.” She said, leading them to it. They walk through large, lavish rooms with no people around. A few floating robots and advertisements all over of products, it all feels overly gaudy. The waiting room was smaller, intentional: four chairs, a wall display, a scent of citrus and ozone. A kiosk spat out visitor badges and, with a cheerful chime, threw a TOS hologram into the air, pages upon pages, recording consent pulsing in bold near the bottom. Clyde tried to skim; Raleigh, Loki, and even the drone beside the desk tapped “Agree” instantly. He sighed and tapped too.

“So how long is this going to take, lady?” Raleigh asked, sounding more exhausted by the minute. “Oh well, the wait time is usually 30 minutes on average, and a higher-up will send for you as

soon as they are available. Thank you for choosing Helix Corporation. Farewell.” She said, leaving without another word. The door is making an audible clicking noise as she does. “Well, that's not too bad.” She said in relief, plopping down into a chair. After they settled, the monitor started to play ads the volume at the maximum clearly meant to draw their attention. A blond-haired man with Blue eyes and a white suit appeared with a crooked smile. “Hi, I'm Aurelius Helix, CEO and founder of Helix Corporation.”

“Many years ago, my father created Multi-tech. Technology that changed the multiverse for the better, but sadly, he was never able to bring it to the public. It's my goal to share his vision as well as my own with the whole Multiverse. Multi-tech is a wonder and has improved many lives and continues to do so every day. Join me and my company in crafting a brighter future.” He said, smiling one last time as the video faded to the Helix Logo, and their song played. “Improving the lives of everyone... pft what a load of shit.” Raleigh scoffed.

Before anyone could respond, the next video started to play. “Eli Vale is back!” The display said as the Idol struck a pose to a cheering crowd. Loki gasped, rushing closer, eyes almost glued to the screen. “Join us at the Helix Media Group for another life-changing... Breath-taking performance one month from now at the Iron Fetter Center.” He further explained, showing a short clip of the Idol singing and dancing on stage, ending shortly after. “Can't you see how incredible they are!” Loki squeals. “Sure.” Both of them said skeptically.

They waited. The rest of the ads were less interesting, and after a while, the reel started looping. Raleigh fell asleep on Clyde’s lap. He wasn’t sure whether to let her rest or try forcing his way in... the thirty minutes had long passed. It felt like one more corporate runaround: stall until the customer quits. Loki finally popped off hold. Before the agent could speak, he snapped, “No more transfers, I demand the boss.” “Please hold,” Loki growled at the ceiling. An hour later, Raleigh jolted awake. “We’re still here? How long?” “Too long,” Clyde and Loki said together.

“Enough. My way.” She pulled on the glove; it shaped to her hand. “If you go in guns

blazing...” Clyde started, but Raleigh was already at the door. She only *tapped* the glove, slid into the lock, there was a soft click, and the door opened. “Didn’t say I was… yet. Come on.” They slipped into staff corridors,empty, sterile, too quiet. Raleigh peeked around a corner: a small team of employees was coming. She raised a finger for silence and began to ghost across.

“Hello, I’m a supervisor, how can I help?” chirped Loki’s phone, loudly. “Hey! Are you authorized to be here?” a guard called. The three bolted the other way. Sirens bloomed. Polite security announcements followed: “Attention guests: please return to your assigned waiting area.” Armored personnel and drones started sweeping the halls. “Now what?” Clyde groaned. Everything was derailed now. “What other choice do we have... we find the CEO guy.” She said as they entered an elevator to the highest floor it would allow.

A group of armed guards stood ready to fire above as soon as the elevator opened. The lights slowly blinked from one floor to the next till it reached the floor it slowly hissed open. “Remain calm. Your acceptance of our Terms empowers automated prevention of unlawful entry... ” The car was empty.

A floor below, the trio belly-crawled through a ventilation branch. “This is demeaning. A luminary like me should never stoop so low... unless it’s foreplay, ” Loki mutters... “Deal with it...” Raleigh groaned. The Duct splits into multiple directions. “Which way is he, Loki?” Clyde asked. “Hmm... seems he is indeed on the top floor, but something seems to be interfering. I can't get a clearer read than that,” Loki said as he pointed toward the duct on the right.

They can hear the alarms blaring outside as they crawl, the sound of men and machines rushing around trying to find them. They enter a tighter vent, struggling to fit through it more than before, Raleigh leading, followed by Clyde and the Lion. Loki smirks, seeming to get an idea, but before he can act on it, the vent starts to creak and strain. “Do you guys hear that...” Clyde said as the vent bottom broke apart, dropping them into the room below. “As you can see, our profits have risen drastically in the last quarter. I suggest we...” One of the men started to say as the three of them crashed

down onto the table. “Don't mind us... We are just passing through.” Clyde said as they climbed off the table, leaving the room. None of them said a word, in complete confusion. A group of guards spotted them right away, chasing after them. “Damn, they have a whole private army here,” Raleigh said, huffing in puffing as they started to fire their weapons at them.

Loki casually dodged the lasers as the phone went on hold. Surely, this was the last time. “Hello, this is Aurelius Helix, CEO of Helix Corp... how can I help you... after you graciously waited through 2341 transfers...” He said, sounding annoyed, clearly only answering to shut him up. Both of their eyes widen as Loki just looks confused. “Ah, yes... wait, Your not the one I wanted, I said, the highest authority, not some low-level CEO. Where's Eli? I'm their biggest fan...” Loki whines as he keeps easily dodging the fire as they run. “Ugh... This line handles enterprise contracts, not fan engagement. Please don’t call again.” He said, hanging up without another word.

“LOKI!” Raleigh and Clyde roared. “What? Oh, right, you wanted him. We’re almost there anyway,” he said, pocketing the phone as they sprinted on. They open the door leading to a massive room with large columns. “He's just up...” Loki started to say, only to see that they were now completely surrounded by a huge force. “Remain calm. Please return to the waiting area!” A guard repeated as they all raised their weapons. “Like hell we are... I'm done waiting. Show us to your boss already!” Raleigh demanded. A man in a dark suit stepped forward with a sigh. His skin was gray eyes sunken. “Stand aside. I'll handle this. I was really hoping to stay under 200 hours this week... oh well...” He said, almost like a walking corpse.

“Hello valued customer. You have violated our terms of service. As the General supervisor of this facility, I must ask you to leave... any further action may result in harm... we deeply care about your well-being, and your patronage, so please comply. If you do so, we can overlook your mistake and address your inquiry another day.” He droned completely deadpan on like he had said the same line a million times. “This is a common thing? Maybe you should I don't know... respond to people's issues then.” Clyde said, only a little surprised after it all.

“Thank you for your input. Helix Corp will do everything it can to provide an easier process in the future. By accepting Section 7.2, you authorized automated containment,” He said. “Please comply.” ” He said, unfazed. “My word. He appears to be more automated than their actual systems.” Loki said with a gasp. “Let us through!” Raleigh again demands the man only sighs. “I see...” The man pulls out a stapler, getting into a loose fighting stance. It would seem he either neglected to carry a weapon or chose not to for some reason.

All of them charge, ready to take on the Supervisor and the many forces. A few of the drones shoot out a foam-like substance that seems to be designed to freeze them in place, but easily avoided by the seasoned warriors. Just as Raleigh reaches him about to strike, and the man does the same, a voice stops everyone in their tracks. “What is going on here?” Everyone stops to look in the direction of the voice, and drones clear a path for the CEO himself. The Supervisor stands up straight, addressing him. “Sorry for the inconvenience, sir. No need to worry, we are dealing with it.” The man says. “Mr. Slate? Why are you even here? You must have all sorts of overtime by now, what have I said about that...” He said, briefly refocusing on him.

“Don't worry, sir, I clocked out before I got into it.” Mr. Slate reassured him, only for Helix to face palm. “What no... that's not the issue... Who do you think I am... make sure you put in the hours you worked later...” He pulls him over to the side. Completely ignoring Raleigh, who is tapping her foot impatiently. “Listen Tobius... You know who those guys are, right... They could turn us into canned tuna...” He whispered nervously, seeming to know about their reputation. “They clearly aren't leaving, so I'll take over, alright... Put in your overtime... clock out... and you know what, take the month off, paid of course.” He orders.

“But sir...” The man argued back... “No, no, no, do as I say... you're making me look bad in front of the scary people...” Helix urged... Mr. Slate relented all the drones and men stood down, returning to their posts. “As you wish, sir. Don't worry, I'll do some work at home.” He promises. “No! You're on vacation... leave!” He said, pushing him away and turning his attention towards the trio.

“Sorry about all this. There has clearly been a miscommunication. I would never ignore such notable people as yourselves, especially not after the glowing avocation Commander Cyrus gave of you.” He said with a nervous smile.

Clyde raised an eyebrow, not buying it at all. “Oh, really? You expect us to believe that?”

“Alright, let me level with you, kid. I'm sure you are tired of all the corporate talk anyway. You invaded our office. I have full legal right to...” He started to say, only for Raleigh to cut him off. “Invaded? The only reason we are here is because you did so first! What happened to Aunt Mai?” She said, outraged. “Who... I don't... oh, you must mean the person we bought the storefront from... I promise you we did nothing wrong. We approach all our purchases in a fair and reasonable manner. Aunt Mary is sitting pretty on a pile of cash somewhere, I assure you.”

“Why the hell would she do that? She loved her store. You must have done something.” Raleigh said, getting closer to his face as he backed away. He snickers. “People always preach of passion and meaning, but at the end of the day, the only true power in the multiverse is money. She accepted it, moved on,” he said with a more cynical face. “You didn't come to HOME just to run a business. You are just after our resources, aren't you?” She said, jabbing her finger into his chest. “Of course we are, and when the time comes, we will offer the appropriate amount for them. Now enough of the morality debate, we are here to talk business, aren't we... We can overlook your little contract in my office... I'm all but willing.” He said, walking away.

Chapter 27: It's Still Ours

Aurelius looks over the documents from behind his immaculate desk. Every corner has some sort of ornate display. On the wall, there are countless awards for excellence and humanitarianism. Tucked away in the corner is a smaller picture frame of an older man in a top hat. “Well, you certainly have me on a tight leash with a contract like this, no predatory pricing, the property we already own is all we can get... Stepping out of line means immediate expulsion...” He said, reading that last part, not happy, but takes a deep breath, smiling again. “Manageable, but perhaps a few adjustments.” He presses lightly. Raleigh glares, crossing her arms.

“No Adjustments.” She said coldly. “Right, well, how about this... I will agree to the terms for

a... let's say thirty-day period, after which we will approach you with a counteroffer. You may look over it and change the things you aren't OK with... but trust me, I believe you will like what I have to offer." He said smugly. "And if you don't follow through?" Clyde said, looking with his eyes, he is not willing to do this again. "I will give you my personal com link. That works better for my interests. We will comply with your rules, I promise, and well, I fully expect you to follow through yourselves if we fall short..." He said calmly, stacking the papers together, signing at the bottom with a few corrections.

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement... now about that other matter..." He started to say, only for Raleigh to stand up and get closer to his face. "You will not be receiving even a molecule of resources from us." She flatly said, leaving just as fast. "Well, you heard her... I may be the boss of HOME now... but she is my boss." Clyde said, shrugging with a rare smug grin, even though he would never agree to it either. He followed her out without another word. Helix grinds his teeth. "Don't be so sure." As soon as they are gone. He leans back in his chair, sighing in relief, before sliding over to a cabinet. He peels off the skin around his neck, revealing it to be merely a cover to hide a more robotic frame. He then removes some makeup around his face, covering up some more robotic features.

Lastly, he removed his gloves, showing that they, too, are fully robotic. He places all of it into the cabinet, leaving the office. He entered a dark corridor, typing a code into the wall as a hidden panel opened up he entered, walking until he entered a large room. It was much different then the rest of the place; it was more practical, half put-together machines all over the place. A man sits at a large work station, tinkering with something, only to notice him. "Eight, you're back... I assume everything went well." He asked, standing up to face him. He had the same face, but more human, smiling at him with the same smile as he removed his goggles, showing that his eyes were red instead. This was the Real Aurelius Helix.

"Of course I did... not that it wasn't stressful... See for yourself, Aurel." The more robotic one said as he reached out his hand, exposing a port which the more human one stuck a wire into. His eyes flashed as though he was receiving days' worth of information and experiences. "Damn it… No luck

with the resources, huh? Shame we can't just take some. From the specs I've seen… they're incredible. I could change everything." He said, rubbing his chin. "Why can't we just take it? How would they even know?" Eight asked as Aurel motioned to an empty container off to the side. "To be frank… I'm not even sure why. Everyone I've sent to jar some says the energy just fizzles out before they can bring it back." Aurelius explained. "Well, that's annoying..." The Robotic twin groans.

"The world simply doesn't recognize your claim." Someone says from above on a higher platform. Aurel looks up in shock, Eight confusion... "What are you.... why are you here? I've done everything you asked." He said with genuine fear. The Boss stepped into the light, revealing himself. "Yes, you have, and in turn, I have come to reward your efforts." He walks calmly over to the workbench, placing a jar next to the energy, yet this one is filled with the powerful air particles. "But... but how?" The man asked in confusion. "This world... HOME, as they call it, is like no other. One can not just take... There is a degree of consent needed." He explains.

"Consent?" Aurel raised an eyebrow. He was one of the smartest minds in the Multiverse, yet everything this man said always sounded strange, confusing even, and yet… he had never known him to be wrong. "Indeed. If the world recognizes you as a part of it, you may use its power." He further explains. "And it recognizes you?" Eight asked, seeming to have less of an idea of who he was. Aurel looks with fear, stepping ever so slightly in front of him without thinking, seemingly out of a protective instinct. "One of my assets. The power can also be given." He answers. "Ah ha, I knew it," Aurel said as his face turned to interest over a new discovery.

"Curb your excitement, I also came to evaluate your performance in infiltration... I find it acceptable, but they have far too much control. Do your best to change this fact. I will leave Payload here to ensure you are guided properly." He said, pacing, hands behind his back, as a large man jumps down wearing an orange jumpsuit... "Agh... you're shoving another wacko onto me... You already sent the twink to watch me, why can't he just do it..." He argues. "The Decoy has a role of his own, as do you. Do not overstep it like your father." He said, voice even as Helix just swallowed.

“Alright… is that all, sir?” he asked, more meek than before. “I have one other thing I would like you to devote yourself to. He walks back over to the table, placing a few items on it. First, a metal that moved like liquid, and a data drive. “This is a transcendent class item as well as the information on a few others like it. “Your mission? Create a transcendent power.” He orders. “Are you crazy? You can't just make those...” He said, unconvinced. “Oh, is that so... They say the late Dr. Corvus managed to make this one.” He said as he opened his hand, a floating Multi-cube rose up, containing none other

Then the Void Generator. Aurel's face twisted at the mere mention of the name. “That bastard created this? It's...“This… isn’t just a cube,” Aurel muttered, squinting. “It feels wrong,” Aurel muttered. His skin prickled just looking at it. “Where did you...” “It doesn’t matter,” the Boss interrupted, tucking it back in his coat like it meant nothing at all. “Focus on what it can do, not where it’s been.”

He froze, almost feeling the ominous nature hiding behind the cube, even tucked away behind many layers of security, he could tell right away the danger and power it held. “Did he really... Alright, I'll show you, you'll see just how great the Helix mind is.” He declared with new confidence, anything to prove himself against that long-dead man's legacy. “You’re just handing that over? Why?” Eight asked. Helix’s glare said Drop it. “Because you’ll do something meaningful with it. Or something catastrophic. Either way…” He leans in slightly, eyes unreadable, voice dropping like a verdict. “I learn more.”

He straightens again, calm and deliberate. “Every asset is a variable. A possibility. Some collapse under pressure. Others… become necessary.” He turns to Aurel now, more direct. “You want to prove the Helix mind? Then do so. But do not mistake this gift for indulgence. Your mission stands, secure the influence, shift the balance, and now… build.” He begins to walk away, but just before the shadows take him, he stops. “Everyone has the potential for greatness. But potential means nothing if it isn’t realized.”

Both Helix and Eight let out a long breath, exchanging uncertain glances toward Payload, who

silently turns and leaves the room without a word. “That was terrifying... don't talk to him like that again... you'll get us both erased,” Aurel said, still recovering. “This fear. I don't get it you're usually not like this. Who was that, and why do you obey him? Aurel looked down, then away. “Someone you don’t mess with.” He hesitated, then added, “I don’t even know how far his reach goes… but it feels unending. When I was just starting up the company, he appeared, offering to help realize my goals.” The way he said offering didn’t sound like a blessing. It sounded like a trap.

“And now we have his tools, and our own.” Eight said, eager. “We’ll push forward...” “No, you don’t get it,” Helix snapped. “He has hackers, hundreds, maybe thousands, every one of them a genius or a lunatic. They could erase us before we even knew we’d made a mistake.” He rubbed his temples. “This company? It’s just another one of his tools. We’re not the innovators here...” Then he caught himself, forcing a breath, and looked over the workbench where the liquid metal shimmered beside the data drive.

“But that doesn't mean we can't make something ours, too.” He picked up the material, turning it in his hand with new hunger. “Come on,” he said. “We’ve got work to do.” Eight didn’t move right away. “You’re not worried we’ll make something too powerful?” Helix chuckled, the bravado slipping back in. “I’m counting on it.” “I'll do what you built me for then. Be both know you can't run the business side of things,” Eight grinned, pausing briefly with a soft sentiment. “But Aurel… don’t sell yourself so short.” “I’m the smartest mind in the multiverse.” Helix grinned back. “No one can rival me.” They fist-bumped, a small, shared defiance in the shadow of a man who could destroy them without blinking. Eight left him to it.

Back at HOME, the new rules were put in effect as the prices balanced, people naturally started to shop everywhere again, Helix Mart, and the Hack Shack reached a state of equilibrium. Proxy Eagerly catered to the few customers in the store, only briefly glancing across the street at the huge store with a scornful emote. The threat was not gone, and definitely not forgotten, but contained. Raleigh had vanished. Clyde looked around the town, looking everywhere for her, but didn't see her

anywhere. He asked everyone, and no one seemed to know where she had gone.

After a few hours, he managed to figure it out. She had moved to a distant floating island high above the settlement, peering down below at it. With the help of a flying bike, someone let him borrow, he made his way up to her, standing just behind. From above, the town looked peaceful. But she sat stiffly, arms wrapped around her knees, unreadable. “You disappeared… no one knew where you went. I thought something might’ve happened.” She didn't respond.

After a moment of silence, he started to worry she was about to close off completely, like he had seen her do in the past. He sat down next to her, legs dangling over the side, not saying a word, just being there with her. After a long pause, she spoke up. “Mikako found out what happened to all the people they bought out... they are fine, like he said... sitting on piles of credits in other worlds.” She said slowly voice filled with pain. “And that upsets you?” He asked, not fully understanding. She lowered her head, burying her head into her knees.

“This place I opened it up to them, I gave them a place to belong and...” She trailed off, voice cracking at the edges. “I thought that meant something. I thought it mattered.” Clyde didn’t interrupt. He waited, his presence steady beside her. “But in the end, he was right. They took his money and left, even though they claimed to be happy here... that they were building something better, something away from all that, with us. I feel like we made a mistake, maybe we should've kept it to ourselves.” She laments feeling betrayed.

“I can't say I'm not disappointed about that either... we defended them even after that... but it doesn't matter... to me... and I believe it matters to all the people that did stick around.” He says, motioning to the town below, they had built. She didn't say anything, still very much in her own head. Clyde reluctantly kept talking. “Is this not what you want... if it really comes down to it, we can leave... try again somewhere else...” He suggested at least throwing that option on the table in case she didn't realize it was there.

She raised her head, finally making eye contact. “I don’t want to leave,” she whispered. “Not

really. I just... I'm scared, Clyde. Not of losing the town, of *keeping* it. Of watching it get worse. Of becoming part of the problem. And now people look to me like I'm supposed to know what to do." She laughed once, bitter and tired. "I'm not a leader. I'm just... me."

Clyde didn't flinch. "I don't think anyone really knows what they're doing in life. This place… It's already changed so much, and it's going to keep changing. Not everyone here is going to be good for it." He paused, then softened. "But it's not just you and me anymore. You don't have to carry it alone. We *have* made something meaningful, Raleigh. And we didn't do it by ourselves. Our friends helped us get here. They *believe* in this place, same like you. And they'll fight to protect it, same as you."

"You are right... I guess I was focusing on the wrong things... Rebbecca, Grant, Lucy, Mikako, those silly robots... even Loki... They are all with us now, but most importantly, you are. I know I suck at this sorta stuff, but... I really wouldn't have made it this far without you. Thank you, I mean it... But I can't help but feel those fears will never truly fade," she smiled with a soft sigh. "I wouldn't have made it either... hell, I might have ended up just like that Slate guy." He joked with a horrified face at the thought.

She laughed lightly, seeming to have been cheered up now. "Let's go back to the house... We can let our friends take over for a while and just rest a bit... and then maybe... we deserve some sort of vacation. We kinda have been working on this nonstop since..." he started to say, counting in his head. "Since Wainwright joined us, what a year and a half ago, maybe longer... Everyone needs a break even if they love what they do." He suggested. "You might be right... after we take care of everything we need to... let's do it at least for a little while." She said, resting her head on his shoulder, and both of them looked down at everything they had built for a little while longer.

Chapter 28: Carnival Reset

Clyde and Raleigh stepped out of the port in wonder before they even had time to react to their surrounding, a colorful clown wearing stilts appeared from nowhere, jumping around and throwing confetti. “Welcome to Carnival Continent, where the fun and joy never dies. For Everyone, Young and old!” He said with a chuckle before bouncing off to do the same to the next couple. Raleigh smiled, looking around at all the bombastic, circus-like decorations. Clyde still looks skeptical. “I mean... I know Loki practically shoved the tickets into our hands, but is this really how you want to spend our vacation?” he asked, frowning faintly. Loki had claimed he just so happened to stumble across two VIP passes. Clyde doubted that very much.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Raleigh beamed. “This place is great! Way better than some boring spa or whatever. This is how you really relax.” “Right...” Clyde muttered. He was sure it would be fun, sure, but he’d been hoping for something a little slower. A place to catch his breath after everything they’d been through.

He wandered over to a nearby information board, looking over a map of the area. A sprawling mega-carnival, just as expected, rides, food plazas, stage plays, arcades, bizarre attractions, and something called the Mirror of Destiny. He blinked and turned to a smaller screen next to the map labeled Multiversal Drift Schedule. “Huh. That’s interesting... Looks like we just left the World Fera?” he said aloud, brow furrowed. “I guess this whole place kind of drifts through the multiverse...” He said to Raleigh, only now noticing she was already halfway down the street, distracted by something. He sighed, knowing he had better go after her before they got separated.

He hurried after her before they got separated, catching up just as she stopped in front of a towering carnival game booth. The man running it greeted her with a showman’s grin. “Test your strength, miss? Step right up, swing the hammer down! Ring the bell, win a prize!” he said, theatrically tapping the target with his cane before offering her a large mallet. “Oh, no thanks,” she said cheerfully, waving him off. “I’ve got my own.” Her glove shimmered, then exploded into a comically massive hammer. Before the man could even register what was happening, Raleigh slammed it down.
The puck launched like a missile. It hit the bell with such force that it ripped the entire thing off the post and sent it sailing into the sky, vanishing with a ding! that echoed far too long. The man stared up, slack-jawed. “...Huh,” Clyde said.

Raleigh, meanwhile, skipped over to the prize table and plucked up the cutest stuffed animal she could find. A pastel llama-unicorn hybrid with googly eyes. “Look at this one, it’s so adorable!” she cooed, hugging it tight before casually handing it off to Clyde like a personal assistant. Then she bolted off again, already distracted by something else down the avenue. Clyde looked at the plush. It was winking. “Yep. Totally relaxing.” Raleigh seemed to have similar ideas about the other games, but

Clyde stopped her before she could do any more damage when they got to one that required popping balloons with darts. “Listen,” he said, stepping in front of her, “you can’t just use your glove again. You have to use the tools they give you. And honestly? These kinds of games are rigged anyway. You’re not supposed to win.”

“Why would they do that?” she asked, already grabbing a dart. “Whatever. This little thing’ll work.” She hurled it with all her strength. It didn’t pop a single balloon… but it did hit the board so hard that it snapped in half, shattering on impact. The balloons all burst anyway from the sheer force of the collapse. The man running the booth stared in silent horror. He slowly handed over another plush, a haunted-looking octopus, before glowering at Clyde. “Ahem.” The man said in a somewhat threatening tone. Clyde just sighed, pulling out some credits to compensate the man for damages. “Now, where did she go?”

Vincent sat at a table drinking what looked to be fake beer. He took a reluctant sip and grimaced. “This was a lot more appealing when I was a kid,” he groaned. Akane sat down next to him, arms crossed. “There you are. What are you doing here? We have work to do,” she said, clearly annoyed. It seemed she’d been sent to fetch him. Vincent didn’t even look at her. “What’s it look like? I’m reliving my youth.” His voice was quieter than usual, touched by something dangerously close to nostalgia. Akane softened slightly. “Of course I remember… This place came to Porta Nexus once a year. I’ve got a lot of good memories here. With my family. Even with you, unfortunately.”

He snorted. “Oh, you mean that time we.” “Not important.” She rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t change the fact our mission...” He waved her off. “I’ve pulled down twenty-three worlds for him. And he still doesn’t give a shit. I think I’ve earned one goddamn day off.” He lowered his sunglasses, staring her dead in the eyes. “You got a problem with that?” Akane hesitated. “It’s not that I don’t think you’ve earned it… But if our mission fails, wait. Is that...?” She trailed off, spotting Raleigh walking down the avenue beside Clyde. Raleigh was happily munching on a turkey leg that looked bigger than her head.

Vincent stood up, cracking his knuckles, ready to prove something, only to sigh and deflate. “Forget it. I don’t care right now. I’m not done with them, but... no grand ambitions today. Just funnel cakes.” He glanced toward a shadowy underpass. “You know the tucked-away one under the bridge?” Akane blinked, then nodded. “Yeah. I remember. I don’t know why, but the ones there always taste better.” “Yep. That’s the one.” He stood up and stretched. “Let’s go. We’ll worry about them tomorrow, even if the Boss ain’t pleased.” Akane groaned. “Damn it… alright. But just for a little while. Then back to work.” The two turned and wandered off toward the bridge, momentarily forgetting the weight of the multiverse on their shoulders.

Raleigh and Clyde stopped in front of a massive haunted house façade, its looming arches and flickering lights promising terror within. Raleigh tilted her head, studying it curiously. “So... people just go in there to be scared? Why would anyone want that?” she asked, clearly baffled. “Well... there are lots of reasons,” Clyde said, scratching the back of his neck. “But I think most people do it for, uh... romantic reasons.” He couldn’t help picturing Raleigh clinging to him in fear, burying her face in his shoulder. “R-romantic?” she repeated, cheeks reddening slightly. She glanced at the entrance, almost like she was wondering if they needed to now, just to prove something.

“Come on, let’s try it,” Clyde said, already heading toward the entrance. “Alright, but they better not say anything about the heat death of the universe or the sun exploding in four billion years,” she muttered with a shiver. “That’s... not... wait, do you think they would?” he asked, eyebrows furrowing in genuine concern. “Never mind. You’ll see soon enough.” They entered together. Inside, the hallways were dimly lit and narrow, filled with eerie sound effects and cobwebs made of string. It was about as standard as haunted attractions got. Raleigh walked ahead fearlessly, arms crossed and eyes darting side to side, completely unimpressed.

Suddenly, a man in a ghost costume burst out from a hidden panel in the wall, letting out a loud “BOO!” Raleigh didn’t hesitate. She punched him square in the face. The man crumpled to the floor with a thud, completely unconscious. Clyde stared in horror. The romantic image he had imagined

earlier shattered like glass. What had he been thinking? Raleigh was Raleigh. She didn't run from fights. She ended them. He groaned, rubbing his face with one hand, then knelt beside the ghost performer to check if he was okay.

"What?" Raleigh asked, genuinely confused. "He was about to attack us." "Well... that's kind of how it works," Clyde explained, rubbing the back of his neck. "They jump out, try to scare us, and we're supposed to, you know... get startled, cling to each other... maybe hold hands..." He trailed off, already regretting saying it out loud. "Oh." Raleigh blinked, cheeks turning a deep red. "If you wanted to hold my hand so badly, you didn't need to come up with such a complicated scheme." She laughed nervously, clearly flustered. Still, she clung to his arm like he'd imagined earlier, gripping his hand tightly.

"I'll try not to punch the next guy," she said, determined. Clyde smiled, blushing faintly as they walked deeper into the haunted house. For a moment, things felt... perfect. Then a zombie crawled out from under the floorboards with a groan. Raleigh immediately kicked him across the hallway. The poor actor slammed into a wall with a dull thunk. "Raleigh..." Clyde groaned, watching the semblance of romance evaporate like fog in the morning sun. "Alright, I get it, sorry... Just hold onto me tight so I can't react," she offered sincerely.

They kept walking, hands clasped. The mood was shaky but recovering, until a masked man at the end of the corridor revved a fake chainsaw and charged them. Clyde stiffened, but Raleigh still reacted. She created a chainsaw of her own, a very real one, and revved it in self-defense. She tore through the fake chainsaw like paper and had already raised it to strike the actor before Clyde yanked her back. The man fell over in terror, dropping his prop as he scrambled to the floor. "Wait... that was part of it too?" Raleigh asked, genuinely confused as the chainsaw vanished from her hand. The hallway lights suddenly flickered on. A voice crackled over a loudspeaker: "Yeah... this isn't... We're going to have to ask you to leave. Please." Clyde sighed, already steering her toward the exit. "Yeah. Okay. We'll go."

Clyde sat outside the haunted house, head in his hands, trying to recover. Raleigh stood nearby, frowning, clearly feeling guilty. “I’m sorry, Clyde...” she said softly. Then her eyes lit up with an idea. “Oh! I know, we can try something else that’s lovey-dovey!” She scanned the street, spotting a slow-moving tunnel ride shaped like a swan. A glowing heart-shaped sign read: The Love Float. “Eh... maybe not that one,” she muttered, visibly cringing. “Nah, forget it.” Clyde stood up, brushing himself off. “Let’s do that one.” He pointed across the plaza at a towering monstrosity of steel: The Multiversal Ride.

Then he saw the track. It twisted through the air in impossible shapes, dozens of loops, corkscrews, and turns that seemed to defy physics. “Yeah!” Raleigh shouted before he could change his mind. She grabbed his hand and dragged him forward with infectious excitement. Clyde braced himself as the coaster began its slow, clattering ascent, rising high into the sky. He closed his eyes when the clicking stopped, silence hanging for just a moment, and then came the drop.

Raleigh screamed with joy, arms raised high. Clyde cracked open one eye. It was... thrilling. He wasn’t terrified. He wasn’t overwhelmed. He was alive. Maybe it was because of everything they’d been through. Maybe after surviving gods, armies, and near-death experiences, this just didn’t feel so scary anymore. Whatever the reason, he found himself laughing. Then he raised his hands and screamed alongside her.

After that, Clyde started to loosen up. They darted from ride to ride, sampling all kinds of food, some delicious, some questionable, and laughed more than either of them had in ages. Sure, he still had to rein Raleigh in now and then, but for the most part, it was exactly what they needed: time to just be. They barely touched the more theatrical side of the park. Clyde assumed Raleigh wouldn’t be into shows or plays, and she didn’t suggest any. As night fell, fireworks exploded in every direction, lighting up the carnival sky with dazzling colors. The crowds quieted as a towering Ferris wheel, larger than any Clyde had ever seen, illuminated in the distance, drawing everyone’s attention. Its lights shimmered like stars.

Both of them moved toward the Ferris wheel without a word. The Carnival seemed to know this moment was inevitable. Even with the massive crowd, the staff handled everything with practiced efficiency, cycling people in and out so quickly it hardly felt like waiting. Vincent and Akane had stayed longer than planned, already seated inside one of the gondolas as it slowly rose into the sky. Vincent sat with his arms crossed, sunglasses still on despite the night. Akane sat across from him, watching the lights below, then looking back at him with something softer in her expression.

“You were right,” she admitted with a sigh. “I think we both needed this.” “Damn right,” he muttered. “So get off my back.” She smirked faintly but then turned her gaze back out the window. After a moment of silence, her voice dropped lower. “Hey... you remember why we joined Omnihack, right? Do you... Do you still think we made the right choice? Is the good really worth all the bad?” Vincent blinked, caught off guard. He pulled his shades off slowly, meeting her eyes. “All of them piss me off to no end sometimes,” he said, his voice quieter than usual. “Their grand speeches. The secrecy. The moral gymnastics. It ain’t really my style. He leaned back, resting his arm against the edge of the gondola. “But... haven’t we reached the heights we dreamed of? Power. Reach. Influence. We get shit done.”

Akane looked away again, lips pressed tight. Her thoughts drifted far from the bright lights below. “I don’t know...” she murmured. Vincent scoffed, leaning forward. “Well, tough shit. It’s not like we can walk away now.” He paused, voice low and steady. “We’re in this, whether you still believe in it or not.” He smirked, the usual fire back in his eyes. “So let’s remind them. Let’s show ‘em just how legendary the Backdoor and the Firewall really are… even if the multiverse barely knows our Faces.” Akane didn’t smile, but her eyes flicked toward him. There was agreement there. Maybe even resolve.

Clyde and Raleigh, just a few gondolas away, reach the top, looking down with wonder. Holding each other's hands. “Well I'll admit this is fun...” He said with a light chuckle. “Yeah...” Raleigh said with a faint smile. “Can't help but worry about HOME though.” She further stated.

“They'll be fine. Grants got your job more or less covered, I'm more worried about Proxy taking my place...” Clyde said with hesitation. “I think he knows better than to make drastic changes, not that he would. I think we all know Loki is the one to do something like that.” She laughs. “Oh gods, you’re right. Maybe we should panic,” Clyde said, both of them laughing.

Raleigh looked out across the horizon, eyes sparkling with the reflected glow. “This is our reset. We go all out here, have the time of our lives... then return with new fire.” Clyde gave her a warm smile and nodded knowingly. She turned to him, leaning in close, and kissed him, longer, softer, more certain than ever before. “I love you, Clyde,” she whispered. “I do too,” he replied, just as quiet. Then she stood up, brimming with excitement as the Ferris wheel began to descend. “I can’t wait to see what this place has in store for the rest of the two weeks we’re here!” Clyde blinked, his smile dropping into alarm. “Wait, we’re here for how long?”

Chapter 29: Dave's Day Out

Loki rose from his bed earlier than usual, brimming with excitement. He leapt out from beneath the covers, dramatically stripping off his nightwear with the flair of a stage magician despite no one being around to witness it. Sliding into his usual clothes and preparing for mischief. He pranced down the stairs to the club area, the rest of the staff already getting ready for another day. He laughs menacingly. “Finally, the day has arrived! With them gone, I can do whatever I want, and no one can stop me.” He said happily, acting like a kid about to throw a party while his parents were away.

“Haha... let the two-week party begin. Non-stop! It will be so ama...” He is cut off by the sound of someone yelling in the distance. “What kinda degeneracy is this place... a bunch of sissies

everywhere... where's the goddamn booze?" Someone on the host side yells. Loki freezes in place, knowing exactly who it is. His posture slumped. His grin vanished. He already knew. He trudged over to the source of the noise with all the enthusiasm of someone being marched to their own execution. Sure enough, he found his father, Dave, red-faced and roaring at one of the club hosts. "The fuck are you doing here, Dad?" He said silently, completely monotone.

Dave roars, looking at him with anger. "The hell you think! You trapped me in Hel with a bunch of sissies. That was one fucking thing, but your biggest sin... taking away my goddamn booze... how could you do that to your own father after everything I've done... Where did I go wrong..." Dave grumbled. Loki sighed, asking him if he really had to ask with his eyes. "Are you... serious... how did you even get here?" He said, confused.

Dave just pointed towards a door in the back with a faint glow. "Oh, right, I forgot I made a doorway to Valhalla from here." He sighed, only now thinking that was somehow a mistake. He stood up straight, adjusting his tie. "As for the alcohol. Marcel said your consumption was becoming rather... much... even for the likes of us. He had to cut you off before you died... again..." Loki groaned. "That's bullshit, I ain't no light weight." He argued back. Loki just rubbed his face. "Look, Father, I would rather not be doing... this... Just go back to Valhalla, and..." He said.

"Screw that place... not my Valhalla, it's hel... hel I say!" Dave argued. "Ugh, fine... I'll look into getting you housing here so long as you... Behave, would you just drop it already?" Loki pleaded. "And the booze." He asked adamantly. "Hmm, alright, but you have a daily limit." He said, waving his hand dismissively. "Deal," Dave said, but his demeanor said he clearly was going to try to get away with more. Loki quickly gives him a bottle of wine and shoves him out of the Lion Club's doors. An audible click was heard signaling that Loki wouldn't be allowing his father to ruin his day as music started to blare from inside.

"This ain't booze... fancy nonsense..." He grumbled but opened the bottle, taking a swig as he started to walk around. He didn't seem that impressed with HOME, but he was glad he wasn't in

Valhalla anymore. No one seems to have noticed him just yet. He wandered through the yakuza district, catching glances as he made it to a stall wine bottle almost empty already. “Whoa, you look like an actual man.” He says to the person running the stall, it had been a while since he saw one, in his opinion. “The hell you on about old man... You got a problem?” The man said, perceiving it as an insult. “It was a compliment, dip shit.” He growled.

The man pulled out a wooden sword, walking around the stall to meet his gaze. “I don't like your attitude.” He growled. “I'm not afraid of you, I'll take you on!” He said, unimpressed, more of the yakuza started to drop what they were doing and surround him. “We take care of our own around here.” One of them said. “Pft... you think you're tough shi...” He started to say as the man drop kicks him, Dave is already down as they kick the crap out of him. The Fox from before watches from a rooftop tilting its head seemingly looking for food. He scampers away after seeing the commotion toward the Commando Barracks.

Grant is with Rebbecca, and a few others, in a small training area they have out back to keep each other sharp. “Come on, just try it, you'll love it, I promise.” She said, smirking, elbowing him. “I told you I ain't doing it... come hell or high water.” He denied. “What's the harm, and just looking at it, at least Grant,” Rigg argued. “It's based on empire tech... ugh, fine...” He said, leaning against the wall as Rebbecca got out whatever she was presenting. “Well, yes and no... I kept your thoughts in mind.” She says, opening a Multi-cube with what appears to be a pistol.

Grant strokes his chin, looking a little more interested now. “Well, you at least got it lookin like a standard issue Union weapon, bullets?” he asked. “That is the default mode, but it has other modes, and realistically no need to reload.” She further explains. “Alright, but let's see if you can fill these old bones in action.” He points it at the nearest target and shoots, hitting dead on. “Hmmm... I reckon that wasn't so bad, could barely tell the difference.” He said impressed, but still not sold on using it. “That's not all. You understand how most multi-tools work despite being adamant on not using them right?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, fought 'em enough to have a basic rundown. Most of em only got a ranged, and a close combat weapon saved to them, right?” He asked. “Right! This uses that idea but expands on it... Though to a lesser extent than Raleigh's glove.” She further explained, taking it back from him, seeming to truly enjoy working on it. She pulls on the muzzle as it expands into a riffle, she does so again as it morphs itself into a sniper, she does a swiping motion as it shifts into a baton. “You can keep it at the hip while having all the weapons you're used to using all at once. Way better than the Empire's version if you ask me.” She explains Rigg looks like he is amazed. “Come on, Colonel, that was so cool, you have to let us...”

Grant holds up a hand to cut him off, eyes narrowed at the shifting weapon. “It’s fancy, I’ll give you that. But I ain’t gonna be the guinea pig for every flashy thing with a trigger. If I use it, it's gotta feel right. Gotta trust it.” “You trust me, don’t you?” Rebbecca asked, smirking but with a sharper edge than usual. Grant looks at her. A pause. “Still deciding,” he said bluntly. “This is the kinda tech you can lock down with a button, ain’t it?” He asked, not really expecting a real answer. Before she could reply, Rigg pressed a hand to his earpiece. “Disturbance in the Yakuza district.”

Grant grunted. “Let’s move. Might as well test this thing out on the way.” He jogged off with Rigg, muttering something under his breath, weapon still in hand. He might never trust her, not completely, but at least he was willing to try. Behind them, the fox scampered into the yard, stopping at Rebbecca’s feet. She crouched down slowly, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “Hungry?” she asked, scooping it up. The fox yelped but didn’t resist. “That’s all it takes to earn your affection, huh?” she whispered, voice light but distant. Her smile stayed, but her eyes drifted, thoughtful and quietly sad.

Kaguya had arrived, striding confidently toward Dave, who had been beaten badly, his face hardly recognizable with all the bruises. She did her best to keep a powerful aura. “Ah, so this is the trash that would dare antagonize my subordinates.” She scoffed, looking down, lifting his chin only to reel back in shock. “Oh my gods, your... Dave Thundermane! War master of War World?” She said, somehow knowing who he was. “This guy some sort of big shot boss?” One of her men asked. “You're

kidding... He is only like the greatest warrior ever!" She said, geeking out a little. "Once he strangled a dragon with his own intestines!" Dave blinked, head lolling. "I did?"

"You did! You ended the Century Blood War by drinking every last soldier under the table! You suplexed a volcano!" Thinking he was simply too powerful to be bothered remembering something so trivial. The crowd stared. One of the vendors, the vendor who'd kicked him: "Wait… the one I just dropkicked two seconds ago?" Kaguya went on. "He beat up a god of war in a dream—and somehow, the god still lost!" Kaguya knelt beside him like a disciple meeting a prophet. "Would you sign my sword?" Dave spat out a tooth. "Well… guess I did all that stuff and forgot about it. Sure, kid. Anything for a fan."

"Did I just beat up a myth?" The vendor asked. Kaguya: "Yes. And shame on you. He was clearly pulling his punches." The Yakuza all exchanged glances. "He didn't even throw a punch before he..." Then slowly, silently, they nodded to please their princess. Then they all turned as Grant came sprinting toward them. Dave's eyes widened. Loki's warning echoed in his head. Behave, or no booze. "Oh hell no," Dave muttered, scrambling to his feet and bolting into an alley like a panicked raccoon.

He dashed toward the hospital plaza, only to spot Lucy and the others stepping outside. He dove into a bush with a loud rustle, muttering, "Damn it… What's that floozy doing here?" Lucy yawned dramatically, stretching. "What a day. I'm ready to partay all night!" Crucible sighed. "Just remember, AID-E's scheduled maintenance is tomorrow. She'll be down for a few days…" "Relax," Lucy said, brushing him off. "If I get too hungover, I'll just have little ol' Iris cure it with her magic." She winked exaggeratedly.

Iris, clearly uncomfortable, responded softly, "Administrator… I know it's usually you telling us this, but maybe try to be a little more mature." "Sheesh, you guys need to live a little," Lucy laughed, "but alright, alright, I'll pace myself." She sauntered off, waving. "I would like to party as well," AID-E added in her flat, synthetic voice. It almost sounded like a pout. "No. Never again," Crucible said immediately. "It took forever to untangle the code you rewrote while somehow drunk."

The team headed back inside. Dave peeked from the bush, scowling. “Why is my son so popular… he’s a loser.” He sighed and wandered off again.

He kept wandering further away from the center of town. Walking aimlessly until he heard shouting in the distance. Cheers. Applause. He followed the noise like a moth to flame, stopping at a makeshift sports field where some HOME residents were engaged in a chaotic hybrid of soccer and dodgeball. “What in the fresh hell is this?” Dave muttered. Someone flew through the air, tackled a guy mid-somersault, and scored a goal with a live bomb.

He looked in amazement as the men slammed into each other with all the might they had. “It's... like war but... whoa...” He didn't know how to explain it. The ball flew into the air, landing near his foot. He picked it up, almost feeling like he had found his new calling. “What is it that you're doing?” He asked them. A burlier man with a mustache walks over with a smile, only with a slight surprise that he didn't know. “Oh, it's called Gravity Ball. Want to play?” He asked. Dave looked like he might tear but only to stop himself, knowing that real men don't cry. “Yes!”

Chapter 30: A Rival Rises

The Rival looks in front of the mirror, flexing despite having no kind of muscles to speak of. He does a battle cry, trying to psyche himself up. He walked over to a bar with 10lb weights on each side, taking out a marker and adding a k at the end. He got under and started to lift, struggling to lift it even still. After a couple, he feels he has done enough moving on to do some more intense training like running up the stairs quickly, giving up halfway into a brisk job instead. He returns to the mirror. “Yes, that's right... your the man... the man...” He jumps, getting all Hyped up.

The next moment, he is once again landing near the wall outside of HOME, ready to invade. “Alright, men, I feel it, this one is going to be the one, the time we break in and finally defeat Orion. So

let's hear it!” He shouts all the men cheer, but with deflated enthusiasm. Clearly, they had grown tired of doing this. “Alright, men, Charge!” He said as he started to lead them into battle. “Grant... their back,” Mara said with a sigh on coms. “Don't you idiots get tired of this?” She asked, annoyed that they kept coming. “They are relentless, it's almost admirable.” Switch said to her, resigned.

“We never tire, now send for Orion at once our duel with be Legendary!” The Rival said with a laugh. “Mara jumps down from the walk, pulling out the weapon Rebbecca had designed for them. “He isn't even here right now...” She groaned. “Where could he possibly be? This is way more important.” The Rival said in shock. “I don't know vacation or something, now get lost.” She said, transforming it into a bat and hitting him with it while he just stood there, lost in thought. He was knocked down right away, easily beaten like always, but this time lost in thought, not even trying to get back up.

The rest of the pirates, fully expecting. Pick him up and drag him off, carried him back to base. He sits there lost in his words, looking over at his first mate, his most loyal yes man. “I may be delusional here, but could it be... Orion... he no longer sees me as a threat?” He asked even though it was clear to everyone outside the pirates that he never was. “No, of course not... you're a threat. You beat him that one time, remember.” The first mate reminds him. “Yeah sure, but... don't tell anyone, but I kinda got lucky with that one...” He said, looking like he might tear up. “Nonsense, Captain, you told us lots of stories about your face-offs when you were with the Remnant, don't forget the battle of Eragore.” The man further tried to cheer him up.

“Yeah, you're right... that fight lasted a whole 5 seconds... days... and He almost remembered me that time. You know what, you're right, I'm amazing. Everyone, listen up! I'm not giving up, we will go all out and attack them one last time!” He shouted, all of them seemingly caught up in it somehow as they cried out. “Yeah!” “This time, we will come up with a brilliant plan. The only reason they haven't lost yet is because I was holding back my brilliant mind, of course.” He explained all of them, nodding, thinking that made sense. “So we will break through their walls!” He said as they again shouted, “Yeah!” “Defeat Orion and His girlfriend once and for all.” He declared. “Yeah!” They

all said again. “And break Captain Dawnstaarr out of prison.” A random Pirate said The Rival caught up in it shouts “Yeah! Wait, what?” But it was too late, the whole crew roared with excitement. “If the Captain and the other Captain join forces, we will be unstoppable!”

The Rival blinked and was suddenly in another world just outside a massive prison as the first mate handed him binoculars. “So what's the plan, Captain?” He asked as all of them listened, eager to hear it. “I um...” He floundered very much over his head. “Who runs this prison again?” He said, changing the subject. “I believe the Mecha Forces handed Dawnstaarr off to The Union, sir.” One of them answered. “Right, The Union. Once my sworn enemy in my Empire days, now split and fractured, a shell of their former self. In fact, I feel a bit bad kicking them when they have fallen so far. Maybe we should reconsider.” He said nervously.

“Wow... Captain, we never knew you were so empathetic to your foes before you slaughter them.” One of the men said with tears in his eyes, seeming to be moved. “Of course I am... not everyone can be as great as I am.” He laugh. “Oh, I know, I think this finger has a little juice in it.” He said, lifting his finger showing the tattoo left from the middle finger's power. He pulled on it like he was wringing out a towel before raising his hand up, trying to emulate the people who used the power far more effectively than him at the prison. Just like that, a fleet of Union ships painted with red sprites appeared, starting to fire on the prison below, shocking them all. “The Captain summoned an army!” One of them said in wonder.

“Incredible... wait, how come he never did that before?” Another one questioned. “I um... we never needed them...” he said nervously. “Forget the small stuff, we need to use their distraction to get inside.” He urged, motioning for them to follow him. “Wait.” One of the bigger more scarier Pirates said, grabbing his shoulder. He swallowed hard, looking up at him. “If we are gonna have two captains, and Dawnstaarr already has a name, what do we call you, Captain?”

He sighs in relief, calming down. “Well, you see my name is...” he started to say as the countless loud explosions from the battle ahead blocked the sound. “...But everyone just calls me

Rival.” He said like nothing happened. “Yeah, Captain Rival!” They all shout, charging forward with no direction. “Wait, stop!” The Rival said in a panic, but they are already charging forward. A union grunt notices the charge while dispatching the prison guard. The Uniform is exactly the same, the only difference being the red stripes, just like the ships. “Um, sir... it looks like Pirates are attacking the base,” he says on coms. “What? Ugh, who cares? We are here for one reason, and one reason only. Extract the Council members before the Union can stop you. “If they get in the way?” He asked. “Deal with them otherwise, leave them be.” The man on coms orders. “Roger!”

A canon strike hits the side of the prison, conveniently giving the Pirates the perfect opening to get inside. They enter to complete Chaos, the two Union factions fighting each other ruthlessly, the Pirates attacking them both indiscriminately. “What are you doing, let them fight each other...” The Rival said even though it was too late. He leaned against a wall, accidentally pushing a button that opened all the cells on the block. All of the prisoners rushed out of their cells, showing their gratitude by further adding to the chaos.

The first mate and a few of the other crew members are hacking into the computers, actually taking the mission seriously. “We found out where she is being held. She is in segregation cell b-55 looks like this prison is bigger than it looks.” The First mate says as the smarter members of the crew file in, avoiding direct combat. “Yes, all according to plan.” The Rival said smugly, seeing a fresh-brewed cup of coffee on the table untouched as he sips it. He doesn't seem to enjoy the taste but swallows anyway, pretending he did.

He leads them down toward the lower levels. Conflict is still ripe, but quieter; most of it hasn't reached the lower levels. A guard sees them immediately, raising a gun. “Get on the ground!” He demands only for The Rival to stride forward confidently. He pulls out a multi-tool, forming it into a gun and firing, only to completely miss the mark, and yet it seems to ricochet and hit him in the back of the head. “I meant to do that...” he claims as they all look amazed.

They kept moving the Crew, releasing all the inmates on each floor, like they had seen him do

weirdly some of them chose to join them instead of fleeing. “I’ve heard of this guy... To think he masterfully manipulated the Union into open conflict like this.” One of the Inmates whispered in awe. He grinned, feeling better than he had in a long time. With each new floor more chose the join him. Further growing his ego, his disillusionment, and pride all in one consistent motion. By the time they reached the bottom, he was practically a new person, brimming with impossible confidence.

“It's just up ahead, boss, but those Redstripes are already down there,” the first mate said with worry. “Nothing we can't handle,” The Rival said with a laugh, strutting deeper into the level. With every step, his boots echoed louder not from impact, but from the sheer weight of self-delusion. They arrived just in time to see the Redstripe commander unlocking a cell. Inside was an older man, prim and bitter. “About time someone did something about that General’s tyranny,” the man sneered. “They had me locked up next to some ghastly pirate captain. She said she’d tear out my throat!” He stepped out indignantly, then saw The Rival approaching. His bravado evaporated instantly as he turned and bolted down the corridor.

“Protect me, you stupid meatheads!” he cried. The Redstripe commander turned to face them. “You're the pirates my men mentioned. What are you doing here?” The Rival grinned and struck a pose. “Well, you see, I manipulated this entire event. Everything is going exactly as I perceived. You're welcome.” The officer blinked. “Pft. Yeah, right. We’ve been planning this operation for months...” He paused. “Wait. There was that one leak…” His voice trailed off as he stared in dawning horror. “You? You leaked the location?”

The Rival nodded solemnly, lying through his teeth. His crew stared at him in awe. “Well, I’ll be damned,” the officer muttered. “Still... I’m leaving with the Council member.” “Go right ahead,” The Rival said coolly, walking past him like he wasn’t even worth the effort. “We came here for our own reasons.” The officer hesitated, glancing back at him. “I’m going to have to tell my superiors about this guy...” he muttered.

They finally reached the cell where Captain Dawnstaarr was being held. She was lounging

lazily on the bench, flipping through a tattered magazine, completely unfazed by the chaos echoing through the prison walls. “Captain Dawnstaarr! We’ve come to rescue you!” one of her old crewmates shouted, practically bouncing with excitement. She leaned her head back over the bench to look at them upside down. “Heh... wait. You’re responsible for this mess?” she asked, a slow grin creeping across her face.

She tossed the magazine aside and sat up, stretching. Her eyes met The Rival’s, unimpressed, unfooled. “Thanks, guys. You shouldn't have… no, really, you shouldn’t have, you idiots.” She said, laughing her head off. The crew looked at each other in confusion. “I was gonna be out in two weeks,” she said, making exaggerated air quotes. “Good behavior.” The Rival’s eyes went wide. “You’ve gotta be... of course I knew that,” he blurted, scrambling to save face. “But my men... I couldn’t bear to see them so distraught over the capture of their former leader. I had to... um... liberate you. For morale.” He fumbled. “Even if I am better than you.” He muttered under his breath. She raised an eyebrow, lips twitching. “Uh-huh. Well, whatever. Let’s blow this joint. I’m sick of prison food anyway.”

Just then, the first mate got the cell door open. She stepped out, clapping him on the shoulder with exaggerated formality. “A real hero,” she said mockingly, but the crew misread it completely, beaming with pride. They encountered no resistance on the way back up. By the time they reached the surface, the red-stripe ships were already retreating, their mission complete. Far off in the distance, Vance watched, a knowing smirk on his face. If anyone had truly orchestrated this entire disaster, it was him. But as The Rival soaked up the praise and cheers of his crew, Vance simply faded into the shadows. Let them think what they want.

Any remaining Union presence had vanished. The pirates seized whatever working ships they could and took off, landing hours later on a barren crater in the middle of nowhere. The Rival struck a dramatic pose on a rock, the wind catching his coat. Dawnstaarr stared at him awkwardly. “Right… thanks for saving me and all, but… me and the guys are gonna head out now,” she said, casually waving over her shoulder as she walked toward one of the ships. Almost all the men he had just

recruited followed her without hesitation. “Wait, what? But… I’m The Rival...” he stammered, blinking in disbelief, his voice cracking on the name.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, scratching her head. “But, like… I don’t know. It’s not you, it’s me, or… whatever.” She boarded the ship with the crew, the ramp sealing shut behind her as the engines roared to life. He watched them lift off. “But… they loved me...” he whispered, the wind blowing dust across the crater as his newfound confidence vanished as fast as it came. He slunk down, defeated, feeling lower than ever had been. “I'm sorry, Captain... I know we aren't much, but we are still here. We will follow you to the ends of the earth!” The First mate declares. He looked up in shock. A small group had stayed behind , loyal not to Dawnstaarr, but to him.

“You guys... You really mean it?” he asked, tears welling in his eyes. They all nodded, grinning with genuine warmth. He broke down sobbing and pulled them all into a group hug. “I love you so much… you’re the best… let’s go home...” he said through the tears. “You got it, Captain! I’m sure if we keep at it, we’ll beat Orion in no time!” one of them added with pure conviction. The group walked away, heads held high, feeling like they had truly grown. In reality? Nothing had changed at all. Or… maybe everything had. They just didn’t know it yet.

The next day, The Rival and his crew sat in front of the TV, eating cereal as they watched the news. “Tensions are high on Union worlds. A prison break, believed to be one of the first skirmishes in an impending civil war, shocked everyone, All parties deny any involvement instead blaming it on pirates.” Aion reported. “Oh crap, they’re talking about you, boss!” one of the pirates said. “Captain Dawnstaarr and his crew,” Aion continued. “While details are sparse, recovered footage does show a pirate-led breakout... though the leader’s face was obscured by debris.” The screen displayed a shaky video of The Rival strutting proudly, only to have a massive slab of concrete block his head from view. The Rival stared, frozen, then launched his bowl skyward in rage. “What the hell?! That was my glory!!”

Chapter 31: Emergency Protocol

Mainframe sits alone in a dark room, seemingly powered down, until her rainbow eyes suddenly flash to life. Alarms begin to blare. She stands swiftly, holographic screens flickering into existence around her as she begins rapid scans. “Emergency,” she says into comms, her voice sharp and mechanical. “Multiversal anomaly detected. Array type: Threat Level C. Chance of Omnihack discovery: low. All units, drop current operations and reroute to world coordinates 143950934.2. Immediate deployment required.” She tapped on the holograms, seeming to direct everything with lightning speed.

Akane is the first to respond. Mid-fight with a squad of insurgents, she slams one into the

ground, only to receive the call. Without hesitation, she bolts off, vanishing in a blur of motion, leaving the half-conscious man groaning in the dirt. Two of his teammates blink at each other, dumbfounded. "…Yeah, that's right," one of them mutters, confused. "And don't come back?"

Backstage, Elliot applies makeup under glowing lights when his tablet buzzes. He scans the alert, sighs dramatically, and calls out: "Manager!" A nervous, bookish man rushes in. "What is it, Eli? You're live in ten minutes!" "Yeah, about that…" Elliot waves the alert. "I hate to disappoint my fans, but something urgent just came up." "WHAT?!" The manager's eyes widen. "You can't cancel! Do you know how long your fans have been waiting?!" Elliot puffs his cheeks in frustration. "…You're right. I don't want to let them down…" He leans in, lashes fluttering. "Alright, I'll make it quick. Stall for me, okay?" He ends with a cheeky wink.

The manager blushes, flustered. "How am I supposed to stall?! They're not here for me!" "If you do…" Elliot sings sweetly, drawing out the words, "I'll give you a reward… anything you want." He blows him a kiss. The manager's glasses crack in half as his whole body tenses like a soldier receiving orders. "Yes, sir!" he salutes and sprints off. Elliot struts confidently out of the dressing room, humming to himself.

Eight sat at his desk, fingers dancing over the keyboard, consumed by work. Every so often, he glanced to the side, where Payload stood, looming silently. Whenever Eight did something Payload deemed out of line, the hulking man didn't speak. He'd just grip Eight's shoulder and shake his head, slow and disapproving. No words. Just pure judgment. It was getting on Eight's last nerve. This time, as Eight clicked over to confirm his lunch order, he felt the familiar weight on his shoulder again.

He glared. "Okay, how the hell is me ordering the Monte Crisco for lunch interfering with your great mission? I'm not even going to eat it." He paused, then whispered in growing frustration, "Because I'm a fucking robot." Payload, as always, didn't reply. He just stared, unblinking, into Eight's mechanical soul. "Ugh. Fine. I'll get the caviar." Eight grumbled, surrendering.

With that, Payload finally moved, bolting out of the office without so much as a word or any

clue where he was even going. “Wait, you’re just leaving after watching me like a hawk all day?” Eight called after him. No answer. After a long beat, he leaned back in his chair and sighed in relief. “Oh gods… he’s actually gone.” But then, his eyes slowly widened with realization. “…He’s actually gone,” he repeated, leaning forward with a growing smirk as he returned to his terminal. Back to business.

Vance had nearly caught up to Noir, still chasing her through the darkened streets. The alarm hit just as she slipped through his fingers… or perhaps because of it. “Damn it,” he muttered, exasperated. “Just when I finally get a free moment too.” He sighed dramatically, the picture of theatrical arrogance. “Sadly… I’m far too useful.” With that, he melted into the shadows, already answering the call. Seemingly failing to notice the tracker she placed on his pant leg.

Rebbecca sighed, entering the Lion club. It was unusually quiet. Most of the staff were on the party side, trying to get something to work. She walked up the stairs to Loki's office. She took a deep breath, putting on her playful mask as she entered. He had his feet propped up on the desk, waiting for her. “Great, you're finally here! It's terrible, truly terrible!” He said, jumping up, practically stepping over the desk and meeting her eyes, showing her the problem. “So you put in the messages.... the priority channel... the HOME is going to explode if this problem isn't solved.” She said laughed with amusement, already knowing it wasn't that important.

“And like my knight in shining pink armor, you have come!” Loki said dramatically. “Only because it was on the way to an actually important problem and I needed a breather. What do you need? Something to do with downstairs?” She asked. “My, my, nothing gets passed the greatest hacker in the Multiverse.” He said, buttering her up as he sat on his desk, turning the laptop around. “I um... Forgot my password...” he said meekly, avoiding eye contact.

Rebbecca laughed at the absurdity. “Your emergency was that you forgot your login?” “It locked me out after five failed attempts. I was emotionally compromised.” He said with fake tears. “What were you trying?” She asked, unconvinced that Loki was that stupid despite the way he acts sometimes. “Password1. Then Password2. Then... listen, can you just hack it already? I actually do

need access to run the club... There's the downstairs systems like you guessed... payroll... shipping manifest... etc...” He pleaded.

“Child’s play,” Rebbecca said, pulling a cord from her arm and plugging it into the port. The screen lit up as her systems began cycling through every possible combination at super speed. Loki paced leisurely behind her, hands folded behind his back. “Say… what is this thing I keep hearing about? Something about a ‘Future Foe’?” Her eyes widened. She didn’t turn to face him, didn’t even twitch, but her fingers briefly slowed. “Where did you hear that name?” she asked, her voice flatter than usual. “No one should know that name.”

He hummed, still pacing. “Oh, you know... here and there,” he said, maddeningly vague. Her mind raced. Had she been compromised? Slowly, silently, she extended another cord,the tip shifting into a blade, keeping it just out of his line of sight. “Another version of Clyde and Raleigh told us to be wary of it,” Loki added, almost casually. “A couple of years back. You should’ve seen them… well, I suppose I didn’t see them either, but girl Clyde was hot. You would've been all over her,” he teased. Rebbecca narrowed her eyes, then relaxed. She retracted the blade. So the others knew? That wasn’t good. But at least it wasn’t a leak from Omnihack, at least that's what she told herself.. She hated this feeling, not knowing.

Her arm lit up. Mainframe’s alert pinged through her neural system. “Aren’t you going to get that?” Loki asked. She finished hacking his terminal and sent the reset. Inside her mind, the mission brief loaded. Loki wouldn't be able to snoop. “All done. I reset your password to 'IdiotLion34.' Gotta go!” Then, with a flicker of seriousness. “Never heard that name before. But... maybe you should drop it. It's probably nothing.” She left before he could respond. Loki watched the door close behind her, smiling faintly to himself, a rare glimmer of sadness in his eyes.

A new world. The Boss stood atop a tower-like platform, staring over the ledge into the decaying landscape below. “Status,” he said flatly over comms. “Cipher Units have been wiped out,” Mainframe replied. “Minimal impact. Colored members should arrive within minutes.” “Recall all

Untouched Ciphers. Their presence is pointless." Below, several figures in gray jackets, all bearing mechanical arms like their colored counterparts, ran for their lives as massive creatures chased them.

The monsters were abominations: faceless, hulking masses of fused bodies, shrieking with dozens of mouths but no true identity. Some of the Ciphers managed to reach safety, disappearing through portals they opened. Others, too slow or too close, watched in horror as their escape routes were disabled… and were promptly absorbed into the living mass. "Firewall," the Boss said on comms. "I've hacked most of the adjacent worlds and set up the barrier, but one's giving me trouble. Too many immutable laws," Akane responded. "You have five minutes." "Got it." She didn't hesitate.

Moments later, Rebbecca appeared next to him, gazing toward a distant city. A grotesque mound of flesh towered over the skyline, growing larger by the second as people fled in every direction. Her eyes flickered as she analyzed it. "This one's going to be a pain… It's close to the Source. Might even have the Code." "All units, shift world frequency to random channels. Now," the Boss ordered. Rebbecca flipped a hidden switch on her arm. Her form distorted for a split second, phasing in and out of reality like a glitched transmission.

A moment later, Vance stepped through a collapsing portal behind them, brushing dust from his shoulders. "I feel it… There's another mass, east side of the ridge," he reported coolly. The Boss didn't hesitate. "Payload, unload. Decoy, draw everything in." A distant explosion cracked through the skyline like thunder. Entire buildings tilted, then crumbled as Payload went to work somewhere unseen, a storm of destruction answering Vance's lead. "You got it, boss!" chirped a new voice. Elliot Vale, dressed like an idol and balanced effortlessly atop a sleek, floating surfboard-like platform, soared into view. He struck a pose midair, arms outstretched as the platform dipped between the monsters.

"Hello, everyone!" he beamed, voice amplified across the ruined world. "Are you ready… for the performance of your lives?" A beat dropped. Music blared from hidden speakers across the board. Lights burst from the edges. With each pulse, Elliot began to move, slow, graceful gestures that escalated into sharp, synchronized steps. As he reached the chorus, he belted out a verse with unnatural

charisma, voice glittering with processed charm. Every monster turned. The pulsing mass paused. The fleshy horrors twisted mid-rampage and sprinted toward him, abandoning their scattered prey like puppets on a new string.

“Alright, let's get to work.” The Boss said, cracking his mechanical knuckles. “Backdoor. Clear the path.” He said Just as Vincent crashes down in front of him from the sky. He smirked, jumping off the side without a second thought, straight into the heart of the monsters with a blue blur. Flashes of lights as whole waves of them, fly into the air or are completely vaporized by his photons. The Boss puts his hands in his pockets, jumping down much more casually as Rebbecca, and Vance follow. Once they hit the ground, he walks slowly toward the center down the path laid out as Vance and Rebbecca charge ahead. All of them step in time with the beat. A few normal humans rush past them to safety. The Boss doesn't even acknowledge them.

A few monsters get past them, reaching his zone and attempting to attack him. Only to be obliterated without him so much as looking their direction. Vance literally flies on the wind using the code to trap the monsters on the ground. He swipes his hand, clustering them all together until they are condensed into a small ball. “Since you like to be conjoined.” He laughed. Rebbecca cringed, moving away from him, deploying all her drones as they fired into the never-ending mass already trying to fill the gap Vincent had forged. She uses her cords like whips with a hard kick at the end that seems to shock them until they don't move anymore.

“I’ve finished sealing them. Beginning containment.” Akane dropped in from above, landing hard as red lines etched themselves across the sky, barriers locking into place, gradually closing in from all sides. She landed not far from Vincent, who was mid-spin, photons tearing through the monsters surrounding him. Her arrival caused a shock wave, blasting everything nearby into the air or dust. Vincent clicked his tongue. “I had that.” “Shut up, this isn’t a game... the whole multiverse could...” “You’re just mad I’m killing more of these things than you.” That did it. “You’re on, asshole.” The two launched into the horde like it insulted their honor, an unspoken competition turning the battlefield into

a blur of red and blue.

The ground beneath them pulsed, slow and sick, like a heartbeat beneath diseased skin. They were nearing the core. Everyone was in position now, save for Payload and Decoy, still carving their chaotic paths elsewhere. “The Code is right under it,” Rebbecca said, eyes narrowing with concern. “If it fully utilizes that power, there is a 23% probability it will breach the Firewall,” Mainframe added. Even with Akane’s containment working perfectly, the risk was rising. Vance raised his hand. The ground answered. Spikes of rock erupted upward, piercing through the writhing wall of flesh. Then, with another gesture, he carved a tunnel beneath the abomination, a path straight toward its heart.

“Trojan. Take point.” The Boss’s voice was calm as ever. Rebbecca nodded and leapt into the passage, her body flickering once more into half-glitches. The Boss followed with his hands in his pockets, unfazed by the flesh brushing the walls. Vance entered last, sealing the path behind them with a cascade of stone. Above ground, the others held the line. Akane’s Firewall constricted further, red lines carving through the city like divine borders. Nothing got through. Nothing would leave.

They descended deeper into the trembling earth, the sound of battle above echoing like distant thunder. The passage led into a cavernous chamber, open, but suffocating. The walls pulsed as if alive, twitching with veins of writhing flesh. From somewhere in the dark, a voice rasped: “Kill me… please… it’s unbearable…” Small monsters lunged from the edges, swarming like antibodies. Vance moved fast, dispatching them with brutal efficiency. In the center of it all, a massive heart beat slowly, crudely assembled from mismatched limbs, torsos, and bone. Embedded in its core, barely recognizable as human, was a man.

“This isn’t what I… what I wanted…” the man groaned, his voice raw and broken. The Boss stopped, eyes narrowing. Vance kept the monsters at bay while Rebbecca knelt, scanning the corrupted floor until her fingers tapped something solid. She brushed the gore away, beneath it, a glowing crystal throbbed, being slowly consumed by the veins of the heart like an artery force-fed into the beast. “The Code is in this,” she said. “But it’s not using it… It’s trying to absorb it. Like a parasite.” The Boss

stepped forward, crouching beside the man's ruined form. He lifted the man's chin gently, the only part of him still intact, still him.

"And what, pray tell," the Boss asked quietly, "was it that you wanted?" "I… I wanted to make the world a better place…" the man choked out, trembling with every word. "No," the Boss said, his voice sharper now, colder. "You didn't want anything so grand." He stood, dusting his coat off with a flick. "I know how this world was before. You had comfort. Stability. Power. You wanted for nothing… and yet it wasn't enough. It never is. That hunger, your hunger, destroyed everything." A beat of silence. The heart convulsed, desperate to cling to the Code crystal. "This wasn't an act of kindness," the Boss finished. "It was gluttony." His usual calm, yet with a hint of silent anger, almost like the man had hit a nerve.

"It's done," Rebbecca said, ripping the Crystal. "Well done, end the threat." Instantly, the monsters evaporated into ash, leaving behind normal people, freed victims, blinking in shock, looking to the skies in disbelief. Elliot sat on the edge of his floating platform, the music finally silent, his expression solemn. Payload stood motionless amidst the wreckage. Vincent and Akane had collapsed, backs pressed together, catching their breath. "Three twenty-four," Akane murmured, deadpan. "Damn it… Two eighty-three," Vincent groaned, too exhausted to argue.

Near the center of the impact zone, a few survivors stumbled toward Rebbecca and the others, eyes wide with awe. "You… you saved us. That was incredible. Thank you. Thank you so much!" one of them cried. "Who are you? I have to tell everyone, you're heroes." Rebbecca gave an awkward laugh, glancing toward the Boss with fear not for herself but for them. "Oh, we're not anyone special," she said with a shrug. "All in a day's work," Vance added, voice laced with mock sincerity. "We do it not for praise… but because we care." "You're amazing! Thank you,all of you!" the man said, trembling with gratitude.

He turned to the Boss… only to find the leader watching him closely. "You were blameless," the Boss said at last. His voice had returned to its usual calm, but something lingered underneath, faint

regret, maybe. Or something far colder. “I’m sorry things ended this way for you.” A pause. “Now go. Live.” The survivor blinked, stunned. Then nodded and ran, eager to tell the others. Behind him, the team stood in silence, watching the world begin to wake.

They left the world behind, the Firewall still pulsing around it, a final barrier between reality and oblivion. Now standing just outside in the space between worlds, they gazed down in silence. The people below, unaware of their fate, began to rebuild what little remained. “Finish it,” the Boss said. Rebbecca hesitated. “But… why? The threat’s neutralized,” she said, almost pleading. “You said it yourself...” “You know why,” he cut in, his tone flat. He turned to her. “There’s always a chance it could re-surge. And now they know of us. Our mission cannot be compromised.” She looked down, fists clenched. “Then why tell them that...” She asked. “A final comfort,” he explained.

She didn’t argue. Instead, she reached into her jacket and handed over the Code crystal. Her hand trembled slightly. She couldn’t bring herself to do it. The Boss didn’t hesitate. He took the crystal and crushed it in his mechanical palm. In an instant, the world vanished, snuffed out like it had never existed. One tear rolled down Rebbecca’s cheek, glinting in the void. The others said nothing. One by one, they turned and disappeared into the shadows, indifferent. Only Akane lingered, glancing back with something that resembled regret.

She sat down, legs folding beneath her as she tried to keep her breathing steady. The Boss stood beside her in silence. “If it weren’t for men like him,” he said at last, “Omnihack wouldn’t exist. The Foe wouldn’t exist. We do this because we must.” He turned away. His words almost sounded like he would prefer it that way. “Sentimentality,” he said as he walked, “was never a luxury we could afford.” The closest he could get to consoling her as he walked away.

Chapter 32: Duality

A grand event had begun. Eight now again under the guise of Aurelius stands on a platform surrounded by many news agencies, of course, Aion was among them, though only Crow seems to have joined him this time. “Hello everyone, thank you all for coming to Helix Corps' most ambitious project yet. Part of our bigger linking the multiverse directive.” He says as he opens his arms, motioning them all to look at the massive marvel of machinery in the sky. It was what looked to me like a train station of sorts with two giant spacecraft inside, each facing a different direction. Instead of tracks, there were tubes fully encasing the ships inside. Above a massive pipe pulsing with an unknown energy.

Elsewhere, Noir prepared herself. Watching a screen to see the tracker she placed on Vance was

still activated; he must not have seen it. She steeled herself, ready to take the fight to him and put it all behind her. With a final breath, she opened a portal to his location, jumping through with weapons already drawn, ready to strike right away, but when she reached the other side, she saw no sign of him, only a large man in an orange jumpsuit looking down from within the station at Eights' demonstration. It was The Payload. She took one step back in confusion as he turned his attention to her.

On HOME, Clyde and Raleigh get ready for the day. Raleigh watches the news less out of interest and more out of a distraction while she waits for Clyde to finish making breakfast. He had taken charge of the kitchen, and she had grown to look forward to every meal. He steps into the living room, arms full of plates and trays, setting them all up as she drools. He sits down next to her as she digs in, taking only one plate for himself, his attention drawn to the screen. “That guy again, huh?” He said as he watched.

“This is the Multi-Loop! With the power of our technology, we have linked one end of the Multiverse to another. In the past, a trip like this would take months, even on the fastest ships, and with a skilled navigator who knew the right way. Now that time has been cut to weeks, and in luxury and Safety. You won't see raids on this baby.” Eight said dramatically on the TV, clearly proud of what he's done. Raleigh snorts, only half paying attention. “Weeks? What a joke, I can do that in seconds. They have to make a big thing like that to get even close to my level.” She said Bragging.

Aion steps up, asking the first question. “You claim safety, but even worlds like Porta Nexus have already rejected being linked to the projects out of security concerns. What are your plans regarding this and the future?” He asked. “Well, actually, Porta Nexus has come around on it, although outside the planet. We plan to have stations at key points in the Multiverse. Next will be Concordia, and so on. As for safety, I assure you we have the best in the...” A thunderous boom cut him off. The entire broadcast shook as the station overhead erupted into flame. Cameras tilted skyward, capturing the impossible: a chain of explosions racing along the Multi-Loop’s hull, each brighter than the last.

Aion’s voice trembled, fighting to stay professional. “It appears... uh... there’s been some kind

of... Seconds after Helix Corps assured safety, an attack? We will bring you more information soon." Aion declares. Noir emerges free-falling in an unconscious state. Payload is about to pursue only to see all the cameras, choosing the fallback instead as they fall. "Wait, is that?" Raleigh said, standing up, getting closer to the screen, seeing just glimpses in the distance of her dark hair. Just as Eight grabs the camera in a panic. "Cut the feed!" He demands as the camera stops and is replaced with a please stand by message. Noir continued to fall, everyone too distracted to notice except Crow, who swoops in, flying away with her before anyone can see.

Raleigh Turns to Clyde. "Do you think it's?" She asked as he was still sitting calmly. "I couldn't really tell, honestly, but assuming it was. Why would she do that? It seems like she had kept to herself the past year." He said in speculation. "Maybe she's been waiting for the right moment. Though at least we get to see that smug asshole get what's coming to him at least a little." She said, rubbing her chin. "Would you blow up something like that?" He asked, seeing as how Noir has changed, she still has the Raleigh DNA on some level. "I um... good point. Well, it's not like it's really our problem." She said, shrugging, already ready to let it go with no clear proof.

Just then, the screen flashes with the words incoming call. "Well, speak of the devil. Well, should we answer?" Clyde said, seeing it's Aurelius himself trying to call. "Why would we screw that guy? Just hang up, and let's go already. It's not like we are involved, and we have plenty of work to do in town." Raleigh said not looking forward to it. Clyde nods, ready to do just that, only to stop hovering over the controls. "Let's put him on hold." He said with a smirk. Raleigh returned the smirk, trying not to laugh. "That's even better." She said as they do just that, going about their day.

Once they reach a crossroads, they part ways. Raleigh kisses him on the cheek as she runs off to do patrols and help anyone out who needs it. The day unfolded slowly, with stacks of forms, petitions, progress charts, and civic updates. Tedious work, sure, but honest. As he sorted through data logs and reports, Clyde couldn't help remembering his old job back home. The endless meetings. The hollow deadlines. The smiling managers who cared more about looking busy than doing anything real. Back

then, everything he did felt meaningless. Here… every signature mattered. Every form helped someone. It wasn't glamorous, but it was real.

He chuckled quietly, thinking of Eight's grand "Multi-Loop" announcement that morning. The man had built an empire of steel and spectacle, machines that looked like progress but weren't built to understand it. They linked worlds for show. Raleigh bridged them by heart. Helix Corp wanted productivity that could be measured. HOME was a purpose that could be felt. And that, Clyde thought as he signed another form, was the difference that made all the difference.

His office screen flashed again with another Incoming call from Helix. He sighs, putting him on hold once more, but after a few minutes, he looks at his empty desk, realizing he was already done. "Huh... guess that's what happens when you're actually trying to fix things." He said to himself with amusement. He looks over at the screen, shrugging, finally deciding to answer.

Helix looked drained, gripping tightly around his face. "Haha, very funny. You got your revenge... Now give me answers." He said monotone, not even a hint of bravado. "Answers for what? We already told you we aren't changing our deal even after another 30 days." Clyde asked. "You know what I mean! I agreed to everything you wanted, and then you went and destroyed one of my biggest works. You may be a sovereign nation, but I have pull in all sorts of places." Eight said in tired anger, but with a hint of something else, like he already knew they didn't have involvement.

Clyde leaned back, studying him. The man looked smaller than the image he tried to project. "Your Multi-Loop thing? Yeah, we saw that on the news. Condolences. But we didn't have anything to do with it." Eight scowled, eyes darting aside. "Then what's this?" He flicked his screen, sending data across the connection. A holographic display bloomed above Clyde's desk, energy readings, movement traces, and at the center, a biometric match. "Bio-signatures confirm at ninety-nine percent," Eight said quietly. "A certain Captain."

Clyde's eyes widened. "So it was her…" He sat forward, lowering his voice. "Listen, you're a smart guy. You do know about the clone, right?" Eight blinked. "The what?" Clyde froze, the

realization dawning that the world might not know as much as he thought. Of course. Aion had covered the Aspects War, but not everything. Not her. The line went silent, the weight of the truth hanging between them, one man seeking control of the multiverse, the other quietly understanding how fragile that control really was.

His eye flickered slightly at the word clone that got to him in a way Clyde wouldn't know. Before he can speak, someone enters the room, catching Eight's attention. He looks nervous but tries not to show it. "You... you really expect me to believe it was some evil clone of your girlfriend... Alright, let's... say I go along with that farce. Even the most perfected of clones have variations. Bring your girl in. We will scan her bio-signatures if they are... you're off the hook. If not well... you better believe you're in for worlds of hurt." He said with anger, but his eyes said something different, almost pleading for them to come and help him. He ends the call without another word.

Clyde groans, confused by that whole conversation, but knowing it's not something he can just ignore now. Something about it was just off. Eight's pleading eyes, what he wanted them to do. He looked at the Clock just past noon. It was time for him to meet up with Raleigh for Lunch anyway, so he thought it best to consult her before they moved on to anything. He made his way to Don Buri, where she was already eating. He sat down, annoyed. "Well, I just had an interesting conversation." He sighs as she looks up, raising an eyebrow.

By the time he finished explaining, Raleigh's expression had gone from confusion to fury. "How could she? I thought we were past this." She slammed her chopsticks down. "I was fine leaving her alone. She gave us back the Hopper, disappeared quietly, and now this?" Clyde stirred his noodles, thinking. "That's the thing. I'm not convinced she's the problem. Helix is trying to draw us out. The way he talked… he sounded scared. Not of us, not of her. Something else." Raleigh leaned back, crossing her arms. "So what? Some manipulative corporate stunt?" "Maybe," Clyde said, eyes distant. "He didn't even sound angry about losing the Multi-Loop. He just kept coming back to the scan. Like he wanted us to move."

Raleigh groaned. “Ugh. Typical. You’re probably right, but I can’t let her go around defaming me. One more broadcast like that and I’ll have to start putting disclaimers on my own reputation.” Clyde smiled faintly. “Then what do you want to do?” She tapped her fingers on the table, thinking hard. “Forget his little ‘come in for a scan’ trick. We’ll find her ourselves.” “How? It’s been a year.” Raleigh smirked. “The lion. It’s literally his only useful quality.” Clyde sighed, already imagining the headache to come. “So much for a quiet week.”

Loki lounged behind the Lion’s bar, humming a jaunty tune while polishing a glass he’d never serve anyone with. Across the floor, his father Dave lumbered by, suitcases in hand. “My, my,” Loki said with a smirk, “and here I thought you’d never leave. Already found a boyfriend, have you?” Dave froze mid-step, glaring over his shoulder. “What... the hell? Don’t compare me to your depravity. Jeff is just… a roommate, you hear? A roommate!”

Loki’s grin only widened. “Sure, sure. I’ll see you next week, after you drink the place dry.” He waved lazily, eyes half-lidded. Dave spat on the ground, turning up his nose. “Pound sand.” “Love you too, Dad,” Loki sang as the door slammed behind him. Just then, Clyde and Raleigh entered. Dave brushed past them on his way out, muttering curses under his breath. Clyde blinked. “You let him stay here?” “Let him?” Loki said, straightening with exaggerated grace. “I endured him. But now he’s gone! Oh, happy day. A true victory for peace and sanity.”

Raleigh crossed her arms. “Pot, meet kettle.” Loki ignored her, “Now then, it’s not often you two come to me willingly. What cosmic disaster brings you to my humble den today? How can I help my dearest friends?” Clyde glanced at Raleigh before answering. “You watched the news this morning, right? That mess with Helix Corp? We need help finding Noir.” The air shifted. Loki stopped polishing. The smile drained from his face. When he finally looked up, his tone had lost all its usual sing-song warmth. “I refuse,” he said flatly. The silence that followed was heavier than any punchline.

Both of them froze. Loki almost never refused a request, and never so flatly. “What? Why?” Raleigh asked, confused and almost offended. “I may not have been there,” Loki said softly, “but I

know how close your last encounter with her came. I won't send you to die." He set the glass down, his tone sharpening. "And what of the poor lady herself? She's a beautiful maiden, lost and wounded. Doesn't she deserve to live her own life, free of your shadow?" Raleigh frowned, taken aback. "That's different… They had all the Aspects then. We're not trying to kill her, just figure out what's going on."

Loki sighed and turned away, tail flicking behind him as his voice lowered. "In the past, yes. I agreed to help you. But things have changed. You're not running for your lives anymore. You're building something. You're happy. Are you not?" "Of course we are, but..." Raleigh started, only for him to cut her off again. "Then live. And let live." He leaned on the bar, staring at his own reflection in a bottle. "You've both earned your peace. You're worried about your reputation, about how she'll 'tarnish' it. Take it from a celebrity of considerable renown…" He glanced back with a faint, self-satisfied grin. "There will always be detractors. Let them bark. You? You keep living."

"Loki…" Raleigh's voice softened, but she couldn't meet his eyes. He turned suddenly, his expression twisting into an exaggerated pout. "And besides! You two only ever visit when you need something. Users, both of you. Are we even real friends?" His lip quivered dramatically. Clyde sighed. "So that's what this is really about…" "Not entirely!" Loki shot back, straightening, his usual bravado flickering. "The other thing is still an issue. If you chase her, you'll be stepping into something that doesn't want to be found. And if you die…" His tone faltered for a fraction of a second before he covered it with a smirk. "Well, then I'll need to find new drinking partners, and that sounds dreadful."

Clyde met his eyes evenly. "Then look at it from our side. If we don't find her, HOME might be in danger, and if HOME's in danger, everyone we care about is in danger. Whoever's behind this isn't content letting us live. So we can't, either." Loki sighs. "I see you're not so quick to let this one go... Alright, fine, I'll find her... with conditions," He said. "Conditions?" Clyde asked. "Yes, firstly. You don't have to be enemies... talk first." He said, pointing a finger in the air. "We were already going In with that mindset," Raleigh explained. "And second?" Clyde pushes. "Second... come have a drink with me," Loki said with a smile.

“We already do that... or do you mean right now? We need to get after her before things get heated again.” Clyde insisted. “No, not now, I understand that. I mean... more regularly, at least once a week, you pick the day.” The Lion said. “Well, sure... maybe you're right, we have neglected you a little, but your crazy stunts don't help with that, you know. You think you can handle that, Raleigh?” He asked. She just tilts her head. “Why wouldn't I be?” She asked in confusion. “It doesn't take much to get you drunk.” He sighs. “Pft, whatever you jerk. I'm good at holding out.” She puffs off her cheeks, kicking him in the shins like she used to do quite often. “Alright, wonderful, then it's settled. Give me a moment, and I'll send you her location.” Loki said, clasping his hands together as they nodded.

Noir opened her eyes, confused and dazed, trying to get up, only for pain to shoot all over her body. She looked around the room, seeing that she was in a dark, abandoned building in a random world that didn't seem to have any importance upon looking closer. In the corner sat Crow. Their dark clothes were barely visible in the darkness. “It's you... But why... after everything.” She asked in confusion. In her eyes, her actions, while filled with grief during the aspect war, were justified, but there wasn't much doubt she used the Chimera Legion to further her goals.

Crow didn't answer, just walked closer to her, reaching out a hand to help her up. She took it, rising to her feet still in a bit of pain. She looked down, seeing that her wounds, while mostly superficial, had been tended to. Crow left the room, motioning for her to follow. She did so, following outside to see the world was competently barren with nothing around for miles. They handed her a portal gun with a nod. “What? I don't understand. You should be furious with me? Or at least resent me, but you... saved me?” She asked, taking it from them.

Crow still didn't answer, staring at her from behind the bird mask. “Say something, damn it!” She groans in anger. “Father was... Marcus was not a perfect man.” They say. Her eyes widen at that admission. “But still I...” She argues. “The others will most likely never welcome you again... but you joined our family... I walk a different path now...” They further say. Crow may not talk much, but she thinks she understands now. “Oh Crow, you dumb kid. I don't deserve that. Thanks anyway.” She said,

looking away.

“Well, I'm gonna go now. I have an oversized hacker to take out.” She said, turning away. Crow tenses at the mention, stopping her. “A hacker? Let me help.” They said, surprising her yet again. “No. Too dangerous. You said you found a place, didn't you?” She said Rejecting the help. Crow looks down deep in thought. “Then take this. Both are powerful weapons.” With one more motion, they reach into their pocket, pulling out a set of keys with coordinates written on them, and a contact card for Anderson News Network. “Thanks... be safe, ok kid.” She said, opening a portal, leaving them there.

Chapter 33: Recursive Error

Clyde and Raleigh gear up in their explorer gear, setting off to the world where Noir currently resides. They land in a desert world with nothing around, just the sound of the wind whistling, taking sand from one pile to another. “Did she already move on?” Clyde speculates. This place didn't seem like one where you lingered. He got ready to call Loki and get an update, only for Raleigh to stop putting her hand to the ground. “I can feel something…” she murmured. Her tone sharpened. “Under the surface. Over...” She stood, following an invisible pulse only she could sense, then brushed sand aside until metal gleamed beneath. “Here.”

“I keep forgetting you can do that,” Clyde said with a faint smile. “You don’t use that part of

your powers often." "Come on," she said, already moving. "Before she leaves." They dropped through a half-buried hatch, landing in the dark. A stale metallic scent filled the air as their flashlights flickered on. Below lay a massive underground facility, an Imperial vault stretching into the depths, lined with rows of ancient weaponry and rusted transport rails that once hummed with power.

Some of the machines bore the white and red markings of the Neo-Empire; others were untouched, still clad in the original black armor of the old regime. "A weapons vault?" Clyde asked, the sound of his voice echoing down the corridor. "More than that," Raleigh said, her steps cautious but certain. She stopped at an empty hangar, large enough to house several capital ships. "They must've cleared out the big stuff before the Battle at the Door." Clyde took it in, unease creeping into his tone. "So what, she's here to gear up? If this place was meant to arm a fleet, she might be planning something big."

Raleigh didn't answer immediately. Her eyes traced the scorched ceilings, the tangle of old wiring and broken tools. "I guess her change of heart wasn't so genuine after all," she said softly, half to herself. A beat of silence followed, the kind that only came when you started wondering what your own reflection might do in her place. They pressed deeper into the bunker. Most of the crates and racks held standard Imperial gear, old blasters, armor plating, and comm arrays. Valuable to the right buyer, sure, but nothing extraordinary. Yet the deeper they went, the stranger it became: the halls grew emptier, quieter, as though the place had been picked clean long ago, save for the few sealed doors that still hummed faintly with energy.

They reach the depths. Seeing a command center, all the most valuable of weapons gone as Clyde approached, he noticed there was no dust around where they once set it must have been taken more recently. "She must be close," he began. A shadow fell across them. Noir stood inches away, her eyes cold, a massive hammer raised and ready to strike. Raleigh barely managed to shove them both aside before the weapon slammed down, cracking the metal floor like glass.

"Wait, hold on! Noir, we didn't come to fight!" Clyde shouted, throwing up his hands. Noir

froze, caught off guard by the sound of his voice. “You guys? How did you...” She stopped herself, shaking her head. “Doesn’t matter. I can’t let you get in my way. Stay out of it.” She turned and ran before either could respond, her white jacket disappearing into the shadows. “Wait! Tell us what’s going on, you stupid idiot!” Raleigh yelled after her.

“Tch. Takes one to know one,” Noir called back mockingly, her voice echoing through the metal halls. She slipped into a side corridor, vanishing into a room lined with towering shelves. Clyde and Raleigh slowed, stepping back-to-back as the dark swallowed the sound of their breathing. “Why did you attack the Multi-Loop?” Clyde demanded, his eyes searching the shadows. A flash of movement. Noir dropped from above, sword drawn. She slashed at him, not full force, almost testing him, forcing Clyde to summon his gauntlets in time to block the strike. Sparks burst as metal met energy.

“That’s your first assumption?” Noir taunted, slinking back into the dark. “How romantic, Romeo.” “Then who did it?” Raleigh shouted, her voice ringing through the empty shelves. “And how are you involved?” Noir’s voice came from nowhere and everywhere. “The fact that you even have to ask,” she said, her tone quieter now, almost bitter, “proves you can’t help me.” A single loud crack shattered the silence. Clyde and Raleigh turned toward the sound, sprinting through the darkness until they reached a collapsed wall. Dust still floated in the air. Noir was gone, the tunnel beyond already collapsing behind her.

“Did she get away?” Raleigh asked, scanning the shadows. Clyde stepped toward the next room, peering through the haze of dust. “Not yet…” he murmured. Through the faint light, he caught a glimpse of Noir, frozen in front of one of the shelves, her posture tense. She seemed fixated on something. Before he could call out, she slipped the object into her pocket, hesitated just long enough to look back at them, then bolted down the corridor again.

“Thankfully,” Clyde said quietly, “she still has a bit of you in her.” Raleigh shot him a glare. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she growled. He just smirked. “You can’t outrun yourself forever.” They pressed on, chasing the echo of Noir’s footsteps through the twisting halls until they burst back

into the hangar. Noir stood there waiting, the wind from her forming portal whipping at her coat. “Well,” she said, glancing around at the hollow vault, “I think I’ve gotten everything I could from this place.” Her smirk widened as she looked at them. “Since you actually kept up with me, I’ll give you one hint.”

She lifted two fingers in a mock salute. “What’s my plan? Easy.” Her grin sharpened. “You can’t fight a fortress with a slingshot.” Before either of them could react, she stepped backward into the swirling light, flashing a peace sign as the portal snapped shut behind her. Raleigh groaned, dragging a hand down her face. “What the hell is that even supposed to mean?” Clyde exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing toward the spot where Noir vanished. “Whatever it is,” he said, “I don’t think she’s bluffing.”

Raleigh frowned. “Did she just become some sort of terrorist?” Clyde tapped his earpiece immediately. “Loki, yeah, she slipped past us. Can you tell where she went?” For a moment, silence. Then Loki’s voice came through, unusually hesitant. “Well… that’s… hmm.” “What is it?” Raleigh asked, already hearing the hesitation in his tone. “An old mine, looks like. Why she’d go there I... oh.” His voice shifted, thoughtful. “That makes more sense. I’m sensing Mr. Helix’s presence there as well. She must have access to information we don’t.”

Clyde and Raleigh exchanged a look. “What would she have against Helix?” Clyde muttered. “She wouldn’t have the same grudge we do.” Raleigh’s expression softened, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. “You don’t think… she’s doing this for our sake?” Clyde frowned. “Why would the person who tried to kill you and take your place, not too long ago, suddenly risk her life for us?” Raleigh looked down, her voice quiet. “Maybe I’m wrong, but… she reminded me of how I used to be. Back when I was just trying to crash and burn somewhere. Looking for a place to… end it.”

Clyde didn’t answer. He remembered those days vividly, the reckless runs, the empty laughter, the nights she pretended not to hurt. The thought that Noir might be spiraling down the same path made his stomach tighten. Even if this wasn’t about them, maybe Raleigh wasn’t wrong. What did Noir even

have left to fight for anymore? “I hope you’re wrong,” he said finally, “but let’s not take the chance.” “Agreed.” “Thanks, Loki,” Clyde added, ending the call. They turned and hurried back toward the Hopper, the desert wind sweeping through the open vault behind them. Whatever Noir was chasing, they intended to reach her before she found it, or before it destroyed her first.

Eight stood at the edge of the platform, the endless sprawl of space stretching out around the asteroid mine. He tapped his foot impatiently, metal echoing against metal, while the last of the miners shuffled past him in single file. Every one of them looked confused, glancing at one another as they boarded the transport. “Yeah, yeah, great job, everyone,” Eight said with a tired wave. “You all get a paid vacation for doing so well. Now, hurry up and get out of here.” The workers hesitated only a second before quickening their pace; no one wanted to stick around a site once Helix Corp started clearing out.

When the last transport bay door sealed, the platform fell into silence. Eight slouched forward, rubbing his neck. “Ugh, I’ve been on low power all day. I need a recharge so badly.” Beside him, Payload stood motionless, his massive frame casting a shadow that swallowed the robot. Eight noticed the look. “What?” he said defensively. “I told you already, the guys here struck gold. Well, metaphorical gold anyway. Aurel needs this stuff to make more of your fancy transcendent toys, okay? And it keeps us far away from any terrorists or nosy newsmen.”

Payload didn’t move, his voice low and deliberate when he finally spoke. “If you were worried about that, you shouldn’t have put it on the company calendar.” Eight blinked. “What?” “Almost no encryption,” Payload added, not even bothering to look at him. Eight stared for a moment, then forced a laugh. “So you finally speak, and that’s what you have to say? Please. Like anyone would bother digging that deep into our logs. To what end?” Payload said nothing. The silence stretched.

Eight’s smirk returned, smaller this time, but sharper. “Relax, big guy. We’re safe.” He turned toward the mine entrance, his polished shoes clanging softly against the steel floor as he walked. The moment his back was turned, his expression shifted, his lips curling into a knowing smirk, eyes dimly

flickering blue in the shadow.

The Hopper lands just outside the mine, landing on the now-empty platform. They look around, surprised to see not a soul. “Well, I guess we should enter the mine, steel yourself,” Raleigh said, rushing in without hesitation. The moment they stepped through the threshold, a faint click echoed through the air. Then clang. A massive bulkhead slammed down behind them, sealing the exit with a mechanical thud that reverberated through the metal walls. Raleigh glanced back. “Well. That’s not ominous at all.” Clyde exhaled through his nose. “No turning back now…” They pressed deeper into the mine, their footsteps echoing into the dark.

Far below, Eight stood in a control chamber surrounded by humming servers and flickering screens. His foot tapped anxiously until a series of alerts flashed across his vision, pings in his internal interface. “What? How the hell did someone trip the system already?” he muttered, feigning alarm even though his smirk was already forming. He flicked his wrist, pulling up a holographic feed. Dozens of camera angles cycled across the projection until one caught motion: a shadow darting through the western corridors.

“West side, vein thirty-six,” he said, loud enough for the giant beside him to hear. Payload turned his head, visor gleaming faintly, then wordlessly stomped off in that direction. Eight watched him go, a quiet chuckle bubbling up as the sound of rocket-assisted footsteps faded. “Perfect,” he whispered, grin widening. “Everything right on schedule.” He froze mid-sentence as someone tapped his shoulder. The metallic thunk echoed slightly. Eight didn't notice his metallic frame had no touch functionality. Another tap. Louder. He turned, synthetic eyes widening. Noir stood behind him, arms crossed, a raised brow, and an amused smirk on her face.

“Your shoulders are so stiff,” she said lightly. “Nervous about something?” Eight stammered, the digital static in his voice betraying a flicker of real panic. “W... wait, how did you...” He flicked open another screen. All the camera feeds were looping empty hallways. His voice dropped. “Did you tamper with the surveillance?” “Mhm.” She nodded with the casual confidence of someone who’d done

it twice before breakfast. Eight stared at her, then muttered under his breath, “Holy shit… he wasn’t lying. There is an evil clone.”

“Hey,” she snapped, narrowing her eyes, “I’m not some evil clone. And I’m definitely not second to your so-called ‘original.’” She pulled a multi-cube from her belt, the air shimmering with energy as it activated. “Relax, relax!” Eight raised both hands, servos whining as he did. “No offense meant. Believe me. I can relate.” His tone softened, almost human for a moment. “Try being a copy of a copy sometime. It does wonders for your ego.” Noir paused, cube still humming in her hand. “Let’s talk,” Eight said quickly. “Maybe we can help each other.” She eyed him, calculating, then slowly powered the cube down and crossed her arms. “I’m listening.” Eight smiled, his projected pupils narrowing just slightly, predatory, confident. “Good. Then let’s start with what you really came here for.”

Raleigh rushed down the long strips of mine Clyde following after a faint hum in the distance of machinery... Payload. But it stopped, almost like it spotted them and realized there had been some sort of mistake. The noise fell silent, changing to a clanging noise. They both kept up the pace to see the man now using a pickaxe to strike at the wall. He looked fairly unassuming, like this almost harmless just your average Joe working in a mine. “Wait...” Raleigh said, stopping. “Is this poor guy working on this whole mine by himself?” Raleigh whispered, lowering her weapon. “Man, and I thought Helix was bad before. I didn’t think he’d stoop this low.”

Payload didn’t answer, just kept chipping away, cheerful as ever. “Yeah,” Clyde said dryly, “real tragedy. The lonely miner on an asteroid. Truly the heart-breaker of our age.” “Hey, you don’t have to be sarcastic,” Raleigh snapped. “He’s probably just trying to make a living.” “Raleigh, this place hasn’t had a living thing in years.” Before she could respond, the man stopped again, looked their way, and smiled like an old friend spotting neighbors across the street. Then, without a word, he went back to hammering. Raleigh sighed. “Alright, forget this. Noir’s our priority.” They turned and started down another corridor.

Clang. Footsteps followed. They both stopped. Slowly, they turned. The man was now “fixing” a machine nearby, pretending to adjust its settings. “…He’s following us,” Clyde said flatly. Raleigh crossed her arms. “No, he’s just... uh, checking that thing. Very… industrious.” They took a few more steps. Clang. Step. Step. Raleigh turned sharply. “Okay, buddy. What’s the deal? Why are you following us?” The man froze mid-step, posture stiff. Then he smiled again, wide, polite, almost cartoonish, and raised both hands.

Clyde squinted, studying him more closely. The arms. metallic, heavy, way too advanced for a miner. The jumpsuit, clean, bright orange. “Wait…” Clyde said slowly, brow furrowing. “Those arms… they look like the ones that Firewall had. And, uh… what’s-his-name, the other hacker guy… back... back...” Clyde said unable to remember Vincent's code name. Raleigh frowned. “The Crazy blue Laser guy.”

“Yeah, that guy. You’re not another hacker, are you?” Clyde asked. Payload didn't say anything. Weighing his options, he was never supposed to encounter them like this. They took that as confirmation. “Are you... a good hacker... like our friend.” Raleigh asked awkwardly. “I... My objectives are absolute... You aren't a part of them... you're classified as... off limits...” He said in confusion, confusing them as well. “Off limits... who...” Clyde started to ask in confusion. It seemed Payload's free will was questionable. “I've said too much...” He mind-readjusted, trying to find the correct action to take. “We must not be exposed.” He said, getting into a fighting stance, going for a punch.

It was easy to dodge. Both of them almost looked sorry, like they didn't want to fight a man who looked so unassuming a not too powerful. Raleigh sighed, forming a hammer and slamming into the wall, expecting that to be the end of him. They walked away feeling weird about the whole thing. “Those other guys were... way stronger...” Raleigh sighs only to feel a bead of sweat going down her face. Her body screams danger. She turns around to see the man already back on his feet, his face contorted into a jagged smile, his eyes glowing with a grimace, rocketing at them. As the whole

hallway burst into flames.

Eight and Noir had sat down talking more calmly. “I see so that's your plan... out for yourself... This is going to bite you in the ass. But whatever I learned what I needed, thanks, I guess.” Noir said calmly as the whole place shook. Eight leaned back, resting his head on his arm. “Better run along now... you'll miss the main event.” He said as he waved her away. She nodded, rushing off to join the fight.

Clyde groaned, pushing aside a slab of debris. His armor hissed and adjusted around him, auto-repairing in flashes of light. They were now in a large open area. Either knocked into it or perhaps created by the explosion. Beside him, Raleigh coughed, shaking the dust from her hair. “You good?” Clyde asked, kneeling beside her. “Been better,” she grumbled, looking down at the faint shimmer fading from her clothes. “What was that shield just now?” He smirked faintly. “A little trick I’ve been working on. I can give you a suit a little for a second or too.” Raleigh blinked, impressed despite herself. “Not bad.”

Before they could say anything more, a distant roar rolled through the cavern. The walls cracked, molten metal dripping down like rain. The explosion had blasted them into a massive chamber, or maybe made one. The air shimmered with heat. Then came the sound of turbines.
Both of them looked up. Payload descended from the fire and dust like a meteor in reverse, jets flaring along his back and arms. His grin hadn’t changed, wide, polite, wrong. The plating on his torso split open, revealing layers upon layers of internal weaponry, missile ports, rotary cannons, and glowing rails of energy coils that pulsed like veins. There wasn’t an ounce of wasted mass on him. No fat, no filler. Just an arsenal shaped like a man. Missiles slid into launch position with a synchronized click. Raleigh’s face paled. “So that’s the fortress she was talking about…”

Chapter 34: The Payload

The massive orange form loomed over them, not even giving them a moment to breathe. Clyde and Raleigh ran like hell, narrowly dodging an impossible number of missiles that screamed through the air like angry comets. “I don’t think he’s running out of ammo!” Clyde shouted over the explosions. “Damn it! If he keeps this up, he’s going to destroy the whole asteroid!” Raleigh snapped, morphing her glove into a piston and firing compressed blasts back at him. They hit squarely, but Payload barely flinched.

They dove behind a jagged slab of rock, the surface pitted and glowing from the constant barrage. “What about your railgun thing?” Clyde asked between breaths. “Can you charge it through

the glove?" "He'd atomize me before it finished charging," Raleigh muttered, glaring up at the inferno raining down. The cover around them was already starting to crumble. "Gods… he's like an Empire battle cruiser in one person... maybe even a fleet," she groaned, instantly regretting how casually she'd underestimated him. The rock cracked and began to give way.

"Split up," Clyde said quickly. "Take every shot you can, and try to drag him down here with us!" He suggested. Raleigh hesitated for a heartbeat, then nodded. They sprinted in opposite directions just as the rock behind them disintegrated under Payload's next salvo. For a moment, the machine paused, its targeting systems visibly flickering as he tried to lock onto both of them at once. The hesitation was brief, but it was something. Clyde noticed. He couldn't tell if Raleigh had, but he prayed she had.

Raleigh took advantage of the lull, charging her glove to absorb a missile midair. The shock rippled through her arm, but it worked; she fired it right back, the explosion lighting up the chamber like sunrise. Payload's endless arsenal answered immediately, erasing the victory in a storm of fire. Clyde darted between collapsed girders and glowing machinery, his mind racing. He needed to level the field. Payload's high ground gave him total control. Thinking fast, he cycled through his arsenal: First, a burst of pure light energy, nothing. Then, the Ultra Blaster, some effect, but barely noticeable.

A new wave of missiles descended. Clyde didn't have time to dodge. His armor flared to full power, absorbing the impact before flickering out in a spray of sparks. His lungs burned; even with all their upgrades, he was barely hanging on. Then it hit him. The Ultra Scouts used to summon vehicles. Bikes, boards, even hover rigs. Maybe… maybe he could do that too. He extended a hand, visualizing the light, the roar of engines, for a split second, something almost formed, but it dissolved instantly, leaving only an empty suit of armor that fell and vanished. Clyde cursed, barely dodging another blast. But the thought stuck.

Maybe he couldn't, but she could. Clyde tapped his earpiece, shouting over the chaos. "Hey, can your glove copy more than just weapons?" "Of course it can!" Raleigh shot back, her voice crackling

with static. “I used to do it with Nova all the time. The only limit is the glove itself. Why? Oh, I think I understand.” Raleigh blinked, realizing what he meant. She reshaped her glove, plates shifting and twisting until they formed a makeshift jet pack strapped to her arm. The engines roared to life, jerking her forward hard enough to nearly dislocate her shoulder. It wasn’t graceful; she couldn’t quite fly, but it launched her up the wall in bounding, half-controlled bursts.

Payload didn’t like that. His head snapped toward her, cannons swiveling. The wall lit up with tracer fire before she could reach the top. “Eyes on me, big guy!” Clyde shouted, sprinting into the open. He poured every ounce of energy into a blast of light that shot skyward like a beacon. His suit flickered, threatening to burn out entirely. “Come on, come on, look at me!” Payload hesitated just long enough. Raleigh closed the last few meters, using the jet’s last burst to fling herself upward. She twisted midair, glove reshaping into a hammer ten times her size. With a wordless yell, she brought it down with the force of a meteor.

The impact hit like a bomb. The entire cavern buckled, shock waves rippling through the walls as Payload was slammed straight into the ground. For a long, breathless moment, nothing moved. Smoke and molten debris filled the air. Clyde staggered closer, panting. “Did… did that do it?” Raleigh’s glove hummed faintly as she pulled it back into standard form. The ground started to rumble. Cracks split across the floor, glowing red-hot. “Damn it!” Clyde groans.

Payload clawed his way out of the molten pit, armor twitching, one arm sparking wildly. His neck hung at an unnatural angle until he reached up, snapped it back into place, and reengaged. His single remaining eye flickered back online, burning red, furious, and unwavering. “Okay…” Raleigh muttered, backing up a step, “That’s new.” This time, he was slower, but angrier. Raleigh darted in, striking first. Clyde followed, his armor flickering with the last of his power reserves. Their attacks came in tandem, quick, shallow cuts and concussive hits, never giving Payload time to reset his aim. In a blur of motion, Raleigh grabbed hold of his remaining arm, locking the joint in place. “Now, Clyde!” He formed the Ultra Saber, pouring every spark of power he had left into the blade. The light burned

pure white as he swung, clean, fast, final.

The arm came off in a single stroke. Payload staggered back, molten coolant spilling from the severed joint. His entire frame convulsed, systems flickering as he struggled to stabilize. They didn't give him a single second to breathe; by now, they knew that would be a fatal mistake. Clyde reformed his gauntlet and drove it straight into Payload's chest, the impact ringing through the cavern like a gunshot. Raleigh was right behind him, her glove reshaping into a massive axe. She swung just as Clyde darted aside, the blade cleaving deep into Payload's armored hull with a shower of sparks.

Clyde followed with a flying kick to the head, the force sending Payload crashing onto his back. Raleigh landed beside him, her weapon shifting fluidly again, this time into a sword, and brought it down in a clean, final arc, shattering the rest of his armor. For a moment, there was silence. Payload's flickering eye blinked once, twice… then dimmed out completely. His hand twitched, reaching toward them before falling limp. The giant collapsed, lifeless, the echo of the impact fading into the molten hum of the broken mine. Clyde fell to his knees, chest heaving. "Is… it over?" he asked between breaths.

"This time," Raleigh said, sinking down beside him, "I think so." They sat there for a moment, two burnt-out silhouettes against the dull orange glow."That guy…" Clyde said quietly. "What do you think this was all about? Is he connected to the others? And where does that leave her?" Raleigh didn't answer right away. Her gaze lingered on the remains. "I don't know," she admitted softly. "But something about this feels wrong." Before either could move, Payload twitched. His body jerked upright with a harsh metallic screech, movements slow and disjointed. His systems were failing, but something deeper, something automatic, was forcing him on. His single eye flickered back to life, a weak, fading red.

He reached into his chest compartment and pulled out a small metallic orb, swirling with the faint, impossible shimmer of a compressed universe. "What is he…" Raleigh's voice broke. "Stop him!" But they were too slow. Payload brought the sphere to his mouth. The fractured voice that came

from him was barely human. “Objective… complete…” He bit down. The orb cracked. A burst of light and energy exploded outward, raw and uncontrollable. Reality folded in on itself, and in an instant, everything, the cavern, the debris, the two of them, was swallowed whole.

Both of them opened their eyes in confusion. The darkness was gone. In its place was light, blinding, endless, and wrong. After the claustrophobic gloom of the mine, the sheer brightness was too much to look at. Clyde blinked hard, shading his eyes. They stood on a floating platform suspended in an infinite blue sky. No horizon, no sun, just a world that stretched forever in every direction.
“Where… are we?” Clyde asked, scanning for any sign of walls, exits, anything. Raleigh didn’t answer right away. Her expression tightened, dread creeping in behind her eyes. “We...” she hesitated, then cursed under her breath. “That’s not good.”

A distorted voice echoed from nowhere and everywhere at once. “Error. Failure to erase targets. Unknown reason.” The sound was Payload’s, but fragmented, like a machine trying to speak through broken circuits. “Wait… is this…” Clyde started. “A universe he controls?” Raleigh’s jaw clenched. “He’s a hacker, remember? Yeah. And I think we’re inside his sandbox.” The voice glitched again, warping with static. “Transcendent interference… reassessing… subjects still classified as off-limits… do not engage… Subjects threaten to expose the mission.” Every syllable carried weight, like commands, rewritten in real time, urging on its next actions. The words weren’t just echoing; they were rippling through the space itself, bending it like sound waves through water.

Clyde and Raleigh moved instinctively, standing back-to-back. “Watch out,” she said quietly. “He might not be able to erase us, but here? He’s a god. I don’t know if we can win this one, Clyde.” “Can we leave before this thing makes up its mind?” he asked, voice low. She turned to him slowly, her expression grim. “There’s no way out.” The voice returned, stronger this time, its tone shifting from mechanical confusion to absolute focus. “Mission priority restored. Neutralization authorized.” The platform trembled. Panels along the edges split open with hydraulic precision, and massive cannons rose from beneath the floor, sleek, gleaming, all aimed inward. In the distance, more floated into view,

hanging in the air like satellites, each one locking onto them. The sight was dizzying. They weren't surrounded by an army. They were inside one.

The cannons charge heavily, artillery fires more missiles than ever before, this time on a singular point. Raleigh forms a massive dome of metal around them, but it is quickly broken apart like it was made of cardboard. She manages to absorb some of the fire, saving it for a later attack. They take turns, one resting, one descending, each time Raleigh taking a bit more of the power for themselves. This was the only strategy they had left. When she felt she had gathered enough, she shot it in all directions, destroying many of the weapons, but it meant nothing. They instantly reformed and became ever more intense than before, faster.

Both of their arms glowed like crazy; the residual power remaining from the arms just may be the only thing keeping them alive right now. The platform shook and inverted. Suddenly, they were free-falling, the platform now above them slowly fading from sight. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, missiles, lasers, bullets, all kinds of things, all approaching them in every direction. Both of them looked at each other, truly not seeing how they could possibly make it out. This is the true power of a Universe Hacker.

They take each other's hands, forming weapons. This may be the end, but they are going down fighting for sure. Exhausted, stuck in a sluggish slow motion as it all inches closer. Then the sky started to crack. Time resumed as reality glitched. They blinked and were standing on the platform once again. "Anomaly." Payload said in confusion. A loud bang, and other, and other. The sky is cracking open ever so slightly more each time. Until it shattered. Noir dropped through the breach like a meteor, hitting the platform in a storm of debris. Her coat whipped in the gale, eyes blazing. Without a word, she lobbed cluster bombs in every direction, the explosions throwing off the cannons' aim. "Anomaly confirmed," Payload's voice glitched. The entire world stuttered, half-rendered sky freezing mid-motion.

Noir didn't care. She moved like lightning, setting up deployable turrets and returning fire in a perfectly coordinated rhythm. Then she drew something from her side, a multi-tool that unfolded into a

massive rotary cannon, the barrels spinning up with a growl. She screamed, and the gun did as well. Bolts of searing light tore through the endless arsenal around them, shredding Payload's manifested constructs. The platform shook. The air warped. Even Payload's control seemed to flicker, his world fracturing under her assault.

She didn't stop. She couldn't. Raleigh and Clyde stood frozen for half a second, watching the impossible unfold. Noir noticed, snarling without turning her head. "What the hell are you two doing?" She reloaded, firing again, eyes never leaving the sky. "Stop gawking and fight!" They both nodded, jumping in but still exhausted. The cannons around them seemed to stay damaged this time. Only a few of them are reforming to fight. "Error: world integrity vanishing." Payload said. The remaining cannons floated upward, their frames melting into bright strands of data before fusing together. Five massive clusters formed above, glowing like miniature suns, then hardened into five identical Payloads.

"You've got to be kidding me," Clyde said, struggling to maintain any armor now. "This just means he is desperate. We have him on the back foot." Noir insisted on activating rocket boots as she flies upwards, implanting a bomb into one of their chest, incinerating them. "Not nearly as strong... that's good," Raleigh said in relief, jumping up to destroy one as well. With a blast from a giant cannon. The Remaining three surrounded Noir, seeing that she is the biggest threat at the moment, firing everything they have at her but also destroying themselves in the process. Noir fell to the ground with a thud, distressing them both. She weakly rose to her feet. Beaten down but not defeated. She started to choke up blood, her previous wounds opening back up.

"Don't worry about me... End this... Every second he loses ground... Find the core!" She commands. He nods, looking around for anything that might match that disposition as more Payloads form rising out of the platform. Nothing was around. Nothing at all... except for the thing they are standing on. "Raleigh the platform!" He shouts as she destroys another one. "What? Are you sure... alright, you better be right." She said as she slammed her fist into the ground, forming a huge drill that cracked apart the platform. It broke apart, making them all fall once more, but inside another payload...

He was encased in glass in the fetal position. Seeming to have the same battle damage as the one they fought outside this place. Noir and Raleigh both form hammers as they fall, giving the main body one last strike with everything they have. The other Reality completely vanishes on impact, the body breaking apart as something falls out from inside. They are back in the mine once more. All of them catch their breath but don't let their guard down... not after all this headache. Before them lies a man, one who seemingly existed inside of Payload.

He had no arms or legs, half his torso was missing, all swallowed by a mysterious ethereal shadow. “What... where am I...” The man said, confused but weak. “Wait... is this... some sort of mind control?” Clyde asked, feeling bad that they might have just killed someone who was just as much of a victim. The man groans. “No... I remember now... That thing... it took everything... I barely survived. He found me.” The man said, only half aware of his surroundings. “He? Who is he?” Raleigh asked, eyebrows raised.

“I told him... I would do anything, even give up my own will... To become a weapon worthy of beating it...” He said, not really answering them like she hoped. “What are you talking about?” Noir growled in anger. “Beware... The Once and Future Foe...” The man said, falling limp, all remaining life vanishing from his body. Their eyes widened. It had been years since they heard that name; they had almost completely forgotten it, and they still had no clue what exactly they were.

Chapter 35: Bound By Design

Noir, Clyde, and Raleigh all face each other exhausted, clearly not up to any more fighting. The fact that they are standing at all is a miracle. “Well, talk, what is all this about?” Clyde pressed through the strain to say. She looked down and out toward the destroyed remains of The Payload. “They have been after me for a while. Same goal as always, and well, I thought fuck that. I'll hunt them instead. This is the result.” Her voice cracked near the end. A flash of something crossed her face, regret, maybe recognition, before her knees buckled. “I see, so that's why you suddenly reappeared in the Multiverse. I guess I'm sorry for thinking otherwise.” Raleigh said half hardheartedly.

“What do you know about them? It might be a coincidence, but this is the third one that we

have encountered. One that seemed to know things about us, and our world," Clyde asked, his curiosity driven by fear of being further manipulated. "Not just that, they all have a similar aesthetic... to well... Rebbecca," Raleigh added, searching Noir's face for answers and concerned about connections to their past. Noir paused, uncertain and embarrassed. "I don't know if she is involved. Ask her yourself. But they call themselves Omni... Omni..." She started to say, realizing she had forgotten, looking embarrassed and frustrated by her missing memory. "Look, the name's not important. They are a group or something. Now that I think about it... that name... he mentioned it..." Noir tried to recall, her exhaustion blurring her thoughts, before she fell to her knees.

Both rushed closer, banged up but not as badly as her. Clyde checked her wounds. "We can talk later. I think you'll be okay, but we should get you to Lucy soon," he said with urgency. Noir didn't answer, fainting. Eight poked his head into the room. "Oh gods, you actually defeated that monster…" he said, half surprised, sliding down rubble to meet them. "Thank you so much. You saved me… and my company…" He recited lines rehearsed in his mind, grasping Raleigh's hands with performative gratitude.

"Save you?" Raleigh asked, raising an eyebrow, yanking her hands away from him. "Yes... that guy showed up out of nowhere years ago... and forced us to go along with some great mission. But he never told us any important details. It was a real drain on resources and took years off my life from the stress... but it's fine now you stopped him," he said, smiling as genuinely as he could, putting his hands behind his neck. They didn't say anything, unsure how to even respond to that after their past issues. "Listen, I know we didn't get off on a great foot, but now that those looming threats are out of the way. Please tell me how I can repay you... Name it, I will move heavens and earths for you!" Eight said with excitement.

Raleigh still didn't seem to be buying it. "Hmm, maybe we missed judged him... could this be the trope where the obvious evil guy is actually not that, but just kinda... looks evil." Clyde speculated. "Hey, what about me screams evil!" Eight said in defense, trying to look innocent. "The eyes. The

smile. The entire vibe. Not everything follows some dumb trope, Clyde.” Raleigh said immovable. The robot frowns. “Ugh, I get it, you don't trust me... Oh, I know... A first token of appreciation.” He said, rushing off deep into the mine, after a moment, he returned with a large Rock with a peculiar look.

“This... sells for billions... It's unique for the multiverse. What you would call a transcendent material. It took years just to find this small chunk. Not even your silly little world has this.” He started to say, slowly dawning on him just how priceless something like that is. “Take it before I realize how much money I just lost.” He said bluntly. Raleigh took it, pulling out a scanner to see how true that statement was. The scanner didn't seem to understand what it was at all. “Well, that's... You're really giving us something like this?” Her tone shifted even if it wasn't fully confirmed.

“Well, yeah… You really helped me out,” Eight said with a soft smile. “What are you going to do if more of them show up?” Clyde asked bluntly. Eight’s eyes widened in feigned surprise. “There are more of them?” His tone faltered just enough to sound believable. A moment later, he composed himself, face hardening into conviction. “Listen, you might not believe me, but I did start Helix Corporation to make the multiverse a better place.” He paused, a hint of rehearsed humility slipping through. “And, sure, to get revenge on Corvus… but that’s another story. I'll do anything I can to help you beat those bastards... who else can honestly?” He said, using Aurel's dreams to his own ends.

“Corvus, huh…” Raleigh muttered. “Long dead, and that asshole’s still finding ways to screw up my life.” Eight blinked in genuine surprise, flickering for once. “You… knew him?” “Knew him, hated him,” Raleigh said, staggering a little. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m running on fumes.” Clyde adjusted Noir in his arms. “Can you even fly the ship like this?” “Yeah,” she said, forcing a grin. “I think so.” Eight jogged after them, ever the salesman. “Wait up!” “What, we’re best friends now?” Clyde muttered.

“Maybe not yet,” Eight said cheerfully. “But think about it, maybe I could set up a Multi-Loop station at Frontier... sorry, HOME. Maybe even get a little chair at your round table?” “Don’t push it,” Raleigh said flatly, using the wall to steady herself. “Alright, alright, too soon,” Eight said, hands

raised. “Still, I think our new relationship is going to be swell. I, uh… do need a ride though. The big guy was holding the keys to my ship.” “Just shut up and come on,” Raleigh sighed. “We’ll drop you off on the way.” They drop him off at his headquarters, leaving quickly, worried about Noir's condition. Eight danced into the office, pointing finger guns at all the employees. “Hey! You! Great job, take the week off.” He said to a random one he didn't know.

They made it to the elevator, grinning ear to ear. He had removed his leash and gained ground at HOME. Omnihack's Goals were furthered, HOME trusted him ever so more; he would play both sides like a fiddle, whichever one rose from the ashes would be his true alliance. Though a part of him hoped it would be HOME, they seemed more gullible to him. “Ha, Aurel was a fool. What a joke this was, truly child's play. He left the elevator at the top floor, striding towards his office as soon as he opened the door, his face dropped. Eliot Vale sat on his desk, legs crossed, waving sweetly.

“Hiya, boss?” He said almost in song. “Why are you here...” He asked. “What? I thought we could have a little chat? You don't want to?” Eliot said, pretending to pout. “I don't have time for you. Ask your manager, that's his job.” Eight said coldly. Sitting at the desk, booting up the monitor. Eliot leaped up, skipping around the desk right behind him. “Oh, you silly robot. I'm not here for that... I'm here as The Decoy. Did you really think we wouldn't catch on to your plan?” The idol said his voice slowly dropping the cute exterior to something low.

“Don't know what you're talking about.” Eight said not reacting at all. “Really? That's how we are playing this, huh?” He said again, more cutesy as he sat in his lap. “The hell are you doing?” Eight said, raising his hands up, full attention on him now. “Payload wasn't much of a personality... but he was my favorite,” Decoy said as his face contorted with anger, looking at him with disgust. “I didn't do anything... I was about to inform you guys about what happened. Eight said, shoving him off of him, his fear slowly rising, all the bravado gone.

The idol laughs. “I don't even know why I'm entertaining this idea... The Administrator wants you scraped now... wiped... reprogrammed... Nothing gets past him.” He said, smirking, holding more

reverence for him than some of the others. “I did everything I was supposed to. You don't have to believe me... besides even if we granted your accusation. I got in didn't I? I fulfilled the mission given to me. You need me.” He said, shrugging confidently. “The only thing we need is your persona.” The Decoy growled, grabbing onto it and literally melting it off.”

The robot had no time to react, falling to the floor with a thud. “Well, that takes care of that now to...” Eliot sang to himself, only to pause, seeing the robot start to stand up again, his face reforming with liquidized metal returning to its original form. “You... did something...” He said, clicking his teeth. Eight straightened, the cold glow of his eyes dim and steady. “Yes,” he said evenly. “I’ll admit, I underestimated you. But thanks to that little event you were all called away to, I had the perfect opportunity to make myself... indispensable. To make myself... Transcendent.” Eliot’s face cracked into an ugly scowl, his entire mask of sweetness gone.

“The living metal…” he spat, voice trembling with outrage. “You dare use his tools against him?!” For a heartbeat, it looked like he’d tear Eight apart right there. But then his posture stiffened, a call. His eye lens flickered, the voice of the Boss echoing in his mind like a calm storm. “So he used the transcendent metal I gave to Helix. Clever.” A low, amused chuckle. “It’s time to shift tactics. You know what to do.” The connection is cut. Eliot took a deep breath, his expression snapping back to that glossy, idol-perfect smile. “Right,” he said lightly, “time for Plan B.”

He skipped toward a side closet, humming the tune from one of his own songs. The door creaked open, and he dragged someone out. A man, beaten and barely conscious. He tossed the body at Eight’s feet like trash. “Can you believe this creep had a crush on me?” Eliot laughed. Eight froze. “Aurel…!” He dropped to his knees instantly, scanning his broken counterpart. Aurel weakly tried to speak. “You… idiot… I told you not to mess with them. You’re supposed to be me. Why didn’t you...” Eliot yanked him back up before he could finish, slamming him against the wall.

“Uh-uh-uh,” Eliot sang mockingly. “Here’s how this is gonna go: Mr. Smartest Mind in the Multiverse is coming back to HQ with me. You’ll do everything we say, no matter how stupid.”

“You think taking him hostage will make me comply?” Eight said, voice cold but cracking around the edges. “Oh, I think it’ll do plenty.” Eliot grabbed him by the neck, lifting him like a toy. “Now… hop on one foot and spin in a circle.” Eight hesitated. Then, to Eliot’s delight, he obeyed. The humiliation was complete.

“Haha! That’s a good boy,” Eliot laughed, his tone swinging back to playful. “Now we’re gonna go. Talk to you later, Boss!” He turned toward the exit, still dragging Aurel along. Before leaving, he stopped in the doorway, his voice low and venomous. “And don’t think we won’t kill him just because he’s smarter than average. There are always ways around your little transcendence, too.” The door shut behind him. The sound of their footsteps faded. Eight sank to his knees, hands clutching his head. His voice cracked for the first time in years.“I’ve… made a mistake.”

The others had made it to the Hospital and were admitted right away. Noir, having it the worst, was sent to Lucy directly. They waited outside, already bandaged up and healed by Iris's magic. After a while, the Doctor left the operating room, crossing her arms. “If you had come any later... if I didn't have the abilities we do... we wouldn't be having a conversation right now. Haven't I already addressed this?” Lucy said like a stern parent. “And if we hadn't, she would be for sure... we may have run toward a fight but...” Raleigh started to say Stopping is still weak.

“No, sorry... I didn't mean it, I get it was something you needed to do... but look around you. You're not alone anymore, right?” Lucy mused. “You're right... But even still... if there are more of them.... I want to get stronger.” Clyde said confidently. Lucy sighs. “Nothing wrong with that... just don't become the thing you despise, alright.” She walked off right away to attend to other patients. “You're cute when you're determined,” Raleigh said, putting all herdead weight on him with a smile. “Hey, watch out, I'm not at full strength either. We are lucky they aren't making us stay too.

Raleigh didn't say anything, not moving at all; he just accepted it. “Hey... you think she'll stick around?” She asked. “I really don't know...” He said reluctantly. “Me neither... Maybe we can convince her when she wakes up. “Well, now that I've had a little more time to rest. Do you think this is a round

table discussion?" He asked. "Nah, too many unknowns, we might be worrying over nothing, too, you know... Let's ask her." She said as he nodded.

Elsewhere. The Boss sat at his desk, the faint hum of machines filling the silence. A holographic blueprint of the Seed hovered beside a glass jar filled with energy from HOME, slowly pulsing with light. Mainframe appeared beside him, her tone careful. "You don't seem concerned about the loss of Payload." The Boss didn't stop working. "Payload was powerful. Quite the loss." His voice was steady, detached. "But his absolute obedience was a mistake. He lacked the flexibility of the others… even if he was more loyal."

He paused, as if replaying old failures in his mind. "A relic of a false method I once considered. I've corrected it. Now, I don't move the pieces… I move the board. His contributions were numerous," Mainframe said. "He will be difficult to replace. That's why we account for all possibilities. This is simply one of them." Mainframe stood silently for a moment, something flickering behind her eyes. She seemed to hesitate, then asked softly, "Then what of me? Am I not also a flaw in your system?"

He stopped working. For once, he turned fully to face her. "Your ability to question this proves otherwise." She frowned. "And yet I am still bound." "Yes," he said, calm but final. "We are all bound. But do not misunderstand, you are not a piece. You are me. My continuity. My will. And if I deviate… the one who corrects me. That is what makes you better." He turned back to his work, the conversation already over in his mind. Mainframe lingered for a moment, the faint hum of the Seed reflecting in her glass-like eyes. Then she vanished.

After a bit of rest, Clyde and Raleigh make their way to the Hack Shack for the confrontation no one really wants to have. They walk into the empty storefront it seems Proxy and Penny had closed up for the day. They stand just outside the door of Rebbecca's workshop, taking a deep breath before entering. She is working on a component for something not even looking up. "Oh, hey. Heard you got into quite the brawl... What's up?" She asked but knew what was coming.

"There's something we need to know," Clyde said, wasting no time. "And you can't dodge the

question this time.” Rebbecca sighed softly, setting her tools aside. She folded her arms on the desk and smiled, that same easy, unreadable smile she always wore when cornered. “Alright. I’m listening.” Clyde and Raleigh sat down across from her. “Firewall,” Raleigh began, voice steady. “The blue guy. And now Payload.” Rebbecca’s eyes widened, genuine surprise, then something else behind it. “Sorry, what did you say?” “Hackers with code names,” Clyde pressed. “Double mechanical arms. Same kind of tech. Similar aesthetic to yours. We get that you’re not friends… but you know who they are.”

Rebbecca looked between them, searching for a way out that didn’t exist. “I told you, didn’t I...” “We need to know,” Raleigh interrupted, voice firm. “Who are they? How do you know them? And do we need to be ready?” For the first time in a long time, Rebbecca froze. No jokes, no quick retort, just silence. She knew she couldn’t tell them the truth. But she also knew they wouldn’t accept a complete lie. So, she gave it to them through a distorted lens. “…Alright,” she said finally. “Yeah. There was a group... a collective. We were all part of it. But here’s the thing about hackers: too many egos. They can’t work together. So it didn’t last. In the end, everyone was out for themselves.” Her voice softened. “Still are.”

“Why are they interested in HOME?” Clyde asked. “Seriously... what a dumb question. Isn't it obvious? They are Hackers, and Hackers see the value of things. Far better than anyone.” Rebbecca answers, remaining serious. Clyde and Raleigh exchanged a look of half suspicion, half understanding. “Look,” she added, “I don’t know if more of them will show up… or if they’ve joined forces again. But if they have, you’d better be ready.” “That’s good enough,” Clyde said finally, standing. “I was already planning to train either way.” Rebbecca blinked, a little surprised that it ended so easily. “Right. Well… you two should rest. You look like hell. Taking down Payload is a true feat for anyone.”

Raleigh stood, but didn’t leave just yet. Her expression softened. “Yeah, but I didn’t come just to grill you, you know.” Both Clyde and Rebbecca looked confused. “You didn’t?” they said in unison. “Nope,” Raleigh smirked, pulling something from her coat. She set the small chunk of shimmering

Transcendent Metal on the workbench. “I don’t know what this is exactly, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out. Make the glove a real powerhouse, like you said. If they come back, we’ll need every advantage we can get.” That gesture, small as it was, said more than any apology or promise ever could.

Rebbecca stared at it, eyes brightening just a little. For once, she was silent, afraid to let the moment slip away. “Oh, and…” Raleigh added as she turned toward the door, “I kinda get not wanting to talk about it. I’m the same way. But if you ever want to… You can talk to me.” She left Clyde following after. Rebecca sat there for a long time, the metal glinting under the workshop lights. For the first time in years, she didn’t know whether to smile… or cry.

Chapter 36: At Last The Beach Episode

Late at night, nothing stirred. Everyone had turned in, not even a lion prowling about. The ground trembled softly, the familiar hum of HOME expanding once again, but this time, it was different. From nothing, the land stretched outward in a flash of orange light. The southeastern cliff side shifted and reshaped, forming a sprawling beach where there had been only air. The Commando barracks, once perched on the cliff's edge, now stood proudly above beachfront property.

An ocean shimmered below, if it could be called that. The water was tinted the color of molten amber, glowing faintly in the moonlight as an existing river flowed seamlessly into it. Yet, at a certain distance, the sea simply… stopped. The waves froze mid-crest, held in place by an invisible wall. The

edge of the world made visible. No one noticed the transformation. All slept soundly, except for one man. Loki stood barefoot in the sand, eyes wide with awe and mischief. Delight hovered nearby, recording everything. “Yes… yes! It’s finally happening!” Loki said, voice trembling with excitement. “After so long... years of waiting... at last! The Beach Episode has arrived!” He threw back his head and laughed maniacally, arms stretched to the heavens.

A faint squawk broke his reverie. Loki looked down just in time to see a penguin, several dozen penguins, waddling toward him in curious unison. They surrounded him like a tiny army, heads tilting in eerie synchronization. “Oh! I see! New life forms!” he said proudly. “Excellent work, HOME! Perfect additions to the cast...” The nearest penguin bit his ankle. “OW! Traitors!” The whole flock charged, pecking and slapping at him as he stumbled backward into the glowing surf. “Fine, fine! I’ll leave! I’ll leave!” he shouted, flailing out of the water as Delight floated above, capturing the scene for “historical purposes.”

By morning, the sun rose over the orange ocean, lighting up the entire village with warm golden hues. A crowd had already gathered near the new shore. Clyde squinted down at the scene, still in his normal clothes, a mix of disbelief and wonder on his face. “Wow… I didn’t think HOME would ever make something like this,” he said. “Is that… a penguin?” Sure enough, the waddling birds were lounging across the sand as if they’d always lived there. “Yes! Yes, it is!” Loki declared, suddenly appearing beside him. He was already wearing swim trunks, sunglasses, and way too much confidence. “And why,” Loki added dramatically, “are you still in normal clothing?”

Clyde blinked. “Because it’s morning? And I just woke up?” “Excuses! HOME has finally given in to my desires for fan service!” Loki declared, gesturing heroically to the beach as if unveiling a divine prophecy. “And penguins?” Raleigh asked, arms crossed, unimpressed as usual. “No, that part was probably me, actually,” Clyde admitted sheepishly. “I really like penguins.” Raleigh laughed at him, then sighed. “Of course you do.” Loki threw an arm around Clyde’s shoulders. “My boy! You see? The world itself rewards passion!”

“What are you idiots waiting for?” he shouted, spinning to address the others. “You can’t let this opportunity slip through our grasp! Go! Prepare yourselves! There are swimsuits waiting to be worn!” “Yeah,” Rebbecca said from behind the counter of a makeshift beach shack, smirking. “And don’t come back until you’re half naked,” Rebbecca added, strangely agreeing with Loki for one with a perverted smirk, already in a very alluring pink bikini that left nothing to the imagination. Which she eagerly showed off to Raleigh, who just looked away as she motioned for them to leave. “Well, I guess we can take a little break.” Clyde sighs.

After an hour, everyone had gone home, only to return ready to enjoy a day of peace for once. Mr. Wainwright and his crew arrived first, setting up the basic infrastructure, shade tents, chairs, a little wooden bar, even a sign that said “HOME Beachfront, Grand Opening.” Ironically, after all the setup, they just sat down and started building sandcastles instead. Each one was weirdly professional, like miniature architectural models.

The Commandos, on the other hand, shredded their armor like it was a nuisance and sprinted straight for the waves. Rigg was already carrying a surfboard twice his size. “Alright! Haven’t done this in a good twenty years!” Grant had set himself up near the barracks, reclining on a lounge chair in a bright Hawaiian shirt, rifle leaning beside him, a radio quietly humming old Union tunes. Mara approached, still in full armor, looking completely out of place among the chaos.

“What are you doing?” she asked, deadpan. “Well, someone’s gotta keep watch,” Grant replied, adjusting his sunglasses. “That’s me, albeit a little more relaxed today.” “We have work to do,” she said, scowling. “None of that today, sweet pea. Go on, enjoy yourself, that’s an order.” She hesitated, the kind of hesitation only a lifetime soldier has when faced with leisure. After a moment, she sighed and turned to head inside to change. Grant smirked to himself and tipped his sunglasses down. “Atta girl.” He said.

Clyde and Raleigh arrived next, walking side by side down the sand path. Clyde wore simple swim trunks and a plain white shirt, the kind of thing that somehow made him look even more

awkward. Raleigh, meanwhile, was in a two-piece bikini, though she kept a jacket zipped up partway, hiding most of it. Clyde guessed she didn't want to show off her scars. He found himself staring a little longer than usual. "I'm kinda surprised you were up for that," he said with a small, genuine smile.

"You look… really good." Raleigh froze, face flushing crimson. "Shut up," she muttered quickly, tugging her jacket tighter. "I did it for you, so you better be happy." Clyde blinked, realizing that was probably the nicest and most dangerous thing she could've said. "I, uh... yes ma'am." When they reached the beach proper, they found the Yakuza already there, all of them standing at the edge of the sand, staring down at something just past the tide line. One of the younger members turned around nervously, a hint of reverence in his voice. "Hold up, bro. You can't just walk in there."

Raleigh raised an eyebrow. "Why not?" The man pointed toward the shoreline. A larger-than-average penguin stood proudly at the edge of the surf, chest puffed out, wings folded behind its back like a crime lord assessing his territory. "You gotta get permission," the Yakuza said gravely. "From who?" Clyde asked, confused. The man pointed again. "That's Pengoro," another said with reverence. "Boss of the beach. Lady Kaguya named him herself." He gestured toward Kaguya, standing not far away under a sun umbrella. She wore a modest one-piece swimsuit and looked like she was trying to negotiate peace with the penguin, equal parts respectful and terrified of starting a gang war.

Raleigh just stared at the scene for a long, silent moment."So you're telling me," she said finally, "that I need permission from a penguin to go swimming?" The Yakuza nodded in perfect synchronization. "Yes, ma'am." A tense silence followed. Then the penguin squawked, one single, commanding sound. One of the Yakuza perked up immediately. "He said we can enter." Clyde blinked. "You speak penguin?" The man shook his head. "Nah, it's more of a vibe. You read the body language." "Exactly right," a new voice added. Mikako appeared beside them, radiating effortless confidence, and about six percent more muscle mass than Clyde remembered. Her swimsuit wasn't modest in the slightest, showing off a set of abs that looked carved from divine granite.

"Holy crap, she's jacked!" Clyde blurted out before he could stop himself. Raleigh's expression

darkened instantly. She grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him away like a misbehaving child. “Nope. We’re leaving. You’ve stared enough for one lifetime.” Behind them, the entire Yakuza crew erupted into chaos, swarming around Mikako like she was a celebrity blessing them with her presence. Kaguya puffed up her cheeks, clearly jealous that her mother was stealing all the attention, though Pengoro gently patted her back, the penguin’s expression oddly sympathetic.

Rebbecca stood next to Loki, Proxy, and the towering penny, who was crouched down next to them. Proxy was also wearing swim trunks, showing off more of his metal frame than he ever had. Ironically, somehow Penny had found a bikini in her size, ironically more covered up than usual, as she didn't wear clothing at all most of the time. “I hope this isn't bad for my circuits.” He questioned. “Proxy Model Seven promised to quote. Go on a beach getaway, Penny would never forget.” The robot reminded him. “Yes, I remember, let's go.” He sighs. Penny picked him up, taking into to a less occupied corner of the beach.

“Ah! The protagonists have arrived!” Loki declared dramatically, throwing his arms wide. “Now the fun can truly begin!” Both he and Rebbecca froze mid-sentence, eyes locking onto Raleigh. A synchronized drool followed. Rebbecca was, surprisingly, the first to start perving, adjusting her sunglasses with exaggerated admiration. Loki glanced at her, then at Raleigh, and then the two of them clasped hands in silent agreement, as though they had just forged an unholy alliance. “I would appreciate it if you would not!” Raleigh yelled, crossing her arms defensively. Loki straightened immediately, clearing his throat.

“Yes, yes, quite right! We can’t forget about Clyde, after all.” He turned on the poor man with dramatic flair. “Why hide behind that plain shirt? Show the world your wonders!” “Wha... no!” Raleigh snapped, but then caught herself staring at Clyde. “...Maybe just a little?” Clyde looked completely lost. “You guys are weird. I’m nothing to look at compared to the rest of the people here.” “Take it off! Take it off!” Loki and Raleigh chanted in unison before realizing it, and both froze in mutual embarrassment.

Blushing furiously, Clyde hesitated but eventually lifted his shirt. For a moment, the sunlight flashed across a lean, scar-lined torso, the kind of battle-worn muscle earned through struggle, not vanity. Raleigh's nose began to bleed almost instantly. She rushed forward and yanked his shirt back down. "On second thought... nope! I'm keeping that to myself. Screw the world." "Aw, you suck!" Loki whines. "Whatever... are you ready for the staple of every beach episode. Volleyball!" The Lion said dramatically.

"I refuse," Clyde said bluntly. "What! You can't refuse, it's a scripted event." Loki said in anger. "You're being awfully meta today... I hate volleyball." Clyde said. "Why?" Raleigh tilted her head, never having played it before. "I have no good reason, I just don't like it." He argued. "Wow... that lame way to kill the mood." Rebbecca mocked. "If you play with us... No, if you beat us... I'll give you a copy of Deadman Happyland season two!" Loki sang. "What that.... how did you know I... You're on!" Clyde said with sudden determination.

They took their places in the shallow water, Clyde and Raleigh joining forces, of course, leaving Loki and Rebbecca to keep up their strange, degenerate alliance. Clyde was locked in, taking it as seriously as one could all for the sake of anime. The Pirates looked at the beach through their giant telescope. "Heh, idiots look at them so vonreble. The perfect time to strike, but we won't." The Rival also said in swim trunks despite his little lighthouse island not having a beach of its own. "Why not Captain?" The first mate asked? "Because we must beat them at full power of course." He explained. "And I don't really feel like it today." He muttered under his breath. "What if you challenged him to that game they were playing.

The Rival's eyes widen like he didn't even consider it. "You're right, let's go at..." He started to say, only for a volleyball to come flying straight for his head, knocking him out despite being miles away. "Captain!" all of them said, worried. "Raleigh... you're not supposed to hit it that far." Clyde tried to explain. "You're not?" She said, confused. All of them are standing awkwardly. "Yeah, we got a point because of that. You have to hit it inside the bounds." Rebbecca explained. "But then you'll hit it

back over.” She said, confused. “Yes, well... the goal is to... keep going until they can't,” Clyde explained. “Ohhhhh!”

Even farther away, on yet another island, two more figures were watching The Rival watch the others. Akane and Vincent lounged on a sun-bleached shoreline, both in swimwear that looked far too expensive for the setting. Unlike The Rival, they at least had the foresight to pick an island that actually had a beach. Vincent squinted through his binoculars, lowering them with a groan. “That idiot’s still here? He’s been monologuing for an hour. What the hell are we even doing here?” He asked as she sat on a beach towel.

“It's almost time for a reevaluation,” She explains. “Ugh, this blows. We can't even go all out on those stupid punks. What's the point? And why do I keep getting lumped with you?” He growls. “That is the point. No, get over here and put some lotion on my back.” She demands. “You're actually taking a break?” He said, confused but complying. A volleyball from several miles away suddenly streaked across the sky like a meteor, slamming into the sand next to them and launching their drinks into orbit. “That bitch!” Vincent shouts.

Again, back on the beach, Raleigh nervously puts her hand behind her head. A random penguin blows a whistle at team Loki, declaring them the winner. “Yay, we won,” Rebbecca said, jumping up and down. “By default... The girl doesn't know the meaning of hold back.” Loki mutters. Clyde falls to his knees, striking the sand, devastated like never before. “I'm sorry, Clyde.” Raleigh sheepishly said.

“Loki stretches. “It's fine. Just about everyone has appeared right, it's almost time for that.” He said with excitement. Before anyone could ask, Lucy and the rest of the healers arrived, their swimwear catching every eye. “Hey, lion boy! Sorry, we’re late,” Lucy said, clinging to Loki and giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “Ugh,” Crucible sighed, crossing his arms. “Somehow I know we’re about to get roped into being makeshift lifeguards.” Out by the waves, Rigg’s surfboard washed ashore with him still attached. Crucible and AID-E hurried to help, while Iris lingered behind, tilting her head. “Time for what?” she asked, curious.

Loki's grin turned radiant. "Haha! I'm glad you asked! It's time for all the semi-relevant characters to show up, even if it makes absolutely no narrative sense!" "What? That's dumb. Why would they..." Raleigh began, only to stop as Cyrus appeared, flanked by Tess and Tara. He gave a casual wave. "Yo." "The hell are you doing here?" Raleigh shouted. "Whaaat? We just wanted a little vacation!" Cyrus said cheerfully. "Don't mind us, we'll be at the bar!" He vanished with his entourage before anyone could respond. "Wait!" Raleigh called after him, but stopped herself, baffled. "That was weird. Cyrus doesn't usually act like that."

"Something strange is going on," Clyde muttered. Before he could finish, Natasha marched down the path with a squad of Union soldiers, all somehow wearing coordinated swimsuits. "Natasha! Aren't you in the middle of a war or something?" Clyde asked. "Oh, no, it's fine," she said calmly. "We all agreed to take a break and go to the beach." She left just as suddenly as she arrived, sunglasses catching the sunlight.

"Yeah, no, something's definitely wrong," Clyde said flatly. Rebbecca leaned over, watching Natasha leave, squinting critically. "You're right. I would've thought she'd have a more muscular ass. Still, pretty mouth-watering. Ten out of ten." Clyde blinked. "No, you... whatever. Forget it." He gave up, flopping backward into the sand as Raleigh laughed beside him.

More random people show up almost on cue. Aion and his news crew are all in swimsuits, but Crow, who is still fully covered in some kinda wet suit. Then came Darla Dog, Alister Cat, and a crowd of vaguely familiar faces no one recognized, like they'd walked straight out of a forgotten spin-off. "Why the hell is the port here? Raleigh asked distractedly. Clyde turned to Loki, glaring. "What did you do... did you invite the whole multiverse to this or something?" He asked. "What, of course not.. I simply hoped the world would bring us to this moment... and it has!" He said truthfully, Clyde just sighed, thinking it must be something else.

Inside the hospital, Noir is lying down, still bandaged up but clearly very antsy, wishing she could move around and leave, only to suddenly be enveloped in a flash of light. She looked down in

confusion, her wounds fully healed, and her clothes changed to a swimsuit. “What the actual hell?” One of the AID-E peeks their head it making sure she is alright. “Ms Noir, are you alright. That attire is hardly appropriate for a hospital, and your wounds... it seems you recover much quicker than projected. “Ugh, look, I don't know what happened, it was some strange magic... hey, wait. You have one on, too. AID-E looked down in shock, just as surprised to see her lap coat replaced with a bikini around her metal frame. The rest of the patients in the hospital had the same issue.

The shoreline was packed. More visitors arrived by the minute. Theron, in full warrior gear turned beachwear, Kugo with his arms crossed but clearly suppressing a grin, even the Ultra Scouts performing synchronized stretches in the surf. Everyone who had ever met Clyde and Raleigh seemed to be there, laughing, drinking, and treating the day like an endless summer festival. “Something’s not right,” Clyde said, scanning the crowd. “They’re all just… here. No reason, no ships, no portals. Just poof.”

Raleigh shrugged uncertainly. “Maybe Loki’s just… being Loki?” Loki smiled innocently, haloed by sunlight. “I assure you, this is simply the universe… celebrating our existence!” Before Clyde could reply, the atmosphere shifted again. A sudden cheer rippled through the crowd as Cindy bounded onto the sand, the Chimera Legion following right behind her. They were smiling. Raleigh rushed over, already putting her glove on. “The hell are you assholes doing here. Cyrus is one thing, but you... We were never friends.” She said, staring them down seriously. Cindy laughed. “Lighten up, captain. Oh, I know, let's settle things with a game of friendly volleyball, our way of burying the hatchet. “We already did that scene,” Loki interjected. “Mellon smashing then,” Wolf suggested.

“No! Leave.” Raleigh growled. “Relax, Raleigh. They mean no harm, they just want to enjoy the beach too.” Loki said, grabbing her shoulder. “And what's next? We invite the Crossbone Remnant and the Fake Reaper to a cookout? Even though he's in prison.” She argues back. Loki pauses like he is almost considering it. “Ah, well. No, I'd say that guy is a little too far on the evil scale for a silly slice of life event like this. He did a lot of fucked up things, you know. Maybe Freya though, she was a very

hot and refined woman... oh wait, she died." Loki said with a laugh. Raleigh isn't having it about to press further, only for the sky to break open.

The sky cracked. A jagged seam of white light split through the clouds, stretching wider with a sound like shattered glass. Every conversation stopped. The air stilled. Even the penguins froze mid-waddle. Something fell. A man with long white hair crashed down into the sand, landing perfectly on one knee. Hair fluttering with ocean breeze as he slowly looked up. The Original Reaper. "I have returned," he said, calm and regal. Every muscle in Raleigh's body tensed. Her hand trembled. She took a step back, face shifting between anger, confusion, and something softer.

The Reaper took another step forward… then lifted a six-pack of beer. "Returned," he continued with sudden cheer, "with the greatest beer in the multiverse!" He grinned. Grinned. The people who knew him stayed still, while everyone else began to cheer as bottles literally rained from the sky, landing gently into the sand. "What... how are you... even here..." She questioned. "We just want to enjoy the beach too," Marcus said, appearing suddenly next to Cindy, who didn't react at all to his presence.

"You people are dead!" She said in shock as she looked toward him, backing away in distress. "And even death deserves a day off, runt." Darrian loomed behind her, that familiar grin stretched ear to ear. For an instant, her facade cracked, grief, anger, and disbelief mixing all at once. "Loki..." Clyde said in concern. "Whatever you did, undo it..." He demands that Loki looks around just as confused. "I mean it, I don't know what's happening either." He said, distressed. Rebbecca was already looking into the code... "You idiot..." Before she could explain, she rushed toward something just out of sight. Half the members of Omnihack had shown up behind the ridge. She took them all down before anyone saw.

They were just cheap copies, but they were still taking time for her to defeat.
Finally, back on the beach, the air thickened. Lucius Novastride stepped forward, flanked by Dr. Corvus, both of them far too pristine for corpses. Lucius's smile was gentle, almost kind, his tone anything but. "It's quite all right. We may have had issues in the past, but today is a day of fun and

relaxation... Enjoy it." He said in an almost threatening tone. The sky started to darken. "Damn it, why does evil have to look so sexy?" Loki said, trying to tear his eyes away from the Emperor. Now, with all these recognizable faces, the people of HOME stood up ready to fight, but none stepped forward just yet.

The copies didn't take it well. They twitched, heads jerking at odd angles, their beach smiles freezing as their bodies began to unravel into streams of astral light. One by one, they turned skyward, merging into a single growing mass of color and static. Even the sky warped. The air buzzed. Kaguya, who had been chatting with a man she definitely fancied, stared in disbelief as he vanished mid-sentence. "W-what the hell is this?" Clyde demanded, tension in his voice. Rebbecca dropped from above, landing beside them in a spray of sand. Her visor glowed crimson.

"It might not have been fully intentional," she said, glaring at Loki, "but this all stems from him." Loki blinked. "Wait, what?! How?!" Rebbecca crossed her arms. "Your desire for a fan service chapter was so strong it created this beach." Loki raised a finger in mock defense. "And what's wrong with that?" She raised a second finger. "You wanted it to follow the usual beats, and HOME didn't know how to make them happen. So it improvised." Clyde's eyes widened. "And this… is what it came up with." Raleigh scowled. "Then why the hell did evil dead guys have to show up?"

Loki rubbed the back of his neck. "I didn't want them to! But, well, when they started showing up, I kinda… rolled with it?" "You absolute moron," Rebbecca hissed. Clyde turned toward the sky. The ball of astral energy was pulsing, shaking, growing with each second. "Who else could possibly show up that hasn't already? And how do we stop this?" Raleigh swallowed hard. "People like… the Caretaker. Or the Phoenix." A shadow burst from the sphere before she finished the sentence, a massive, blazing bird of fire shrieking toward the beach.

Pengoro leapt into action, launching himself skyward with a defiant squawk. His feathers shimmered like steel as he met the Phoenix head-on. The two titans clashed above the waves, claw versus beak, light versus flame. With a furious screech, Pengoro slashed across its chest, then struck

with a final, devastating peck. The Phoenix dissolved into sparks… and Pengoro fell, wings singed. “No! Pengoro!” Kaguya screamed. Iris dashed forward, magic flaring from her palms as she knelt beside the wounded penguin.

Clyde stared, eyes wide in awe. “Holy crap… Pengoro’s a badass.” Raleigh didn’t even look at him. “You’re forgetting the bigger issue.” The ball of energy convulsed, reshaping into a towering three-eyed being with writhing tentacles that clawed at the sky. Its voice was an earthquake, yet it was also for some reason wearing a bikini. “That doesn’t even look like him…” Clyde muttered. Grant and the Commandos drew their weapons. The Yakuza followed, forming a battle line beside them. Raleigh, Clyde, Rebbecca, and Loki charged the center, sand exploding beneath their feet. The monster slammed a colossal fist down, only for Penny to appear in a blur, catching its arm mid-swing and locking it in place.

“Oh crap… kaiju fight?!” Clyde shouted, stopping short. “No, you idiot!” Proxy barked. “She barely has combat abilities. She’s just holding him down!” “Right, they all said, rushing forward, unloading everything in their toolbox.. The Yakuza launched into synchronized team attacks, shouting their moves like they were in an old tournament anime. Kaguya stood at the edge of the surf, cheering them on, clearly having never fought in her life, but her energy somehow pushed them to hit harder. Mikako and the Don Buri owner sprinted up the creature’s arm. He drew a hidden blade, and she unsheathed an ornate katana glowing with power.

The Commandos rolled out heavy artillery from the nearby barracks. Grant aimed skyward, one eye squinting down his rifle. “Fire!” The Union ship responded instantly, a rail cannon beam tearing through the monster’s side. The blast blew off one of its arms in a shower of molten sand. Rebecca anchored herself with data-tethers, restraining its thrashing tentacles long enough for Clyde to leap in, slicing through its chest in a blazing cross-slash. Above them, Raleigh rocketed skyward, energy surging through her glove as it reshaped into a massive hammer, larger than she’d ever managed before. She came crashing down, slamming it into the creature’s skull.

Penny released her grip and dove aside as the impact flattened the beast, the shock wave sending waves across the ocean. The monster hit the water with an earth-shaking splash. Silence. They all celebrated, tired, bruised, but triumphant, until the thing moved again. Its body began knitting back together, like nothing had happened. Loki stood frozen, eyes wide with disbelief. “No… this isn’t what I wanted. How dare you warp my wish!” He pointed at the regenerating mass, frustration breaking into fury.

“The only thing I desire now… is for you to be gone!” A crimson rift opened beside him, and from it emerged another giant, this one red and radiant. The two titans faced each other for only a heartbeat before the red one threw a single punch. The corrupted creature exploded into mist. Then the red one gave a thumbs-up to Loki and vanished as well. Just like that, it was over.

Everyone stared for a moment, unsure if it was safe to breathe again. Then, slowly, they sank down into the sand, utterly exhausted. Rebbecca appeared beside them, her fingers flying across a holographic keyboard made of light. “And… done. I couldn’t completely erase the anomaly, but I managed to explain to the world why this wasn’t right. It… took it well.” She smiled faintly. Everyone exhaled in relief. Raleigh wiped sweat from her brow. “Man, I love this place… but it can be terrifying sometimes.”

They all turned toward Loki. He took a nervous step back. “It was an honest mistake, all right?!” Without a word, they all grabbed him. Moments later, Loki was buried in the sand up to his neck, only his head sticking out. He pouted as everyone returned to having fun like nothing happened, volleyball resumed, splashing in the orange waves, and penguins waddled in victory parades. Lucy passed by, setting a slice of watermelon next to his head before walking off. Loki sighed, watching the sunset reflect on the strange sea.

Clyde, Raleigh, and Rebbecca retire to the bar for a drink. “A hell of a day,” Clyde said, exasperated. “It was fun,” Raleigh said with a smile. “Don't worry. I can't fully control the code of the world, but now it knows not to listen to Loki at least.” Rebbecca reassured. Both of them sighed in

relief. “Thank all that is good in the Multiverse,” Clyde said. The rest of the night was Slow but uneventful, everyone having a chill and good time. Unfortunately for Noir, the moment she tried to sneak out of the hospital, everything reverted she was back. Bandaged up, still damaged from the battle. A couple of AID-Es found her stroking her head and lifting her back inside. Noir blinked. The smell of salt clung to her. “Was that… real?” One AID-E patted her blanket. “Statistically improbable, but logged.”

Eventually, everyone went home, leaving nothing but the penguins who now lived there to waddle around. Loki was still trapped in the sand. “Hey, um, friends, are you still there... The tide is coming in... I would really like to leave the beach now...” He said nervously. “Friends?” He said one last time, hoping someone would come. Only a curious penguin. He looked at it with a pleading eye, only for it to walk off, distracted by something else. “No wait, come back!”

Chapter 37: Family Ties

“It ain’t right unless it’s Wainwright.” The old Porta Nexus jingle echoed through an ancient ad reel. A young Russell Wainwright grinned proudly at the camera, hair still black and full, standing in front of a half-built tower. Beside him was a boy, his son, Colt, mimicking his father’s confident thumbs-up. Years passed in a montage of sawdust, steel, and laughter. Father and son built together, grew together, and for a time, they understood each other perfectly. However, every partnership eventually reaches its breaking point.

Now Colt stood tall beside his father, blueprints spread across the table. “I think we should use

sprocket hinges for this project," the son, now a young man, suggested eagerly. "They're new, untested, but they've got potential." Russell shook his head, calm and firm. "No, no. The alloy in those isn't strong enough. The whole structure could collapse." "You're just being stubborn, old man," the son shot back. "You've got to try new things once in a while. The old model's flawed, too." "Maybe in twenty years," Russell said, a faint chuckle hiding his unease. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. And if it doesn't work, it doesn't work."

His son clicked his tongue but dropped the argument, for now. When Russell left to handle another site, Colt slipped a box into a worker's hands. "Use this instead. We're trying something new." The worker hesitated, but followed the instruction, trusting the Wainwright name. Weeks later, the unthinkable happened. The building buckled and came apart like sand under a wave. Port Authority officers arrived within the hour. One of them, a Captain, scanned the wreckage, his expression grim. "This looks deliberate. And from Wainwright of all people... If this had lasted another day, dozens could've been killed."

Russell stood silent, eyes flicking toward his son, then back to the officer. He understood what this meant. The family name, their entire legacy, gone, he had to make a choice. "Who's responsible?" the Captain demanded. "Do we need a full investigation? I can't imagine you would risk something like this, Mr. Wainwright." Russell's throat tightened. He drew a slow breath and spoke. "No investigation needed. It was me. I switched the material at the last minute. I didn't trust my son's choice in metal." He said nervously.

The Captain blinked, surprised. "I see. Then I'm afraid I'll need your license. You'll come with me." Russell nodded. No argument. No defense. Colt watched in disbelief as his father walked away in silence. His hands trembled with fury. Why had his father gone behind his back like that? In his heart, the answer twisted into something bitter. He didn't see sacrifice. He saw betrayal. And from that day forward, he swore he would never forgive him.

Colt jerked awake at the holo-table, a sour taste of the past fading from his tongue. "Ugh. Bad

memories," he muttered, staring at the half-finished blueprint hovering over the glass. He'd founded Wainwright Beyond out of spite, and the company had flourished. He saw himself as an innovator, someone who didn't just raise buildings, but reimagined cities. That doomed sprocket alloy had been a stepping stone; he'd never used it again, already leapfrogging to better materials by the next project.

He stood, smoothing the lapel of his immaculate black suit, and looked out over his city. He had really made it. And yet, hollow. Years spent chasing the future had left him remote, untouchable, even to his own staff. The cost of true innovation, he told himself. He sat back at his desk to check his computer. Emails, Contracts, Forecasts, then News. A headline snagged his eye: "Frontier, a place for anyone to start anew," by Crow. The date was old, but the photo froze him in time. In the background, unmistakable: Russell Wainwright. He zoomed in, then read.

Crow's prose, sharper than their usual one-word replies. spilled out across the page: "Russell Wainwright, once a beloved and respected builder in Porta Nexus, has joined Frontier as Head of Urban Development. While controversial to some, the partnership has proven fruitful, a testament to Frontier's message: a place where anyone can start over." Colt pushed back from the table so hard the chair skidded. He stabbed the intercom. "Stella, cancel my meetings for the next week. I'm going on a trip." A pause. "Sir? Are you well?" "I'm fine," he said, already grabbing his coat. "Something came up that I can't ignore. I have to stop him from destroying another community." He killed the line and headed for HOME.

The transport touched down quietly on HOME's outskirts. Colt stepped out in a dark coat and cap, blending in among the small trickle of newcomers. The rush of arrivals had slowed; no one gave him a second glance. He started walking. Every few steps, he'd pause, tap a wall, lean close, knock, listen. Solid. Real. "Hmm," he murmured, almost disappointed. A woman carrying fruit slowed to stare at him like he'd lost his mind. Colt ignored her. He was a man on a mission.

He followed the path through HOME's growing districts, examining every beam and corner like an inspector at war with nostalgia. The architecture was clean, shockingly clean. He saw no structural

flaws, no poor joins, no shortcuts. It was maddening. Then he stopped. The Chamber of Influence rose ahead, a seamless fusion of classical stonework and futuristic glass. Colt found himself speechless. He hated to admit it, but the craftsmanship was flawless; old-world charm merged perfectly with new techniques.

He pressed on through the Yakuza district, shoulders tight as men in suits watched him from the corners. Their style was strange, unlike anything he'd designed, but the foundations were solid. Whoever built this city knew what they were doing. He didn't stop until the hospital came into view, and froze.

It was identical to the one he had designed in Porta Nexus. Down to the brick pattern, the courtyard layout, and even the symmetry of the front windows. His jaw clenched. "That's impossible," he whispered. An AID-E unit emerged, gently assisting a patient to their transport. Colt approached, running his fingers over the wall. "This brick and mortar, it's… the exact same."

The AID-E turned, eyes flickering. "Sir, are you having a mental break?" Colt replied, serious. "Why does this hospital look exactly like the one I built in Porta Nexus?" She scanned his face. "Identity: Colt Wainwright. Records say you designed this." "So why is it here? This isn't Porta Nexus." "Correct. This is HOME." "Then how?" She hesitated. "Administrator Lucy forbids revealing classified info to citizens from Porta Nexus."

"We're not in Porta Nexus, are we?" Colt countered smoothly. "So technically… that doesn't apply." The android hesitated again, processors whirring. "You will not inform the Port Authority?" "Sure." "Very well," she said, explaining subspace technology and HOME's design network. Colt's face hardened. "Figures. The old man couldn't have done this alone." "Of course," AID-E replied. "I'm designed to heal. Are you sound now?" Colt grimaced and turned away. "Yeah. Sure." He walked off, leaving the past behind.

He pressed on toward the beach. The new sidewalks gleamed faintly in the light of HOME's pink-orange horizon, fresh stairs winding down toward the sand. Someone had even started a small

pier. It was impressive, but still simple, still honest. Colt tested the outer walls, knocking every few meters like a man hunting ghosts. Solid. Perfect. No flaws. His frustration grew. He kept moving, past Loki's Club, Helix Mart, the Barracks, and the old bunkhouse the Commandos had turned into Raleigh's "Not-Sheriff's Office." Every foundation was sound, every weld seamless. It made him sick.

Finally, in desperation, he knocked on a random door. An elderly woman with green skin opened it, smiling politely. "Hi," Colt said briskly. "I'd like to inspect your basement." Her expression dropped. "The hell did you just say to my mama?" a voice thundered from inside. A massive green-skinned man charged forward, sleeves rolled up. "Wait, no, that's not..." Colt bolted before the explanation left his mouth. "Get back here, you pervert!" the man shouted, barreling after him. Colt dove into an alley, heart pounding, finally losing his pursuer. He slumped against a wall, panting. "Great. Brilliant. I'm going insane."

He looked up and froze. There was one site left. A construction area still in progress, lanterns glowing softly around scaffolding. He slipped in quietly. Only a few workers remained, tidying up for the day. Colt crouched by an unfinished support column, eyes scanning the framework, then stopped cold. There it was. A sprocket hinge. The same design he'd proposed years ago, the one that caused everything. Only this version was made of a different alloy. Stronger. Stable. His breath caught. "No way…"

"Hey! You're not supposed to be here," one of the workers said, noticing him. Colt didn't move. "These, these sprockets. You use them often?" The man frowned, then nodded. "Yeah. They're standard now. Works great with the new composite materials we've got here." He leaned closer, squinting at Colt's face. "Wait a second… are you..." "Colt?" Russel asked, looking in disbelief. He had come back to the site to get something, only to see him. His son turned to face him, eyes filled with confusion. He motioned to the sprocket right away. "Why?" That's all he said. After the revelation that his son was in front of him, he moved closer. They had not spoken since the fallout, but he already understood just what he was asking. "The design itself was a good one. It was the metal that was the problem. I learned

that pretty early on in this place.

“After all that talk... that day if you had just listened to me...” Colt yelled. Russel just took it. The worker finally spoke up. “With all due respect, you don't know the full story.” Another more seasoned worker drawn in by the commotion said. “James... don't.” Russel urged. “No, sir... I won't let him disrespect you anymore.” James argued now that he knew who he was. “What are you talking about?” Colt asked. “Mr. Wainwright didn't switch out your design... he...” He started to say. “I said don't!” Russel demanded before running off in a huff of anger.

James sighs, but doesn't let up. “Your father took the blame for you. I hope it was worth it.” He said, leaving without another word. Colt's eyes widened with sudden recognition, thinking back to the moment. His father wasn't being stubborn; he didn't switch them out. He had been wrong, and he knew that taking the blame himself. He rushed to find where his father had gone.

Russell sat on a weathered bench overlooking the cliffs, the sea below reflecting the dying sun. The wind carried the scent of salt and iron from the scaffolds below. Colt finally found him there, sitting alone. He slowed, then quietly took a seat beside him. For a long time, neither spoke. The waves filled the silence for them. “Why’d you do it?” Colt finally asked, voice low. “If I was that wrong, if the whole thing really was my fault, why take the fall for me? You lost everything because of it. You didn’t even correct me.”

Russell stayed still, staring out toward the horizon. “That day,” he said at last, “I had to make a choice. I looked in the mirror and saw two things: an unfinished building, still rough, still full of flaws, but with the makings of a beautiful skyscraper one day…” He paused, a faint smile ghosting across his face. “And a worn-out shed. Been through too many storms. Creeks in the wind. I wasn’t about to let that skyscraper get torn down just because it made a mistake.”

Colt’s throat tightened. “You’re calling me the skyscraper?” Russell chuckled softly. “Heh. Don’t get too proud about it. You’re still missing a few floors.” They both laughed, quiet, weary laughter that broke the years of silence between them. Colt leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“You're still a stubborn old man. All this time, I thought you didn’t trust me. That you couldn’t stand to let me do things my way.” “I did trust you,” Russell said simply. “That’s why I didn’t fight you that day. You had to learn from the fall. And I… had already had my time at the top. Losing the license hurt, sure. But you're my son, the love and Pride I feel for you will never change.”

“Now that I know the truth... I have to get you out of here. I'll talk to the Port to get you back and out of this backwater.” He said now on his side, like he once was. “Pft... don't be talking about this place like that, this place is my home now. It's truly amazing, more than you could even imagine.” He said, dismissing him. Colt paused, unsure what to say. “So what now? You really forgive me just like that?” He said conflicted. “If I didn't... well, it doesn't matter,” Russel said calmly. After another long pause, Colt speaks up one last time. “How would you feel about a group project. Just you and me. Like old times.” He said, pointing to a nearby floating island. Russel looked shocks, smiling like he had not in a very long time. “I would enjoy nothing more.”

Chapter 38: Round Table, Shadow Table

Raleigh entered Clyde's office, raising an eyebrow. He was sitting at his desk with full armor on, working. “What are you... doing?” She asked, puzzled. Clyde sits up from the couch to the side used for meetings, puzzling her more. “Oh, well, you see.” He said as the armor stood up, waving its arms and bowing. “I learned a new trick. Thought I'd try it out while working. Two birds, one stone.” He said as both of them made the same body motions. Not long after, the Ultra Suit vanished. “Wow, so you have extended the time, and now you can control it remotely? That's so cool!” She asked, genuinely impressed.

“Among other things. I'm not so useless anymore, huh?” He said with a smirk. “Yeah... maybe

not. I'd better watch out or you might outpace me.” She joked, jabbing his side as he frowned. “Hey!” He said, half pouting. She rubbed her head against his shoulder. “My big, strong man.” She said lovingly, making him blush. He readjusted his clothes. “Well, anyway, something you needed?” He asked. She stopped what she was doing, standing up straight. “Oh yeah. It's time for the Round Table Meeting, come on, everyone is waiting already.” She said. “Crap, I completely forgot. You don't seem all that annoyed this time around.”

“I'm not that impatient...” She pouted he just gave her a look. “Ok, fine. It's been a while, theirs even stuff I want to bring up.” She explained. He nodded, going downstairs without another word. Everyone was there waiting except Loki, but everyone expected as much. They didn't even question his absence; no doubt out there doing something weird. All of them were casually talking amongst each other as they took their seats.

“Alright, let's get started. Who's first?” Clyde said, taking the reins. Mr. Wainwright spoke up. “Ms. Rebbecca and I just finished the final touches on the town's shield.” He said with a smile. Clyde raised an Eyebrow, not even knowing they had been working on it. “A shield?” He asked. “Well, yeah. It will cover the whole town, sorta like the one in Porta Nexus, but different. We are still testing it, but the plan is to make it more Reactive.” Rebbecca said, waving her arms with excitement to visualize it.

“Reactive?” He asked. “Well, that's something, Me and the boy's pushed for. Problem with the big one down at the Port is well... Feels claustrophobic so some folks. We want em to feel safe but not trapped.” Grant explained. Rebbecca continued her explanation. “So the idea is if someone were to attack the shield would activate in that section only blocking it instantly. While we don't need to worry about wasting power, it is much more efficient.” She says. “Wait, but like... wouldn't that almost make it less effective?” Raleigh asked. “Well, time will tell, but no, that shouldn't be a problem.” The Hacker explained.

“What about infiltration?” Mikako asked, thinking more like a street thug. “Well... It probably wouldn't be able to do anything about that unless they are flying past it. It should block anyone sketchy

from entering from the sky at least.” Rebbecca said. “And if a fleet like The Union shows up again?” Clyde asked. Rebbecca laughs. “Yeah, no... that problem is a thing of the past, even if we had to activate the whole shield, they aren't getting in. “But... that does lend to another issue. Me and the guys, have not had many issues guarding this place. But worst-case scenario, we'd lack firepower in that instance. Safe but with no way to fight back.” Grant brought up.

“Right, so that's the main thing we are trying to figure out today. What are our thoughts?” Clyde said he already knew that much. “Well, I'd like to retrofit the Union ship. It's got firepower, but we don't have the men to man it, and there are a lot more auto... auto.” He started to say, not knowing the word. “Autonomous?” Rebbecca asked. “Right Autonomous. If we did that, we could just put a handful of guys up there and the rest of us could focus elsewhere, maybe even a few smaller ships. What do you think, Russel?” Grant suggested.

Mr. Wainwright rubbed his chin. “Hmm, well, I'm sure it's possible, but here's the thing. Shipbuilding is a whole other art. I don't have the experience to build anything worthy of that. We are best off trying to commission that from a shipwright if you ask me.” He explained. “We still have quite a war chest, and relying on our own resources means we don't have to expense much. I'm sure we can put that on the to-do list. Any other suggestions?” Clyde asked.

“Ah, yes, my turn!” Raleigh said excitedly. “Mechas! Just think each commando gets their only super robot!” She suggested thinking of form over function. “Something like that Ain't easy to learn overnight. Sides big machines like that are powerful until you meet stronger threats, so it doesn't matter.” Grant argued. “Please, I have one of my own. I mastered it overnight, basically. And come on, people can't just beat super giant robots.” She said confidently. “Raleigh, you're one of the people he is talking about.” Clyde sighs.

Raleigh deflated, sinking into her chair in disappointment. “But Mechs.” She said softly, pouting to herself. “Not saying we should completely dismiss the idea. You gotta keep in mind we only have so many men.” Grant said, feeling a bit bad. “What about giant robots?” Rebbecca said, trying to

cheer her up. “It's not the same. That determined look the pilot makes when he enters, zipping around all cool like...” She said, resting her chin on the table. “Smaller robots that get into larger robots?” Rebbecca asked even though it wouldn't be practical. “I guess that's... kinda ok.” She said after some thought.

“I say we green-light the retrofit, and revisit the Mecha thing later. Maybe we can find a way to make it work like the Mecha World does. What's next?” Clyde said. They went over a few less interesting topics, trade commerce, and how the population was feeling about living at HOME. Daily logistics and upcoming events. It took them about an hour to go through it all.

“And well, I think that's about everything except well... That...” Clyde said, annoyed. All of them looked at each other and nodded. “I can't believe he came all the way here to talk to us, though,” Raleigh said, head down on the table now. “Let's send him in.” Clyde sighed. Not long after, Eight entered the room with a grin. “I'm so happy to be here! Finally, time to renegotiate after... 90 days.” He said, a little annoyed that they had pushed it back so far. He looked over at Loki's Empty seat, deciding to help himself to it. Some of them glared but didn't stop him.

His smug face slightly falters upon seeing Rebbecca. He paused as she waved toward him with a smile. “So what exactly do you even want to change?” Clyde asked. “Well, I'll be blunt. A lot of my issues are non-issues now after you helped me out with our... Mutual problem. Thanks again for that, by the way. What do I want now? Well, the same as before... but with a caveat. I've made efforts to make my company less efficient, you see.” He lied.

“Less efficient?” Raleigh raised her head, raising an eyebrow. “Well, yes. I never wanted to do half the things people negatively say about us. Now I don't have to, but I still want to innovate. Having access to even a fraction of your resources would further that goal and improve lives all over the Multiverse. I'd pay whatever price you deem appropriate, of course.” He explained. They didn't completely buy into his words, but they had softened now that they at least thought they knew the story. “Clyde looks at Raleigh, who gives a reluctant nod.”

“Well, the only hang-up I have is well... we told someone we would wait until he was ready. Do you know Garrick?” He asked. “Ah, the Guild Master? Helix Corp uses its mercenaries from time to time. So he is preparing something, huh?” Eight asked in surprise. “He brought up a good point. You can't just introduce a power like that right away.” Clyde answers. Eight bit his lip in annoyance. “He's probably right about that. Very well, I will be patient,” he sighed, knowing that he really didn't need it anymore since Rebbecca was already giving it to Omnihack.

“Well then, to my other reason for coming here. The Hackers... I have no new information. But I would like to be kept in the loop, and of course, if I learn anything, I will share what I know too, and we. I have to leave. Thank you for your time.” Eight said confidently, smirking at Rebbecca, who smirked back in amusement. He got up to leave right away, clearly already late for something. “Let’s make sure that’s one deal we don’t regret signing twice,” Clyde said to the others. Eight turning just as he reached the door, nodding more solemnly.

With that, everyone ended the meeting, slowly leaving the Chamber. Mikako left her daughter waiting outside with her arms crossed. “Kaguya? What's wrong, sweetie?” “I should be the one running those meetings, I'm the next heir after all. Mikako snorts a laugh. “Is that right. You already had your chance during the election. I don't think you're ready for something like that. Besides, it's not like I'm the leader or anything. Just a piece in the larger picture. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you will truly be ready.” She said, half-mocking, half-sincere. “

Pft... you dare... that stupid Lion just caught me off guard... I'll show you...” She grinds her teeth, storming off. “Do you still want pork cutlet for dinner?” Mikako asked. “She stopped briefly, suddenly looking more timid. “Yes, please.” She said before resuming her rampage. She would show her mother, she would show everyone.

A few days later, Rigg woke up from his bunk, looking at his nightstand, seeing a scarlet envelope stamped with a mysterious seal. He opened it in confusion, reading what it had to say. “You are formally invited to join the Shadow Government. True Rulers of HOME?” He said aloud in

confusion. He tucked it away, moving about his day without another thought. He bumped into Grant pretty quickly. “Oh, hey, Colonel. Think someone is playing a prank on me, got this weird letter...” He started to say with a smile, only for Grant to stop him.

“No way... You serious... A red one?” Grant said in shock. “Well, yeah, why?” He said in confusion, “Took the same deal off of a few people in town, and a couple of Pirates.” He said, scratching his chin. “I don't know what this is about, but seeing as you're invited for some reason... how about being our inside man. Might be nothing, though.” Grant asked. “Well, I... sure... do you really think it's something to worry about?” He asked. “Dunno,” Grant said bluntly. Rigg sighed, looking at the date listed and the address, raising an eyebrow. “I'll do it.”

Later that night, he walks into a dark room. Earpiece on so Grant can listen in. Three figures already sat down at the table. “Welcome, Reginald. We have chosen you. The true leader of the commandos, To Join the Shadow Government.” One of the figures said. “True leader? Shadow Government.” He asked in confusion. “Yes, you are the one who runs the Commandos and helps out when no one notices. Do the important things that people don't even know need to be done, or HOME will explode. When they have an issue, they come to you first.” The Voice said.

Rigg was a little taken aback; he didn't think anyone had noticed. He had felt like the Commandos hadn't recognized all that he had done lately. “How do you even know all that?” He asked. But before he answers. The door to the basement opens violently, assaulting them all with light. “Hey, Lady Kaguya, are you gonna be long? I was about to close up the shop for today... And why are you just sitting in the dark?” The Owner of Don Buri asked, flipping the light on. “We um... might be a while.” Kaguya, the figure in the center, said sheepishly.

“Alright, well, if you guys get hungry, I left some food out for you... and don't stay out too late, Lady, your mom will kill me.” He said, leaving without another word. “As I was saying.” Kagaya started to say as Rigg turned his attention back, looking in shock. Sitting beside her were both Dave and The Rival. He pulled out his weapon right away after seeing him. “Wait, Rigg, calm down, play

along for now," Grant said. He lowered his weapon. "Yes, that's right. "Here we don't have to put on the facade. We all control parts of this place. Of course, I am the greatest among you." Kaguya motioned for him to sit. "Well, I don't know about that, but you're right, I am pretty great." The Rival said smugly.

The Rival Stood smugly posing. "I am the one responsible for creating tension. Our little game, designed to strengthen HOME defenses for the real threat, of course, I could beat you commandos in one hit, but then you would never get stronger. And the Pirate underworld is under my control too." He explained with a laugh, but was clearly reading from a paper given to him. Dave stands awkwardly. "Why am I here again?" He asked, not really knowing that Kaguya whispers into his ears. "Oh, right. I control the culture of HOME, toughening them up through Gravity Ball.. I mean relentless training." He said, correcting himself.

"And I am the Leader," Kaguya said, covering an Eye dramatically. "I control everything from the shadows. I exploit HOME's Resources for myself." She motioned to the cake she had on the table. "I hack hearts, not systems. I control emotion itself! The people worship me without even knowing it! I am… uh… Omni…Hack? No, wait... HackOmni! Yeah, that sounds way cooler!" She laughs. The others follow her lead, doing it too. "I'm literally a god," Dave adds. "The name needs work. Who would call themselves something like that?" The Rival said dismissively.

"Rigg just looks awkward. "And you, Reginald, perhaps our most powerful piece. It was you who reset the power during the blackout. Helped that old lady cross the street that one time." Kaguya went on. "You saw that?" He said in surprise. "Of course, I recognize greatness. Now take your place among us." She smirked. "What about all the other people you invited?" He asked. His expression soured. "Well, they didn't show up, so they don't get to be a part of it anymore." She mumbled.

"Well, sure... I'll join the shadow government." He said only for Grant. "Great!" The Rival said, already having shed his Pirate persona. He now had his hair slicked back in a dark leather suit, petting a random cat he had just now. Grant couldn't help but laugh on coms. "I'm sure they won't do anything

dangerous, but why don't you watch over these idiots for me. I'd rather know what dumb idea they are planning than not.” Grant Ordered as Rigg sighed.

They started to meet semi-regularly after a while. They did everything from board games to talking about all the things to role-playing all the secret things they did, though to them it was all true. Rigg just watched most of the time, but sometimes joined. They were always happy to see him, starting to call him the 4th general of the apocalypse. At first, he was annoyed by it, but over the weeks, he started to look forward to it. “He even helped The Rival sneak in and out of town a few times. Each time, the man would peel off one costume and emerge as someone else entirely, a pirate, a rogue, a businessman. It was as if his personality was stitched into the fabric of whatever he wore.”

Before he knew it, he was walking more confidently, wearing darker clothing and a beret. He wore a cape even though the other Commandos looked at him funny. Somewhere along the way, he had bought into the bullshit. Once again, he sat in the basement looking at them all with an evil smirk. “It's finally time for us to rise from the shadows. Yes, we will do a coup de ta.” Rigg said. “Then they will truly know who runs the place.

Grant busted in with a few commandos... “OK, I think it's about time we end this. What's wrong with you?” He sounded disappointed in him. “No, you can't stop the revolution, it is coming!” Rigg said now fully radicalized. “Go by, brothers run away, I'll hold them off.” He said dramatically, but they just looked at each other and around the room, seeing no other way out. “This... isn't what it looks like?” She said nervously. “I'd expect as much from that idiot, but you, Kaguya. I don't think your ma will be too happy about this when I tell her.” Grant said, “and you... Honestly, I don't even know who you are.” He said, pointing to the shocked Dave.

Kaguya's eyes widen in shock. She gets on her knees, pleading. “No, please. It was... just a prank... don't tell her I was gonna overthrow the government... I'll do anything.” She said, starting to sob. Grant just faced palm. “I won't let you do that to my comrades,” Rigg said, charging toward them. Grant delivered a swift punch to his head, knocking him down. “Snap out of it, you idiot.” He groans.

Rigg looks around, confused. “Well damn... I guess things did go a little too far, sorry, Grant.”

“Kick out the pirate, and let that one go, I guess... Come on, Missy, Mikako, and I are gonna have a little chat.” He said, picking up Kaguya as she sobbed. “No, please, anything but that. You have never seen her angry.” She pleaded. He keeps going, only stopping briefly to look back at Rigg. “And sorry. I honestly didn't know you were doing all that stuff alone. Next time, just say something.”

Chapter 39: Reevaluation

Noir had finally recovered enough to leave the hospital before anyone noticed, and she wasn't about to stick around. She had an evil organization to hunt. She slipped past the AID-Es with practiced ease, scaling rooftops and moving through the quiet twilight of HOME. From above, the town looked strangely peaceful. Decorations hung half-finished in the square below, and for the first time, Noir saw what her counterpart had built, a real community. She paused, her shadow stretching across the cobblestones. Did she really have to leave?

The thought lingered longer than she wanted it to. She shook her head hard. "This isn't where I belong," she muttered. Even still, she envied Raleigh's peace. "I'll find something like this for myself."

She jumped down, landing near the Helix Mart. It was closing for the night, but she managed to slip in just before the doors locked, buying a cheap portal gun with the last of her credits. By the time Clyde and Raleigh walked past the plaza, talking and laughing under the lights, Noir was already on the roof again, hiding in the shadows.

She took one last look at the town below, the lights, the people. Then she took a deep breath and aimed the portal gun. Just as her finger pressed the trigger. “You know,” came a familiar voice from across the roof, “the second you leave… I won’t be able to protect you from them.” Rebbecca stood there, the moonlight reflecting off her mechanical arms. Her face was calm, but her eyes pleaded. Noir groaned. “Oh, shut up. I can handle myself. And why do you even care? I didn’t rat you out.”

“Rat me out about what? You don’t know anything.” Rebbecca jumped closer, her tone teasing but tense. Noir’s eyes narrowed. “I will.” That landed like a blade between them. Rebbecca sighed. “Why do you have to know, Noir? Just… stay here. You don’t have to...” Noir clamped a hand over her mouth. “You think you know me, but you don’t. So stop pretending you do. You’re the last person who knows what’s best for me.” Rebbecca blinked, muffled words caught behind Noir’s hand—and then blushed. “Ooo, I like that,” she said with a smirk. Noir pulled away. “Ugh.” Noir rolled her eyes and fired the portal, diving through without another word. Rebbecca stood alone, her face hardening. “Oh, Noir,” she murmured. “I wish that were true. Good luck.”

Noir landed on the other side, some random wasteland under a pale sky, just in time to get hit by a stun blast to the back of her head. She collapsed instantly. Vance crouched beside her, laughing softly. “You know, when she said ‘the second you leave,’ I didn’t think she meant literally.” Noir groaned weakly. “You again…?” Vance smiled, gripping her by the hair to tilt her head up. “I missed you too. But do you have any idea how much trouble I got in after your little stunt?” “The stunt I pulled? With Payload? Pretty sure that was on you…” she mumbled before her eyes rolled back.

“Ha! How was I supposed to know he’d be in public?” Vance snapped, kicking her limp body in

frustration. “You were supposed to lose to him, remember? Then I could swoop in, and present you to the boss and no one would be the wiser. But no you just had to go and kill him, almost exposing us too. Endangering my position.” He sighed, wiping dust from his gloves. “It hardly matters. The result’s the same. Just came with… a little more heat than I expected.” He slung her over his shoulder, his usual smirk returning.

Clyde sprinted through an unknown battlefield, rubble crunching underfoot. Drones screamed overhead, firing in synchronized bursts. Others charged on the ground, blades flashing. He dodged most, until one got close enough to swing. Clyde blocked with a newly formed gauntlet, sparks flying.

He countered, sweeping his arm wide and knocking the enemies down before leaping high into the air, forming metallic boots mid-jump. He crashed down like a meteor, obliterating the next wave in a shockwave of dust. But they just kept coming. Empire soldiers. Union troops. Remnant fighters. Neo-Empire elites. Every force he’d ever faced was here.

He summoned the Ultra Saber in one hand, the Blaster in the other, and charged forward. Energy bolts and slashes cut through the crowd in perfect rhythm. Still they multiplied, endless.

He gritted his teeth. “Alright, fine, let’s make this interesting.” He threw out his hand, and the Ultra Suit materialized, not around him, but beside him. A perfect duplicate. Then another. And another. They fought as one, defending and attacking in sync, until they saw their chance.

They combined energy into a massive cannon, something that once required the entire Ultra Scout team to pull off. He fired. The blast leveled the battlefield, leaving nothing but silence and smoking craters. The other suits vanished, and Clyde collapsed to one knee, catching his breath. “Alright,” he said, raising a fist triumphantly. “That was nothing. Let’s keep going!” He said raising a fist in the air.

The world seemed to answer. Pixels started to materialize into a person. The Original Reaper,

Followed by Luicus, The Payload, and The Fake Reaper. “That is not what I meant” He said sheepishly as they all rushed him easily defeating him. “He felt the world glitch beneath him, dust turning to static, rubble flattening into a gray grid. A moment later, the battlefield dissolved completely. “Wow Clyde was really good. You have gotten a lot stronger.” Raleigh said lowering herself to his still fallen form. “Then what was that at the end.” He said annoyed. “You said keep going.” Rebbecca laughed shrugging at him.

“She’s right, though,” Rebbecca added, stepping closer. “When we first met, you were a total wimp, even with the crutch of universal code.” She covered her mouth, laughing. “You’ve come a long way, boy wonder.” “Haha… very funny.” Clyde sat up, brushing off virtual dust. “So, did you guys finish with the upgrades?” “Sure did,” Raleigh said, grinning as she lifted her arm. The new glove gleamed, its plating now infused with transcendent material. “You won’t believe what this thing can do now. It’s so awesome! I can’t wait to get into a fight so I can show you!”

Rebbecca rolled her eyes. “Pfft, says the person who stopped paying attention halfway through because she was distracted by lover boy.” She waved a hand dismissively. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, it’s linked to your mind anyway. But hey, why not test it now? There’s a perfect specimen right here.” She motioned to Clyde. Clyde’s face hardened instantly. “No. Never again.” Rebbecca tilted her head. “Why not?” Raleigh rubbed the back of her neck, chuckling sheepishly. “Oh, um… he’s still a little mad about the last time we sparred.”

“He should be!” Clyde said, pointing at her. “She doesn’t know the meaning of ‘hold back.’ Last time, I ended up buried halfway into the ground!” “I said I was sorry…” Raleigh muttered, fidgeting with her fingers. Rebbecca burst out laughing. “Oh, this I wish I’d seen.” “Yeah, yeah,” Clyde sighed, waving it off. “So… now that I’ve been humiliated in high definition, what’s next?” Rebbecca smirked. “Well, if you’re done pretending to be a punching bag, the festivities are about to start.” “Alright, let’s go!” Raleigh said excitedly.

All three smiled as they started toward the door, but Rebbecca faltered, her grin fading. “One more thing,” she said suddenly, her tone shifting serious.

Both of them turned to face her. “What is it?” Raleigh asked. Rebbecca hesitated for a moment, her expression unusually serious. “That new upgrade of yours… I’m not saying don’t use it, but well, I have a theory.” Raleigh tilted her head. “A theory?” Rebbecca looked away, folding her arms. “According to the old records, Raleigh the Explorer could naturally move between worlds. She didn’t need any tech for it. And yet…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Never mind. Just don’t let it become a crutch, okay?”

Raleigh gave a small nod, sensing there was more behind those words but not pressing it. “Got it.” They passed through the Hack Shack storefront, ignoring the usual chaos inside. It was especially crowded today, subspace wanderers of every shape and species brushing shoulders. Samurai, robots, mages, even a family of giant chinchillas squeezed through the aisles, arguing about adapters. From behind the counter, Proxy groaned, his face screen flashing a tired emoji. “No, we do not sell dog food! This is a tech store!” The door shut behind them before they could hear the rest of his rant.

Outside, the world was alive with color. Ribbons and banners hung from every rooftop, holographic streamers dancing in the breeze. Stalls lined the main street, filling the air with the smells of sizzling skewers, candied fruit, and alien spices. A small volunteer band tuned their instruments on the main stage at the plaza’s center, where the largest banner fluttered proudly above the crowd: “HAPPY 2ND BIRTHDAY, HOME!” “Two years already, huh?” Rebbecca said, almost in disbelief. “Feels like we were still patching holes in the roof yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Clyde admitted, scanning the bustling streets. “And somehow, Loki managed to outdo himself this time.” “Speaking of that lion,” Raleigh said, frowning slightly. “Anyone actually seen him?” Clyde shrugged. “Probably off doing something weird. But hey, he clearly had his staff working overtime. Let him have some fun.” He gestured toward the event volunteers, half of them wearing

cheap lion-ear headbands and shouting orders with comical enthusiasm. “Well,” Rebbecca said, linking arms with both of them, “enough talking. Let’s see what this festival-slash-birthday-bash has to offer!”

They were swept up into the current of the crowd, laughter and music spilling from every direction. Commandos stood at their posts here and there, vigilant but relaxed, taking shifts so everyone could enjoy at least a few hours of peace. For now, it truly felt like peace. Mr. Wainwright was crouched near the stage, tightening a bolt on one of the supports as a small crowd gathered around him. When the wrench clicked, the onlookers burst into applause, mistaking it for part of the show. He froze, blinking in confusion.

“Oh no, it was just loose, I...” he stammered, turning bright red as laughter rippled through the crowd. Even on a day like this, the man couldn’t stop fixing things. Raleigh passed by balancing an impossible mountain of food in her arms, struggling to keep it all from toppling. Clyde and Rebbecca followed, each holding a couple of skewers like civilized people.

They ran into Grant, fully armored despite the festivities, with Mara at his side. He gave a wave. “The guests of honor!” He Joked “So I’m assuming everything’s quiet?” Clyde asked. “No annoying pirates to worry about today?” Grant chuckled. “Funny you say that. They actually asked if they could come. We told ’em no, of course, but that captain of theirs?” He shook his head, laughing. “Said he was gonna throw an even better party on his little rock.” Mara snorted, equally amused. Clyde pictured it immediately, a sad room, one balloon, music that didn’t fit the mood, the crew standing around in painful silence. He shuddered. “Yeah. Sounds about right.”

Grant nodded and resumed his lazy patrol, still grinning. As they walked, his gaze caught on a candy-apple stand. He turned to his daughter. “You like candy apples, don’t ya?” Mara looked away, cheeks coloring. “I’m not a kid.” “C’mon, sweetheart.” He softened, voice lower. “Your old man didn’t get to watch you grow up. Humor me, just for one day.” She sighed, taking the candy apple with exaggerated reluctance. One bite later, her expression betrayed her. “…It’s fine,” she muttered,

pretending she wasn't smiling. Grant just chuckled, the sound swallowed by festival music and the distant hum of fireworks testing overhead.

Akane stood on the edge of a small floating island overlooking the festival below. From up here, HOME looked almost unreal, music, lights, and laughter blending into a serene kaleidoscope of color. It was almost enough to make her forget why she was here. Vincent adjusted his shades, the faint hum of his photon circuits flickering around his arms. "So," he said, cracking his neck, "we got a plan, or are we winging it?" Akane's gaze remained fixed on the plaza below. "I was going to test their shield. But at this point…" she trailed off, arms crossing. "I'm sure Trojan already did her job."

"That ain't what I asked." His voice carried an edge. "Why are we even doing this if I can't go all out? You know that's my thing." "This isn't an execution," she corrected coolly. "It's a reevaluation." Vincent sighed, tapping his foot impatiently. "Yeah, whatever. We going or what?" She crouched slightly, ready to jump, but then froze. Something caught her eye, movement in the plaza below. Three familiar faces entered the crowd: Mikako, Kaguya, and her boys, all laughing together under the lights. Akane's heart stopped. "No… see…" she murmured, lowering her hand. Vincent followed her gaze, his brow furrowing. "You've gotta be kidding me." He lowered his shades, staring directly at Mikako. "You knew she was here."

"She wasn't supposed to be," Akane said quickly. There was no calculation in her tone now, just raw emotion. "That's why I picked today." Vincent stared at her for a long moment, lips curling in disbelief. "You did." His voice was quieter now, edged with something like disappointment. "All this time you act like you don't care, and now you choke because of her?" Akane looked away, eyes cold again but her composure shaken. "We can't back out. You'll go alone. You're more than enough."

"Hold on." Vincent stepped closer, tone hardening. "Since when do you give me orders? Talking like you're my boss all of a sudden." "Vincent..." She said shortly. "No, don't 'Vincent' me. You're always preaching about the mission coming first. What happened to that, huh?" He jabbed a finger

toward her chest. “Now you’re getting sentimental?” Her silence said everything. He scoffed, turning away. “Fine. I’ll do it.” As he crouched to jump, Akane grabbed his wrist. Her grip was firm. “She’ll recognize you.” She said. “Yeah?” He smirked, tugging free. “So what?” He said coldly. “Do you still have your mask?” She asked. “Why would I carry that stupid thing around?” He said spitting at the ground.

Clyde and Raleigh spotted Mikako weaving through the crowd, her usual composed smile softening when she saw them. “Mikako? I thought you had a family thing today,” Raleigh asked, still halfway through a mouthful of food. “Oh, that.” Mikako laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of her neck. “Yeah, we came back a little early. Kaguya didn’t want to miss the celebration.” “Hey! You’re the one who said we could come!” Kaguya shot back, her usual bravado wavering under her mother’s glance.

“I also said the ceremony was more important, you brat.” Mikako flicked the back of her daughter’s head lightly. Kaguya clutched her head dramatically. “Ow! That was a critical hit!” Raleigh chuckled, but the warmth of the moment dulled when Kaguya muttered, “I’m tired of being sad. I never even knew Aunt...” “Kaguya.” Mikako’s tone was calm, but final. The girl fell silent immediately, eyes downcast. The moment passed, swallowed by the music and chatter around them. But the heaviness lingered, just for a heartbeat too long. Mikako smiled again. “Sorry about that... Didn't want to lower the mood.” She said none of them wanting to press just what she was doing before coming here.”

The sky cracked. A thunderous impact rippled through the air as Vincent slammed into HOME’s upper shield, the translucent barrier flaring to life. He stood atop it, dust swirling around him. “No joke, huh?” he muttered, flexing his hand as energy pulsed through it. “But they don’t call me Backdoor for nothing.” He struck again. The shield shimmered, then split, an impossible breach. He dropped through the gap, landing in a crouch dramatically… wearing a paper bag over his head. “The hell?” Clyde said flatly.

The crowd froze. A few of the Commandos instinctively drew weapons, surrounding him. “Who is this guy?” Mikako asked, one of her men handing her a wooden sword like it was second nature. “Someone we hoped never to see again,” Clyde sighed. Raleigh shoved the rest of her food into her mouth. “Can’t remember his name,” she mumbled through a full mouth, “but I think he said someone did something to his back door, and now he’s, like, traumatized or something.” She explained. “That poor man,” Mikako said sincerely.

Vincent tilted his head. “The what? I didn’t say that at all, you idiot! I’m The Backdoor!” Grant stepped through the crowd, fully armored, his voice booming. “Well, Backdoor, you’re surrounded.” Commandos formed up around him, weapons ready. Vincent gave a low chuckle. “No, I don’t think so.” He raised his hand, and the world shook. A massive explosion tore across the sky, followed by the roar of engines. Everyone looked up as a fleet of mismatched ships emerged from the clouds: Union models, old Empire hulls, even pirate designs bolted together like Frankenstein’s monsters. The shield held up blocking every strike of fire.

Grant ground his teeth. “Damn it.” “We got this, Grant. Go,” Mikako said, stepping forward with a sharp grin. “I need to blow off some steam anyway.” She said. “Careful, Mikako. He’s no joke,” Clyde warned, moving beside her. Rebbecca sat down cross-legged nearby, arms folded, watching with an unimpressed frown. “Of course he’s not. Look at the bag. That’s the mark of a true professional.” Mikako grinned, cracking her neck. “Well, I’m no joke either.” She lunged forward with blistering speed, her wooden blade cutting through the air like steel. Vincent responded instantly, forming a sword of light to meet her strike. The plaza erupted in shock waves of energy.

Chapter 40: Unmasked

Grant sprinted toward the outer wall, half the Commandos already moving in formation behind him. The faint shimmer of the shield lit the horizon with pulses of energy. “Report, Rigg,” he barked into his comm. “It’s strange, sir,” Rigg’s voice crackled through the static. “Didn’t think any of these guys were still kicking… and working with the Union no, wait former Union. It’s like someone scraped the bottom of the barrel and still found a few scraps left to throw together.”

“What are they doing?” Grant asked, breath heavy. “Looks like they’ve given up on the air assault. Switching to ground. You were right about the shield, it’s holding.” “Good. We’re minutes out. Don’t launch your counterattack until we arrive.” “Copy that.” The channel hissed with feedback.

Grant gritted his teeth, glancing toward the distant flashes on the horizon. The retrofitting Union ship wasn't here to back them up. The shield was doing its job, but if the enemy breached from below, all that power meant nothing. A loud crash echoed through the comm, then Rigg's startled voice: "What the.. what are they doing here?" then static. Silence. "Rigg? Rigg, come in!" Grant snapped, but the line stayed dead. "Hold on, we're almost there…" he muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else.

Mikako faced Vincent across the plaza, the paper bag still clinging stubbornly to his head. Everyone else stood on the sidelines tense, ready, but she didn't need them. She moved first. Lightning fast. Vincent barely had time to react, his photon blade hissing through the air as she slipped under it, countering with a blow so sharp it tore a streak of light from his weapon. Sparks scattered across the cobblestones.

His stance faltered. Years of training, stripped away by instinct. He ditched finesse for survival, shifting his blade into a pipe of light, rough, improvised, street-style. Mikako tilted her head. "This fighting style… it feels familiar." "You've probably fought plenty of thugs," Vincent sneered, stepping in close. He swung the pipe and cracked it across her head. The impact sent her crashing through a nearby stall, wood splintering under the force.

Raleigh lunged in before Mikako could recover, energy humming through her arm. She tried to absorb his light, but he twisted it, keeping it just out of reach like a cruel tease. "You didn't think I'd figure around that, you dumb bitch!" Vincent barked, blasting her into another building. Mikako shot out of the wreckage a heartbeat later, silent fury in her eyes. She struck his face dead-on. The paper bag tore halfway off. Vincent stumbled back, clutching it desperately with one hand.

"Just what are you trying to hide?" Mikako shouted, rushing forward. Vincent kept one hand clamped over the paper bag, the other up to block. Her wooden sword clashed against his metal palm with a sharp crack. "Wouldn't you like to know?" he taunted, his voice calm but his stance tightening.

She swung again, he caught the blade by its edge, twisting hard. With a flick of his arm, he launched her upward. But the moment she left the ground, he knew he'd screwed up.

Mikako twisted midair, body and blade aligned, and came crashing down with devastating precision. The impact threw Vincent backward, his hand slipping from the bag just as it tore free. The world went still. The paper bag fluttered away, landing somewhere in the debris. For a single heartbeat, silence reigned as their eyes met. Vincent's smirk was faint, almost apologetic, almost mocking. Mikako's face twisted into pure rage. "You…" she whispered, trembling. "You're supposed to be dead." Vincent exhaled slowly, lowering his weapon. "Well," he said dryly, "I guess that puts an end to this reevaluation."

"You! How are you alive? What are you doing here?!" Her voice cracked, fury spilling into every word. No one had ever seen her this unrestrained. "Does it matter?" he said flatly, turning his back. "I'm done here." "You're not going anywhere!" Mikako screamed. "Not today, not on the day you killed her!" Vincent froze for just a moment, muttering under his breath, "So that's what she meant… damn it." Then, with a frustrated snap of his fingers, he tore open a glowing rift. "I'm not dealing with this." He stepped through without hesitation. Mikako darted after him. "Wait! don't go!" Raleigh shouted, reaching out as the portal sealed shut. The sound echoed once, then faded, leaving only the hum of the shield and the stunned silence of everyone left behind.

A sudden calm swept through the plaza. Everyone froze, waiting for the next explosion that never came. For a few long seconds, the air was still, heavy and unsure. Then, bit by bit, life started creeping back. Some citizens cautiously resumed the festivities, pretending nothing had happened, almost used to it by now. Others stood frozen, whispering in confusion, and a few quietly slipped away, the mood ruined for them completely.

Clyde pressed a finger to his earpiece. “Grant, talk to me. How’s it looking outside?”

Grant stood on a ridge overlooking the battlefield. Smoke curled from the wreckage below — but the fight was over. The Commandos were scattered among the debris, standing awkwardly beside a few surviving pirates. “You’re not gonna believe this,” Grant said slowly. “Problem’s… dealt with.” The Rival struck a heroic pose amid the chaos, flexing like he’d just won a tournament. “Yeah, that’s right! No one steals my glory!” he bellowed, laughing like a maniac.

Grant sighed. “We got unexpected backup.” “From who?” Clyde asked, uneasy. “The pirates. They showed up just before we got here. I don’t know if they were trying to help or just didn’t like the other guys, but… they fought like hell.” “And now?” Clyde asked. The pirates erupted into cheers. “Hey, Captain! We could use a few new ships!” one of them shouted. “You’re right!” The Rival pointed dramatically toward the burning fleet. “Men! Claim them for ourselves!” “Wait, what?!” Grant started, but it was too late. The pirates charged toward the abandoned ships, shouting victory chants as they went. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “...Never mind. Situation contained, I supose. They’re… looting what’s left. But I guess that’s cleanup in their language.”

Back in the plaza, Raleigh was pacing so fast it was making Clyde dizzy. “We need to go after them,” she said sharply. “Now.” “We don’t even know where they went,” Rebbecca replied, crossing her arms. Her tone was calm, but her eyes flickered, she probably did know. Clyde turned toward Kaguya, who looked more shaken than anyone had ever seen her. The bravado was gone; she looked small. “Do you know who that was?” he asked. “No I… Mom doesn’t get like that with anyone,” she said quietly. “I’ve never seen her lose control.” Raleigh clenched her fist. “Then we’ll get Loki to tell us, like always.”

“Sure,” Clyde said, his voice steady but weary. “We’ll do that. But first, we need to figure out what just happened. Why they came here, what they wanted, and what to do with the prisoners. And if there’s another attack coming, we can’t leave HOME undefended.” He looked around. The crowd was

slowly rebuilding itself, stalls reopening, laughter returning in cautious bursts. It was like the chaos had already been absorbed into the rhythm of the day. “Guess they really do trust us,” he murmured. Raleigh raised a brow. “Or they’re just numb.” Clyde gave a dry laugh. “Either way… we’ll take it.”

“Let’s take the fight to them for once,” Raleigh said, clenching her fists. “I’m tired of people showing up, doing whatever they want, and...” “I agree,” Clyde cut in. “But we need to prepare first, and… has anyone actually seen Loki?” Rebbecca froze mid-step, eyes widening like a math error finally caught up to her. Not that they hadn't seen him but that she failed to account for his powers she readjusted. “Come to think of it… I don’t think I’ve seen him since…” They all said it together. “The beach episode.” They bolted toward the shore.

Loki sat half-buried in the sand, staring serenely at the horizon as waves rolled in. He looked like a monk who had reached enlightenment, or someone who gave up trying to move days ago. “Oh hell, he’s still here,” Clyde muttered, guilt creeping in. “Loki… are you okay? How did you even survive?” Raleigh asked cautiously. His eyes didn’t open. “I have become one with the waves. We are one with the waves.” “Loki?” Clyde tried again, kneeling beside him. “It’s us… your friends.”

“Ah yes,” Loki murmured softly. “I had friends once.” “Loki, we’re sorry, we didn’t know...” Clyde began. Loki finally turned his head, sand cascading down his cheek. “All I wanted was a little fan service… to witness the wonders all body types had to offer. Alas, my dreams were my undoing. Now I am bound here… in an eternal beach episode.” He sighed dramatically. “Do not become like me. It would be a grave mistake.”

They all stood in stunned silence. Then Clyde muttered, half under his breath, “Lucy said she really felt like sitting on your face earlier, but she just couldn’t find you.” Loki shot upright like a resurrection miracle, sand flying everywhere. “Let’s go! Right now! Oh hey guys.” He tilted his head,

realizing who he was looking at. “If you could do that the whole time then...” Raleigh began, disgusted. “No, don’t misunderstand,” Loki said quickly, brushing off sand. “I was truly stuck. I just lacked the motivation!” He paused, grinning sheepishly. “Also, I probably did deserve it… a little.”

Noir stirred, her head pounding as her vision slowly focused. Cold metal cuffs bound her wrists to the chair, one on each side. The air hummed faintly sterile, electronic. This wasn’t HOME. It wasn’t anywhere she recognized. A flicker of light, and Mainframe appeared before her, projection lines tracing her silhouette like a glitch brought to life. “No changes,” she said flatly, scanning Noir like data on a screen. “What... where am I? Who are you—” Noir started, but Mainframe cut her off. “Your questions will be answered by him.”

The room seemed to tilt, and suddenly, he was there. The Boss didn’t enter so much as exist; one moment, the space was empty, the next, it simply contained him, as if he had always been part of the code. The air thickened. Noir’s heart dropped, the sheer pressure of his presence was suffocating. “So this is it,” he said, his voice calm but heavy. “Seeing you in person truly makes the difference. A clone, perhaps… but you still shine just as brightly as your mother once did.” That word , mother hit her like a shock. “My… what?” Noir managed.

For a moment, his expression softened, almost nostalgic, before he quickly recomposed himself. “I am the System Administrator of Omnihack,” he said evenly. “You are a potential asset… and a dangerous anomaly. I offer you two futures.” He clasped his hands behind his back, pacing slowly around her. “One, The Root has already made known to you. Join us. Become an Operative, a color, a purpose, a place.” His tone darkened. “Or refuse… and cease to exist. You are far too dangerous to remain free.”

Noir stayed silent, partly from defiance, partly from instinct. She knew words wouldn’t matter here. “This isn’t a choice to be made lightly,” he continued. “So, I give you one week. When the

countdown reaches zero, we will no longer take chances with you." And then, he was gone. No sound. No flicker. Just gone. A digital beep echoed through the room, and red numbers appeared on the far wall:168:00:00 — 167:59:59… Noir's throat went dry. Mainframe stepped forward, unblinking. "You are nothing like him." Noir hissed referring to Vance.

"Our mission is of utmost importance," Mainframe replied, tone still robotic but faintly defensive. "Would you like to be educated? I may provide clarity in your decision. Though your clearance is... limited." Noir's eyes narrowed. "What even is your mission? Hunting ghosts? Stopping some bogeyman? Sounds delusional." Noir scoffed. "Not delusional," Mainframe said without emotion. "Confirmed. The Once and Future Foe. Threat Level: SSS at maximum recorded output. The greatest threat of the past… and the inevitable threat of the future." Noir exhaled slowly, her gaze hardening. "And you think you're the ones who can stop it?" Mainframe's expression flickered, not amusement, not anger. Something else. "No. We are simply the ones who must.... By any means."

Chapter 41: Burned in the Past

Twenty years ago. The streets of Porta Nexus had collapsed into chaos. Three gangs ruled the underworld then, each a pillar holding up the city's black market empire. When one fell overnight, it left a gaping hole, a power vacuum that pulled everything else down with it. Now, the Kinryū-kai and the Mafia tore through each other for control while the Port Authority watched from behind barricades, pretending those districts no longer existed, or maybe someone had paid them to look away.

Two sisters sprinted through the wreckage of a once-busy square, boots splashing through rain-soaked ash. One with jet-black hair, the other with fiery red. Behind a barricade of crates, Jiro, the same

man who would one day run Don Buri, peeked out over the chaos. Dozens of gangsters were brawling in the open street, the night flashing with gunfire and the crackle of stolen tech weapons. He spotted the sisters and waved. “Ah, the young masters have arrived! Been a while, Mikako, Akane,” he said, casual even under fire. “Give us an update,” Mikako snapped, already scanning the battlefield. “Relax, sis,”

Akane said, cracking her knuckles with a grin. “We’re all here for the same thing, time to get fired up.” Jiro ducked as a stray bullet tore through a sign overhead. “Looks like a new player just showed up,” he muttered nervously. Mikako turned, eyes narrowing. “A new player?” “Yeah… rough bunch,” Jiro said. “No ties to anyone. No code. No honor.” But Akane was already gone, tired of waiting for details. “Thanks, Jiro,” Mikako called as she sprinted after her sister, muttering under her breath, She’s going to get herself killed one of these days.

She followed her sister straight into the chaos. The square had turned into a messy mêlée: Yakuza in sharp black suits trading blows with Mafia heavies, some pig-faced brutes swinging cleavers, civilians scrambling for cover, and then a new element, a pack of scruffy street thugs who looked like they’d grabbed whatever metal they could find and started swinging it around. Mikako scanned the scene, frowning. “What are they doing here? This place was supposed to be cleared out.”

Akane didn’t answer; she was already cutting through the crowd, impatience in every step. Mikako clicked her tongue. The Kinryū-kai couldn’t stand idly by when civilians were getting trampled. She moved to intercept. A man with long, wild black hair laughed as he slammed a rusted pipe into a Yakuza’s ribs with one hand and kicked a Mafia thug with the other, spitting on the cobbles like he owned the street. “Yeah, take that! You ain’t so tough!” he crowed.

The pig enforcer spat back, voice trembling. “Who are you?” The man shrugged, amused. “Heh. Who we are doesn’t matter. We’re sick of your shit. Now it’s our turn.” Akane had already zeroed in on him, saw the way he led, the way others followed his chaos. Without hesitation, she closed the distance and punched him square in the jaw. He hit the pavement, then popped up, surprised and grinning. “Well damn,” he said, wiping blood from his lip. “Someone here can actually throw a punch. A broad too.”

“She’s not just any broad,” Akane shot back, flashing a grin of her own. “Name’s Akane Kinryū. You vulture.” He tossed his head back, amused. “Vincent Cross,” he answered. “You got a problem with vultures?” They didn’t wait to talk. Both lunged at once, blades and fists meeting the instant they closed. The square held its breath, the first real collision of two dangerous reputations.

Mikako ran into the melee just in time to intercept a splintering board that was on a collision course with the back of a terrified office worker. She caught the board’s edge, toppling to the ground with him. The man landed on his backside, his slicked-back black hair and crooked glasses making him look even more stunned. Two thugs rushed at them, but Mikako blocked their attacks and knocked both aside with precise strikes, shielding the office worker behind her. When the brief flurry ended, she turned to the man. “You okay, dude?” she asked, half-smirk, half-concern.

He just stared for a beat, jaw slack. “I was just saved… by the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he blurted, utterly lost, she turning as red as Akane’s hair. “What?” Mikako snapped, caught off guard. He blinked, shook his head as if waking from a dream. “Sorry, sorry. That was, I got distracted. Thank you. I’ll find some way to repay you, I promise.” He bowed awkwardly and ran off, still stumbling over his words. Mikako watched him go, a little off-kilter. Nobody normally dared talk to her like that, not with her status as the next head of the Kinryū-kai. A grunt nearby tried his luck, stepping up to take advantage of the distraction. Mikako didn’t even turn; one quick snap and he was out cold. Her cheeks still burned faintly.

Hours drifted by, and the square finally emptied. Bodies lay where they’d fallen, breathing hard, bruised and spent. Akane and Vincent lay side by side on the rubble-strewn pavement, both nursing fresh cuts and grins. Vincent laughed through the ache. “You’re no joke, Red Hair.” “You either, Cross,” Akane shot back, breathless. They traded a look and, almost at once, both snarled playfully, “Next time we fight, I’m kicking your stupid ass!” They collapsed into another round of exhausted laughter, the war for the night settling into a fragile truce.

Time passed, and the new group began to solidify. People started calling them the Iron Vultures,

the ones who swooped in overnight, scavenging the wreckage and building something powerful out of the city's decay. A fragile peace returned to Porta Nexus, but the tension never truly faded. Whenever the Kinryū-kai and the Vultures crossed paths, fists followed. The red-haired enforcer, Akane Kinryū, the Immovable Object, and the Iron Vultures' rising ace, Vincent Cross, the unstoppable force, clashed on sight. Every blow was half fury, half flirtation. Nothing between them really changed; it just took a different form.

Later that night, Akane slipped out of an abandoned building, Vincent close behind. Before he could speak, she caught his collar and kissed him hard. "We still on for Sunday?" she asked with a grin. "Yeah. And don't think because we're sleeping together, I'll go easy on you," he said, pressing a finger against her chest, and meaning every word. "If you did, we'd really have a problem," she teased. "Whatever, bitch. See you then," he said, turning to leave without looking back.

Mikako, who had been searching nearby, froze as she caught the end of the exchange. Her voice shook between disbelief and disappointment. "Akane… how could you do that? With him of all people?" Akane shrugged. "What? You think that changes my conviction? If he gets in the way of the family's business, I'll treat him like anyone else. Don't lecture me, not when you've got that little office boy hanging around all the time." "What are you? No, we're not... he's just..." Mikako stammered, face going red.

As if summoned by name, the man came jogging around the corner, holding up his collar. "Mikako! Look!" he said, beaming. Around his neck was a fresh golden dragon tattoo. Akane tilted her head. "Wow. Whoever did that had great penmanship. Almost looks real. But maybe don't go showing that off, the Kinryū-kai doesn't like imitation." Mikako blinked, flustered. "What do you mean... I mean, I joined!" the man said proudly. "You what?" Mikako shouted. "How did you even pass the test? You're scrawny and..." she hesitated, lowering her tone, "you could've been killed!"

He rubbed the back of his neck, smiling nervously. "It was rough, yeah. But every time I thought I'd fail, I thought of you. You wouldn't give up, so neither did I." He gave a small bow before

running off, probably to his new squad. Mikako buried her face in her hands, mortified. “I don’t get it,” Akane said with a smirk. “But if you like him, go for it.” “He just has a strong sense of duty,” Mikako said softly, seeming to greatly admire that about him. “I need to convince him he doesn’t owe me anything. A guy like that… isn’t cut out for this life. He’ll break. And besides, Mom’s already got people lined up for me.” Akane’s smirk faded. “Yeah, well,” she said, turning to leave, “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

The routine became law. Akane and Vincent fought; sometimes she won, sometimes he did. Both gangs egged them on like it was a sport, cheering from rooftops and alleys. Their clashes had become so common that no one even questioned them anymore. The contradiction only deepened, as absolute hatred and burning affection became so intertwined that they were indistinguishable.

But someone was watching. Two figures stood at the edge of a shattered overpass, their faces half-hidden by the glow of flickering street signs. Both wore plain gray jackets. Both had twin metal arms. “I think they’d make good Ciphers, don’t you?” one said, voice smooth and artificial. “I concur,” the other replied, eyes reflecting the chaos below. Another draw. Another rooftop. Akane and Vincent lay side by side in the dust, bruised, breathless, staring up at the smog-choked sky. Around them, the city moved on, too used to their fights to care anymore. “Don’t you ever get tired of this?” Akane asked quietly.

“Of what?” Vincent smirked without looking at her. “Winning?” She sat up, brushing grit from her hands. “My family taught me that honor and duty are everything… but look at us.” Her voice softened. “At the end of the day, we’re just thugs with better suits.” “Pretending you're different,” he said flatly. “Can’t say that’s a revelation.” “Don’t you ever want something more?” she pressed. “To fight for something that actually matters? Not just some patch of turf in a city that stopped caring years ago.”

Vincent sighed, rolling to sit beside her. “Never thought about it. You know how we started, right?” She shook her head. “We grew up here. Bottom rung. No one looked twice at us unless we

made noise. So we did. The Vultures? We built them from nothing, took what we wanted. And now? Everyone knows me." He grinned faintly. "That's gotta count for something." "And that's enough for you?" She asked. "It's gotta be," he said, leaning back on his hands. "But I ain't saying I'll stop chasing bigger highs."

"That's perfect," said a voice from behind them. Both turned sharply. The two gray-coated figures stepped out of the shadows, eyes glinting coldly. "Your sentiments," one said, addressing Vincent, "are precisely what we look for." "And your conviction," said the other, turning to Akane, "is exactly what we need." Vincent frowned, sizing them up. "The hell do you two want?" The first one smiled faintly. "What we want… is to offer you something greater." The second one's tone was calm but heavy. "A chance to rise. To fight for something that matters."

"And you think we're just gonna join your little club 'cause you said so?" Vincent scoffed, rising to his feet. His smirk carried all the arrogance in the world, but his eyes sharpened like a predator's. The two strangers exchanged a glance. "Then let us speak your language," one said, cracking their neck. "So to speak." Both recruiters moved with fluid precision , their metal arms unfolding like blades. It wasn't flashy, it was perfectly controlled.

Vincent grinned, finally interested. "Now we're talking." He dashed forward, pipe raised. Akane followed instinctively, her movements in sync with his, the familiar rhythm of rivals turned partners. But their opponents weren't ordinary. Every punch Vincent threw was deflected with mechanical ease. Every strike Akane landed was, redirected, used against her. They weren't trying to win. They were measuring them. "Analysis complete," one of them said mid-fight, sidestepping a sweep that would've shattered anyone else's knee.

Akane grit her teeth. "You're holding back." "You're both more compatible than projected," the other replied calmly. Vincent spat blood, eyes narrowing. "Oh, hell no." He swung again, full strength this time only for the recruiter to catch the pipe between two fingers. Sparks flared. "Enough." The fight stopped. Their metal arm blades retracted, the glow fading. The recruiters stood untouched, but

neither Akane nor Vincent were humiliated, just challenged.

“You both want more,” the first recruiter said, tone smooth and cold. “Power, purpose, a world beyond this city’s filth.” The Second one said. “And you’ve just proven you’re worthy of it,” the other added. “We don't recruit by chance.” Akane glanced at Vincent. Neither spoke. They didn’t have to. Both were still panting, adrenaline mixing with curiosity. Finally, Vincent wiped his lip, grinning through the pain. “...Alright, you’ve got my attention.” “Good,” the first recruiter said. “Because once you accept, there’s no going back.” He placed a glowing object on the ground both of them vanishing quickly as they came.

They didn’t touch it for a long time. The city’s noise had faded, the gang wars outside slowing to a distant murmur. The cube’s glow painted their faces in pale gold, as if daring them to move. Neither spoke at first. For Vincent, the answer felt obvious. He’d been chasing something bigger his entire life, recognition, power, a name that meant something. He wasn’t built to say no. But Akane... She stood frozen, torn between duty and the whisper of freedom she didn’t know she wanted. She thought of her sister, of Mikako’s stubborn loyalty, of her mother’s expectations, of the men who looked up to her as the Kinryū Kai’s enforcer. All of it would vanish the moment she reached for that light.

Could she really let it go? Could she really walk away from everything she was raised to protect? Vincent’s voice cut through her thoughts. “You already know what I’m gonna do.”Akane sat with her sister on the rooftop that night, the lights of Porta Nexus flickering below. Mikako watched the skyline quietly, arms crossed. “You ever think it’ll end? This petty fight between factions.” Akane asked. Mikako didn’t look at her. “No. But we’ll make sure it doesn’t get worse.” Akane snorted. “That’s not good enough. You sound like mom.” She said “Maybe mom had the right idea,” Mikako said softly. “You don’t fix chaos by feeding it more chaos.”

Akane leaned forward, the frustration in her a hot, restless thing. “So what, we just sit around pretending this place isn’t rotting? Don’t you ever wonder if there’s something bigger? Something

worth fighting for?" Mikako finally turned toward her. "You already have something worth fighting for. Family. Honor. People who depend on us." "That's not what I mean," Akane shot back. "You fight to maintain things. I want to fight to change them." Mikako's expression hardened. "How is that different?"

Akane's voice cracked, just slightly. "We aren't special we are the same as everyone else in town... we just got a little lucky. Think of all the people in town that are suffering. We claim to be their protectors, but are we really." Mikako went quiet. When she spoke again, her tone was heavy. "You sound just like him." Akane frowned. "Who?" "The Vulture... Well maybe a little gentler around the edges... you said you could fight him, but can you really. He's influenced you. Pulled you away from family." She argued.

"No I... aren't you and him the same..." She asked in fury. "No... I won't give into my desires I know what honor is." Mikako claimed. "Whatever... you think your better, that I can't fight him anymore! I'll show you!" Akane stormed off with another word rounding the corner just out of sight and activating the cube. Almost immediately there was an answer. "You have chosen wisely. Tonight. Vinccent Cross, and Akane Kinyru die. Wait further instructions." They said through the cube.

Before Akane knew it, she was standing in the ruins of an abandoned building, face-to-face with Vincent like always, but this time, something was fundamentally different. The tension between them wasn't the usual rush of rivalry or passion. It felt heavier. Final. Vincent rolled his shoulders, his expression uncharacteristically serious. "Last chance to change your mind." Akane said nothing. She just took a deep breath and charged. The building shuddered from the impact of their first clash, shock waves rippling through the walls. Within seconds, the decrepit structure erupted into chaos, windows exploding outward, flames licking at the night sky as if the city itself wanted to swallow them whole.

From the street below, a lone Yakuza footsoldier sprinted toward the Kinryu compound, panting. "Boss! It's Akane, her and Cross are fighting!" Mikako didn't even look up from the table where she was reviewing ledgers. "So? They do that every other day." "No, ma'am," the man said,

trembling. “Not like this. This time... it’s a fight to the death.” The pen slipped from Mikako’s fingers. For a long, frozen moment, she said nothing, then she was already moving, she bolted through the door. By the time she arrived, the building was half gone, roaring flames painting the street in orange light.

The heat hit her like a wall. The sounds of battle still echoed inside, inhumanly powerful blows that cracked concrete and shattered steel. “Call the fire division!” she shouted. “They don’t come out here anymore!” someone from the Vultures yelled back, equally panicked. Mikako ignored them, scanning the burning structure for any opening. Each faction stood on opposite sides of the street, Yakuza and Vultures alike paralyzed by the sheer violence of what they were witnessing, each secretly praying their champion would win.

Inside the blaze, shadows collided, two silhouettes intertwined in destruction. Each impact echoed like thunder, sparks scattering through the inferno. Mikako clenched her fists. She didn’t mean it. She didn’t mean for it to end this way. But the last words they’d spoken, Akane’s angry promise to “show her.” echoed louder than the flames. Then the building erupted, bursting outward in a violent bloom of fire. Heat rolled through the streets, forcing everyone back. For a long, agonizing moment, nothing but the roar of burning filled the air.

When the flames finally died down, the ruins were unrecognizable. Among the charred debris, they found remains, two shapes locked together, inseparable even in death. Mikako dropped to her knees, disbelief giving way to a raw, shaking cry. The sound tore through the smoke and silence, a wound the city itself seemed to absorb. Around her, Yakuza and Vultures alike stood frozen, none truly believing it was over.

High above, unseen through the haze, Vincent and Akane watched from the rooftops. “That was a neat trick you pulled,” Vincent said quietly, his tone caught between awe and guilt. Akane didn’t answer. Her eyes were fixed on her sister below, tears cutting through soot on her face. “What have I done?” She said. One of the two Ciphers stepped forward. “Come. Let us begin. Welcome to Omnihack.” They followed without another word.

The underworld shifted in the weeks that followed. The Vultures and Kinryu-Kai stopped fighting. They didn't like each other, but out of respect for their "legendary enforcers who fought each other to the death," they left each other alone. Peace, of a sort, was born from the ashes, bought by two ghosts. Mikako never forgot that night. She tried to honor her sister's memory by changing the Kinryu-Kai from within. She opened their doors to dialogue, to trade, to rebuilding. In time, she married the office worker, the same man she'd once saved in the streets. He was never a fighter, but he tried every day to be good enough for her.

When Kaguya was born, Mikako swore her daughter would never live the lives they had. The gangs stayed divided but stable; the city began to breathe again. For a while, things did get better. She worked with the Port, with the other factions, with anyone willing to talk. But even then, she could feel it, that unchangeable rot festering beneath Porta Nexus, waiting.

Then came the Siege. Mikako cradled her husband's body amid the rubble, blood soaking through her hands, her cries echoing through the smoke and ruin. Another loved one she couldn't save. Another promise broken. She shut herself away for weeks after, silent as stone. Akane's words haunted her. Fighting for something that matters. One night, she stood and whispered them aloud. "Then that's what I'll do."

She called out, "Jiro!" He appeared almost immediately, bowing low. "Yes, ma'am?" "That place you mentioned," she said. "You think we can make it there?" He hesitated. "You were listening? Well… yeah. It'll be hard, but why?" She looked out the window toward the broken skyline. "Tell everyone we're leaving. If they want to come, they can. If not…" she paused, steadying herself. "I won't begrudge them." Jiro nodded once, expression unreadable, and left to spread the word. Mikako closed her eyes. For the first time in years, she felt something that almost resembled peace.

Chapter 42: Cipher Initialization

Akane and Vincent found themselves in a place that defied sense. No sky. No ground. Only endless, sterile corridors folding into each other, like a maze that built itself as they walked. Their footsteps echoed faintly, as if swallowed by the walls. The two Ciphers who had recruited them led the way, moving in perfect synchrony. “Do not stray,” one said without looking back. “Unless you wish to be lost forever.” Neither argued. They followed.

At last, the path opened into a room lined with uniform racks, rows upon rows of identical grey sleeveless jackets. The two Ciphers stopped at the threshold. “Put these on,” one ordered. “When you are ready, exit through the far door.” Then both vanished into static. Akane picked up one of the

jackets, running her fingers over the coarse fabric. “I’m starting to think we made a mistake,” she muttered. Vincent smirked. “Ha. Giving up already? These guys are the real deal.” “Hold on a damn minute! I didn’t say that!” she snapped, turning just in time to see him half-undressed. “Then suit up,” he said casually, tugging the jacket on. “Man, these uniforms are tacky though. Gonna have to talk to management about that.”

She rolled her eyes but followed suit. When they stepped through the far door, a small crowd was already waiting. New recruits, whispering nervously, all dressed the same. At the center stood an older man with the trademark twin mechanical arms, hands clasped neatly behind his back. The faint sound of machinery hummed from beneath his skin. Above them, a balcony overlooked the chamber. Vance watched with a knowing grin while Payload loomed silently in the corner.

“Welcome, new recruits,” the man began, his voice calm yet commanding. “You stand before Omnihack. I am The Compiler. It is my purpose to mold you into perfect agents for our great mission.” His tone was neither cruel nor kind, just absolute. Vance’s grin faded as he turned to leave, clearly losing interest. Vincent raised a hand. “Yeah, uh, question, what exactly is that mission?” The Compiler’s gaze turned to him, eyes like glass lenses narrowing. “All answers you are permitted to know,” he said coldly, “will be told to you now.” Akane tugged Vincent’s arm, silently urging him not to push it.

The Compiler resumed. “First, what we are. Then who we serve. Then what we fight for.” He began to pace, every step measured, every word deliberate. “We are Universe Hackers, the strongest beings in existence. Those who bend reality to our will. Those who rewrite the code of creation.” Murmurs spread through the recruits. “I thought they vanished decades ago.” “No, I heard rumors, some still exist.” “Don’t you have to be, like, a genius or something to do that?”

“Silence.” The single word cut through the noise. The Compiler’s gaze swept across them like a laser. “All of you were chosen because you can evolve. But in the words of our System Administrator:

‘Potential means nothing without execution.’ Do not disappoint him.” He paused, letting the warning settle. “Even if your intellect is lacking, our systems will correct that. What you lack, we will install. What you are, we will rewrite.”

He turned back to them, the air growing heavy. “And our goal...” He hesitated, just briefly. “Our goal is to prepare for what comes next. The Once and Future Foe... a being beyond logic, an infection that devours reality. If we do not prepare, the multiverse itself will collapse.” The room fell silent. Even the hum of the walls seemed to fade. Vincent crossed his arms. “That’s it? Some scary monster in the dark? You expect us to just buy that?” “Mind your tongue,” The Compiler said, voice sharp enough to freeze the air. “If you wish to learn more, succeed.”

He turned, the mechanical joints in his arms whirring softly. “Follow me.” The recruits moved in line, Vincent grinning faintly while Akane hesitated. As they stepped into the next corridor, another mirror-lined hall that seemed to stretch forever. Akane caught her reflection beside Vincent’s. She barely recognized the woman staring back: same eyes, same face, but the fire behind them dimmed by the cold light of Omnihack. Vincent only smirked. “Guess we’re in the big leagues now.” Akane said nothing. For the first time, she wasn’t sure if he was right.

The Compiler led them through another corridor, this one wider, brighter, its walls humming softly with unseen machinery. The sterile air stung their throats. To the right, towering structures loomed behind transparent panels, rows of buildings, dormitories, and training arenas all contained within the same endless facility. There was no horizon, just geometry.
He stopped abruptly and turned, expression unchanging. “I see we’ve already lost a few. How unfortunate.”

Only now did Akane notice that a third of the recruits were gone. No sound, no struggle, they’d simply vanished. “For those of you who remain,” The Compiler continued, “this is the first phase of your training. You will live here until you complete it. Survive the process, and a final test awaits.”

He paused, his mechanical arms folding neatly behind his back. “You have one hour to collect yourselves.” Without another word, he walked away, the faint hiss of hydraulics marking each step until he disappeared behind another door.

Akane stared after him. “Did they… quit?” she asked, her voice small in the vast silence.

Vincent frowned, scanning the empty hall. “We can’t leave this place that easily. Remember what those two freaks said when they brought us here? ‘Do not stray.’” He glanced toward the shadowed corridors that stretched endlessly in every direction. “They’re not gone, Akane. They’re lost. Which means they’re basically dead.” The thought sent a chill through her chest. Around them, the remaining recruits drifted toward the dormitory block, some silent, others whispering prayers or curses. The air smelled faintly of metal and ozone.

Akane hesitated. “Guess we should… pick a room?” Vincent shrugged, his grin returning. “Might as well. Don’t wanna get lost before the fun starts.” They followed the others into the dorm, identical doors lining an infinite hall, each room sterile and white, furnished with nothing but two narrow beds and a single screen embedded in the wall. When the door closed behind them, it sealed with a mechanical hiss that sounded far too final. Akane sank onto her bed, staring at the blank ceiling. “I think we really did make a mistake this time.” Vincent leaned back against the opposite wall, smirking faintly. “Maybe. But it’s too late to hit ‘undo,’ isn’t it?”

The training began simple, routine, even. They were tested in every way imaginable: physical endurance, tactical awareness, memory recall. Obstacle courses, logic puzzles, math equations that looped into fractal nonsense. Every performance was recorded but never discussed. No rankings. No feedback. No praise. It became clear that accuracy didn’t matter. Only persistence did. Days or what passed for days blurred together in that sterile void. The air never changed. The light never dimmed. They slept when exhaustion forced them to, woke when The Compiler’s voice echoed through the walls like a system notification.

Then, something shifted. The next obstacle course looked identical to the last same floor, same walls, same pacing. Until the lasers appeared. They moved together and forward, bright red lines that cut through the air like blades. One recruit hesitated for a second too long. There was no scream, no explosion. Just light, and then they were gone. Erased. The rest ran faster. By the time it ended, fewer than half remained. None spoke. None questioned. Even the written tests had stabilized, every survivor capable, efficient, unshaken.

The Compiler finally appeared again, his mechanical arms folded neatly behind his back. His voice echoed perfectly through the room. “You have done well,” he said, tone neither pleased nor kind. “We have recorded sufficient data. Now… we move to the final phase.” He turned, the sound of hydraulics punctuating each step. “You are not truly one of us until you pass. Come.” They followed without hesitation. The lights dimmed as they walked, the corridors narrowing, the hum of the facility deepening to a low mechanical drone. Eventually, they entered a massive circular chamber. Ciphers, real ones, stood in flawless lines around the perimeter, silent and unmoving, their eyes glowing faintly like pilot lights in the dark.

At the center waited a single machine smooth, metallic, curved like a giant spinal column. Two arm-sized apertures yawned from its front, cables snaking up into the ceiling like veins. Akane stared, stomach knotting. “What… is that?” she whispered. The Compiler turned, unreadable. “Your ascension,” he said. “Your final test. Give up your arms.” A ripple of disbelief ran through them; then, as faces registered it, everything clicked into cruel clarity. Not a single Cipher in the room had organic arms. The realization landed like a punch. “But why?” someone demanded.

“The System Administrator grants power greater than you can imagine,” the Compiler replied, voice flat. “Through his arms you will be strengthened. This is not a gift, it is an exchange. To receive, you must relinquish. Lose something to gain something else.” Panic flared. A recruit screamed, “Screw this, let me out! I don’t want to join.” The Compiler’s answer was chill and certain. “That option has

always been available. Step through that door." He indicated a dark entryway. A few desperate figures ran for it and vanished; silence swallowed them. "Omnihack will not be compromised," the Compiler added, watching the survivors with patient severity. He did not need to finish the sentence. The choice was only a choice in name. Refuse the arms, and the world made that decision for you.

Vincent clicked his tongue, anger and resignation warring behind his eyes. He hated being forced into anything, but there was no way out now. He was the first to step forward. "Wait, are you sure?" Akane asked, her voice barely steady. "Sure of what?" Vincent said. "That I don't want to die? That I want to be someone?" The Compiler's expression shifted, a flicker of satisfaction crossing his normally mechanical calm. "Then step forward, Candidate. Place your arms inside."

Vincent glared at the machine like it had insulted him, then did as told. The metal sealed around his forearms with a hiss. The hum built to a scream. Light flared, burning white, and Vincent's eyes went wide. The sound that came out of him wasn't human. The machine was devouring his arms, piece by piece, nerves lighting up as they were rewritten. "Do not lower them," the Compiler said flatly, watching him writhe. "If you remove them before the process completes, your integration will fail." He had to hold still. Through pain so sharp it stole his breath, through bones grinding and flesh searing, he stood there, shaking. When the machine finally released him, he collapsed forward, blood pooling beneath him as a smaller device grafted black ports over the fresh stumps, sealing them before he bled out.

He gasped, trembling but alive. "Next," the Compiler said. Like it was nothing. Like it was routine. Some recruits broke instantly. They turned for the exit, knowing what awaited, choosing it anyway. A few didn't even reach the door before security drones vaporized them cleanly, silently, like deleting a line of code. Akane stepped forward. "I'll go." She didn't say why. Maybe she didn't need to.

The pain hit her just as hard, but she bore it differently. Her jaw locked. Her body shook. She didn't scream. The smell of scorched flesh hung heavy in the sterile air. When the machine released her, she

fell beside Vincent, both breathing in ragged gasps.

Vincent turned his head toward her, eyes still wild and feverish. He managed a faint smirk. “I’ll miss those powerful things,” he rasped. Around them, others followed. Some survived. Others didn’t. The Compiler surveyed the room. The machine still hissed faintly, the smell of ozone mixing with blood. “Congratulations,” he said evenly. “You’ve been granted access.” Two senior Ciphers approached and attached mechanical arms to Vincent and Akane. The connection hissed, metal fusing with flesh, and both flinched as data surged into their nervous systems. It wasn’t like moving a limb. It was thinking movement and watching the universe respond. Cold. Precise. Powerful.

“You are now Cipher 241 and Cipher 242,” the Compiler said. For the first time, there was something close to pride in his voice. Then everything stopped. The lights froze mid-flicker. The hum of machinery halted mid-tone. Even the air itself seemed to solidify. Everyone, every Cipher, every recruit, stood locked in place. Only the Compiler could still move, trembling, his processors racing to comprehend the phenomenon. And then he appeared. The Boss the green-clad figure materialized, mask gleaming like liquid metal. Mainframe stood beside him, calm and composed, her body radiating soft, pulsing light, She looked physically older then the one in the present. Like the current one reverted in age.

The Compiler immediately dropped to one knee. “Administrator! You honor us with your presence!” The Boss said nothing at first. His voice, when it came, carried through the frozen air with terrifying precision.“None resisted freezing.” It wasn’t a question. The Compiler hesitated, stammering. “N-no, Great Administrator. All complied...” He started to say The Boss wasn't interested.” “Unfortunate,” The Boss said quietly, almost to himself.

The Compiler froze in place, unsure whether to speak. “Shall I, erase them? Begin again?” “That would be a waste,” The Boss replied, stepping forward to inspect Vincent and Akane. They couldn’t move. Couldn’t even breathe. Yet both felt him looking through them, like their thoughts were

being dissected. “They may yet prove themselves useful,” he said finally. “Mainframe. Begin.”

Mainframe’s eyes flickered open, glowing in concentric circles of data. She raised her hands gracefully, palms outward. Lines of energy webbed across the room, threading through every frozen Cipher. The Compiler watched in silent awe. Even he could barely process what she was doing. Then, just as suddenly, the light faded.

When Akane opened her eyes again, Mainframe stood before her. “Cipher 242,” she said, tone flat and absolute. “Your new mission has been assigned. Threat Level: E. Please proceed.” She gestured toward a glowing portal behind her. Akane blinked, dazed. “What? What about...” she began, glancing around. Vincent was gone. The room was empty. “Further information is available to you inside,” Mainframe interrupted, pointing toward Akane’s new arms. Before she could respond, a pulse of energy surged through her body.

The implants came alive, force-feeding data into her mind—names, coordinates, strategies, even the target’s scent. Akane gasped. “I… I know everything now.” “Yes,” Mainframe replied, unblinking. “Now go. This mission has time sensitivity.” “Just like that? Already?” Akane asked, still reeling from the rush. “You have already proven your value. Further evaluations are unnecessary,” Mainframe said, her voice like static made calm. She gestured once more toward the portal. Akane stepped through, and her life as a Cipher began.

Days blurred into cycles. Missions into numbers. Vincent was out there too, she could feel it, somewhere in the data flow, but they never met again. Each was assigned to different sectors, different universes, different wars. They became ghosts of Omnihack’s will. She learned quickly. They both did. World to world, their orders came without context: eliminate warlords, dismantle terrorist cells, prevent the detonation of weapons of mass destruction. Sometimes the missions were simpler, steal research, plant incriminating data, manipulate the downfall of governments. The legitimacy of these targets was never clear.

Omnihack didn't explain why. It simply knew. And Akane obeyed. At first, she hesitated. Then, as the results came, cities saved, crises prevented, she began to believe. This was what she had wanted: purpose, power, the ability to stop chaos before it spread. She felt the code of worlds flowing through her arms, the pulse of existence itself. For the first time in her life, she wasn't bound by the laws of others.

Then came her first C-level mission. She wasn't alone. Payload was there. She'd never seen destruction like his, entire landscapes erased in seconds, the air vibrating with controlled annihilation. She stood in awe, realizing there were levels above her, unreachable plateaus of power. A "Colored Operative," Mainframe called him. Akane wanted that. She wanted to reach that height.

But the missions never stopped. Every time she returned, Mainframe was waiting. The robot would restore her body, erase fatigue, pain, even scars, and send her out again. Days, weeks, months… it all blurred. She no longer remembered the faces of those she'd saved, or those she'd killed. Until one day, Mainframe paused. "You have done well," she said. Her tone was still cold, but softer. "Missions have slowed. Take some time for yourself."

The "core facility" was similar to the training complex sterile, geometric but warmer, almost welcoming if you ignored the absence of windows. Everything was purposeful, practical, and eerily quiet. A dorm wing stretched down one side, a massive recreation hall stood empty on the other, and near the center was a cafeteria that hummed faintly with unseen machinery. Her stomach growled. It had been months... real months.

She grabbed a tray and stepped into line. Rows of Ciphers stood in silence, waiting their turn. Missions must have slowed down, she realized. She reached the end of the line, holding her tray up to a scanning drone. It whirred softly, and a bowl of steaming ramen with rice appeared before her.

She hadn't asked for it. She blinked at it, confused. It wasn't like her family's cooking, but it wasn't bad either. It smelled right, and that was enough. She turned, and nearly collided with someone.

Vincent.

Their eyes widened in mutual disbelief. “Cross,” she said, her voice catching. “It’s been… I don’t even know how long.” He looked down, tray in hand, his expression flat. “Hey. Let’s eat.” They sat together in the far corner. For a few quiet minutes, they didn’t speak. Then she noticed his restless tapping. “You don’t seem… happy,” she said softly. “Of course I’m not,” he snapped, drawing glances from nearby Ciphers. He lowered his voice. “This place blows.” He took a breath, frustration spilling out in waves. “Yeah, the power’s great. But for what? ‘Go here, kill this guy, erase that record.’ Over and over. And don’t let anyone know about us. How the hell am I supposed to make a name for myself if I can’t even exist?”

Akane sighed. “I get it. But that rule’s absolute. You can still be flashy, just don’t make it traceable. Be subtle.” “I am subtle,” he growled. “But that stupid robot keeps telling me I’m this close...” he pinched his fingers together “...to ‘overstepping protocol.’” She smirked, slurping her noodles. “You never change. Still complaining about authority.” He gave a half-smile. “Guess some things survive cybernetic enlightenment.” They both laughed softly. For the first time in months, it felt almost normal. “Hey,” she said, eyes narrowing playfully. “Let’s have a duel.” He blinked. “I don’t really feel like beating anyone senseless right now.” She grabbed him by the collar and dragged him off.

Later, the room was quiet. “I… needed that,” Vincent said at last, lying back against the bed, breath unsteady. Akane brushed her hair from her face, smirking. “Kinda surprised they allow that sort of thing.” He shrugged, voice dry. “Pretty sure they don’t care what we do, as long as we serve the mission.” He mimicked Mainframe’s tone perfectly, and she laughed. Then he went still. His expression hardened. “What?” she asked, tracing a finger along his chest. “You look like you saw a ghost.” “There’s something wrong with your body,” he said quietly. She blinked, thrown off. “What? I mean, there are bound to be side effects, but...” She started to say.

“I’ve studied every inch of your body over the years,” Vincent interrupted, half-teasing, half-serious. “Looking for openings. And that…” He pointed to her shoulder, just above where the synthetic met flesh. “That’s not how it was.” Akane frowned and turned to look. The seam between her skin and the mechanical graft shimmered faintly, like light bleeding through from beneath. She touched it, tracing the divide. “Doesn’t feel any different,” she said, though her voice wavered slightly. Her eyes flicked back to him, scanning his chest, his arms, searching for something similar. Nothing. So she ripped the sheets away.

“Hey! What the hell, bitch?!” he barked, startled. She ignored him, eyes narrowing. “Hold still.” Her gaze locked on his right thigh. “There. That’s it.” Vincent glanced down. “I don’t see anything...” Before he could finish, she was already at work, her cybernetic fingers opening along the seams, unfolding into surgical tools. “Hold still,” she repeated, her tone calm... too calm. “You better be right about this. And watch my manhood, it’s right there.” He pleaded. “There’s no way I could miss it,” she said, deadpan.

With one clean incision, she reached in and pulled something out. Vincent winced, gasping in pain. The object dangled from her grip, glinting under the sterile light. Small. Mechanical. Deliberate. “A bomb?” she whispered. “What the hell…” Vincent sat up, breathing hard. “This must be how they do it.” “Do what?” She asked. He swallowed, eyes darting toward the door. “Some of the others talk. About the boss. About how he can erase anyone, anywhere. Doesn’t matter where you are in the multiverse, he just, poof. Gone. No one knows how. No one’s dumb enough to test it.”

Akane’s stomach twisted. “Then we were supposed to... ” She said “...be erased if we disobeyed,” he finished. His voice was tight, almost a whisper. Her pulse quickened. “Then get mine out. Now.” Vincent didn’t argue. His hands were rougher, clumsier, but steady. When he opened her shoulder just under the bone, he found something else entirely, organic, pulsing faintly, more like a living gland than a device yanking it out.

“Different types,” he muttered. “Different placements. To keep us from finding patterns.” He held it up carefully, disgusted. “The fact we caught this at all’s a miracle.” Akane stared at it, then forced herself to look away. “Vincent… we can’t tell anyone.” He nodded grimly. “Yeah. Not if we wanna stay alive.” They destroyed the devices burning, crushing, and finally reducing them to ash, and buried the remains deep in the recycle chute. Neither spoke again after that. That night, they lay in silence. No joking. No teasing. Just waiting to see if they’d still be breathing when morning came.

When they woke, everything was normal. Too normal. Vincent got dressed first, grumbling. “I swear, if that robot’s got another mission for us today, I’m gonna...” He opened the door mid-sentence, and froze. The hallway beyond was gone. In its place stretched a long, sterile corridor they’d never seen before, white walls humming softly, light bending toward a single door at the far end. They swallowed hard the choice was clear. Walk forward. They steeled themselves walking slowly down the hall opening up the door.

A vast, endless blue sky spread out before them, the floor reduced to a narrow white platform suspended in nothing. The door behind vanished. Only the two of them remained, two figures, and one other. The Boss. He stood at the edge, overlooking the horizon, hands clasped behind his back. Mainframe hovered in the distance, half-present, half-light, until he gave her a single glance. She nodded once and disappeared.

Their hearts pounded. They didn’t know whether to kneel or run. He turned to face them, expression unreadable. “Do you know why you are here?” Neither answered. They couldn’t tell if it was a question or a trap to get them to say more then he knew. Akane swallowed. “No, sir.” The Boss’s face didn’t move, but his tone softened slightly, as if pleased they caught on. “Good.” He stepped closer, slow and deliberate. “The bombs implanted in your bodies serve as a final level of compliance, unknown to most Ciphers, though rumors persist. If one were to go rogue, they would be instantly deleted. But the devices also serve another purpose.”

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. “They are the true final test.” Vincent’s jaw tightened. “How many ‘final tests’ do you people have?” he muttered before realizing the mistake. He stiffened. “Sir.” For a moment, the Boss said nothing. Then, just barely, his expression hinted at amusement. Akane spoke quickly to cover for him. “Have we failed?” “No.” The Boss’s eyes glowed faintly behind the mask. “You have passed.”

He circled them like a teacher inspecting tools. “Few ever discover the compliance devices. Fewer still survive doing so. That tells me two things.” He stopped in front of them. “You are dangerously perceptive. And you are useful.” He extended a metal hand toward the empty sky. “I am offering you advancement. Become Colored Operatives of Omnihack. More power. More freedom. More responsibility.” His voice sharpened on the last word. Akane hesitated. “You… trust us more after defying you?” “Trust?” The Boss’s tone almost cracked into laughter, but didn’t. “No. I reward results. Whether born of loyalty… or fear.”

He stepped past them, voice echoing as the endless blue sky warped and rippled into flowing code. Akane’s jacket flickered and shifted, the gray fabric morphing into a deep crimson sheen. She looked down in confusion. “Cipher 242,” the Boss declared, his voice like thunder in the static air. “You have the makings of an immovable wall. You will be designated with the codename. The Firewall. Color: red.” He paced again, turning toward Vincent. The same distortion washed over him, his jacket darkening to blue while his black hair stayed unchanged, something he must have altered later.

“Cipher 241. You are the Firewall’s opposite, an unstoppable force. You will be known as The Backdoor. Color: blue. Finding exploits, and leading all charges.” His words carried finality. Not commands, but verdicts. The two of them exchanged a glance, half awe, half defiance, and nodded. Whatever fear lingered in their chests was buried beneath one shared conviction. At least for now, they wouldn’t let him down.

Chapter 43: Showdown

The air rippled as Vincent dropped into a barren world flat, endless, colorless. A faint ember clung to his coat before he brushed it off with irritation. “Took me forever to out run that demon,” he muttered. “She’s gotten strong on her own.” “Of course she has,” Akane replied coolly. She sat at a lone table in the middle of the wasteland, the only thing for miles. “She was always stubborn. Now sit. Let’s play.”

Vincent frowned. “What the hell? We’ve got work to do, don’t we?” Akane sighed and gestured again. “Ironically, there’s something the three of us always forget.” He groaned but dropped into the seat across from her. “And what’s that?” “That damn lion.” She flicked her wrist, and a chessboard

flickered into existence between them. Vincent blinked. “You dragged me to a desert for board games?”

“He’s no fighter,” Akane continued, ignoring him, “but that power of his…” She mubbled. “What power?” “As long as Loki knows about you,” she said, moving a pawn forward, “he can pinpoint exactly where you are.” Vincent’s hand froze over his piece. “So that’s how they keep finding us. If we go back to base, they’ll trace it too.” “Exactly,” Akane said, sliding another piece forward. Vincent leaned back, rubbing his chin. “Then doesn’t that mean we can never go back?”

“That remains to be seen,” Akane replied. “Trojan’s already working on countermeasures. But until then, conditions have changed.” He raised a brow. “Meaning?” “We can’t kill them,” she said, a sharp smile curving across her lips, “but we can beat them.” Vincent grinned and shoved back from the table hard enough to rattle the pieces. “About damn time.” He glanced down one last time at the board and made his move. Akane looked over it, amused. “Hmm. Checkmate. You’re actually pretty smart when you don’t get impatient.”

“Can beat us now?” The voice cut through the still air. Both turned. Raleigh stood a few meters away, Clyde beside her, arms crossed, watching with a calm, cold expression. Vincent’s smirk widened. “Well, shit it’s already time, huh? No wait this time around. Thanks a bunch.” Akane rose, her new arms gleaming faintly in the lightless void. “Why here?” Clyde asked. Akane’s tone went flat. “The time for talk is over.” “Yeah,” Vincent added, cracking his knuckles. “Time to kick your ass!” They all moved at once.

Raleigh and Vincent collided first, fists slamming together hard enough to send shockwaves through the wasteland. Sand exploded outward in rippling waves. She reached out trying to absorb the light with her glove. Vincent laughed, twin blades of light flickering into his hands. “Ha! Dumbas, didn’t I already tell you I found a workaround?” He fired a burst point-blank. Raleigh blocked, the energy searing across her armor. “Work around this!” she shouted, bursting from the smoke with a giant scythe.

He caught the blade mid-swing with both hands, grinning through the strain. She smirked, releasing it. She let go of it sipping around reforming a blade mid-motion and driving it through his side. “That fucking hurt!” he barked, slamming his fist down. The weapon shattered, shards scattering like sparks. He ripped the broken steel from his body and hurled it back. Raleigh barely twisted aside; it skimmed past, slicing her arm open.

Across the field, Clyde faced Akane in a mirror of their last battle, only now, he was ready. He sent one Ultra Suit construct charging forward. Akane raised a crimson shield, and the suit disintegrated the moment it struck. But she didn’t see the second one. It came from behind and cracked her across the head, breaking her concentration. Clyde surged in, gauntlet forming over his right hand. “Gotcha.” He drove his fist into her gut, the impact echoing like thunder. Akane skidded backward, her boots tearing furrows in the sand. She straightened slowly, wiping blood from her lip. “Wow… you’re like a whole different guy this time.” Her smirk returned, sharp and unshaken. “Guess that makes this fun again.”

She wasn’t letting her guard down anymore. Clyde rushed in, hammering her with everything he had, but every strike sparked against a sudden red shimmer. A shield formed around her again and again, each one harder, sharper, some even throwing him back. Clyde skidded across the sand, catching his breath. “That shield’s no joke.” Akane smirked, arms crossed behind the barrier. “Well, it certainly has most people beat.”

He shifted tactics. An Ultra Suit construct dove into the ground like a burrowing predator. A second later, it erupted beneath her, catching her across the face. She staggered back, a faint bruise darkening under her eye. For the first time, her composure cracked. “Very good,” she said, genuinely impressed. Then, with a flick of her wrist, another shield shimmered beneath her feet. “But no more tricks from below.”

Clyde side-eyed Raleigh’s fight across the field. Hers was exactly what he’d come to expect

over the years, standard on the surface, but so blindingly fast it was almost unreadable.

“I think we should trade dance partners,” He said as she darted backward, sliding past him just as Vincent lunged. In the same heartbeat, Clyde pivoted and met him head-on, driving a fist straight into his jaw. Raleigh mirrored the move, slamming her own punch into Akane at the exact same moment.

Both hits landed with explosive force. Akane’s last-second shield shattered like glass. Vincent reeled, blood flicking from his lip.

Now Clyde took the fight to him. The Ultra Saber blazed to life, metal formed from light clashing against light shaped into metal. Sparks and energy arced in every direction. Clyde kept pace, matching Vincent’s swings strike for strike, though he could tell his opponent’s earlier wounds were slowing him down. Vincent fired another blast of condensed light, sharp as a blade, but Clyde shifted into full suit, armor sealing around him in a single pulse of silver-blue light. He pushed through the barrage, closing the distance. “You’re supposed to be the weak one,” Vincent spat, clicking his tongue in irritation. Clyde moved, slamming a gauntlet into his jaw. “Then this will be embarrassing for you.” The hit sent Vincent crashing into the ground, the impact scattering sand in a ring around him.

Across the field, Raleigh was struggling with the shield. Every hit she threw bounced back, force against force, snapping her weapons mid-swing and sending shock waves through her arms. “Alright,” she muttered, flexing her fingers. “Time to test out my new upgrades.” A smirk tugged at her lips. The glove’s plating expanded, crawling down her arm, across her back, and linking to the other hand. Metal shifted and reformed, glowing veins of energy coursing through it. A small device on her back whirred to life, and an indicator blinked, a pair of orange wings flickered into existence. Then she vanished. Akane blinked, scanning wildly. “Where?”

Raleigh reappeared inside the barrier, grinning. “Right here.” Her punch landed square across Akane’s face, shattering the shield from within. Both pairs fought in perfect sync, momentum building until it became one fluid rhythm. Clyde and Raleigh pressing forward, Akane and Vincent barely able

to recover between blows. The four of them collided in a final clash of light, sound, and willpower.

Clyde and Raleigh moved as one, striking from opposite sides, two converging arcs of silver and orange. The impact detonated through the wasteland, hurling Akane and Vincent backward. The two hackers slammed into each other mid-air and crashed to the ground in a heap, smoke and dust rising around them. For a moment, the battlefield was silent again.

The two stood up battered, limping, refusing to fall. Vincent's mechanical arm sparked once before snapping loose and clattering onto the ground. Clyde took a cautious step forward. "So," he said, voice steady, "you ready to give up? Tell us what your plans are?" He already knew the answer. Raleigh cracked her knuckles, grinning. "We can beat your asses all day." Both hackers only smirked. In perfect sync, they reached into their jackets and pulled out small, glowing spheres, each one pulsing like a heartbeat, light folding inward instead of outward. Condensed universes. They crossed their arms, pressing the cores together. The air warped, light fracturing across the sky. A single pulse tore through the battlefield, bending gravity itself. "Oh fuck!" Raleigh shouted as the explosion expanded.

This time was different. When Clyde and Raleigh opened their eyes, they were standing in a massive boxing arena, half painted blue, half red, a crude line splitting the world itself down the middle. Above, a roaring crowd cheered and waved foam hands, but something was off. The faces were wrong, flat textures, flickering, like intentionally low-resolution models from a cheap video game.

Clyde blinked, trying to process. The air hummed with static. His arms flared to life, the Arms of the Multiverse, glowing faintly as the residual energy stabilized them. It was the only thing keeping their bodies from unraveling in this fractured reality.

Across the ring, Vincent and Akane appeared, strutting through holographic lights. Their injuries were gone, their bodies fully restored, now dressed in flashing coats that shimmered between colors. They waved and blew kisses to the artificial crowd, basking in the fake applause. Clyde frowned. "So what, we're gonna box now?" he asked, climbing onto the mat. Akane rolled her

shoulders, mechanical arms glinting. “Something like that,” she said casually. “No rules though. Do what you want.” Vincent grinned, cracking his neck. “But make no mistake...” With a snap of his fingers, steel walls slammed down around them, locking into place with a metallic boom. “...this is a cage match. Welcome to my world bitch!”

The bell rang. Round two began. Even now, Clyde and Raleigh held the edge, but only barely. Akane fought with precision and restraint, refusing to use cheap tricks. Vincent, of course, had no such honor. Every hit landed, every small victory earned, was immediately erased. Wounds healed. Weapons reformed. The hackers rose again, tireless and untouched. Clyde felt it first, the fatigue setting in. Each exchange drained them more than the last. Akane and Vincent weren’t trying to win with power. They were grinding them down, endless loops of attrition.

Raleigh wiped the sweat from her brow, growling. “Guess we’ll just have to hit you so hard you stay dead.” She swung at Akane, fist blazing with energy. Vincent vaulted onto the ropes, slamming his fist down into her with a mocking grin. Clyde intercepted, driving a kick into his side to knock him clear. Raleigh staggered upright, gasping, while Clyde froze, his mind racing. No matter what he tried, there was no good counter. Not here. Not in a world where their enemies could rewrite the rules.

His thoughts spiraled back, the Trial Worlds, where they’d survived by cutting off Mother’s ability to erase them. Payload, where everything seemed lost until Noir had broken through reality itself. They didn’t have either of those options now. “Damn it…” Clyde hissed just before Akane clotheslined him, slamming him hard enough to rattle the cage. But the impact jolted something else loose in his mind.

What had Noir done back then? What had changed the rules? He replayed it in his head, the way Payload’s control had faltered the instant Noir tore through the barriers. The moment the system recognized a paradox and collapsed. Clyde’s eyes widened. He looked down at his glowing arm, the Arm of the Multiverse and remembered the last time he’d punched through reality itself back in the

Source World. Gritting his teeth, he reached forward. The air resisted like solid glass. Then crack. A thin fissure of white light splintered across the arena.

“Raleigh,” he gasped, pushing harder. “I know what to do.” He pointed toward the widening cracks. Both hackers froze, their expressions flickering with unease. They could feel it too, that something was coming undone. They lunged in unison, trying to stop him. “What, Clyde?!” Raleigh shouted, rushing toward him. “Only what you can do,” he said, just as their blows landed. The impact crushed the breath from his lungs; he coughed blood, but managed a grin.

Raleigh understood. She vanished, her orange wings flaring, teleportation power snapping her out of existence. Vincent blinked. “Did she just… abandon her boyfriend?” He shook his head with a sympathetic wince. “That’s rough, buddy.” Before Akane could reply, the air boomed. Cracks spidered across the arena walls, light seeping through like fractures in glass. “What the hell…?” Akane whispered. The fissures widened, warping the ground beneath them until the fake sky shattered. Reality split open, air from the outside world rushing in.

Raleigh’s silhouette appeared beyond the cracks, her glove glowing white-hot as she ripped the world apart from the outside. The entire condensed universe broke like a mirror. Akane and Vincent staggered, their forms flickering, their injuries reappearing and vanishing as the godlike stability they’d held unraveled. Vincent steadied himself, his grin returning, though thinner now. “No. It won’t be that easy.” The code of the outside world was seeping in, corrupting their perfect environment. Their control was slipping. They weren’t gods anymore.

No one was giving up Clyde and Raleigh rising together with second wind as they knocked them back even with her shields Raleigh was able to slam into them destroying them with Ease Akane just didn't have the stamina anymore. “I'm tired of all you ass holes coming into my home.” She said punching her in the jaw knocking some teeth out of her mouth. “My life.” She said with another punch. Clyde mirrored her with Vincent. “And fucking everything up.” She said uppercutting her.”

She wound back her fist making it larger and larger. “So take your bullshit... and go somewhere else!” She said slamming the giant fist now the size of her whole body into her as she is sent flying into Vincent both of them are shot into the wall of the remains of the world so hard they shatter making it vanish completely flying into the sky out of sight. Raleigh took a deep breath smiling proud of her success. “Hey um. Not to kill the mood but... We kinda needed to make sure... and find out why they kept attacking.” Clyde said sheepishly

Raleigh’s eyes widened. She grabbed Clyde by the arm and teleported them to the crash site before the dust could even settle. Their broken enemies still lay there, barely alive. “So,” Clyde said, catching his breath, “you going to tell us what this is all about?” “Not a chance.” Vincent smirked weakly, forcing himself upright. Before either of them could react, he opened a portal and shoved Akane through it. The rift snapped shut behind her. He turned to follow, but his strength gave out, he collapsed face-first into the dirt.

Raleigh stared down at him, exhaling. “Well… we got one of them. But can someone like this even be contained?” Clyde shrugged. “We don’t have a choice.” She sighs. “Maybe they were acting alone,” she said, hoisting Vincent’s limp body over her shoulder. “Either way, we’ll make him talk.” The Depths of HOME. It took days to prepare. Deep beneath the central compound, Wainwright and Rebbecca oversaw construction of a prison built for one purpose: to hold a Hacker. Layers of null fields, dimensional locks, and psychic dampeners wrapped around a reinforced sphere.

“You sure about this?” Clyde asked, watching as lights flickered along the walls. “If he breaks out...” “Where else can we keep him?” Raleigh interrupted. “I’m not handing him over to a third party. At least here, we can see him.” She raised her voice just enough for their prisoner to hear. “And hey, if he talks, maybe we’ll let him go.” Vincent sat bound and gagged in a steel chair, eyes flicking between them as the cell sealed shut. Rebbecca stood at the entrance, watching him closely. When their eyes met, a flicker of fear ran through him. The locks hissed. Grant stepped up to the observation glass.

“Anything you want to say?” When the gag was removed, Vincent said nothing. “Alright. See you tomorrow,” Grant muttered, walking away. The others followed, leaving the Cipher alone in the dark.

Vincent’s head jerked at every sound. He knew what happened to captured Omnihack operatives. They vanished. His mechanical arms twitched, anxious, calculating. Footsteps echoed. Slow. Measured. He braced for the worst, until the door opened, and it wasn’t who he expected. Mikako stepped in. Her expression was blank, cold. In one hand, she dragged a dead Cipher by the collar. She let the body drop at Vincent’s feet with a wet thud. “I tried to ask your friend here what your deal was,” she said flatly. “He wasn’t very cooperative.”

Vincent stared at the corpse, its head had imploded. He was shocked she was even able to capture one without really knowing about them. Mikako’s voice softened, just slightly. “You, though… something’s different about you. So tell me what happened to my sister?” Vincent swallowed hard. “… She made a choice.” Mikako’s hands clenched. “A choice?” She gestured to the corpse. “This is what you call a choice?” “I don’t know what you’re caught up in,” she hissed, turning to leave, “but I will find out. Even if it takes years.” She dragged the body away, leaving silence in her wake.

Vincent slumped back in the chair, breathing shallowly. Then a voice behind him purred. “Good. You didn’t talk.” He nearly jumped out of his restraints. Rebbecca leaned casually against the wall, one hand in her pocket, the other twirling a small data drive. “Relax,” she said, smirking. “If I wanted you dead, you wouldn’t have heard me coming.” He glared at her, unsure if she was bluffing.

“Unlike the others,” she continued, tone lowering, “I don’t actually want everyone to die. I think I can save you and please the Boss at the same time.” She leaned closer, eyes glinting in the half-light. “So what do you say, Blue? You in?” Vincent hesitated, then nodded once. “Good,” Rebbecca whispered. “Then let’s begin.”

Chapter 44: Breakout

Noir stared at the wall, the timer nearly at zero. She hadn't moved, hadn't eaten, she didn't even feel hunger anymore. For a week straight she'd done nothing but watch the numbers tick down. Mainframe appeared, her voice oddly soft. "You are running out of time." "And?" Noir replied, cold and detached. "Shall I explain again what we..." "I don't need your vague explanations." Noir cut her off.

Mainframe stepped closer, blocking the timer. "The process will not be clean. Because of your … transcendent mind, I cannot erase you painlessly. I will have to resort to a far more painful method of termination. I do not wish to." Noir scoffed. "The evil god-robot afraid to get her hands a little dirty?

What a joke.” Mainframe tilted her head. “What could convince you? What would it take for you to join Omnihack?” The robot asked “Nothing. Nothing you can offer would make me want to join you. I might not know everything about you, but in the end you’re no different from the Empire that used to chase me around. Survival my ass.”

Mainframe said nothing, visibly processing the defiance. Then her eyes flickered with data. “A C-Level?” she muttered, and vanished without another word. The weight of her presence lifted. Noir exhaled slowly. If there was ever a moment to escape, this was it. She scanned the room. No doors, no seams, no windows, just smooth metal and silence. Everyone entered through Mainframe; in a way, this place was Mainframe. Noir closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, searching beyond the visible. The pain hit instantly. Endless rooms unfolded before her, looping over and over, corridors that led to nothing, chambers that might hold people or only echoes.

She thought of Raleigh the Explorer, how she could traverse worlds effortlessly. What made her different? The Sync Rate. Corvus’s old lectures came back: hers had always been somehwere at 90, just shy of the Explorer’s 100. The timer’s final hour began. Noir clenched her fists and focused harder, forcing every part of her being to reach outward. Half an hour … nothing. Then the world tilted. She felt herself falling forward, her restraints vanished. When she opened her eyes, she was still in the same room, except the light was red and the countdown was gone.

“Did someone help me?” she whispered, shaking her head. No, that couldn’t be it. She looked again with her mind. The architecture was nearly identical but shifted, like she’d slipped into another version of the same place. She tried again, aiming for a hallway. Green light. Success. Noir wandered through identical corridors, growing more confident each jump. The sameness of each world actually helped her learn. Finally, she sensed variation a larger room. She phased toward it … and landed on a metal table.

Aurelius Helix looked up in shock. “I’m working! I’m working! Don’t erase me!” Noir blinked.

“How did you get here? I’m not with them, you don’t recognize me from the Mine?” “What … I don’t … oh. You must have met Eight.” He relaxed slightly, still wary. “How did you get here then? Wait... you’re one of them. The G-Units, aren’t you?” He asked. “I’m so tired of that label,” she muttered, sighing. “But yeah … that’s about right. In my case, it’s a little more complicated.” She sighed. “Complicated how?”

“Why do you care?” she snapped. “Because I’m a scientist.” He said. She grimaced. “Great.” He blinked. “Fine, if you really want to know... yeah, I’m a clone. Now can we go? I’m kind of in a hurry.” His eyes lit up. He grabbed her arm. “Really? You won’t believe this, but I’m a clone too! I’ve never met another model!” She shoved him off, disgusted but faintly intrigued. “Sorry,” he stammered. “I’ve never been able to tell anyone except Eight. I got ahead of myself.” Noir froze. “So that’s what he meant, ‘a copy of a copy.’ Of who … wait …” Her face went pale. “That crazy old guy.” She said sheepishly. “You met him?” Aurelius gasped. “No way. The Neo Empire... you were there.” He said nervously. “I was,” she admitted. “Did you kill him?”

“Of course not. The dude killed himself. Kinda sad, honestly. Look, we don’t have time for this. You’re a prisoner here too, right? I’m breaking out. You can yell at me later.” He hesitated. Omnihack’s power was absolute … but so was the impossibility of her being here. She was already halfway out the door that didn’t exist. “Hold on, I’ll come, just let me grab a few things.” He rushed to the far side of the lab, shoving random components into his pockets before stopping at a machine: a half-finished robot, the Void Generator cube embedded in its chest.

“You’re bringing that?” Noir asked, uneasy. “Whatever it is, it feels wrong.” “I’d rather take it than leave it in their hands.” He looped wires around the robot and strapped it to his back. “Alright. I’m ready.” Noir grabbed his arm. “Then hold on.” They plunged through the wall and reappeared in red.

“You know anything about this place I don’t?” she asked. “Do you know there’s a god-robot and an army of hackers who can delete us whenever they want?” he shot back. She gave him a look. “Point

taken.” Closing her eyes, she scanned again. Nothing. She took his hand and jumped once more, moving world to world, hoping she’d eventually find the edge.

In a purple layer, she finally sensed something different. She aimed for it and appeared in a hangar unlike any before. There were no doors, just a single ship of glossy black stone, faintly glowing and pulsing, rough and unfinished, like someone had strapped rockets to a boulder and called it a day.

“What is this thing? Whoever designed it clearly didn’t know what they were doing,” Aurelius said, gazing up at it in disbelief. “Hey! How dare you insult my work!”

A voice rang from above. A woman leapt down from the ship’s hull, a mechanic with green skin, wide goggles, and a peculiar blade strapped to her hip. “Your work? It barely even resembles a ship.” Aurelius laughed, momentarily forgetting they were fugitives. “Do you even know what this is made of?” She frowned, rubbing her hand over the black surface. Aurelius blinked, then pulled out a small scanner and ran it across the hull. His eyes widened. “Oh gods… it’s... how did you get so much of this? This stuff’s practically indestructible!” He began to geek out just as alarms blared overhead. “All Ciphers, emergency protocol,” Mainframe’s voice boomed through unseen speakers. “Move out and locate the malware immediately.”

Noir’s stomach tightened. Mainframe must have discovered her escape but not yet located her within the countless worlds. Aurelius ignored the danger, tracing the ship’s side markings. “How were you able to cut it?” The mechanic didn’t even flinch at the alarms. “It’s tough, sure, but with this baby…” She drew the blade from her hip, a strange ripple of energy distorting the air around it. “Portal Blade. One of a kind. Perfect tool for the greatest shipwright in the multiverse, that’s why they captured me.” “No way, really?” Aurelius said, grinning despite everything. “I’m meeting so many cool people today! I’m the greatest mind in the multiverse, I’d love to...”

“Enough!” Noir snapped, her voice cutting through his rambling. Her patience had reached its end. “We do not have time for this. Can it fly?” The mechanic blinked, tilting her head. “Fly? Uh,

theoretically, but even if it could. No doors, no windows... no way out." She said motioning to the four walls surrounding them. "Let me worry about that." She said rushing inside. The two of them followed behind. The controls were barely functional patchwork wiring, half-finished panels, and rough carvings etched into the unyielding black hull. Even simple adjustments looked impossible. The only "window" was a crude screen showing the hangar outside.

"What are you going to do?" the shipwright asked. Noir didn't answer. She yanked open a panel, pulling wires loose, twisting them together, then plugging several directly into the ports along her neck and temple. Static sparked across her skin. Nothing. She gritted her teeth and added one final connection. Her eyes flared white. The ship trembled, lifting off the ground, barely. "Now what?" Aurelius asked, looking around for a door that didn't exist. "We..." Noir began, but the air warped before her.

Mainframe materialized in front of the ship, her figure filling the hangar. Aurelius and the mechanic froze, their confidence evaporating into raw fear. "There is no escape." Mainframe said coldly, her voice echoing through every world at once. A massive pillar of light formed outside, crashing down and pinning the ship in place. Metal screamed. Noir smirked, raising a hand in mock farewell. "You're five seconds too slow." The ship shimmered, and vanished. Mainframe's eyes widened, her projection flickering for the first time. For her, this wasn't just an escape. It was a catastrophe.

Both Helix and the shipwright jumped around, laughing in disbelief as the screen filled with the endless expanse of space, stars, nebulae, and nothing familiar in sight. Noir had aimed for a universe on the far opposite side of the multiverse, just to be safe. "We actually did it," Aurelius breathed. "We actually got out of that place. Thank you, there's no way we could've managed it without you, Miss…" He paused, realizing he didn't know her name.

"Noir," she said bluntly, unplugging the wires from her neck one by one. "Aurelius Helix," he

replied with a bright grin, offering a hand she ignored. “A pleasure!” He turned to the mechanic. “Oh, me? Name’s Eevynin,” she said with a casual wave. “Nice to meet you,” Noir replied, her tone flat but not unfriendly. “So… now what?” Aurelius asked, glancing between them. Noir stared out at the stars, the faint glow reflecting in her eyes. “We keep moving,” she said quietly. “This isn’t over yet.”

Chapter 45: Manhunt

The three fugitives kept their distance, each absorbed in their own restless thoughts. Noir sat cross-legged in the center of the ship, eyes closed, trying desperately to meditate. It wasn't going well. Her fingers twitched. Her jaw clenched. Every faint metallic ping of the half-finished vessel scraped against her nerves. Across the room, Eevynin crouched with a wrench between her teeth, poking through a jumble of exposed panels. "Seal integrity's holding," she muttered, tapping a pipe. "Shockingly."

On the opposite side, Aurel examined a circuit with deep offense. "Copper wires? Seriously? Everyone knows Helix brand..." Eevynin spun. "Of course I know! It's what they gave me to work

with. They probably wanted to see if the prototype could fly at all before wasting premium materials on it.” She said. Aurel paused, then reluctantly shrugged. “Hmm… that does sound like them... So, we’re basically flying around in a toaster missing half its screws.”

“It is not a toaster, you bastard!” Eevynin shot back. “It’s just… unrefined!” Their bickering rose in pitch. Noir’s eyelid twitched. “Quiet down already!” she snapped, eyes flying open. “I’m trying to focus!” Aurel blinked at her. “Focus on what? You’ve been surprisingly silent.” He said “What do you think?” Noir growled. “I’m trying to understand these… powers I apparently have. Maybe, maybe if I do it right, I can raise the Sync Rate…” She sighed. “Sync Rate?” Eevynin echoed, confused. Noir sighed, rubbing her temples. “Corvus always said mine was the highest of the… other versions of me. He said it meant something.”

Aurel’s face instantly twisted with disgust. “What does that old man know?” he snickered. “You hate him too, huh?” Noir said. “I don’t like the creep, but whatever doesn’t matter. I need to figure this out before they find us again.” She rose to her feet, intent on slipping away to try again. “Your powers are fancy and all,” Aurel said, waving a hand, “but now that we’re out, shouldn’t we focus on practical things? Like repairing this hunk of junk before it falls out of the sky?” Eevynin gasped. “It is not!”

Noir cut them both off with a long, exhausted breath. “No. He’s right.” She glanced toward the display screen, paranoia flickering in her eyes. “Let’s find somewhere more discreet. Before Mainframe recalculates our trail.” The three shared a rare moment of mutual agreement. “Then let’s go where everyone goes to hide,” Eevynin declared proudly. Aurel blinked. “Where?” “Misty Point,” she said, hands on her hips, as if unveiling a brilliant master plan. “I’m pretty sure that’s the first place they’d look,” Noir muttered. “And that doesn’t help with us finding an actual place to lay low.”

“That’s the thing about Misty Point.” Eevynin crossed her arms. “The fog can hide anyone, and everyone there is hiding from something anyway. Plus...” her eyes sparkled, “they’ll have all the materials we need.” The real motivation. Aurel stayed silent, clearly unfamiliar with the place. “With

what money?" Noir asked. She stopped. A memory surfaced, her memory, Raleigh's life. Misty Point's neon fog, the underground markets, months of hiding from the Empire between impossible alleyways. They always caught her eventually, sure… but Misty Point bought time. Always had. Then her stomach dropped. Omnihack might not have that problem. "…Alright," she said reluctantly. "Fine. But maybe we should split up once we get there. Being together just paints a bigger target on our backs."

"Nonsense," Aurel snapped, waving her off. "Listen here, you arrogant girl. You think Omnihack only wants you? They want all of us just as badly, maybe more." He leaned in smugly. "You're not shaking us off after dragging us out of that place." Noir growled, recognizing exactly what he was doing… and irritated that it was working. "Fine. Whatever. Let's just go already." She exhaled and looked toward the cockpit. "But we're leaving the ship in orbit," she added. "I think I can warp us down there." Aurel and Eevynin exchanged a glance. Warp. Not with tech. With her. "Right," Eevynin said, tightening her goggles. "Nothing can go wrong." She said. "Everything can go wrong," Aurel corrected. Noir rolled her eyes. "Shut up." She plugged back into the ship without a word warping them just outside the planet in an instant wasting no time as yanks out the cords walking over to them before they have time to react.

"We are already... wait slow down you..." Aurel said as both him and her back away. Noir grabs onto them and warps them away before they can protest. They blink and suddenly see they are surrounded in a thick fog the trademark to the world. "We didn't die!" Aurel said with excitement before noticing they were in the air somewhere quickly starting to fall. "Fuck!" Eevynin said in a panic. Noir quickly grabbed onto them again before they reached the ground warping again to a crowded street. "Sorry looks like I don't have it down just yet." Noir said. The other two looked like they were about to pass out form all the sudden jerking around. Aurel took a deep breath dusting himself off.

"Well we do a lot of crazy things in the pursuit of knowledge so I suppose... No harm no foul" He said with a sigh. Eevynin as already disappearing into the fog. "I great I can't wait to go hit all my

old hang out spots, I wonder if my sis is in town." She said as they chase after. "Hey wait up!" Unseen in the haze, a Cipher watched them from a rooftop, lenses glowing bright red behind infrared goggles.

Mainframe's world flickered awake in an instant, her core lights pulsing with cold precision. She didn't hesitate. She never did. "Attention all available Colored Agents." Her voice carried through countless channels at once, crisp and absolute. "Targets have been located. Threat Level: B. Objective: Termination by any cost." The robot said. Vance was first "Of course." His smug voice bled through the line."I captured that brat once already. This'll be child's play."

Then Elliot, a low laugh followed. "After you poked the hive she was hiding in? And got poor Payload deleted?" His tone sharpened to a mocking edge. "This is all your fault, Vance." Decoy said "How dare you imply!" The older man gritted his teeth. Before he could finish, Akane cut in softly, still subdued from her loss and from Vincent's capture. "Threat Level B? I won't deny the G-Units are formidable… but they're not world-destroyers." Her voice carried hesitation, something she rarely showed.

Mainframe answered immediately, each point delivered with cold mechanical weight. "Subject Noir is classified as a greater threat for three reasons. First: She knows too much. Second: Her power continues to evolve beyond expected parameters. Third: She accomplished the impossible. She escaped an Omnihack world. No one has ever done so. No one should have been able to." She said with a chilling pause. "Now who's making excuses?" Vance sneered. Rebbecca's icon lit up. Her tone was calm, almost bored. "I'm sitting this one out. I can't leave right now, it'd look too suspicious." She hung up before anyone could respond.

Elliot cackled. "Aww, poor Trojan doesn't want to fight her little crush.
I still can't believe the Boss thinks so highly of her." Mainframe's voice cut clean through the chatter. "Enough. Deploy immediately before the targets relocate. Trojan's refusal has been logged." One by one, the agents confirmed. "Understood." "Acknowledged." "I'm moving." Vance ended the call last, a

confident sneer in his tone. “Let’s get this manhunt over with.”

Noir sighed and reluctantly followed as Eevynin darted ahead, weaving through Misty Point’s fog-soaked alleys. The deeper they went, the louder the shouts and laughter became… until they emerged right into a pirate docking zone. A pirate spotted her instantly “Eevynin? You’re alive?! Damn it, that means I lost the bet.” He groaned dramatically. “Thought you slunk off to some dark corner to work on a battleship and forgot to eat or something.”

Eevynin’s eye twitched. “Nah, nothing like that, I’ve just… gotten myself into something.” Then the rest of the insult registered. “Hold up... you bet on me? And against me? I’m not that aloof, you dickhead!” He grinned, clearly not believing a word of it. “Uh-huh. Sure.” He sighed. “Ugh, whatever,” she muttered, shoving a datapad into his hands. “Look, we’re in a rush. Can you get me this stuff in an hour or two?” The pirate scanned the list, and froze. “Are you crazy?” He looked up at her like she’d asked for a planet. “This would take days just to track down. And from the looks of things, you don’t have a single credit to your name.” His eyes slid to Aurel.

“Unless your new friends are bankrolling your next fixation.” Aurel blinked, confused. Noir raised a brow. Eevynin leaned in with exaggerated puppy-dog eyes. “Come on, my guy. You know I’m good for it. Do this one favor. Sis can cover whatever you can’t.” He sighed, rubbing his temples. “You know that’s probably why she bet against you too…” He shook his head. “Alright, fine. I’ll see what I can do. But don’t expect the moon, alright? If it weren’t for the captain...” He cut himself off abruptly. “Never mind. I’ll contact you in an hour.” With that, he walked away into the fog.

Eevynin spun around to find Noir and Aurel staring directly at her. “…What?” she asked defensively. “No offense,” Noir said slowly, “but are you actually some kind of notorious pirate?” Eevynin waved both hands. “Eh well, not really. That’s my sister’s thing. She’s crazy.” She tapped her chest proudly. “I just build the best ships out there for anybody. Doesn’t matter who...” She hesitated, grimacing. “…Okay, maybe I’ll cross Hackers off that list.” She sheepishly said.

Noir opened her mouth to respond, but her stomach let out a monstrous growl that echoed through the fog. She couldn't remember the last time she ate. Mainframe had kept her alive with nutrient infusions, no real food, no hunger cues. Now her body remembered all of it at once. Without a word she drifted off, pulled by pure instinct and zero self-control. The others exchanged a look, sighed, and followed. "Noir's such an open book," Aurel laughed. She shot him a death glare over her shoulder… but then allowed the faintest smile.

They ended up at a shady diner, the least shady in Misty Point, which still wasn't saying much. "I'll cover us," Aurel said confidently. "I'm rich." Before either could stop him, he rushed to the ATM "Don't use that," both Noir and Eevynin blurted out. Aurel blinked, annoyed. "Why not?" Noir sighed and opened the front panel with one finger. The interior was a nightmare of crossed wires, stolen chips, and mismatched parts. "This isn't a real ATM," she said flatly. "It steals your information."

Eevynin nodded. "First rule of Misty Point: assume everything is a scam." "Huh," Aurel said, genuinely impressed. "How dastardly." He reached into his pocket. "Guess this will do instead. Omnihack left my personal effects intact." He pulled out a gold, architect-crafted ring, gleaming with embedded circuitry. Noir's eyes widened. "Are you sure you want to part with something like that?" "Well… not really," he admitted, rubbing his neck. "But I'm not one for fancy-smancy jewelry. My best friend gave it to me on a whim."

Noir blinked. "Wait, the robot copy of yourself? Eight? That's kind of sad," she muttered, actually feeling a little bad for him. "So sheltered," Eevynin added. Aurel groaned. "You're both ruining my noble sacrifice. I was trying to look cool." "You're not using that, idiot." Eevynin plucked the ring from his hand and shoved it back in his pocket. "I'll put the food on my tab. Again." There was no room for debate. Aurel slumped in defeat. Noir smirked. Somehow, despite everything, it felt… normal. Almost like a real group. Even in a dangerous place like this there was a calm she hadn't felt in a long time.

But peace in Misty Point never lasted long. Halfway through their meal, the front window exploded inward as a pack of masked thugs tumbled through it, guns already blazing. Glass scattered across the floor; customers screamed or dove under tables. The diner owner didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. Just leaned on the counter with dead-eyed apathy as bullets chewed into the walls. "What the hell do you guys want?" Noir snarled. No answer. Just gunfire. She warped behind the closest thug and kicked him so hard he folded into the drywall like a crushed tin can.

Eevynin drew her portal blade in a single elegant motion, and completely failed to land a single hit. She swiped. Missed. Swiped again. Missed harder. Noir actually felt her soul leave her body for a moment. "Oh good, someone else can... nevermind." "I got this!" Aurel announced confidently, grabbing a chair and lifting it overhead like a mighty barbarian. He threw it. It traveled approximately three feet and gently toppled onto the floor. Noir froze. She was walking around Misty Point with two giant neon targets. "New plan!" She grabbed both of them by the collars and tackled-warped them out of the diner, reality folding around her in a jagged flash.

They hit the floor of the pirate base with a thud. "That was close," Noir exhaled, rubbing her face. "Too close." "Who were those guys?" Aurel asked nervously. "Might've just been random goons," Noir said, though she didn't sound convinced. "It happens here sometimes… or they caught onto us." "It should've been enough time," Eevynin said, already jogging ahead. "Let's meet up with my guy and get out..." "Oh, we caught on," a voice interrupted. They froze. Vance sat casually in a metal chair, legs crossed, spinning Eevynin's contact's datapad around his finger. The pirate lay at his feet. "You bastard, he was barely involved in this," Noir growled, fists tightening.

"Maybe," Vance said with a smirk. "Nevertheless… involved. Did you really think you could hide from us? We're not the Empire." He leaned forward. "We are so much more." "Stop monologuing and attack," Akane snapped, dropping from the rafters like a meteor. She struck first, full force, and Noir barely caught the punch, sliding backward across the metal floor. Aurel and Eevynin turned to

flee, but Elliot stepped into the doorway, leaning against the frame with a playful grin. “Heeey, boss,” he said sweetly. “What are you doing all the way out here? You never should’ve left your little box.” The fog outside warped with more figures approaching. The Manhunt had begun.

They slowly shifted back-to-back, Noir scanning every shadow. Four Colored Hackers at once. One alone had nearly killed her. Her pulse pounded. Can we even win this? Then in the corner, she spotted something. A stacked pile of metal, wires, coils. “Hey… is that the stuff you needed?” Noir whispered. Eevynin peeked. “Um… yeah. That’s it.” Before Noir could act... The floor swallowed them. A ripple of light, and Eevynin and Aurel vanished beneath the metal plating like the ground had turned to liquid.

Vance leaned back in his chair, smug. “Really? Them? You care about these idiots?” he mocked. “I thought you worked alone. Thank you for making our job so much easier.” Akane didn’t wait. She lunged. Noir blocked the punch, sliding backwards. Noir ignored her. She warped straight into Vance, tackling him so hard the chair snapped in half. “Give them back!” she roared, fist raised. Vance looked up at her with calm, unshakable boredom. “The mission only requires you dead,” he said. “Those two? They can live, if you stand still and die.” “But you won’t let them go either!” Noir snarled. She slammed her fist down. Vance caught it. Effortlessly.

He stood and swung her across the room like a doll. Noir crashed into a metal wall, coughing. A crack split the floor open. Eevynin erupted upward, portal blade slicing through the steel as she scrambled out with Aurel beside her. Vance’s expression finally broke. “Impossible. That blade...” Noir seized the moment. She warped forward, grabbing both of them, but Elliot yanked Aurel backward in the same instant. Noir had a split-second choice. Save one? Try for both? Risk losing everything?

She clicked her tongue in frustration and made the hard call. She warped Eevynin and herself away. They slammed into the ship, alarms blaring. “Not good!” Eevynin shouted, sprinting to the console. Through the monitors, burning lances of energy hammered the hull from all sides, a Hacker

bombardment. The ship's stone-like body held, but everything inside was frying. Consoles blew out in sparks. The air seal flickered. Noir grimaced. "Sorry. I'm going back for him." "HURRY UP!" Eevynin yelled, diving toward a ruptured pipe as steam hissed out the breach. Noir warped back immediately, and Akane's fist met her face mid-arrival, hurling her into a wall.

"Can you..." Noir wheezed, peeling herself from the dent, "stop doing that?" She scanned the room wildly. No Aurel. No Decoy. Her stomach twisted. "It's not too late to give up," Vance sang, smug. At least that confirmed Aurel was alive. "Where is he!?" Noir snapped. Vance groaned theatrically. "We are getting nowhere. Firewall... shall we?" He pulled a glowing sphere from his pocket. Noir's blood ran cold. A Condensed Universe. "Oh hell no." She warped so fast the air detonated, snatching it from his hand before he could blink. Vance's eyes widened, his composure cracking.

"What how did you... Inconceivable!" Noir tucked it into her pocket. "I'm keeping this," she said with her best deadpan sass. She glanced toward the pile of materials. They needed those to escape. Needed them now. She reached out, trying to warp the pile without going with it. Didn't work. So she warped with it. Instantly she was back on the ship, arms full of parts. "Sorry! Still no Aurel!" she shouted. "Hurry UP!" Eevynin yelled again, sealing another breach with emergency plating. Noir warped back outside. Through the fog, she saw a hover-vehicle rising.

Inside: Elliot. And a bound, slumped Aurel. Aurel looked down, defeated, like he really believed she'd left him behind. Her jaw clenched. She warped forward, materializing in front of the vehicle. Elliot blinked. Too slow. Noir ripped Aurel free and warped them both to a rooftop, Aurel collapsed into her arms, eyes wide and watery. "You came back for me… you do care." She softened. "Of course we..." A sharp pain stabbed into her ribs. She choked, stumbling backward. Her eyes shot down. A knife.

Aurel melted in flickering pixels. A holographic frame dissolved. Standing before her was

Elliot. He grinned, all teeth and cruelty. “Idiot,” he said sweetly. “I can’t believe you fell for that.” He twisted the knife. “They’re calling you a B-level threat? What a joke.” Noir’s face twisted in disgust. “You’re the ugliest kind of person.” She sneared. Elliot froze then his expression warped into something rotten. “What did you just say… you little bitch?” He grabbed her by the head, ripping her hat off and slamming her backward.

“You’re nothing. Not even a person. You’re a copy of someone. A knockoff.” He leaned close, voice dripping venom. “A copy of someone more valuable… and just as pointless.” Noir struggled to keep her eyes open. The knife burned inside her. Poison of course. “No… you’re wrong… I’m just…” she forced through clenched teeth, “…Noir.” She punched him in the gut with everything she had left. Elliot staggered, and she warped.

She reappeared beside the vehicle. Aurel strapped to the seat, alive. “You really came back for me, I...” She smacked him on the forehead. “What the hell was that for!?” he yelped. “Just checking,” Noir muttered, clutching her side. The other Hackers were regrouping fast. Noir didn’t hesitate, she warped them both back to the ship.

Eevynin was still frantically sealing panels, but at least she wasn’t screaming anymore. “How are we looking?” Noir wheezed. “Not good! They keep firing on us. Every time I fix something they undo it!” Eevynin snapped. “How much time do you need?” Noir asked. “I don’t know twenty, maybe thirty minutes if nothing else explodes!” Aurel scoffed. “Thirty? Seriously?”

He rolled up imaginary sleeves. “I thought you were the ‘best shipwright in the multiverse.’ I can do it in half the time.” Eevynin ground her teeth. “Oh yeah? Then you’re on. Scratch that ten minutes!” They split, both diving into opposite corners of the room, grabbing tools and shouting over one another. “How are the rockets?” Aurel yelled. “They’re the weak point,” Eevynin responded, “so I put shield plates around them when they’re not firing. They’ve held so far!”

Noir watched them, two geniuses racing the clock like idiots. And she smiled. She would buy

them the time. “If I don’t come back when you’re done… just go,” Noir said quietly. “I’ll… catch up.” They nodded. But she didn’t think she would. In fact, this fog-drenched world… It felt like the place she’d been searching for all this time. A perfect place to die. Noir warped.

She returned to the street. The fog curled around her like a burial shroud. The Colored Hackers stood waiting, like hunters readying the next phase. “You wanted me,” Noir said, stepping forward. “Come take me.” “You idiot,” Vance laughed. “You fool.” He melded the earth around her feet like liquid concrete as Akane landed another brutal punch. Elliot darted in for the kill, But Noir warped again, appearing on the opposite side of the street, blood dripping from her wounds, the fog billowing behind her.

“Enough. Even if it just slows her down,” Akane muttered, frustration edging her voice. She pulled out a condensed universe. Elliot mirrored her instantly, grinning like a child reaching for fireworks. Akane grabbed Noir by the wrist before she could warp again, holding her in place with iron precision. Elliot tossed his universe into the air with dramatic flourish already activating it mid-spin. Both spheres unfolded at once. The world bent. The fog, the street, the shattered buildings, all swallowed whole.

A new landscape snapped into existence. A red wasteland, cracked and dry. Yellow lightning danced constantly, striking the ground in violent rhythm. Ciphers flooded in on all sides, some still wearing the cheap thug disguises from earlier, their illusions flickering in the red light. Noir clutched her head and staggered. Her skull felt like it was splitting open. The world wasn’t just hostile, it was wrong. Spatial rules bent and unbent, the horizon folding inward, up becoming down, left becoming nowhere. Her internal compass, that strange, innate, Raleigh-like navigation sense went berserk.

She dropped to her knees, dizzy and sick. Akane stepped forward, her tone clinical. “Your mind may save you from being erased, but I designed this world for your other self.” Noir couldn’t hear anything but the ringing in her skull, a shrill, endless alarm. No one else seemed affected. Vance

strolled toward her with bored confidence. Elliot skipped beside him like a twisted mime, delighted with her suffering. Akane watched them and frowned. “Can we at least give her a somewhat merciful death?” she asked quietly. Both men turned toward her, and shook their heads with identical glee.

Noir barely saw them. Her vision doubled and split, her stomach twisted, the ground pitched sideways. She reached for her pocket. Her fingers brushed the cool metal of the stolen condensed universe. One gambit left. One impossible gamble. If she could activate it before losing consciousness. If it even worked the way she hoped. But her hand slipped. Her arm gave out. She slumped forward into the dirt as they closed in. She had pictured her death differently more hectic, more violent, more on her feet. Not like this. Not flat in the dirt, unable to hear her own thoughts, watching her killers approach with grinning faces. If she could change one thing, anything, she would’ve died fighting.

Her eyes slid shut. The ringing, the nausea, the fractured gravity, it all blurred together into one suffocating haze. And beneath it, a quieter truth whispered through her: At least the pain will finally be over. But then. A voice echoed in the dark. Rebbecca’s voice. Not real, just a memory imprinted deep in her mind. “I don’t get it. I thought you were going to become Noir. Find your own path.” Then another. Clyde’s voice, warm and stubborn. “At the door you said you wouldn’t die.” Then Raleigh the one she once was. “You’ve come so far. You’re not me anymore… so why are you stopping now?”

Her pulse throbbed. Two new faces flashed across her thoughts, the idiots. The geniuses. The two she’d tried so hard not to care about. Eevynin’s chaotic enthusiasm. Aurel’s smug, clueless brilliance. People who shouldn’t matter. People who shouldn’t have gotten under her skin so fast. And yet... “No…” Noir whispered. Her eyes snapped open. She forced herself up, muscles screaming, balance failing, reality tilting but she stood. Just as the Hackers reached her. She warped. In an instant she was behind Akane, slamming a fist into her jaw and sending the hacker crashing into the others.

Ciphers surged toward her in waves. Noir fought through them with sheer desperation, warping, striking, dodging, scrambling, the world still spinning out of control around her. Then a crack tore,

through the sky. The unrefined ship burst through the upper boundary of the sandbox, ripping apart the stability of the condensed universe itself. Lightning faltered. The red sands shook. Akane recoiled. “Oh come on. Another transcendent power?!” Noir stared upward, and for the first time since the torture began, tears touched her eyes. Her voice was barely a whisper. “One day… I’ll come for all of you.” Then she warped, vanishing from the collapsing world.

Eevynin and Aurel jerked back as Noir materialized, battered and barely standing. “Noir!” they cried at once. “I told you…” she wheezed, “to go without me.” Aurel folded his arms, trying not to sound shaky. “How could we leave without a navigator?” “We’re in this together,” Eevynin said, trying to smile despite the fear on her face. Noir actually smiled back small, tired, real. She crawled toward the ship’s interface. “Wait, no we can do it for now!” Eevynin said, panicked.

“No…” Noir whispered, plugging herself in. “We need somewhere they can’t find us.” She shut her eyes. “Only I can do that.” She searched. Worlds flickered past her mind, thousands she knew, millions she didn’t. Noise, static, pain. Something called to her. Something distant. Empty. Unmapped. A place beyond their reach. She threw the warp. The ship vanished.

The Hackers stared at the empty sky in fury the condensed world slowly disapating. Akane gritted her teeth. “Mainframe. Can you pinpoint their destination?” Silence. Then Mainframe’s voice, though strained, came through. “I have estimations… but it seems she has evaded us.” The ground cracked beneath the weight of the failure. Lightning sputtered out. For the first time in Omnihack history. A target had slipped completely through their fingers.

The ship drifted downward, gravity barely touching it as it settled onto the strange new world Noir had dragged them to. A world with no sky. No ground. Just… a lone floating island the size of a city block suspended in pitch-black void. The only illumination came from distant ripples of lightning arcing through the darkness like slow, silent veins. The three of them stepped out onto the rocky surface. Aurel looked around skeptically. “…Not what I would’ve picked but...” Noir collapsed before

he could finish. Both Aurel and Eevynin rushed to her, the shock immediate. Aurel knelt beside her, his hands already moving over her injuries. “Damn it she’s burning up,” he muttered. “And this knife wound… something’s in her system.” Noir’s breathing was shallow. Her warping was half instinct at best. Her mind barely hanging together after the sandbox assault. They carried her inside.

A Few Days Later. Aurel was walking past the makeshift infirmary when Noir suddenly jerked awake, gasping for air. She looked around wildly before grounding herself. Aurel set down a tray of tools and approached. “Oh good, you didn’t die,” he said, voice flat but relieved underneath. “I did my best to patch you up, but medical care isn’t really my expertise.” He looked her over. “You should be more careful. You’re already covered in scars.” Noir glared at him, but didn’t respond. Aurel cleared his throat, suddenly awkward. “Hey… so far nothing’s tried to kill us, but…”

He gestured vaguely at the void outside. “This place. Is it actually safe?” “No guarantees,” Noir said, rubbing her temples. “But I think so. I just… need to talk with it a bit more.” “Talk… with the island?” Aurel asked. “It called out to me,” Noir said quietly. “Something about this place is… different. It’s like it’s alive. Or listening.” Aurel paused at that. “Well, that lunatic shipwright is already happy here. As long as she has scrap, she’ll build until her hands fall off. I suppose I’m the same.”

He sat down beside her. “More importantly... what you said earlier. About Sync Rates.” Noir frowned. “…What about it?” “The word ‘sync’ implies dependency,” Aurel said, tapping the side of his head. “Corvus always had you hooked up to some machine, right?” “Yeah. So what?” Noir asked, annoyed. “I’ve heard stories about the Explorer,” Aurel continued. “She didn’t need machines. She moved through worlds on her own.” “She hit one hundred percent,” Noir muttered. “I only have ninety. She...” Aurel cut her off with a frustrated sigh. “I think you’re looking at it wrong. She hit one hundred because she never relied on machines.”

Noir blinked. Aurel leaned back, crossing his arms. “That old bastard didn’t help you. He stunted your growth. Sync Rate wasn’t a measure of your power, just how well the machine could keep

up with you." He stood up to go help Eevynin with repairs. "Well… just a thought," he said, waving dismissively. "You've already done things even she probably couldn't. Food for thought." He left. Noir sat alone with the silence. And for the first time, She wasn't sure if she'd been limited by her past… Or if she was finally becoming something new.

Chapter 46: Loki Party

The air at HOME was still a little tense. Most people who cared had calmed down but not Raleigh. She paced around the house jumpy. Clyde sighed not sure what he should say. “Raleigh... what is up with you?” he asked. She glared at him. “What do you think. Their are crazy hacker people probably just waiting behind the corner to attack us.” She said with rage. “I get that we don't know much about them but we handled then so far havent we? I'm not saying to let your guard down but...” He started to say as her glare only sharpened.

“Clyde is right. I think we could all use a little breather.” Loki said sitting on the couch calmly. Raleigh almost turns to strike him before realizing it's him. Then she decides to do it

anyway. “How many times have I told you not to show up uninvited!” She said punching him bare fisted. “Alright alright I get it I'm sorry...” He said pleading. She sighs stopping her assault. “What do you want this time Loki.” Clyde groaned. “Right well... HOME does not yet have many traditions, yes? And well it would seem some like Raleigh are still kinda antsy after that whole debacle with the hackers. So I have planned a new event. One I'm sure will catch on and surely become a yearly occurrence.” he said with a laugh.

“what does that have to do with traditions?” Clyde ask She marched over to the window to check it out. “I swear Loki if there is some sort of giant panda out their or something I'm going to banish you.” She said Loki pulling her back just before she reaches. “Ah, ah, ah not just yet. Traditions are usually long standing, but HOME is brand new, that means you get to be the one to create them.” He said excited as he motions for them to follow him to the front door. The reluctantly follow.

“With out further ado I give you... Loki Party!” He said with usually bravado as he open the door. Outside the town was mostly like it normally was but people were gathered all around the sides of the roads cheering as he opened the door. The road itself was painted with while lines and spaces you would find on a board game. It would seem Loki made a life sized one. “You want one of our traditions to be shamelessly copying Mari...” He started to say only for Loki to cover his mouth in fear.

“Don't invoke his name. Do you think just because we are in the multiversal sticks that company can't send their ninjas to destroy us.” He said seriously before calming down returning to his normal self. This is Loki Party got it. Now quickly put on these overalls and colorful hats.” He pulling them seemingly out of no where. “Loki... if anything is going to bring them here its that.” Clyde sighed. “Oh your right forget the costumes.” He said tossing them aside.

“What's a Loki party?” Raleigh asked still not convinced. “I'm glad you asked. It's a very competitive game were you complete to win... Sta... Shiny Loki gass orbs. Who ever gets the

most wins. Just role the dice play a mini game repeat until the game is over. Oh and the whole town Is participating in some form you don't want to let them down do you?" he said smugly. "Raleigh looked at all the people below already lined up stationed somewhere for the game. She looks a little annoyed they were roped into it. "Alright find but if something happens we are stopping OK." She said pressing her finger into him so he knows she means it. "Of course now lets see. Our players will be Clyde, Raleigh, Rebbecca, and Me!" He said with a laugh as Rebbecca Hops over.

"Wait aren't you like the game master... sounds like your planning on cheating." Clyde said with sharp eyes. "Why yes but I won't... ugh fine your right, but we have to have four players... hmm maybe Proxy?" He looked down seeing he was already with penny below next to a giant mystery machine. "No we can't cut that..." He looked around seeing no good options. "I'll be right back." He jumps into the air vanishing from sight landing on the Pirates light out taking The Rival by surprise.

"What the hell are you doing... " The Rival sputtered. Loki didn't answer. He simply scooped him up like a toy and jumped, leaping clear off the lighthouse and back toward HOME. "PUT ME DOWN! I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING, WHY ARE WE IN THE SKY!?" the Rival screamed as the clouds blurred past. "We need a fourth player," Loki said cheerfully as they landed. Clyde and Raleigh both crossed their arms in identical disappointment. "What? It'll be fine!" Loki pleaded. "He plays the silly game, then we kick him out again."

Rebbecca stepped in, smiling brightly. "Oh come on, guys. We need at least one human sacrifice." "Human what?" the Rival asked, horrified. "Nothing, little guy," Rebbecca said, patting his head. "You're here to take on your great rival in glorious combat." His eyes lit up instantly. "Re… really!? At last! ORION VESPER! PREPARE YOURSELF!" he shouted, pointing at Clyde. Clyde didn't even look up. He just sighed. Loki clapped loudly. "Enough dilly-dallying! Roll your dice to determine turn order! The people crave drama!"

They rolled. Clyde: 6 Raleigh: 1 Rebbecca: 8 The Rival: 10. The Rival jumped into the air. “I’m the BEST!” He immediately rolled again, another 10. “This will be EASY!” He strutted forward ten squares, landing on a question block. “Oh, that’s good, right?” Loki grinned. “No.” The Rival was launched straight upward, rocketing into the sky until he disappeared over the clouds. Clyde stared. “Loki. What the hell.” “What? He landed on an Event Space,” Loki said innocently.

Rebbecca rolled next, a nine almost like she manipulated it that way, landing on blue. “You get money!” Loki declared, handing her a stack of Loki Dollars. “Yay!” Clyde rolled a 5 and landed on red. “Do I… lose money? I don’t have any...” A bulky yakuza leaned out from behind a building. “HEY. You owe me by the end of the month.” He made a throat-cut motion. “Or else.” Clyde froze. “Why am I in debt?! How is that fun?!” Loki only smiled. Raleigh rolled a 3, got money, and stomped back into line looking offended at the simplicity of life.

Loki clapped, sparks literally popping off his hands. “Now that everyone’s had their turn… it’s time for the staple of Loki Party… THE MINIGAMES!” A giant door materialized behind him. He opened the middle one with a flourish, motioning for them to enter just as, with comedic timing that could only be divine, The Rival finally crashed from the sky face-first, arms spread like a fallen pigeon. “Ghhph, I’m fine!” he yelled into the pavement. Everyone stepped over him and through the doorway.

They emerged into a bizarre world: endless sky, floating platforms, and a colossal tower covered in glowing handholds. “Welcome,” Loki announced, “to the Tower of Friendship! Work together as a team and you can all share the prize!” He grinned wickedly. “…Or whoever reaches the top first gets the whole pot. Your choice.” Raleigh’s eye twitched. Rebbecca smirked. Clyde… believed. For some reason. “Alright,” Clyde said, rallying the group. “Let’s see the best way we can...”

Raleigh kicked him straight off the ledge. “RALEIGH?!” Clyde screamed as he fell into the void. She leaned over the edge and shrugged. “Sorry Clyde. This is a game. And I wanna win.” She explained. Rebbecca and The Rival both burst out laughing at the sight…until Rebbecca casually

punched The Rival off the platform without looking at him.

“WAIT NO! NOT AGAIN!” he yelled, plummeting a second time today. The two women shot forward. Raleigh started jumping across platforms, slipping her glove on, sparks ready. Rebbecca pulled out one of her cords, lassoed the tower’s peak, and grappling-hooked herself to the top like a stylish demon-spider. “Hey that's cheeting!” Raleigh roared. “And that isn’t?” Rebbecca called back sweetly, already halfway there. Raleigh transformed and warped, popping onto the top with a snarl. Loki applauded theatrically. “Congratulations on your… teamwork!” He split the prize in half between the two clear cheaters. Raleigh and Rebbecca accepted the money like two cats pretending they didn’t knock a vase off the table.

Clyde returned looking… emotionally injured. “Clyde, come on,” Raleigh muttered. “It’s just like one of your video game things.” She said calmly. “It FEELS personal,” he mumbled. “It wasn’t,” she insisted. The next rounds blurred together: Raleigh’s rolls were cursed. Always a 1. Sometimes a 0? Loki insisted that was possible. Rebbecca rolled like she’d memorized the RNG seed. Every result perfect. Suspiciously perfect. The Rival hit every event space known to mortals. Boulders. Cannons. Tornadoes. At one point a chicken chased him across the board. Clyde did… fine. He wasn’t dead, so that counted as a win.

For one of the minigames he took them into a forest. Mr. Wainwright and his boys stood there like they’d been waiting all day. “Russel tells me the boys are running low on materials,” Loki said proudly. “So for this next challenge… see how much wood you can chop.” Axes were thrust into their hands. Loki popped out from behind a tree with a megaphone. “READY GO!”

The axes came down immediately. Clyde chopped his log clean through, only for the tree to instantly regrow in a puff of green particles. One of Wainwright’s boys scribbled down a point. Clyde nodded, rolled up his sleeves, and got to work. Chop. Regrow. Chop. Regrow. He was starting to find a decent rhythm. Raleigh took one look at the axe, snorted, and threw it over her shoulder. “What are you

doing?!" Clyde shouted. "Winning." She pulled out a chainsaw, she revved it like she was about to dismantle a planet, and tore through trees at quadruple speed. Wainwright's boys scrambled to keep up, frantically marking down her score.

On the opposite side of the clearing, Rebbecca… was not chopping anything. She was tinkering. The Rival, meanwhile, swung dramatically, only for his axe to get stuck halfway through the log. He pulled. He strained. He yelled. Then he fell backward, still clinging to the axe. "MY SPINE!" Clyde and Raleigh exchanged a look. This minigame was theirs. Clyde pushed harder, chopping at breakneck speed. Despite Raleigh's chainsaw advantage, he was just barely keeping ahead. His determination burned. Her chainsaw snarled.

Then Rebbecca rolled her machine over. It was a monster: a rotating buzz-saw-platform-thing attached to a vacuum chute. She planted it beside her tree. It whirred to life. CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP, Trees vanished continuously. A second machine popped out and neatly stacked the chopped wood into a perfect display. Both Clyde and Raleigh froze mid-swing, staring. "Oh COME ON," Raleigh barked. "She isn't even doing it herself!" Loki shrugged. "No rules against automated supremacy."

Rebbecca waved sweetly while drinking boba she had somehow acquired. Raleigh revved her chainsaw harder. Clyde gritted his teeth. They both tried to catch up, but when time ran out? Rebbecca had tripled their scores. "Sucks to suck!" she chimed, collecting her stack of Loki Dollars while her machine puffed out celebratory confetti.

The pace of the game took shape fast. Rebbecca, riding her absurd luck and shameless cheating, reached the first glowing orb. Ten Loki Dollars. She paid immediately. Loki presented her with… a miniature sun. A literal mini-star, small enough to hold, blazing with soft gold light. "Whoa..." Rebbecca blinked. Then nonchalantly stuffed the sun into a multicube. "Mine now." The Rival continued to hit every event space in existence. A cannon shot him into the mountains. A boulder

chased him through town. At one point, a flock of chickens mugged him.

Raleigh's luck on the board was abysmal. She rolled every bad number possible. Meanwhile, she dominated the mini games, winning more of them than anyone, to the crowd's delight. Clyde was the next to approach a shining orb. He stepped onto the space dramatically. And the same bulky yakuza from earlier stepped out of the shadows. "I'll be taking that." He plucked the orb from Clyde's hands. "What?! I owed you three dollars at MOST!" "It's called interest," the man said sternly, before strolling off and lighting a cigarette. Clyde stared at his empty hands in disbelief.

All the minigames were designed to seemingly to help out the town in some way while still be entertaining to watch. Like the trees, they would gather materials, create things HOME needed but in an really over the top way, and then an occasional curve ball. "AH! Ah ah!" Loki shoved Grant back with surprising strength. "They're not intruders. They're here to set up the next mini-game!" Grant stared at him, dead-eyed and exhausted.

Raleigh formed a hammer instantly, lunging toward the nearest pirate with murder in her eyes. Only for Loki to pop in front of her like a smug green roadblock. "Nope! That's against the rules," he sang, wiggling a finger. "Only dodging. No maiming the guests." A plasma bolt struck her square in the back. Raleigh hissed through her teeth. Loki beamed. "Ope! Looks like you're the first one out!" He said."I will kill you, Loki." Clyde and Rebbecca, much calmer, had already slipped into dodging mode. Clyde using practiced footwork, Rebbecca moving with casual swagger like she was avoiding puddles instead of death beams.

Meanwhile The Rival stood in the middle of the chaos, blinking, confused why no one was targeting him. Rebbecca sauntered over to the nearest pirate, leaning in just close enough to fluster him. "Hey boys," she purred, resting a metal finger under his chin. "Why don't you aim for him instead?" The pirate swallowed hard and nodded so fast his goggles rattled. The others saw Clyde, their actual enemy, and immediately agreed. Clyde spun around. "Seriously?! That's cheating, right?" He protested.

“She dodged the shots,” Loki shrugged. “Perfectly legal.” The Lion said. Clyde groaned. Plasma bolts rained toward him from every direction.

After a surprisingly long series of panicked yelps and accidental dodges, one bolt clipped Clyde’s leg. “HA!” The Rival shouted triumphantly. “I DID IT! I WON!” All the pirates immediately stopped shooting and hoisted him into the air, cheering like they had completely forgotten why they came in the first place. A stray laser hit him in the back of the head from someone unknown. “Well it looks like we have a winner. Rebbecca!” He declared. Raleigh rubbed her back, glaring murder at Loki. Clyde rubbed his leg, glaring murder at Rebbecca. Rebbecca looked pleased with herself.

The pirates were allowed to stay for the rest of the game mostly because their boss was participating. They were now fully invested, shouting, cheering, and somehow also gambling on the side. Everyone had earned Loki Orbs by now: Rebbecca: 5, Clyde: 4, Raleigh: 4, The Rival: 0 The Rival pretended not to notice this last part. Clyde rolled and landed on a blue space next to Raleigh. He leaned close, whispering, “We can both admit she’s cheating somehow, right? Can we at least team up to take her down?”

Rebbecca, far off on her space, waved at them with a sweet smile that somehow still felt threatening. Raleigh groaned, rubbing her temples. “…Fine. But the moment we pull it off? I’m out for myself again. You hear me?” They shook hands like two temporary villains forming an alliance in a children’s cartoon. “My turn,” Raleigh said, cracking her knuckles. Despite her whining, she had hundreds of Loki Dollars saved up from events and bonuses. She could turn this around easily. She rolled.

The die clacked across the board and landed on a green tile. Marked with a little chibi lion face. “Huh. Looks like… Loki? That’s good, right... Thats good right?” She said almost pleading. A puff of confetti, and Loki appeared beside her in a pose that made Clyde visibly recoil. “Of course it is!” he declared. “You’ve landed on my space. That means you get a special random reward!” A massive

spinning wheel materialized towering overhead. It had sections labeled: +10 Orbs, Loki's Minigame, Dance-off, Chaos Tax, Mystery Hug, ???, and many more that Raleigh didn't want to think too hard about.

Her pupils shrank. "Please be orbs. Please be orbs..." The wheel slowed… Clicked… Clicked And stopped on: SHARING. Loki gasped in pure, unfiltered delight. "Ohhhh my, you got the BEST one!" "I… did?" Raleigh said nervously. "What exactly is..." Loki looked at her with a twisted grin. "Communism." Before she could blink, ALL Loki Dollars, hers, Clyde's, Rebbecca's, even The Rival's pitiful zero, shot off their bodies in glowing streams. They swirled into a huge glittering mass in the center of town. Then the mass exploded like confetti being redistributed.

Equal piles fell neatly in front of each of them. Raleigh stared at hers. Clyde blinked. Rebbecca smirked. The Rival looked extremely proud of himself for getting something. Raleigh grabbed Loki by the throat and shook him like a malfunctioning vending machine. "HOW," she screamed, "IS THIS A GOOD THING FOR ME?!" Loki's feet dangled off the ground. "I-I-It spreads the wealth!" he choked cheerfully. "ITS FAIR!" "It's STUPID," Raleigh hissed. The crowd cheered anyway. More minigames more nonsense.

Loki hopped onto a raised platform in the middle of town square, arms spread theatrically. "Ah, my beloved friends and victims. I mean, players! Alas, we have reached… the final turn!" A dramatic gasp went through the crowd (mostly supplied by Loki himself). "And because of this momentous occasion," he continued, "the last blue space will now award… THREE ORBS!" All four players froze. Three orbs. Game-changing. Victory-shattering. Rebbecca's smirk actually wavered. But before anyone else could even strategize.THUNK. The Rival rolled.

Landed directly on the triple-orb space. Scooped them up instantly. "HA! I did it again!" he declared, striking a pose. His entire pirate crew roared like he'd just conquered a nation. The whole board shifted after his purchase. The next orb location appeared on the furthest possible corner—miles

away in turn distance. No one could reach it. Everyone else sighed in despair, shoulders slumping. Rebbecca smirks silently, arms folded, looking unbearably smug. They all took their turns anyway, each movement dripping with quiet resignation.

Then Loki clapped his hands. “Why the gloomy energy, my dearest contestants? Did I forget to mention…” He paused dramatically. The world held its breath. “…that the FINAL MINIGAME comes with a prize of… TWO ORBS!” Clyde, Raleigh, and even The Rival all snapped their heads toward him. Rebbecca’s smirk vanished. A cold wind blew. The three of them slowly turned their heads… glaring daggers at Rebbecca with the shared, unspoken intent of “She dies first.” Rebbecca adjusted her posture, smiling pleasantly but now sweating just a little. “Let’s all… play fairly,” she said. “No promises,” Raleigh growled.

“Now… the moment you’ve all been waiting for!” Loki declared, throwing his arms wide. “The final minigame! The ultimate finale to this glorious competition! It is…” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a crumpled slip of paper, and muttered under his breath “…looks like I forgot to plan the actual minigame.” Clyde stared. Raleigh stared harder. “I mean it’s, uh... A COLLABORATION!” Loki blurted, straightening instantly. “Yes, yes! A beautiful, inspiring, community-driven masterpiece crafted by the very people of HOME!” He pointed dramatically at Mikako, Grant, Russel, Lucy, and the assorted crowd.

They all frowned at him but begrudgingly started murmuring ideas to each other. Raleigh pinched the bridge of her nose. Before anyone could question further, Proxy stepped forward with steam practically blasting from his ears. “Hold on,” Proxy snapped. “We spent ALL NIGHT building this.” he slapped the side of the massive mystery machine he and Penny stood beside. “and not ONE person landed on the space?!” The Robot Seethed. Loki winced. “Unfortunate. Perhaps next year...” “UNFORTUNATE?” He said. Proxy shrieked. “Lion... this thing is a trial, a tribulation, a masterpiece of engineering requiring twenty-seven components, six sub-puzzles, and an...”

Loki slapped a hand over his screen-face. “No, no! Spoilers! If they know what it does, it won’t be mysterious anymore.” “You will be fairly compensated,” he whispered urgently. Proxy crossed his arms but backed down, still glaring with an angry emoticon face.

An hour of chaotic arguing and frantic building later, the town had assembled a makeshift obstacle course on a distant floating island. A monstrosity only a group effort could create. Grant cleared his throat, clearly exhausted. “Alright. Here’s what we came up with.” He pointed at the course. It had four branching paths, each starting at a different cliff edge, all merging into one enormous ramp that nearly scraped the sky. At the top, sitting cross-legged like a smug deity was Loki, with two shimmering orbs beside him.

Grant continued. “Each of you will begin on your own starting path. You will need to dodge attacks from the Commandos, the Kinryu-Kai, and… the pirates.” He said the last part with deep professional shame. From the sidelines, the pirates flexed their guns proudly and yelled. “WE ARE READY TO PROVIDE ‘MOTIVATION!’” Mikako cracked her knuckles. “My girls will be helping too.” ”Watch out for traps too.” Russel explained. Clyde stared at the nightmare they’d built. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This is the final miniame?” Grant sighed the sigh of a man who had accepted chaos as a lifestyle.“Yes.”

The air crackled with tension. Each player stepped onto their starting line as the entire town gathered to watch. Above them, the Commandos perched on rooftops and scaffolds, weapons set to stun, ready to “encourage” the players to keep moving. Behind the racers, the Yakuza clustered behind Clyde, glaring so intensely it felt like the temperature dropped ten degrees. The debt collector grinned and dragged a thumb across his throat. Clyde swallowed. “…Why do I have these guys?!” The Pirates were already hoisting The Rival onto their shoulders. “ONWARD, MEN!” he shouted triumphantly, pointing toward the obstacle course like he was leading a naval assault.

Clyde opened his mouth to complain again. Then realized he desperately needed the handicap.

"…Actually, never mind," he muttered. "This might even the playing field." The bell rang. A deafening CLANG that shook the road. All four shot forward. The first stretch wasn't complicated: a long balance platform while a pack of thugs chased them with foam bats. Clyde and Raleigh moved smoothly. Rebbecca glided through. The Rival surfed across on the backs of his pirate crew, screaming "FASTER!" like they were rowing a Viking longship. The crowd roared.

They converged at the middle checkpoint at almost the same moment. Waiting for them were two very familiar figures: Mikako, casually polishing her wooden sword and Rigg, cracking his knuckles. The Rival charged first. Mikako didn't even move her feet. She flicked her wrist hitting the Rival soared backwards like a launched firework. "I don't know if I admire or feel bad for the guy's delusional determination," Mikako said. Rigg nodded solemnly, like this was a funeral.

Clyde and Raleigh locked eyes. They shared a silent plan. They sprinted forward, then suddenly veered not at the guards but at Rebbecca, boosting her forward. Rebbecca winked, slipped between Mikako and Rigg like a shadow, and vanished into the next section. Before they can stop her."Tch, she's fast," Mikako muttered. The two refocused, blocking the path again. Clyde clenched his fist, charging it with a small pulse. Raleigh formed her glove into a hammer..

It wasn't meant to hurt, just to move them. Rigg instantly stepped aside. But Mikako just smiled, planting her feet. "You think we haven't fought you two before?" Raleigh swung. Mikako parried the hammer one-handed, sparks flying. At the same time, she flicked her wooden blade up, delivering a clean slash across Clyde's chest. Not enough to injure, but enough to knock him on his ass. Clyde hit the ground with a grunt. Raleigh skidded backward, boots carving into the dirt. "Okay…" Clyde wheezed. "They're… serious about this tradition thing."

"We don't have to beat them just get past." Raleigh said shifting to her second form. Grabbing him and warping past. Mikako frowned. "Now who's cheating." She grumbled. They kept running see Rebbecca in the distance as the path narrowed. They sprinted along that narrowing path. Commandos

fired stun blasts above to keep the crowd hyped. Ahead of them, Rebbecca was already tackling the last leg, scaling a massive wall.

“Why don’t you just warp to the top?” Clyde groaned. “Unlike her, I want to win somewhat fairly!” Raleigh snapped. Rebbecca glanced back, smirking, and fired a climbing cord upward. She rocketed up the wall like a smug elevator. Raleigh growled, formed an axe, and hurled it up with perfect aim, severing Rebbecca’s cord. Rebbecca fell, but caught a foothold effortlessly, already recovering before she touched the ground. Both Clyde and Raleigh were gaining on her.

Halfway up, Rebbecca grinned and tossed a smoke bomb straight down. A puff of thick gray, and Clyde launched through it, blasting upward. He smashed the section of wall above Rebbecca, removing any handholds so she couldn’t climb further. Raleigh climbed up beside her and shot her clean in the ribs with a stun pulse. Rebbecca’s eyes widened as she slipped again. She smirked. She pointed her other arm at the sky and fired another cord. “You didn’t actually forget I had two, right?” she teased, swinging wide over their heads. “I remembered,” Clyde said. He was already at the top. He shoved her gently back down.

Rebbecca blinked in surprise, then grinned. “Well played.” Raleigh pulled herself up moments after. “You did it,” she sighed. “I almost feel bad I have to betray you now.” “We could split the reward?” Clyde offered. “No way. Do you really want a three-way tie?” Raleigh said. “Ugh… I guess you’re right.” He rubbed his chin. “Rock-paper-scissors?” Raleigh nodded, though suspiciously. Clyde smirked. “I’m going to throw paper.” She froze. Was he giving her the win? Was he bluffing? Was that the bluff? Her brain melted. She chose scissors. Clyde threw rock.

“HA! That’s for all the bullshit everyone’s been pulling!” he laughed. Raleigh looked like she might strangle him… then sighed in defeat. “Alright, fine. Go.” Loki appeared in a whirl of sparkles and nonsense, handing Clyde the glowing orbs. It burned like a miniature sun. “Congratulations, Clyde! It looks like you might have won!” Loki cheered. “What do you mean might? I have the most orbs,

wait. You're not… no… " Clyde whispered, dread creeping in. "What?" Raleigh asked. "It's time for the final results!" Loki declared, somersaulting off the tower.

Everyone gathered in the center of town. Rebbecca looked smug. Raleigh looked hopeful. The Rival looked utterly broken, his men patting his back like he'd survived a tragedy. Loki raised his hands dramatically. "Here are the standings before bonus rewards! The Rival: 3 orbs! Raleigh: 4 Rebbecca: 5! And our beloved anchor Clyde… 7! But it's not over yet!" Loki yelled, the entire town cheering. Clyde froze. "The Minigame Orb…" Loki paused theatrically. "…goes to the Captain! … well… uh… you're both captains… ANYWAY it goes to Raleigh!" Raleigh blinked. "Wait really?"

"Next! The Event Orb… awarded to the person who experienced the most significant, uh, disasters!" Loki paused again. "…Captain Rival!" The Rival shot upright. "I knew those explosions meant something!" The Rival said. "And next!" Loki spun. "The Sympathy Orb!" The entire town sighed in unison. "That… also goes to The Rival!" Loki announced. The Rival burst into tears. Raleigh gasped. "Wait That means… we're all tied for last place." She groaned. "Not yet!" Loki sang. "Because there's more!"

Clyde went pale. "The Highest Roll Orb… goes to…" He checked a card. "…also The Rival Seriously I didn't even rig that one!" The Rival screamed in triumph. "And the last one worth a two orbs. The Loki Orb Awarded to the player who entertained me the most!" There was a beat of silence so thick you could cut it with a butter knife. Rebbecca blinked. "…that's not a real category." "It is now!" Loki said proudly. Raleigh groaned into her hands. "Of course it is." He said

Clyde rubbed his face. "Please. Please don't say it's..." Loki turned the card around. It had an enormous doodle of The Rival drawn in crayon. "The Rival!" He yelled. The crowd gasped. The pirates exploded into cheers. The Rival dropped to his knees, overwhelmed. "I… I finally… WON SOMETHING… I mean I totally have before but... I beat Orion!" He sobbed so hard one of his crew had to pat him on the back so he wouldn't choke. Clyde stared in horror. "He wins with THAT!?"

Rebbecca pinched the bridge of her nose. “He didn’t even play well. He hit every trap.” Raleigh looked like she wanted to personally throttle Loki. “I swear to god if this becomes a tradition...” Loki beamed. “It is now!” He lifted The Rival’s hand high. “The winner of the first Ever Loki party Folks!” The crowd cheered. Clyde looked physically ill. Raleigh muttered threats under her breath. Rebbecca clapped slowly, sarcastically, because the chaos amused her. And Loki? He winked at the crowd. “Same time next year!”

Everything turned into a mini celebration as people all over talked about the event. “Did you see the way he did that. Although if I was playing I...” Kaguya said with stars in her eyes to some of her men. Clyde looked at them all with Raleigh. “Well looks like we might not have a choice after all.” She sighs. “Maybe its not so bad... but we will have to change some things around next time, Less bullshit.” he sighed. “But my friends that's the most interesting part.” Loki said putting his arms around both of them. Both of them glared but sighed letting the moment happen.

Raleigh let out a softer breath, watching the chaos swirl around them, the pirates hoisting the Rival like he’d won a war, townsfolk arguing over strategies for “next year.” “Well… if nothing else,” she admitted, eyes dropping to the ground with a faint smile, “I guess it calmed me down a little. I almost forgot why I was so worried.” Clyde followed her gaze, watching the Rival and his crew celebrating like they’d always belonged in HOME, only Grant still lingering at the edge, arms crossed, wary but not intervening. “Yeah,” Clyde said quietly. “Maybe it’s time we shift a few relationships too.”

Chapter 47: The Pirate Problem

The Rival sprinted through an unfamiliar area of HOME , his pirate crew scrambling behind him in panic. Something enormous was chasing them; its footsteps shook the ground, but no one dared to look back. They burst into a clearing and stopped in front of a massive nest made of twisted branches and shimmering stone. The Rival raised a triumphant finger. "We've made it! There better be treasure here," he called, already climbing up the side of the nest.

He hopped inside, then stopped and frowned. "First Mate," he said slowly, pointing at the smooth, spotted egg in the center, "why is there no treasure here? Only... fancy rocks." The First Mate cleared his throat. "Sir, I think that is the treasure. Or our intel was bad. Very bad." Before The Rival

could react, the egg cracked. A sharp little claw poked through, and an adorable dragon hatchling burst out with a squeaky roar of victory. It blinked its huge eyes, looked around, and immediately locked onto The Rival.

The creature toddled toward him, chirping happily, then circled his legs, rubbing against him like it had found its mother. The entire crew stared. The Rival placed a hand over his heart. “That,” he whispered, “is the most adorable bird I’ve ever seen.” The pirates exchanged looks. “…Yes,” the First Mate agreed. “A very adorable… bird.” The Rival bent down, scooping the tiny dragon into the air, holding it over his head as he had just discovered the multiversal equivalent of destiny. “Yes! We did find treasure after all!” he proclaimed.

The hatching cooed, nuzzling his cheek. The Rival’s eyes sparkled with purpose. “And his name shall be… POLY!” The crew erupted into cheers. With their “treasure” secured, The Rival leapt from the nest, his men scrambling after him as they fled the forest with newborn Poly tucked proudly in his arms. Behind them, something enormous growled. They ran faster.

Clyde and Raleigh walked down the quiet street toward the Chamber of Influence. The lights inside were already on; the rest of the council was seated, waiting with the expection of Russel who was busy elsewhere, and had little to say on the issue. The moment the two stepped in, the room’s murmurs died. Clyde sat down with a tired sigh. “Alright. It’s been a month. Everyone’s had time to look into things on their own. So let’s get started. Who are these hackers? Are they still a threat? When will they strike again? Etcetera.” He gestured vaguely. “Someone talk.”

No one needed prompting. Every gaze in the room slid slowly, naturally to Rebbecca. She groaned, rubbing her eyes dramatically. “Okay, okay, fine. Look, they’re called…” She paused, thinking. “The Root Collective. Some of you might’ve even heard the name. Before most hackers vanished off the face of the multiverse, they were kinda well-known-ish.” Clyde frowned. “Vanished?” “Well, yeah,” she said, leaning back. “A few decades ago, it wasn’t exactly common to run into a hacker, but it wasn’t impossible either. Then… he changed that.” “Hmm, I remember hearing about the

mysterious vanishing, but I'm surprised I've never heard that word," Loki said with worried surprise.

A quiet discomfort settled over the table. Mikako squinted. "I've heard the name somewhere. Only in rumors, though. Something about someone called 'The Root'… who controlled the others?" "Close enough." Rebbecca shifted uncomfortably. "He didn't 'lead' them, he dominated them. Used raw skill to force them all under him. Hackers are usually lone wolves, selfish, paranoid, and allergic to teamwork. But they respected his power. Or more accurately…" She hesitated. "If they didn't, they didn't live very long."

She drummed her fingers on the table. "…but even fear loses its grip eventually." Raleigh leaned forward. "So what happened?" "His goals were idiotic," Rebbecca muttered. "Eventually, every hacker banded together just to stop him. And they did. Sort of. They won the war, but it was ugly. So many died just to stop one guy." She exhaled sharply. "After that… everyone scattered. I thought that part of my life was over. Thought I'd never have to hear that name again." Her voice softened, losing its usual snark and mask. "But he survived. And somehow he's pulling the strings again."

The table fell quiet. "…that's all I know," she finished. "He never contacted me. If you want real answers, you'll need Backdoor to talk." Grant sighed heavily. "I go down to see him every day. Not a word. Not a sound." Mikako folded her arms. "I've caught a few of them. Their grunts, they call them Ciphers. But before I can interrogate them, they're killed remotely." She scowled. "Whoever their leader is… he doesn't mess around." Rebbecca raised a brow. "Honestly? The fact you were able to catch one is incredible." There was no smugness in her voice now. Just sincerity, rare, unsettling sincerity.

"Why have we never talked about it before... was this when we first met.... that pain must have been... do you have a code name too..." Raleigh asked, face filled with different emotions. Some anger, some worry for her. Rebbecca looked away with a frown, true pain in her voice as she rubbed the area of her arms where flesh had become metal. "I'd rather not talk about anything that isn't useful information." She pleaded. "They did that to you?" Raleigh's eyes widened. It reminded her too much

of herself. Rebbecca didn't answer, trying to smile. Clyde, sensing her discomfort, tried to move on.

“Do you know what their goal is?” He asked. “I can only estimate they want this place because of its resources. There is no better prize for a hacker than a world with the energy of an entire Multiverse, but what they would use it for... couldn't say,” Rebbecca said, thanking Clyde with her eyes. Then Loki leaned forward, pushing something once again. “Forgive me if I'm wrong. I have no information of my own to offer. But this group... do they really have no relation to the... what was it... Ah, The Once and Future Foe.” Loki said as the whole room shivered without explanation. “The Payload did mention that before he died,” Raleigh said, rubbing her chin. Rebbecca paused, not sure what to say. She had already told Loki she had no idea what that was, but Payload's ghost contradicted her.

“Our leader was always ranting about something like that... I just thought it was the ravings of a madman. No one ever saw the threat, so most of us thought it wasn't even real. But if something like that is real... You better hope he is wrong.” She said, eyes widening with true fear, since she knew herself it was very real. Her metal hand trembled. “Sorry, that's all I have to offer.” She stood up, walking away. It got to her more than she thought it would. The trauma of the past. The trauma she is living with that she can tell no one about.

All of them frowned. Raleigh looked down, feeling like she pressed a little too hard. “We had to ask. We need to know what's coming.” Grant reassured. “You don't trust her,” Clyde asked. “ She is useful; no one is saying otherwise. But trustworthy... not at all. I know you've known her most of your life, Raleigh, but...” Mikako started to say. “You don’t think I know that?” Raleigh snapped, not angry, but hurt. “She’s screwed me over plenty of times when we were kids. Left me in danger, disappeared when things got scary…”

Her voice softened. “But she helped me, too. She was there when no one else was.”
Silence fell again. Then Loki, usually chaotic, rarely serious, leaned forward, hands folded. “Sometimes,” he said quietly, “the only way to trust… is to trust.” He smiled softly, almost sadly. “She

may not be ready. But if we extend faith… I believe she'll return it." Lucy nodded silently beside him. They linked arms and left together.

Grant looked down at the weapon Rebbecca had forged for him. He'd never used it. But he always kept it on him. "Faith, huh…" he murmured. Mikako sighed, rubbing her temples. "Look, I get it. I'm just saying, don't drop your guard entirely. My sister… for years, I thought she was dead. And now finding out she's with them too?" Her voice cracked slightly. "I trusted her more than anyone. And yet she… "We know," Clyde said gently. "We're sorry we couldn't capture her, too." "It's fine," Mikako muttered, though her voice said otherwise. She took a shaky breath. "But since Rebecca's gone… I'll be honest. I've found a few leads. I didn't want to say anything while she was still in the room."

Clyde straightened. "Alright. Let's hear them." "These hackers all share a look," Mikako explained. "Twin mechanical arms. The grunts are colorless, but the higher-ranking members…" She tapped her device. A hologram appeared. Eli Vale is singing on stage, radiant and adorable. "Unlike the others, this one's very public. Too public. Maybe by coincidence. Maybe not. But I'm certain he's part of them." "…He? That's a guy?" Clyde blinked, baffled. Raleigh squinted. "Isn't that Helix's idol? He's either stupid or lying to us. Probably both."

"Why would he be so public when all the others ain't?" Grant asked. "That's the thing that makes my theory fall apart. A possible reason is that it's their way of influencing the masses. I think what some of us should do is go to one of his upcoming concerts to scope it out, and well, if he ends up just being some dramatic Idol, we drop it, and keep looking, but my gut is telling me this is our guy." She said, urging them to agree. All of them look at each other, looking like they have formed a plan.

Clyde sits silently thinking it all over, but something else suggested to his mind after the Loki Party. "I think there is one thing we should take care of before we go poking around in more danger." All of them look at him, confused. "The Pirates... I get that The Rivals... leadership has mostly made them not that big of a deal... a minor annoyance at best, but they aren't letting up. He never lets up."

Clyde sighs. “Believe me, I'm grown tired of them.” Grant groaned. “Maybe we should just send them somewhere they can't come back, like the cartoon world,” Raleigh suggested.

“The cartoon world? Don't you remember what they did to us, Raleigh. I think that's a little harsh even for them.” Clyde said sheepishly, remembering being literally flattened like a pancake in rubber hose fashion, shuddering a little. “It is?” Raleigh said, rubbing her chin. “I've kinda been sending all the trouble makers there.” All of their eyes widen. “You what!?” They all say. She looked at them nervously, not realizing it was such a big deal. “Well, yeah. For most people causing trouble who live here, I just lock them up for a day or two, but if people push it too far or haven't really settled in with the rest of the people. People who cause real harm, I sent them off. It's only been like two or three people.” She said almost like a question.

All of them calmed down. “I guess their ain't no problem with kicking em out.” Grant said with a sign. “I was thinking something different. “I think we could maybe... integrate them into HOME.” Clyde said reluctantly. Grant stood up like he was shocked by the very idea. “No way in hell am I...” He started to say. “In name.” Clyde said cutting him off. “They've already shown they are willing help us... I'll be it for the wrong reasons but I'm thinking this. We ask them to join us. They can guard the booneys they live in, and no one goes to. They think they are helping. They stop attacking, and while maybe not the most useful, more forces to protect HOME.”

Mikako laughed at the crazy plan. Grant sat back down thinking it over. “Well I'll be... I have gotten tired of their... antics. That just might be the answer.” Grant chuckled. “He was in the empire.” Raleigh said rejecting it deadpan. Grants face hardens seeming to not have known that. “So was Cyrus.” Clyde said. She glares at him clearly still not fully trusting him either. “Yeah well he was also in the Crossbone Remnant. The evil mass murdering faction.” She frowned. His face dropped. “Crap your right.” He rubbed his head. “Alright new plan. We ask him about that... something tells me even if he intended to... he hasn't killed many people. If he somehow is that evil we kick him out. If not...”

Raleigh sighs. “Lets just get this over with.” In the Hack Shack Rebbecca listens from a device

she planted she frowned hearing the whole conversation. “I can make that work.” She said to herself.

Clyde and Raleigh headed toward their private hangar, the metal door sliding open with a familiar hiss. The Hopper sat parked inside like an old friend, sleek, imperfect, still patched from a dozen adventures. Raleigh’s expression softened. “Man… feels like it’s been a while since we used her.” “Well,” Clyde said with a shrug and a tiny smile, “now you just are a Hopper.” Raleigh rolled her eyes but kept smiling. “Still nice to go back every now and then.” She ran her hand along the hull in a rare quiet moment, then hopped inside. Clyde followed, and the ship lifted off, cutting through HOME’s skies toward the Rival’s lighthouse.

The Lighthouse. When they landed, something was… off. The place was too quiet. No shouting. No pirate music. No cannon misfires. No argument over who stole whose sock. Just silence. “Okay… creepy,” Raleigh muttered. Clyde cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hello?” No answer. But faint whispers drifted from behind a nearby barrel. “Shhh! No, stop it will hear us. It can smell fear!” Before Clyde could even question it, the barrel exploded outward, the Rival leaping out in a dramatic pose, Poly swooping beside him and mimicking the pose perfectly. “HA! ORION!” the Rival declared, coat fluttering from absolutely no wind source. “You have come to me this time! Clearly, my EPIC VICTORY over you in the Loki Party shattered your pride! But fear not! I shall defeat you again. For I...”

A thunderous roar shook the sky. The Rival froze. Then whispered as quietly as possible, “…oh shit, it heard.” He cleared his throat loudly. “I uh... Nothing... I'm going to go over hear now.” Then he dove back behind his barrel-hideout with zero dignity, Poly flying after him and hiding behind his head like a scared parakeet. Clyde stared. “What the hell is going on?” Raleigh shrugged. “This is… new. Even for him.” Then, a giant red dragon crashed down roaring so intensely that the nearby windows cracked.

“Since when does HOME have dragons?” Raleigh asked as she put on her glove, running to fight it. Clyde figured she could probably handle it, going over to where the Rival was hiding. He looks

down, seeing him peek over the barrel in fear, the rest of his crew doing the same. One look at Poly, and he already had a decent idea of why the dragon was here. “Did you... Steal that dragon's baby?” He asked as Raleigh traded blows with the beast in the distance. “What, no? This isn't some stupid lizard. This is my new pet parrot named Poly. Every Pirate has to have a parrot, idiot, then that giant hawk appeared out of nowhere and attacked us.” He explained proudly. The Baby chirped cheerfully.

Clyde looked around at their rather size able fleet they had now. “Did you even try to attack it will your ships.” He asked thinking they would probably be able to damage. The Rival choked like the thought didn't cross his mind. “And um... harm such a majestic creature. I could kill it myself, but...” He said. As his men all gasped in awe. “Eh whatever why don't you...” before he could finish the dragon suddenly disengaged barreling toward her baby seeing them in the corner of her eye. It raised it's massive claws up to swipe at The Rival, and Clyde before Raleigh could respond with a warp. Poly Flew in the way raising both arms as it barked at its mother like a dog.

Confusion spread across its face, followed by a low, heartbroken rumble. She lowered her claws slowly. Clyde stared at Poly. Then at the dragon. Then back at The Rival. “…What did you do?” Clyde demanded. “Did you trick the baby? Hypnotize it? Feed it glue?” “What?! No!” The Rival gasped. “He just knows how awesome I am. Obviously.” The baby dragon chirped happily again. “And,” The Rival added proudly, “I think you might be right about that other thing. Poly isn’t a parrot. He’s actually a hawk.” Clyde buried his face in both hands.

The dragon cried out one last time, loud enough to rattle the lighthouse door, then slowly lifted its head toward the sky. Its massive wings stretched wide, catching the sun in a breathtaking shimmer. With a single mighty flap, it rose into the air, circling once above them. Then it flew away. Everyone watched in silence as the shadow of its wings drifted across the ocean. The Rival blinked slowly. “...Wait,” he whispered, voice cracking, “Poly… was that… your mama?” For a moment, The Rival looked genuinely heartbroken. Then he smacked Poly lightly on the head. The baby hawk-dragon squawked, confused. “Get out of here!” The Rival shouted, though his voice wobbled horribly. “We

don’t want you anymore!”

His entire crew gasped as if he’d just stabbed himself. Tears already welled in their eyes. “Go on!” The Rival insisted, pointing dramatically. “Birds should hang out with other birds! Not with… stupid pirates!” His men began sobbing openly. The dragon mother hovered far in the distance, watching. Poly didn’t understand at first. Then, very slowly, it toddled forward and nuzzled its tiny head against The Rival’s leg, chirping affectionately. Only then did it spread its little wings and take off, flying clumsily back toward its mother. And every pirate on that dock absolutely lost it.

“The best five hours of my LIFE,” The Rival wailed, collapsing to his knees. “That bird… that beautiful bird… completed me…” His crew bawled as if attending a funeral. Clyde sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Right… I’m sorry you had to make such a devastating decision. But… you did the right thing.” Raleigh whispered, “He did? Did he, though?” Clyde whispered back, “I’m choosing optimism right now.” The Rival wiped his eyes, sniffling, but tried to stand tall. “No… no, it’s fine. If you truly want to duel, Orion, then I shall persevere.” Clyde and Raleigh exchanged a cautious, worried look. “Actually,” Clyde said slowly, “we came here for something else.”

A short while later, the three of them sat on barrels outside the lighthouse. The Rival, now emotionally drained, listened intently as Clyde explained the plan. “So,” Clyde finished, “we’d… like you and your crew to officially join HOME. Patrol the outskirts, keep people safe, and contribute to the community. In exchange, you stop raiding us.” The Rival stroked his chin thoughtfully, nodding as if considering a master plan. “Ah, I see,” he declared. “You wish to unite our forces! A brilliant maneuver. With our combined might, we could conquer the entire multiverse!” “No,” Raleigh said immediately. “That is absolutely not what we’re doing.” The Rival ignored her. “I would accept without hesitation, but…” He paused dramatically. “I must confess a terrible truth.”

Raleigh sighed. “Are you evil?” “What she means,” Clyde said quickly, “is… have you done a lot of bad things?” The Rival puffed up proudly. “Of course! I have felled countless foes! Held the multiverse by the balls! Men tremble at my very name!” Clyde didn’t even blink. “How many?” The

Rival deflated instantly. "…One," he admitted in a whisper. "Maybe a handful. And they were accidents. Please don't tell my men. They look up to me." He whispered this into Clyde's ear like they were lifelong rivals bonded by honor instead of nonsense. Clyde nodded sagely. "Thought so." Then he stood up and extended his hand. "Well? What do you say? Will you join us?"

He blinked, and The Rival was gone. Clyde and Raleigh turned in unison just in time to see him already halfway out of his pirate coat, standing at a whiteboard surrounded by his crew. He was scribbling furiously, dramatic symbols everywhere. One big one in the center: a stylized red bird. His pirates nodded solemnly, taking notes like this was a strategic war briefing. "Yes," The Rival announced proudly. "We shall call ourselves… the Sky Hawks. In honor of our dear comrade, we tragically lost." He tugged a leather jacket on with the seriousness of a man assuming a sacred mantle. His crew followed instantly, jackets, goggles, bird-coded emblems they somehow had ready, tossing their pirate hats aside like shedding an old skin.

Clyde and Raleigh just stood there, heads tilted, watching an entire identity crisis unfold in real time. "So… that means you're on board?" Clyde asked carefully. "Of course," The Rival said, as if it were obvious. Then he lifted a finger dramatically. "But one last condition! If we are to join your noble alliance… we must duel. Like the old days. One last glorious battle for old times' sake." Clyde sighed.

He had no memory of these "old days," but if this brought peace, fine. "Alright," he said. "One duel." The pirates, now the Sky Hawks, cleared a circle. The Rival stood at the center, blazing with determination. Clyde looked bored out of his mind. With a roar, The Rival charged. His attack was telegraphed enough that even Clyde's pre-Hopper self would've dodged it. Clyde started to step aside… then stopped. The Rival's fist hit Clyde square in the chest. Clyde didn't feel a thing. But he slowly staggered back like he'd been hit by a freight train.

"Oh no…" he said, voice flat as cardboard. "My… defeat… The crowd went berserk. "I KNEW HE COULD MATCH ORION!" a Sky Hawk shouted. "They're moving so fast we can't even SEE IT!" yelled another. Raleigh cackled so hard she had to hold her knees. Nourished by the applause, The

Rival charged again, landing another harmless blow. Clyde pretended it hurt even worse. He wondered, sincerely, if even the teenage Clyde who used to work at a grocery store could beat this man. Probably. Easily.

A few more dramatic fake reactions and Clyde finally collapsed to his knees. “Oh no… You defeated me… It’s a good thing we’re allies now…” he said in the least convincing tone possible. The Sky Hawks exploded in cheers, throwing hats, jackets, and possibly their sanity into the air. “He DID it! After all these years, he FINALLY DID IT!” Raleigh walked over and jabbed Clyde in the ribs. “Need me to nurse you back to health after your devastating loss?” He gave her a look. “…Maybe.” They slipped out while the Sky Hawks celebrated like they’d won a war.

True to his word, The Rival didn’t attack anymore. The Commandos eased up, even letting them come in and go into town if they behaved. The Sky Hawks began patrolling HOME’s outskirts like overeager mall cops. Every time Grant passed them, they snapped into dramatic salutes. Grant would sigh, hesitating before returning a stiff, confused nod. He wasn’t sure how to feel. Meanwhile, the Rival stood proudly at the bridge of his flagship, staring into the horizon with heroic intensity. “Yes… We will rise,” he whispered. “For you, little hawk, we lost.”

A soft chirp answered him. He gasped. “POLY! You came back!” The baby dragon-hawk nuzzled into his chest. The Rival spun around with childlike joy. Outside the deck window, the massive mother dragon paced the ship calmly, not attacking, merely… watching her adopted weird little pirate family. Clyde and Raleigh, from far below, froze as the flagship suddenly surged forward at triple speed. “ONWARD, SKY HAWKS! TO VICTORY!” The Rival declared. His men erupted in cheers. Grant stared up from the town wall, eyes widening. “…This was a terrible idea,” he muttered. But the dragon, oddly peaceful, drifted beside the ship like a guardian beast.

Chapter 48: The Decoy

Clyde, Raleigh, and Mikako appeared in a new world using Raleigh's upgraded navigation powers. Clyde and Raleigh wore their usual clothes, but Mikako looked more casual than usual—sunglasses on, posture stiff. "I never thought I'd be going to an event like this," she muttered, clearly uncomfortable. They stood on a massive open-air space station, its plaza alive with color. Eli Vale's face appeared on every pillar, screen, and floating hologram. Fans carrying light sticks, glitter makeup, and matching outfits buzzed with excitement, preparing for the concert.

"I kinda wish we were more prepared if this turns into a fight," Clyde said, bracing himself. "Or at least had a few more people with us."

Raleigh replied, “Well, we can’t bring Rebbecca… for obvious reasons. And Loki’s a super fan, so bringing him would’ve been an even worse disaster. Not many options left.” “Treat this as recon,” Mikako said. “We don’t need to engage unless absolutely necessary.” “Fair enough.” Clyde stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Uh… did we buy tickets?” “Hell no,” Raleigh snorted. “I warped us past the gate. I’m not giving Helix Corp or any hacker a single dime.” Clyde and Mikako exchanged a silent shrug. They moved deeper into the station, passing merch stands filled with posters, dolls, glow batons, and overpriced shirts. “Man, people really love this guy,” Clyde said as he looked around. “Wild to think we only heard of him a while ago.”

“The multiverse is huge,” Mikako replied, “and yet somehow small.” Raleigh slowed as she watched a group of teenagers excitedly playing Eli’s music from a portable speaker, singing along in full harmony. She frowned. “I know it’d make things harder for us… but part of me kinda hopes we’re wrong about him. For the fans’ sake.” Before Clyde could respond, a group of fans in perfectly coordinated outfits marched past, eyeing the crowd like fashion police. One abruptly pointed, not at Clyde, but at a random man behind him.

“Um, excuse me?” the fan said, scandalized. “Are you wearing pink to an Eli Vale concert?” The man blinked. “Uh… yeah?” The whole group gasped, clutching their hearts. “That’s one of his anti-colors! He literally said in his interview last month that he hates pink. Bro didn’t even do his research... embarrassing.” The man looked helpless. “I was going to buy merch! I just discovered him recently!” The group turned up their noses and marched off with theatrical disdain. Raleigh stared after them. “…Okay, now I feel less bad.” Clyde rubbed his chin. “Somehow… I think that was Rebbecca’s fault.”

They drifted with the crowd until they reached the back of the massive auditorium. Since they’d warped in without tickets, hanging near the shadows was the safest bet. Clyde glanced around, hoping for an empty seat, but even in a chamber this huge, every single one was filled. Fans bounced, shouted, waved glow sticks, their excitement a physical force. Then, without warning... Total silence. A silence

so complete it felt rehearsed, as if the entire audience shared one mind. A geyser of smoke blasted upward from the stage. Lights snapped on. A silhouette appeared, striking a practiced, dramatic pose, microphone raised like a divine artifact. The crowd erupted.

As the smoke peeled away, Eli Vale stepped forward, waving, glowing, smiling, already in total control. The music hit instantly. A pulsing beat. A shimmering synth. Then his voice, smooth, electric, addictive. “I’m the glitch in your heart, the spark in your feed, the algorithm of every need. Every click, every chant, every scream you stream, I’m the one turning code into dreams.” Eli danced with fluid precision, every move sharp enough to cut light. Fans swayed, gasped, already entranced. “Plug in, zone out, let devotion flow, I’ll rewrite the truth that you think you know. No veil, no rule, no symmetry. I bend the world to your love for me."

The three intruders traded looks, uneasy ones. Raleigh whispered, “Okay… that’s… yeah, that’s suspicious.” The music dipped, softer, warmer, just for a second. Then the bass exploded. Eli spun into a rapid-fire choreography that looked impossible for a human body. “Eyes on me, eyes on me! Change your reality, make you insane for me! We’re the Reality Hackers, kings of the key, Spinning new worlds out of your belief! Eyes on me, eyes on me! All your gods, they wanna be me! Every thought, every dream you see, Break the code, join the Reality Hackers with me!” He didn’t slip. Didn’t breathe wrong. Didn’t miss a beat.

It was perfect. Too perfect. Even Mikako, usually stoic, looked startled. The song surged onward, flashing lights, dizzying moves, layered vocals, all carrying the same theme: devotion, control, reality rewriting. Finally, Eli stopped center stage, reaching toward the crowd as if pulling them in. “So sing my name, let your mind agree. All you’ll ever need… is your eyes on me!” The auditorium detonated into cheers. Clyde stared at the stage, expression twisted somewhere between concern and exhausted disbelief. “Okay, but… if he is one of them… aren’t those lyrics a little too on-the-nose?”

Mikako shook her head slowly. “Actually? No. According to every file I read, having a themed persona is normal for idols. Leaning into dramatic, creepy, or exaggerated concepts is part of the brand.

If anyone accuses him of something…" She gestured vaguely. Raleigh finished the thought. "He gets to say, 'Relax, it's just performance art.'" "Exactly." Mikako sighed. "The more obvious it is, the easier it is to hide." Clyde looked back toward the roaring fans, thousands of them chanting Eli's name. "…This might be harder than we thought."

Eli lifted the mic again, smiling with practiced sweetness. "Thank you for coming, everyone!" The crowd detonated into cheers once more. Glow sticks waved like a neon ocean. "Are you all ready…" he asked, tilting his head, eyelashes fluttering, "…for another great performance from little old me?" The response was deafening. The fans roared as if their lives depended on it. Clyde muttered under his breath, "I'm starting to feel like this is one massive circle jerk…"

As if he heard him, no, as if Clyde's words were part of some prewritten script, Eli lifted a hand to his ear, feigning surprise. "Hmm? Oh! Before I forget!" His smile widened, too bright, too clean. "This concert… is going to be a little different." The crowd gasped on cue. "Why, you ask?" Eli twirled, spreading his arms dramatically. "Because tonight, we have… guest stars! Yes, that's right, REAL celebrity guests!" He snapped his fingers. Spotlights swung violently off him and slammed onto the shadows at the back of the arena, right where Clyde, Raleigh, and Mikako stood. The trio froze mid-step like deer caught in cosmic headlights. The crowd screamed. Some in excitement. Some are in pure confusion. Some are totally misidentified.

Then Eli giggled. A soft, airy, evil little giggle that didn't belong on any idol stage. "I know why you three are here," he sang, voice sliding between melody and mockery. "You thought you could crash my scene." He drifted across the stage like he was weightless, spotlight following him perfectly. Clyde, Raleigh, and Mikako stood frozen where they were, every eye in the arena locked onto them. The pressure was suffocating, like the crowd itself was a living thing waiting for a cue. "Well, let's not keep my fans waiting," Eli chirped. "I'd never want to bore them." The audience roared again, but the roar felt different now. Too synchronized. Too perfect.

"I'm known…" Eli announced, twirling gracefully with his mic, "…as The Decoy." All three of

them stiffened. That code name alone was enough, too specific, too damning to be a coincidence; they had walked straight into a trap. Raleigh whispered, “Oh hell.” Eli leaned forward as if he were inches away instead of meters, his smile stretching unnaturally wide in the screen projection behind him. “Aww… did I break your little fantasy?” he cooed. “Were you hoping I was just a cute little idol with a cute little secret?”

He briefly dropped the facade, just long enough for his face to twist into something predatory and wrong. Monstrously wrong. “The real show…” he murmured, mic lowering, “…is about to begin.” The lights cut. The bass rumbled like a heartbeat. Then the music slammed back in. “March, march, march…” Eli sang, voice echoing through the arena like a command layered over reality itself. Around them, the fans, glow sticks still raised, began turning toward Clyde and the others. Their eyes glazed over. Pupils dilated. Smiles fixed in place. Movements perfectly synchronized as if a single mind puppeted them all. One step forward. Another “Uh, guys...” Clyde started. “March, march, little soldiers march!”

The fans advanced, closing in with unsettling, mechanical precision. Raleigh summoned her glove. Mikako slid her hand to her sword. Clyde braced himself. Above them, the Decoy grinned down like a god observing insects. “I don’t feel so good about beating up a bunch of weak nerds,” Mikako muttered, lifting her wooden blade halfheartedly as the crowd swarmed from all sides. “Maybe that’s also a trick,” Clyde offered, punching one fan gently, only to watch the guy immediately flop over like a fainting goat. They all stared. “…Maybe not,” Clyde finished.

“We need to get to the stage!” Raleigh barked, shoving her way through the sea of dazed superfans. Clyde and Mikako pushed after her, careful not to accidentally kill anyone whose greatest crime was buying merch. Two fans jumped in front of them, blocking the path. Clyde blinked. “Hey, aren’t these the same guys from earlier? The ones who bullied the pink-jacket dude?” They didn’t respond. They didn’t blink. They stood there, perfectly still, like NPCs waiting to load an attack animation. Raleigh held up her hands. “Okay… don’t wanna hurt you.”

Then Eli sang again, voice dripping through the arena speakers like honey mixed with electricity: “My song fills you with power, Fills you with speed, Anything you want, Anything you need…” The transformation was instant. One fan’s body exploded outward with muscle, swelling into an impossibly massive brick wall of a man. His outfit shredded apart like tissue paper. The fan next to him didn’t get big; he got compact. Every ounce of him condensed, streamlined, muscles tightening like steel cables. His smile vanished, replaced with eerie blankness. “Uh,” Clyde said, watching in horror as the slim one crouched. Then he blurred.

A burst of speed so fast Raleigh barely registered the movement slammed into her. She flew backward, skidding across the arena floor hard enough to scorch the metal. “Raleigh!” Clyde shouted. The bulky fan roared, stomping forward. Every step cracked the plating beneath him like brittle glass. Mikako slid beside Clyde, wooden sword raised. “Okay,” she muttered, eyes narrowing. “I’ve changed my mind. I feel very good about beating up buff nerds.” All around them, more fans twitched unnaturally. Their eyes flickered to glowing yellow as their bodies jerked, limbs warped, muscles or reflexes mutating to match Eli’s rhythm. In seconds, Clyde and Mikako were surrounded, dozens of them, all altered in different ways.

The Decoy twirled onstage, smiling like a performer in a dream. “Dance for me, break for me, Let the world shake for me…” The crowd shrieked with joy. Clyde and Mikako braced back-to-back, barely keeping up, blocking, parrying, dodging, but unable to push forward. Raleigh recovered with a snarl, blurring past the speed-boosted fan and slamming him into a wall. The impact rattled the rafters. “Enough of this.” She slipped on her glove, sparks shooting up her arm as she triggered her second form. In a single warp, she appeared onstage.

A blade formed in her hand mid-step. She slashed, but Eli dodged with perfect grace, spinning out of reach as if it were part of the choreography. He didn’t miss a beat. Didn’t miss a note. Kept dancing like this was all rehearsed for months. The front-row fans gasped in awe, cheering wildly. “OH MY GOD, NEW CHOREOGRAPHY!” Raleigh tried again. Slash, warp, slash. But Eli flowed around

each attack, limbs bending, footsteps gliding, body turning with unnatural rhythm. His movements blurred with the spotlights, tricking the eyes, the sound system syncing to every dodge. Suddenly, his manager leapt onto the stage, eyes glowing the same sickly yellow. His glasses were cracked. His smile was wrong.

He struck at Raleigh with unnatural strength. She ducked, flipped him over her shoulder, and smashed him into the stage floor. The fans screamed again, but with admiration, not fear. Clyde and Mikako fought tooth and nail through the aisles, pushing, blocking, and weaving past altered fans who stumbled and lunged with puppet-like aggression. But they were still far from the stage. Even when they knocked one down, two more surged forward. “MOVE!” Clyde shouted, shoving aside a speed-glitched fan. “We’re trying!” Mikako snapped, slicing another’s arm just enough to disable him. At last, they burst through the final cluster of bodies, panting and bruised, and sprinted toward the stage. The song ended. The last note echoed through the arena. The manager collapsed at Raleigh’s feet. Clyde and Mikako vaulted onto the stage beside her.

“What have you done to these people?” Clyde demanded, horror creeping into every word. Eli tilted his head innocently. “Hmm? Me? I didn’t do anything except entertain them.” He pressed a hand to his chest with feigned humility. “And they love me for it.” “You’re being… weirdly open about this,” Clyde said suspiciously. Eli giggled softly, airily, and unsettlingly pleased. “I’ve already drawn you in,” he purred. “You’re just little moths fluttering toward my light. Even knowing who I am, you look anyway. You can’t help but look.” His voice dropped, sweet and poisonous. “You belong to me now.”

Raleigh stepped forward. “You’re still very public. That’s a stupid move.” “Oh, sweetheart,” Eli sighed, wagging a finger. “We don’t allow outside filming. The world itself denies it. And the fans?” He smiled sweetly. “They don’t remember anything unless I want them to. Their memories remix themselves into the show I give them.” Clyde’s stomach dropped. “Universal…” Raleigh whispered, eyes widening. The glow crawled up her arm, responding on instinct. “Crap. He’s the god of this

world."

Eli spread his arms as if welcoming them to paradise. "Finally, you understand." Lights brightened around him in a halo. "You walked willingly into a stage I own. A universe I wrote. And unlike your fun little condensed worlds…" He tapped his mic against his palm, click "…you can't break this one open." He smiled. A real smile. Predatory. Triumphant. "Welcome to my reality, but I'm a merciful god. I'll give you a chance." He said with a smile as the crowd responded as if it were the greatest thing they had ever heard. A shadow loomed in the rafters, frowning. "That makes things harder." They said.

Eli twirled his mic between his fingers, basking in the horror dawning on their faces. "Aww, don't look so scared," he cooed. "It's not like I'm actually a god." He winked. "Not technically." Raleigh's jaw clenched. "Explain." "Oh, gladly." Eli stepped across the stage with the swagger of someone who'd practiced this speech in the mirror a thousand times. "See, my little universe runs on an extremely simple principle." He snapped. The lights above shifted to golden script, lines of universal code rippling like water. "Talent defines divinity. Meaning the most skilled, most beloved, most perfect performer becomes the highest authority here." Eli gave a theatrical bow. "And surprise, it's me. Because of course it's me."

He dragged a finger down one glowing line of code, and the world rippled with it. "You three? You're invaders. Outsiders. You don't have audience imprinting. You don't have fandom momentum. You don't even have proper choreography." His eyes sparkled with cruelty. "You can't challenge me here. Not on my stage." Raleigh's hand tightened around her glove. "You think we won't find a way?" "Oh no, no, no…" Eli laughed lightly and airily, but with something rotten underneath. "I want to humiliate you." He pointed his mic at Clyde like a weapon. "So!" he sang, the word cascading like a musical flourish. "Let's make this fun. A little friendly competition." The code shifted again. Spotlights crashed down on the trio, forming a stage beneath their feet, a random assortment of instruments. Eli spread his arms.

“I challenge you,” he declared, “to a Battle of the Bands!” The crowd exploded with excitement, unaware of the true stakes. Eli leaned in close, voice dropping to a venomous whisper they still somehow heard over the crowd. “And when you lose, the code will recognize me as the sole divine performer.” He tapped Clyde’s chest with the mic. “And that means I decide your fate.” He twirled away with a pirouette. “Try to keep up, I'll let you figure things out during this next song,” he sang sweetly. “I’d hate for the show to be boring.” A shimmering soundproof bubble sealed around them like a dome, muting the screaming fans and the thunder of Eli’s next song. Outside, Eli twirled, kicked, and sang flawlessly… as if he hadn’t just threatened them with divine execution.

Chapter 49: Battle of the Bands!

Raleigh paced like a caged tiger. “Are we seriously entertaining this guy? Let’s just go. Warp out, punch him later, whatever. We’ll find another way.” She growled, watching Eli hit a perfect high note that made the crowd melt. Mikako shook her head. “What if we don’t get another chance? If this world locks us in? If the code doesn’t let us leave until someone wins?” Clyde exhaled through his nose. “Do either of you have any musical training? At all?” Mikako raised her hand halfheartedly. “I, uh… played bass a bit with my sister back in the day. Badly. My band was called Emo Tsunami.... we never survived our first gig.”

Clyde nodded solemnly. “Good enough.” Raleigh pointed at herself with wide, earnest eyes.

“I’ll be the lead singer then. My heavenly voice will turn all their heads toward me instead.” She cleared her throat, dramatically, and released a sound so unbelievably horrible it rattled the bubble’s walls. It was like someone tried to autotune a dying whale. Mikako flinched so hard she nearly dropped the bass. “Um—Raleigh… I mean this lovingly… but you’re completely tone deaf.”
Clyde stared at her in open disbelief. “…I didn’t think it was biologically possible to be that off-key.” Raleigh folded her arms indignantly. “Hey! My voice is adorable!” “No,” Mikako said gently, “your vibe is adorable. Your voice is a crime.” Raleigh looked personally attacked. Clyde glanced over at the drum kit waiting beside her. “Try these instead.” He held out a pair of drumsticks. Raleigh blinked… then snatched them with intense determination. “Fine. But I’m only doing this because I want to cave his skull in later.” She sat, tapped the drum experimentally, BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM. Perfect tempo. Perfect rhythm. Completely instinctive. Mikako blinked. “…okay, drummer.”

Clyde grabbed the guitar, testing a few chords. “He told us to ‘figure things out’ during his next song. That’s the arrogance part. He doesn’t think we can.” Mikako plucked a bass string. “So what’s the plan? Outperform him?” Clyde shook his head. “No. We’re not beating him at his own game.” He looked between them: the tone-deaf drummer, the out-of-practice bassist, and himself, who could play but definitely wasn’t a star.

“But we can beat him at ours.” Raleigh raised her sticks. “And what is ours?” Clyde smirked. “Being stubborn as hell.” He pointed toward Eli, who spun in the distance, bathed in adoration. “We don’t need to be better than him. We just need to be good enough that the audience doubts him. That’s how you break a god whose power depends on worship.” Mikako nodded slowly. “Shake their faith…” “…and the world stops listening to him,” Clyde finished. Raleigh grinned. “Alright then,” she said, cracking her knuckles. “Let’s destroy his world, and run like hell if this plan doesn't work.” He muttered the last part under his breath.

The bubble popped, and the roar of the crowd slammed back into their ears all at once, a tidal wave of cheers for the idol still standing smugly center-stage. Eli bowed with a theatrical flourish.

“Alright, everyone,” he purred, “it’s time for our guest stars to shine. Give them a hand… they’ll need it.” He stepped aside, settling onto a small silver stool like he was about to watch a comedy show. The crowd gave a few polite claps, mostly confusion, and some irritation. A ripple of murmurs spread through the arena. Clyde swallowed hard.

They scrambled to set up, Raleigh gripping her drumsticks like she intended to kill someone with them, Mikako stiff with stage fright, Clyde tapping the mic like it might explode. “Uh… hey… uh, what’s up…” Clyde said, voice cracking. “We’re… going to… uh… play a song.” He backed away like the microphone had personally offended him. He strummed the first chord. Mikako came in early. Raleigh came in late. It was atrocious. Like three different songs being played in three different universes. The crowd immediately turned hostile. “YOU SUCK!” “Get off the stage!” “What is this, open mic night?” “BRING BACK ELI!”

A glow stick narrowly missed Clyde’s head. They stopped, mortified, glancing at each other like maybe they should just accept death. But then Raleigh inhaled sharply. “Again,” she said firmly. Clyde nodded. Mikako steadied herself. They tried once more. This time, the tempo aligned, shaky, imperfect, but together. A softer, calmer melody. Clyde began strumming properly. Raleigh dropped into rhythm. Mikako’s bass thrummed under them. No lyrics prepared. No plan. Clyde’s arm, his multiversal connection, flickered weakly, guiding him like a failing compass.

He stepped up to the mic. “This multiverse…” he began, voice uncertain but real, “…it’s a dangerous place.” The crowd quieted slightly. He continued, searching for words in real time, “But this same multiverse… has so many wondrous things. People trying, people surviving, people building something new. Even when everything is chaos…” He glanced back at Raleigh and Mikako, both sweating bullets but still playing. “…they keep going anyway.” The arena fell still. Not cheering. Not booing. Just listening. The authenticity, the vulnerability, they weren’t good, but they were human. Honest. Trying because they had to, not because they wanted applause. Somewhere in the audience, a fan whispered: “…they’re not great, but… they’re trying.” Another nodded. “It… kinda feels real.”

Onstage, Eli Vale's perfect smile twitched, a tiny stutter in an otherwise flawless performance. Like a glitch in the system. He hadn't expected them to get even this far. His eye twitched again, sharper this time. Then, without waiting for their song to end, Eli exploded into motion. He lurched to center stage, snatching the spotlight back like he was ripping out a rival's throat. He violently launched into a new song. His voice hit like a sonic weapon.

"Who are you? To me, you're nothing, I'm your god, your breath, your everything!" His movements were sharp, almost angry, spins with too much force, steps that cracked the stage flooring, gestures so aggressive they bordered on threatening. Flawless. Beautiful. Terrifying. Every note bent the world around him. Every word clawed attention away from the trio like he was dragging it back by the roots. Clyde, Raleigh, and Mikako stared, stunned. Even though he had challenged them, the fact that they had taken even a sliver of attention had shaken him.

The song ended with a final, vicious flourish. Eli struck another picture-perfect pose, arms spread, chest heaving. The crowd roared. His smile snapped back into place, too wide, too bright. "Now," he purred, "let's take a look at the score, shall we?" He tapped the air. A holographic UI shimmered into existence overhead: Eli Vale: 99% Guest Stars: 1% Eli stared. Then his face dropped. "What?" The word ripped out of him like a snarl. His stage persona shattered, his expression twisting into raw, unfiltered rage. He looked like he couldn't comprehend the idea that even one person… one single mind… one tiny fragment of the multiverse… preferred someone else.

He dragged in a breath, forcing the smile back onto his face like a mask being stapled to his skin. "Maybe," he said sweetly, voice trembling with fury, "they just need to hear your awful song again to remember who the real star is here." He skipped off to the side, movements jerky, uneven, borderline glitching. The crowd murmured. They had never, not once, seen Eli Vale falter. Eli Vale didn't falter. Clyde blinked. "…It was that easy?" He didn't understand the full mechanics, but the reaction was real, and he could feel it; his plan was actually working.

He took a steadying breath and began a second song. It wasn't amazing. It wasn't even polished.

But it had rhythm. Heart. And sincerity. And the crowd felt it. More fans softened. “Ohhh, I get it. He’s trying to promote new talent.” “They’re not perfect yet, but give them time! They could be as good as Eli one day!” “Aww, this is kinda wholesome.” Then the cheering started. Not huge, but real. And that was enough. Eli stormed back onto the stage, hearing every single word. “You think this is FUNNY?!” he barked, face contorting.

“This is YOUR humiliation, not mine!” The crowd flinched. “P–promote these losers? Why would I do that? The only person you need to see is ME!” A ripple traveled through the audience. Some of their eyes stopped glowing yellow. A few blinked out of their trance entirely. Above them, the numbers had shifted: Eli Vale: 80%, Guest: 20%. Clyde stared at the hologram. “…We didn’t even push him that hard.” Eli gritted his teeth so hard his jaw trembled. “It would be one thing if you were idols,” he spat, “but YOU...”

He pointed at Clyde with shaking hands. “You wouldn’t know music if it ran you over with a truck!” He stopped. Because the percentage climbed again. 22%… 23%… 24%… He staggered backward. His chest rose and fell too fast. His hands shook. His pupils glitched between shapes, circles, squares, and hexagons as raw panic began strangling him. “No… no no no…” he whispered. “If they look away… if they even think someone else matters…” His breath hitched. “They love me. They love me.”

He clutched his head. “The Administrator… he loves me… he chose me…” His voice broke. “Yeah. Yeah, they’re just, just being stupid. They’ll be humiliated. Humiliated and dragged straight to him...” “Uh… are you okay?” Clyde asked carefully. Eli froze. Then his entire posture snapped upright. The mask slammed back into place so fast it was almost audible. He smiled. Too wide. Too bright. Too wrong. “Clearly,” he said with forced cheer, “we need one FINAL battle.” He lifted his mic like a sword.

“A duet.” His voice dripped with venomous confidence. “Me… versus all of you.”
The crowd gasped. “My fans won’t possibly confuse real talent when it’s in the same song.” His smile

widened. “Try to survive my verse.” Eli starts right away, “Step into my stage, try to fill my light… You’re scraps on the cutting room floor of the night. Every chord that you strum, every breath that you take. I perfected these worlds while you barely stayed awake.” He spins, microphone glinting, the crowd roaring on cue.

Clyde swallows, steadying himself. “Maybe we’re small. Maybe we’re new. But a song doesn’t care who it’s singing through. You stand there flawless, sure, we can see. But we never claimed perfection. Only honesty.” Eliot's smile tightens. “Pretty words, brave face… a charming little bluff. But echoes of truth aren’t truth enough. You try to climb mountains I carved with my hands; I am the architect. You’re just… fans.” The crowd cheers automatically; something in the code pulls them.

Mikako meets Clyde’s eyes, breath steady. “You’ve built skyscrapers out of mirrors and smoke. You shine, sure, but only if no one else speaks. We’re not reflections of you, or ornaments on your stage. We’re people. We’re voices. We’re more than your cage.” A murmur rolls through the audience. Eli’s eye twitches. “Listen closely. I’ll only say this once: My fans know my worth, you’re a footnote, a stunt. I sing, they believe. I breathe, and they scream. What do you call a ‘song’? I call a regime.” He steps forward, tone almost royal. “I don’t want your truth, I want your obedience. Everything else? Inconvenience. Stay in your lane, this spotlight is mine! I’ve bled for this stage, every note, every line! I crawled up from nothing, don’t cheapen my climb! This world is my heartbeat. My worth. My time.”

Clyde steps closer, guitar ringing like a challenge. “If your whole world is this blinding light… Then you’re standing alone, and calling it fame. You can’t kill every echo just to protect your name.” The crowd quiets. A few shout encouragement at the trio, something Eli has never heard. The scoreboard flickers, their number slowly rises. Eli’s breathing stuttered, voice cracking at the edges. “You think you understand? You think this is a game? Try starving. Try begging. Try singing your name into empty streets where no one turns their head, where your voice is your heartbeat and silence means death!”

Clyde once again sings. “We aren’t laughing at pain. We all came from it, too. But hurt turned to

hunger won't make them love you. You're talented, Eli. That part's real. But fear isn't worship. Control isn't zeal. If your whole empire collapses from someone else's song… Then maybe it wasn't that strong." Something snapped inside The Decoy. His pupils jittered like dropped pixels. He clutched his head as their percentage surged. He reverted mid-scream into his old chorus, voice cracking, "EYES ON ME! EYES ON ME! Every god you've dreamed of wants to BE ME! I AM REALITY, DO YOU HEAR MY CALL? LOSE YOURSELVES IN ME, OR YOU ARE NOTHING AT ALL!" The crowd recoils, not in awe, but in fear.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Noir drops down from above, standing between them, grabbing a mic. "Spotlight junkie with a god complex, glued to your fandom like a parasite rex. You don't sing truth, you choreograph a scene, but truth ain't something you can autotune clean." Clyde and the others' eyes widen in shock. "Damn, I guess Raleigh can rap at least." He muttered. "You preach devotion, but you're terrified of motion, one honest note, and your whole code breaks open. Your fans love a dream. 'til you force them to kneel. But a voice ain't divine if it's scared to be real." She goes on.

Elliot started back away, pulling at his hair like everything was falling apart. "You hide in perfection 'cause your ego's too brittle, one crack in the mirror and you shatter down the middle. You're a glitch wearing glitter, a fraud in a crown, and the second they look elsewhere… your whole world shuts down." Noir sung, dropping the mic. It hit the floor with a boom that echoed like judgment. The arena fell silent. The scoreboard trembled. 49%… 50%… Eli Vale stumbled back, face twisted in glitchy horror. "No, no, no... You ungrateful little shits!" He screams, looking out at the crowd, face twisted.

His voice wasn't melodic anymore. It was raw, cracked, and distorted with rage. The crowd flinched. Eli spun on them, face snarling like a corrupted mask. "I'M A HACKER, I HACK ALL OF YOU!" he shrieked. "I control the worlds, ALL OF THEM! The Collective depends on me! You LOVE me because I MAKE YOU!" Spittle flew from his mouth. His mic squealed with feedback. Clyde whispered, "Uh… does he know he's saying all that out loud?" But Eli wasn't listening. He was

unraveling. “YOU ARE NOTHING WITHOUT ME!” He pointed wildly into the crowd. “THIS ISN’T A GAME! KNEEL TO ME! WORSHIP ME!” A ripple of uncertainty moved through the arena; half the fans genuinely weren’t sure if this was an act. Then he snapped. Literally.

He dove off the stage, seized a random fan by the collar, and dragged her back up with terrifying strength. She kicked and struggled, eyes wide. Eli crushed his hand around her throat. “WHICH ONE OF YOU WAS IT? YOU?” he screamed inches from her face. “You must’ve liked them more, IS THAT IT?!” The arena gasped. Raleigh, Clyde, Mikako, and Noir all lunged forward, but Eli jerked the hostage up like a shield. “STOP! I’ll snap her neck!” Everyone froze. Eli’s voice turned eerily calm and sweet and dead-eyed.

“See? I still control all of you.” He tilted his head, smiling with a broken jawline glitch. “Our organization controls everything. He does! Even when you think you have a choice, you don’t.” The fan choked, tears streaming. Clyde’s knuckles turned white. “Now,” Eli hissed, “Tie. Each other. Up.” There was a stunned pause. Then Noir raised a hand gently. “Hold on a second,” she said. “You might… want to rethink that.” Eli snarled, tightening his grip. “Why’s that?!” Noir pressed a button on a device clipped to her belt. The enormous holographic screen above the stage flickered, the scoreboard vanished, and a news broadcast popped up with perfect clarity.

BREAKING NEWS: MULTIVERSAL ICON ELI VALE GOES MASK-OFF LIVE ON STAGE — HOSTAGE SITUATION UNFOLDING. HACKER CONSPIRACY? Footage provided by Aion News Network. The arena erupted in horrified whispers. Hundreds of cameras, real ones, not the restricted world’s fake feed, projected Eli’s meltdown from every angle. His own face stared back at him, twisted in rage, choking a fan. Revealed. Exposed. Ruined. Noir crossed her arms. “Smile for the multiverse, superstar.” She mocked. “He lowered the girl but didn't let go. “Impossible. You can't film here. You're lying. How could you?” He said in disbelief.

“I figured that out when I was scoping out the place, but I had a powerful weapon up my sleeve, and they told me a perfect way around that.” She opened a portal with her hands, showing that there

was a camera filming just outside the world. “Thanks, Crow, you really helped.” She whispers. His grip loosened enough for the hostage to yank free and bolt into the crowd. All of them started to run in terror, except a few who still believed. He didn’t even notice. His eyes were locked on the giant screen replaying his meltdown. His confession. His threats. His failure. “My role…” he whispered, voice quivering. “I’m… The Decoy. I serve the Administrator. I serve the vision. But if no one looks at me... if no one believes... how can I... how can I...” Something cracked inside him.

The mask shattered. He screamed. And then he lunged. A blur of glitching motion. He struck with feral desperation, no rhythm, no grace, no elegance. Just raw need. Noir warped behind him in an instant. Her heel slammed into the back of his skull with a sharp thwak. Raleigh’s eyes widened. “For real? You didn’t even use a machine...” Eli twisted mid-air, landing on all fours like a spider. His arms warped, mechanical frames bursting open, reshaping into monstrous hacking-claws pulsing with yellow static. He launched at Clyde. Clyde brought up his armored arm just in time. The impact pushed him back several feet. Mikako darted across the stage, wooden sword. She slashed downward.

Eli smashed into the floorboards, denting them. Raleigh didn’t hesitate; she leapt, hammer glowing in her hands, and brought it down in a seismic slam. Dust shot up. The stage shook. Eli’s body crumpled under the impact, twitching, glitch-static spilling from his limbs. He lay there on his back, breathing in sharp, broken digitized wheezes. The four circled him cautiously, weapons raised, breaths steady but wary. After everything the others had put them through… After what Eli himself had already shown… None of them was convinced it was over.

Noir crouched beside the fallen Decoy, rummaged through his pockets, and yanked out a tiny glowing orb, its surface swirling like a self-contained galaxy. “A condensed universe,” she muttered. Then she slipped it into her coat. “Yeah, no. We are not doing a round two of that.” Everyone exhaled at once, shoulders dropping. Even Raleigh. “So… what now?” Raleigh asked, planting her hammer on the ground. “Cage him next to the other one? Loki’s gonna flip. He loves this guy.” Clyde rubbed his neck awkwardly. “Speaking of that uh...Eli?” The Decoy didn’t move. His eyes were unfocused, his

body limp, his breath thin. He looked… hollow.

Clyde held out a small blank card and a pen. “I know we just kinda kicked your ass, but do you think we could get an autograph for our friend?” The Decoy blinked at the card. Then, very slowly, like muscle memory tied to obsession, he whispered: “…Anything for a fan…” His hand trembled as he took the pen. But the signature he scribbled was elegant, sweeping, practiced, almost beautiful.
The three stared at it, looking at Clyde like he was an idiot.

Before any of them could react further, the giant holographic screens around the arena flickered. SIGNAL LOST. The lights snapped off. Pitch black. For half a second, no one breathed. Then a whisper. Right at Noir’s ear. “Your time will come.” A presence, cold, knowing, moved between them. The lights blasted back on. Eli Vale was gone. Only scorch marks remained where he had lain. Clyde pinched the bridge of his nose. “…Great.” Raleigh groaned. “I hate hacker villains.” Mikako exhaled through her teeth. “This just got worse.” Noir closed her fists around the stolen universe, jaw tight. “He didn’t slip away,” she said quietly. “He was taken.”

Chapter 50: Calm before the storm

The group exits the venue together and looks up, surprised to see coalition ships in the sky. Men descend, swarming the area. In the distance, Cyrus and Tess approach, with Eight (disguised as Aurel) following close behind. Raleigh narrows her eyes. “What are you doing here... and with him?” she asks Noir, who receives a similarly sharp look, making him sweat. “This place is Coalition territory. Do you realize what you just did?” Noir sighs. Clyde tries to answer, “Stopped a crazed idol from murdering his fans?”

“Yes... But more importantly.” He sighed, showing them an article written by Crow that says. “Hacker hostage situation uncovers a conspiracy?” All of them crowd around it, surprised, except Noir,

who seemed to have planned it that way. “I was given a powerful weapon, and I used it. What better way to fight a group like that?” She said unapologetically. “Indeed, but now every major power in the multiverse is in an uproar,” Cyrus explained. “Really? I didn't think that was enough information to make that happen.” Clyde pondered. “It's not, but it is enough to seed doubt. I'm sure they will forget about it in a month or two. I will not.” He said confidently. Eight raises a hand sheepishly. “I um... kinda filled him in on a few things too. I can't believe there was another hacker in my company and I didn't even know...“ He said sheepishly, trying to look grateful.

All of them rolled their eye, not fully buying into it. “It's ok if you were scared of them, don't lie about not knowing,” Mikako said bluntly. Eight lowered his head, nodding. “Sorry...” He said, admitting it. “What's important now is we...” Cyrus started to say, only for Noir to interrupt. “Yeah, no, I didn't agree to become the super best friends league. I'm out.” She said, holding up a peace sign about to warp, but Raleigh grabs onto her before she is able to be dragged with her.

Cyrus looked concerned the last time he met. They weren't friends, and now they have some strange new power. “It seems much has happened.” He said almost like he was asking if that was ok with Clyde. “I'm sure they will be fine tell talk and come back... I hope...” He said only half sure, but knowing at the very least she can warp back here herself. “Let's sit and discuss everything we know,” Tess speaks up, motioning to a nearby table. Clyde signs, locking in for a long explanation.

Raleigh and Noir appear in a random world. “How are you able to just do that? I figured out something similar, but I need this.” She said, showing off the glove. Noir yanks her hand away. “Why should I tell you... Maybe I'm just better than you.” She shrugged but then took a deep breath. “It wasn't easy... let's just say I was put into a situation where it was either doing it or death. Can you believe it... I think that stupid asshole actually dampened our powers.” She laughed. It was a sad, traumatic laugh.

There was a pause; no one said anything, but she didn't turn to leave either. “Hey Noir... I get that things are... weird between us... but...” Raleigh started to say. “Wasn't me leaving HOME without

even saying anything to you enough of an answer already. I don't belong there." She shut her down. "I'm not saying that... but maybe you could come around ever so often... for um... strategy. So we can take on The Root Collective together." Raleigh said nervously. "I bet Rebbecca would like that." She said like she was grasping at straws for reasons. "The Roots, what?" Noir knew that Vance was called that, but the name she knew was Omnihack. She dismissed it as a misunderstanding. "Rebbecca, huh..." His thoughts lingered like she considered telling her something, but decided not to.

"No dice... maybe one day I'll show up, but as far as fighting hackers together, no way. I've been to their base, you can't just break in... I'll find a way, and I'll take care of them... so you and Clyde can... so you can enjoy the life you wished for." She said, facing away. Raleigh frowned face welling up with tears. "I'm sorry..." That's all she managed to get out. "Don't be, I'm Noir, remember. I think I might have found something anyway." She started to walk away before remembering something. "One more thing before I go sit tight." She vanished, leaving them there alone.

In a short while, she returned holding something. "Sorry took me a second to remember where it was." She handed her a notepad. Not just any notepad. The one Clyde wrote his bucket list in. She started to open it, but she stopped her. "No... do it with him..." She smiled softly. "Alright, see you, and... I hope you have a great life." She walked without another word.

Vance dropped Eli Vale onto the polished floor like discarded trash. The Decoy hit his knees hard, breath rattling, makeup smeared and glitching like corrupted pixels. Two figures stood before him. Mainframe. Silent. Watching. And beside her… The Boss. Calm. Still. Precisely controlled. A presence sharp enough to cut reality. The Administrator. "Leave us," The Boss said. Vance bowed once, no hesitation, no question, no personality, then vanished through the door without a sound.

Eli gasped and scrambled to straighten himself, kneeling upright like a worshiper before an altar. "Great Administrator. I... I know I failed, but please, I..." The Boss raised one hand. Silence. He spoke in a voice so calm it made Eli's spine curl. "Failing was within parameters. Failure was acceptable." Eli blinked, hope flickering. "Then… then what did I..." "You did something

unforgivable," The Boss said. Cold. Surgical. Final. Eli's throat locked up. "W–what? I don't..." Mainframe answered for him, tone clipped and precise. "Your mission had two acceptable outcomes. One, Defeat Raleigh and Clyde Moore. Capture them. Two, if you could not do either, seed Phase One of Trojan's Going Dark Protocol. Instead… you exposed us."

His pupils glitched. "No… no, I didn't! I never mentioned Omni..." "But you made many other claims." Mainframe cut in. "Claims that created paranoia. You triggered several network sweeps. Public speculation. Enough to expose dozens of undercover Ciphers. If not for me correcting the data feeds, they would now be dead." The Boss sighed, soft, disappointed, infinitely worse than anger.

Elliot finally understood. A tantrum. A meltdown. A single emotional outburst nearly collapsed an entire segment of their organization. He bowed so low his forehead hit the floor. "Great Administrator, I... I'm sorry... I truly am. Please, it was my fault, I admit it! I can still fix this! I..." He looked up, eyes wild, manic. "I'm your Decoy!" The Boss turned slightly, face unreadable. "A distraction no one sees or believes," he said, "is not a distraction at all." He looked directly at Eli. "You can no longer fulfill your role."

Elliot's breath stuttered. "No, no, please... Administrator, please... I'll do anything to make it right... You're everything to me, please. I need to make it right, just tell me how, please... please..." The Boss did not answer. Mainframe frowned, almost pitying. Finally, he turned back. "You can still be useful," The Boss said. A pause. "…with your death." Eli didn't understand at first. His mouth opened, shut, opened again. Then it hit. And he smiled. A broken, luminous smile stretching too wide. He began to laugh high, hysterical, euphoric. "I will," he said, voice trembling with exhilaration. "It will be my greatest performance yet!" He bowed low again. "Thank you."

Raleigh warped back into the plaza with a crack of light. The others were still seated. Clyde, Cyrus, Tess, Mikako, Eight. Papers scattered. A makeshift war-table. "Oh, you're back," Cyrus said, rubbing his temples. "Clyde just finished explaining everything he knew. We were about to go over battle strategy." Raleigh folded her arms. "I don't need your help. And armies aren't exactly useful

against… this kind of enemy." "It's no longer just about HOME," Cyrus replied calmly. "This concerns every world. And from what Clyde's told me..." A voice cut him off. "...it concerns me too." Rebbecca appeared out of absolutely nowhere, dropping into the seat next to Clyde like she'd been there all along.

She crossed her arms and pouted dramatically. "Thanks for inviting me to this, by the way." Everyone froze. Cyrus's eyebrow twitched suspiciously. He was calculating. Considering. Measuring her sudden appearance against everything Clyde just explained. Hacker battle. Live broadcast. Hidden factions. Rebbecca's… tendencies. Then he remembered Project Deforestation. Her role. Her actions. The way she'd stood against the Empire. His expression softened.

"If you want to blame someone," Mikako cut in, raising her hand boldly, "blame me. In truth… I didn't fully trust you." Rebbecca slumped back, arms draped across the back of her chair, expression flat and unimpressed. "I mean, yeah," she deadpanned. "If you'd brought me, the fight would've been way easier. Just saying." She raised a metallic arm lazily, if it was proof enough. Eight immediately saw an opportunity and pointed at her. "If you knew he was a hacker," he said accusingly, "why didn't you say anything?"

Rebbecca slowly turned her head toward him. Her eyes widened. Then she smiled, the kind of smile that meant someone was about to be roasted alive. "Oh, I knew," she said sweetly. "Didn't know he was part of the clique, though." She leaned forward, elbows on knees, grin sharpening. "What's your excuse?" Eight sputtered. "I... I, uh, well, I already said..." "Uh-huh." Rebbecca blinked slowly, unimpressed. "And how'd that work out for you?" Eight wilted like a dying plant. Clyde pinched the bridge of his nose. Raleigh sighed. Cyrus exhaled sharply. Tess quietly sipped her drink like this was already becoming a long day.

"The problem is," Clyde said slowly, fingers steeple as he thought aloud, "we still don't know where they are… or if this 'Boss' of theirs is even alive." Raleigh shrugged, waving a hand dismissively. "Doubt he's as entrenched in the Coalition as he is in the Union—if he's alive." "No, no,"

Rebbecca cut in, sitting forward and tapping the table for attention. “That’s not actually why I’m here.” Everyone looked at her. She smirked, enjoying the momentum shift. “Vincent is ready to talk.” Cyrus sat up straighter. “The Blue Hacker you mentioned?” All three of them nodded. Raleigh snapped her fingers. “Wait... why didn’t you lead with that?!”

Rebbecca raised both eyebrows, unbothered. “Does it matter? You know now.” Then her smile disappeared. “But there’s a catch. He said he’ll only speak with you two...” she pointed at Clyde and Raleigh “...no one else. And no recordings. Not even a hint of it.” “Why us?” Clyde asked. Rebecca shrugged. “Dunno. But if anyone knows where their base is... It’s him.” Cyrus immediately leaned forward, commander mode activated. “Then what are you two waiting for? Go. Afterward, we can coordinate a strike and hit the base together.”

“Hell no,” Raleigh snapped. “This is our thing!” “Cyrus,” Clyde said gently, “I know you want to help. And I get why. But… I’m afraid that if you send troops into this, it’ll just end with them dying.” Silence fell. He continued, voice steady. “Everyone we’ve faced so far? Given the right conditions, they can erase people like they’re gods. We only survived because of the Arms.” Cyrus stared at him, jaw tense, then exhaled through his nose. “And you’re forgetting what we did in the Trial Worlds.” He placed a hand over his chest. “And that I still carry some of this with me.” The Heart Aspect glowed faintly beneath his palm.

Rebbecca leaned back, crossing her legs, unimpressed. “You could call Corvus a ‘hacker,’ sure… but compared to these guys? He’s an amateur. That little trick stunt you pulled with him?” She tapped the table. “Not gonna work this time. Not against veterans.” Cyrus’s fists tightened. “Then I’ll go alone.” Tess, who had been quiet until now, whipped her head toward him. “The hell you are.” He turned to her, shocked at her tone. Tess stood abruptly, palms on the table. “Think about everything you built. Every world depends on you. Every plan. Every alliance. Even if they don’t erase you, everything you’ve built...” her voice cracked “...it still needs you.” Cyrus glared, hurt and frustrated. “And you expect me to do nothing?” “I’m asking you,” she said softly but fiercely, “to do everything. To live long

enough to fight the right fight. Not die in someone else's." Her voice trembled at the edges.

Cyrus stared at Tess, chest heaving… then slowly closed his eyes. "…Alright." He stood. Tess let out a shaky breath she didn't know she was holding. "We should be going, then," Cyrus said. "Good luck, all of you. And don't worry about the idol's fans. We're already running brain scans, no lasting influence, at least none we can detect. Perfectly healthy. If not a little… obsessive." He nodded once, an attempt at reassurance, then turned and walked off with Tess. The room exhaled. The tension was left with him. Everyone else headed back home.

They stepped through into the central square. Before they could get three steps, Loki came sprinting up, waving frantically. "You two... I heard all about it!" Clyde didn't break stride. He simply held out the autograph. "Here. Got you a present." Loki froze mid-sentence, eyes bugging out as he clutched the card like a holy relic. Clyde walked past him without another word.

The lower levels buzzed with containment locks. Grant stood outside the door, nodding as they approached. Inside, Rebbecca tapped at a console, shutting down every remaining feed, sealing the window, encrypting whatever needed encrypting. She leaned back against the wall and motioned toward the cell. "He's ready," she said. "Or as ready as he ever is." Clyde and Raleigh stepped inside together. Vincent sat in the containment chair, wrists bound, posture loose but not relaxed. He looked… calmer. But not defeated. His eyes were sharp, studying them like puzzles. "So Bonnie and Clyde finally return," he said with a smirk. "Heard you took down Decoy. Congratulations. Never liked that prick."

"Who the hell is Bonnie?" Raleigh muttered. "It's a reference," Clyde sighed. "More importantly, are you ready to talk?" Vincent chuckled. "That's what I said." Then his expression shifted, serious, almost grim. "But before that… I've got a couple of questions of my own." Raleigh folded her arms. "We're not letting you waste our time again. You barely talk as it is." "Just two," Vincent insisted. He didn't raise his voice, but something in his tone made them pause. He leaned forward slightly.

“First…” His eyes sharpened. “Do you really think you can beat him?” Raleigh scowled. “If we didn’t...” “Second.” Vincent cut her off, gaze intense. “If you did beat him… how would you know you actually did?” Both Clyde and Raleigh froze. Before they could respond, Vincent jerked violently, like a shock collar zapped through his body. His metal arm sparked, and the restraints rattled as he winced in pain. “Vincent?!” Clyde stepped forward. Vincent snarled, forcing himself upright again. “Yeah, yeah. Your damn fault. Nobody’s fixed my arms since your little stunt, so now they zap me whenever.”

But Clyde’s eyes narrowed. That explanation didn’t fit. The timing didn’t fit. And the look on Vincent’s face definitely didn’t fit. “…What do you mean?” Clyde asked slowly, “How can we be sure?” Vincent stared at him. A long, heavy stare. Then he spoke again, flat, rehearsed. “Just what I said, dipshit. We fought him ourselves. Thought we beat him.” A pause. A strange one. Like he wasn’t choosing his words, but repeating them. “Ugh, look. I’m just saying he sure showed us. Or whatever.” His jaw twitched. “Now he’s back, and he beat us all back into submission.” He forced a grin. “You think we want to work for him?” Another spark. Another wince.

“You were watching us this whole time, right? Evaluating us? And yet you’re asking a stupid question like that.” Her glare hardened. “We will beat him. And if he somehow crawls back again, we’ll beat him again.” “Or,” Clyde added with a grim sigh, “we beat him once… then make super sure he can’t come back.” Vincent’s grin sharpened into something almost approving. “Right answer.” He leaned forward. “You wanna know where they are? I’ll tell you… But my way.” Both Clyde and Raleigh frowned in unison.

“Look,” Vincent continued, “Akane is still in there. She’s ain't like me. She thinks she’s fighting for the betterment of the Multiverse or whatever.” His expression softened, strangely protective. “Don’t you dare tell her any of this. She’s a good woman. Loyal as hell. She’s got honor the other hackers don’t have.” Clyde narrowed his eyes. “…What are you asking?” Vincent inhaled sharply. “Take me with you.” That floored both of them.

“I’ll fight on your side,” he continued, voice low, almost pleading. “And maybe, maybe, I can

flip her too. If we beat him, then the hackers don't have to listen to him anymore. And we'll walk away. Go our own ways. You'll never see us again." Raleigh scoffed. "As if we'd believe that. You'd attack the second we blink." "Well," he spat, "tough shit. It's that or nothing." Both Clyde and Raleigh sighed heavily. "…We'll think about it," Clyde said, already walking out. "See you soon," Vincent said with unsettling confidence. They stepped out. Rebbecca's eyes lifted immediately.

"I think I can guess what he asked." "He wants out," Raleigh groaned. Rebbecca shrugged casually. "Well there's an easy answer. Give him what he wants, plus some shiny new arms. If he steps out of line, I disable them." She snapped her fingers playfully. Clyde rubbed his chin. "I don't think we have many options. If this is going to end, we need every edge we've got… I just hope he isn't right." They left. Rebbecca didn't follow. Clyde looked back. "You're not coming?" She waved them off. "I'll catch up. I need his measurements if I'm making custom arms." They nodded and left the hall.

Rebbecca entered the cell. Vincent sat on the floor, exhausted, but defiant. Her expression was cold, tired. "You couldn't just follow the script?" she sighed. "Fuck your script. I got it done, didn't I?" Vincent growled. "And you seeded doubt while doing it." Her tone sharpened. "How are we supposed to return to the shadows when the Multiverse is paranoid?" Vincent grimaced. "You sound like him…" The words struck her like a slap. She looked down, hurt but silent. Vincent studied her for a long moment, brow furrowing.

"You know, kid… I never understood you." He slouched back against the wall. "Why do you do all this? Helping me, helping anyone after everything. It's not like we ever got along. He wouldn't do that." He exhaled. "My reasons were petty. I just wanted to be someone big." He pointed at her. "But you? You're smart. Smarter than all of us. So why follow him?" A long, painful silence. "…Because despite how much I hate it…" Her voice cracked. "He's right. I do what we must." She looked small. Defeated.

Aion scrolled through screens, data streams, cross-world reports, and the full, unedited footage of the concert disaster. "You know, Crow," he said, "when you told me you wanted to live stream some

random idol concert, I thought you were weird." Crow gave a thumbs-up without looking away from the monitor. "But now I get it," Aion continued. "You've uncovered something big. Really big. Good job, my boy." "The hard part starts now," Crow murmured. Aion nodded gravely. "We'll need an independent investigation. Isn't that right, Mia?" Beside him, Mia turned her head, one of her eyes glowing violet. "Easy for you to say," she muttered. "I'm not nearly as good as before." Aion placed a hand on her shoulder, reassuring. "Don't push. The truth always rises."

Chapter 51: The “Final” Infiltration

The air at HOME was tense. Everyone moved with quiet purpose, the kind of silence that only happened before something enormous. Mikako dug through a vault in her home, brushing dust off an old wooden box. Inside lay an ornate katana wrapped in faded cloth. She rested a hand on the hilt, exhaling slowly. Russel busied himself with maintenance work as always, hammer tapping in a steady rhythm, trying very hard not to think about the battle everyone else was about to dive into.

Raleigh stood on her balcony, watching the city below. Watching everything they built. The wind tugged at her hair, but she didn’t move. Clyde stepped beside her, mirroring her quiet stare. “Hey,” he asked softly. “You good?” She nodded, though it wasn’t convincing. “This feels like… that

moment," she murmured. "Like before Project Deforestation. Before the Wishing Door." "But?" he prompted gently. "Well… Vincent's right." Her voice tightened. "How can we be sure? What if we think we win and… we don't?" Clyde sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Then we have faith in ourselves," he said. "And maybe we make extra sure we take him down." That earned a small smile from her, brief but real.

"There's one thing I think we should do before we go," she said, reaching to the side. She pulled out the bucket list notebook. Clyde's eyes widened. "Is that... Man, I completely forgot about that. With everything that happened after the Wishing Door…" "Noir had it," Raleigh said. "She was pretty insistent we read it together." They sat, shoulders brushing lightly, and opened it. At first, it was exactly what they expected. Clyde's old messy handwriting, from when he was still new to the multiverse: Punch a monster and not die — crossed out aggressively. Raleigh snorted. Visit a world that isn't depressing — big dramatic check mark. Ride a dragon? — still uncrossed, circled three times.

Then— Figure out what the hell Raleigh's deal is.

Raleigh froze mid-page turn and glared at him. "My deal?" "You know how you are." Clyde grinned. "Think I figured it out by now, though." She rolled her eyes and flipped the page harder than necessary. Next: Learn how to actually fight, and stand by her side. Crossed out. Clyde frowned. "I definitely didn't mark that one." Raleigh brushed her shoulder against him, embarrassed but pleased. "…Guess Noir thinks so anyway." They moved on, but Clyde noticed something. These entries should've stopped ages ago. Except they didn't.

The handwriting changed. Sharper. Neater. Someone else's. Sleep somewhere safe, without checking the doors twenty times. Let someone else steer the ship for once. Talk about the past without joking. Actually rest. Stay. Let myself want nice things. Stop pretending I don't care. Stay. Raleigh's expression softened, confusion flickering under the surface. "Did she write this…?" she whispered. Then they reached the one that made it undeniable: Make Clyde blush six times in one day. Raleigh

made a noise between a squeak and a gasp, slamming a hand over the page as she went bright red. Clyde tried very hard not to laugh. “So… do you think she was trying to tell you something?”

Raleigh’s face scrunched, flustered and pouty. “I... yeah, okay, maybe. Damn Noir… telling people stuff I don’t want to share…” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him without thinking. They turned the page. Only one entry remained. Noir’s handwriting. Clear. Simple.

Have a family. Clyde stared at it for a long time. He wasn’t sure how to interpret it, a wish from Noir, a buried desire from Raleigh, or a future neither of them had dared to speak aloud. But as he looked out over HOME, over the people they’d saved, the life they were building, he realized something. They were already halfway there. Maybe more.

After that quiet moment on the balcony, Clyde and Raleigh made their way to the staging ground: The Chamber of Influence. Everyone was already assembling. Rebbecca stood at the center console, her posture sharp and focused. Loki lounged nearby, Lucy at his side, while the rest of their crew whispered nervously among themselves. Proxy was off in a corner, clearly doing something important but looking incredibly displeased about it, his screen-face flickering between irritated emotes every few seconds.

Grant entered behind them, wheeling Vincent in on a heavy containment rig a platform of reinforced metal, restraints, and shock-dampeners. Vincent’s body was half-destroyed from their previous fight: one arm missing entirely, the other hanging in twisted, half-broken metal shards. Grant’s jaw was tight. “Are you sure about this?” he asked, urging them to reconsider. The room fell into a shared hesitation. Then, one by one, everyone nodded. Grant grimaced… and released most of the locks.

Vincent burst free immediately, stretching like a man waking from a pleasant nap. “Man, feels good to move again,” he said casually. “Your prison system is heartless, by the way.” “It’s heartless because you’re that dangerous,” Clyde said tiredly. “You know that, don’t you?” “Course I do.” Vincent

cracked his neck. “Now bust out that new arm.” “Oh, you’ll get it,” Rebbecca teased, not looking up. “Whether you deserve it is another story.” Mikako walked in shortly after, solemn and ready. “Alright,” Rebbecca said, projecting a holographic map into the air, a massive, industrial structure. “Let’s go over the details.”

The building looked like an enormous factory: angular, cold, utilitarian. Nothing ornamental at all. “That’s their base?” Raleigh frowned. “I expected something… more grand.” Vincent snorted. “The Boss doesn’t care about spectacle. Only results.” “Funny, coming from people with perfectly matching neon trim,” Mikako muttered. Rebbecca ignored them. “There’s no point trying to sneak in. Even if he doesn’t know we’re coming, he will the second we arrive. So this time? We hit the front door. Hard. Fast. No subtlety.” She pointed to the enormous reinforced entry gate.

Clyde scratched his chin. “What are they even building?” “Weapons. Duh.” Vincent replied, sounding annoyed Clyde even asked. Clyde exhaled slowly. “You’re forgetting something. They’re hackers. They probably have access to the world’s code.” “Nope, didn't forget” Rebbecca said, grabbing a wristband off the table and tossing it to Clyde. “That’s what this is for.” Clyde examined it. “Like the Trial World bands?” “Same concept, refined. Protects you from local code manipulation. Although with your transcendent powers, you won’t rely on it as much.”

Raleigh raised her hand. “Okay, but… even if that helps us stay alive, how do we win? He can just keep healing himself, right?” Vincent leaned back. “He doesn’t run the code himself. Too unstable. Too much strain. So he has a machine doing it instead.” Proxy suddenly perked up, his screen flashing into a cheerful emote. “Oh! Like my lovely Penny once did!” Vincent stared at him. “I... I don’t fucking know. Maybe. Whatever.” He looked back at the others. “Name’s Mainframe.” “So we head for her first,” Mikako said, glaring at Vincent hard enough he actually flinched. “You know the way?” “Yep. You can count on me,” he smirked. “And my sister?” Mikako’s voice tightened. Vincent paused. Then sighed. “I can’t see why she wouldn’t be there.”

The tension shifted. Grant stepped forward. “We should come too, even if it’s dangerous. You’ll need backup.” Raleigh shook her head. “No. We appreciate you, Grant. But you’re the only one who can guard HOME while we’re gone… and lead it if we fail.” Grant hesitated, then let out a defeated sigh. “Alright. Fine.” “Perhaps I should go as well?” Loki asked, raising a hand with dramatic flourish. “And do what?” Clyde asked flatly. “You’re not going to fight.” “Moral support!” Loki announced proudly. Everyone shook their heads instantly. Loki looked devastated.

“Enough of this,” Vincent snapped, tension finally spilling over. “It’s not a complicated plan. Just give me my arms and let’s get this over with.” Rebbecca didn’t flinch. She only smirked, lips parting slightly in amused cruelty. “Proxy,” she called sweetly, “is it ready?” Proxy turned around holding… a robotic arm. A very small robotic arm. A Rebbecca-sized robotic arm. Vincent raised an eyebrow. Then two. Then his entire face contorted. “Are you fucking kidding me,” he groaned. “I am not wearing that.” Rebbecca shrugged. “Didn’t have time to find your size. You’ll have to settle for a good ol’ Rebbecca hand-me-down.”

“That’s a lie and you know it, we have a whole pile of...” Proxy began before Rebbecca slapped a hand over his nonexistent mouth-screen. “Shhhh.” Proxy’s screen-face drooped into a defeated flat line. “Ugh. Fine. Let’s just get this one on and repair your other arm so you can leave already.” He sparked his tools to life. Vincent tried to shove him away using only his torso and shoulder stumps. “Hey, hey, careful with that thing!” “Stop squirming,” Proxy scolded, “you’re making your arm holes smaller.” “That’s not a thing!” “It is now.” Lucy stepped closer, jaw set, radiating quiet resolve. Loki followed behind her, unusually serious. Loki placed a hand on Clyde’s shoulder, then Raleigh’s, then Mikako’s. “Good luck to all of you,” he said softly. “I have faith in every one of you.”

Then he turned to Rebbecca. “Please…” his voice softened further, “…keep them safe.” Before she could react, he hugged her. A full, unannounced, sincere hug. Rebbecca froze, arms half raised, eyes wide, absolutely ambushed. Lucy smirked knowingly. Clyde blinked. Raleigh’s eyebrows shot up.

By the time Rebbecca recovered enough to smack Loki's back and tell him to get off her, he'd already released her and stepped away. They headed toward the exit. Clyde, Raleigh, Mikako, Rebbecca, Lucy, Proxy still fussing with wires, and finally Vincent dragging himself forward with the stub of his working leg. Grant remained for one last moment, looking at the departing team with a heavy, solemn breath. Then he followed after them… closing the doors behind him.

They all loaded into the Hopper. Clyde and Mikako sat up front Rebbecca, and Vincent in the back seats, and of course Raleigh hooked herself in. "Are you sure you want to take the Hopper?" Clyde asked. "Well I can't really warp just anywhere the other day just yet, this will be safer too... It think." Raleigh said unsure. No one questioned it further. Raleigh flicked switches. The Hopper hummed, the portal lined up, and they jumped straight toward Omnihack's hidden base. Turrets immediately rose from the ground like angry flowers, spitting bullets and beams into the sky. "Yep," Clyde muttered, gripping the console, "they definitely expected us."

The Boss stood at a large observation window, watching the Hopper descend through fire. Behind him stood Elliot, Vance, Akane, and Mainframe, lined up like pillars. "Trojan was correct," The Boss murmured, hands clasped behind his back. "An abandoned project site is the perfect stage for the final battle. Take your positions." They all bowed and disappeared into the corridors. All except Mainframe. She lingered beside him, expression unreadable. "Proposal," she said.

The Boss didn't turn. But he didn't dismiss her either. "Why not attempt alliance?" she asked. "They have proven formidable. Perhaps using them willingly would be the most efficient path toward defeating it." He finally looked at her, barely. "They lack the will," he said simply. "But they will be useful regardless." Then he turned back to the window, watching Raleigh dodge turret fire with the casual recklessness of someone drifting a race car for fun.

Back in the Hopper, Raleigh cracked her knuckles. "Hey Clyde," she said casually, "it's been a while since I've crashed this thing." Clyde blinked. "Yeah? I don't really see how that's..." Then his

eyes widened in horror. “Raleigh. Raleigh no. RALEIGH DON’T!” She just smiled. The Hopper accelerated. Mikako braced so hard she left dents in the dashboard. Rebbecca leaned back, perfectly calm, like this was a casual commute. Vincent screamed like a man witnessing his own obituary being written. “You CRAZY BITCH!” he shrieked, gripping the arm rest with the tiny Rebbecca-sized arm Proxy installed.

“I mean,” Rebbecca said thoughtfully, “she’s unpredictable.” She said unbothered. A thunderous CRASH ripped through the base as the Hopper smashed straight into the front doors, shattering them off their hinges and carving a neat Hopper-shaped hole through several meters of reinforced wall. The ship didn’t dent. Raleigh fist-pumped. “God I missed doing that.” Smoke rolled around the hull as the Hopper settled. A dozen hackers materialized instantly, weapons drawn, code-infused eyes glowing. Vincent pressed his face against the window. “Ciphers,” he muttered. “Great. Perfect. Love this. Fantastic.” But everyone else was already sprinting out of the ship. “HEY... WAIT UP!” Vincent yelled, scrambling awkwardly after them with one and a half arms.

Ciphers swarmed them the moment they stepped out of the Hopper coordinated, sharp, merciless. One lunged at Clyde with machine precision. Clyde blocked with his gauntlet, skidding a full foot across the floor. “Damn, these guys are tough.” “Stronger than any grunt we’ve ever fought,” he added, knocking one unconscious with a heavy backhand. “They’re still just grunts,” Mikako grunted, slicing clean through a Cipher’s arm, then kicking the helpless body across the hall like a discarded soda can. Vincent flicked blood off his tiny arm with pure disgust. “Stop wasting time with these losers and follow me.” They hesitated, then reluctantly chased after him as he darted deeper into the facility.

They ran through a massive industrial corridor, metal catwalks above, pipes hissing steam, alarms beginning to blare. Wave after wave of Ciphers poured in like a chewed-up, corrupted SWAT team. Clyde punched one so hard it embedded into the wall. Raleigh warp-slammed three into each

other like bowling pins. Mikako used her blade like a guillotine, each strike a precise, practiced death sentence. “Seriously,” Clyde shouted over the chaos, “why are the grunts this strong?!” “Professional training,” Rebbecca yelled. “The Collective doesn’t hire scrubs.” “Can confirm!” Vincent added unhelpfully.

They finally burst into a huge crossroad , four branching hallways. Vincent pointed forward. “Mainframe’s down that path.” Then, without hesitation, he turned right. “Wait, where the hell are you going?” Mikako demanded. He didn’t even slow. “Where do you think? To find her.” Mikako stepped after him. “And you think you’re doing that alone?” He scowled. “Better than doing it with you slowing me down.” Mikako sprinted after him, fury snapping behind her eyes. Clyde, Raleigh, and Rebbecca exchanged looks. “Should we stop them?” Clyde asked. Rebbecca waved the idea away. “Nah. If things go sideways, we’ll hear them screaming on comms.” She turned down the Mainframe hallway. “Come on. We’ve got our own target.”

Vincent and Mikako pushed deeper until the sterile hall opened into a wide warehouse full of scattered tech, crates, half-built constructs, and Omnihack inventions. Nothing flashy, but everything quietly dangerous. Mikako froze. In the next room, framed by industrial lights, stood Akane. She hadn’t aged. She hadn’t softened. She was carved in that same calm determination Mikako remembered… from before everything fell apart. “Akane…” Mikako whispered, breath trembling. Vincent shoved her aside hard enough to knock her off her feet. “What the?!” she snapped, but he was already sprinting through the doorway. He slammed the door shut behind him. Mikako’s eyes widened, betrayed and burning. She slammed her fist against the metal door. “DAMN YOU, VINCENT! We should’ve never trusted you!”

Inside the room, Akane stood with her arms crossed, unimpressed. And absolutely not happy. She opened her mouth, then paused. Then she stared at Vincent. More specifically, at the tiny Rebbecca-sized arm bolted where his normal arm should’ve been. “…I’m hesitant to fight Mikako,”

she began, “but did you really have to...” She snorted. “I’m sorry, I can’t take you seriously like that. Did you have a little too much alone time in prison?” Vincent’s eye twitched so hard it nearly rebooted him. “Shut the fuck up, bitch.” Akane raised her hands to her mouth laughing historically. “Just saying.” He cracked his neck, trying to regain dignity. “Whatever. I guess we gotta at least pretend we’re fighting…”

Rebbecca guided them into the next chamber, and immediately the air turned blisteringly hot. Molten metal churned in glowing rivers below catwalk grates, the heat radiating upward in suffocating waves. Sparks rained from overhead machinery. Massive industrial arms hammered sheets of heated alloy flat, feeding them one after another onto a conveyor belt of gleaming metal plates. Clyde stared as the plates reached the far assembly line. “What are they building here…?”

The plates were welded, bolted, reinforced, forming a torso, then limbs, unmistakably humanoid in shape, growing more recognizable with every segment connected. “Something bad,” Rebbecca answered. “Let’s get to Mainframe before...” She didn’t get to finish. A static buzz crackled across the room as an unseen intercom sputtered to life. “Ah… intruders. You’ve made it quite far. And since curiosity brought you here…” The voice was smooth, artificial, and wrong. “…allow me to show you exactly what we’re building.”

A deep mechanical THUNK echoed under their feet. Then the floor opened. Gear-teeth groaned as massive metal panels slid apart, revealing six circular platforms rising on hydraulic pistons. Steam vented in violent bursts. Heavy chains snapped away. Something huge began to rise. The first one lifted above the floor. Then another. And another. Six total. Gleaming chrome frames, ribbed armor plating, exposed pistons and reinforced limbs, each one a monstrous, mechanical interpretation of the fallen hacker. A perfect army of Payload nightmares.

Raleigh’s eyes widened, breath catching in her throat. “…They look like Payload.” Not almost. Not inspired by. Payload. Replicated. Refined. Mass-produced. Six pairs of glowing yellow eyes

ignited simultaneously. Rebbecca's expression dropped into a cold, humorless deadpan. "…Okay. So now we know." Clyde raised his armored arm. Raleigh's glove flared to life. Rebbecca cracked her knuckles. "Well… guess we're finding out the hard way." The six Payload Units stepped forward in perfect synchrony, metal fists tightening with hydraulic power. They weren't going down without a fight.

Chapter 52: The “Final” Boss

The six Payloads opened fire instantly. Raleigh warped the group into the air just in time, reappearing above the metal monsters. She didn’t hesitate, she formed a massive glowing sword and drove it straight through one Payload’s chest. Clyde followed, forming a gigantic multiversal boot that slammed down like a meteor, knocking the machine flat. Rebbecca outdid both of them. She flicked her cords forward, wrapping them around two Payloads, and slamming both straight into a third with a violent crunch. The last Payload locked onto them and unleashed everything, beams, bullets, pulses of code, before any of them could stop it. The explosion flung all four of them into the wall hard enough to dent the metal.

Raleigh warped behind the last Payload in a blink and sliced it to pieces in a single clean motion. All six machines were completely totaled… but still twitching. Still trying to drag themselves forward. Still attempting to claw toward them with that same unbreakable, mindless determination Payload once had. Rebbecca drove a cord straight into the nearest one's core and ripped it out. Its eyes dimmed with a soft fading glow. "That was tough…" Clyde breathed, shaking out his arm. "But not on his level." Rebbecca cleared her throat sharply, as if Clyde had just said a word he wasn't supposed to.

She motioned toward the production line. "That doesn't matter," she said, voice tight. "Look at this." They all turned. The assembly line stretched forever. Endless metal plates. Endless frames. Endless cores. Endless resources. "Under the right conditions…" Rebbecca whispered, "…this is his fleet. Endless materials. Endless firepower. This isn't six. This is… everything. An army like this..." Her lip quivered. "...could wipe out worlds." Raleigh rested a hand on her shoulder. "Then we destroy this entire place before he can."

They pushed deeper. The hall narrowed, dimmed, became colder. A sudden oppressive silence settled over the air. Rows and rows of server racks filled the next chamber, towering black pillars of humming data, each one connected by thick, snaking cables. And in the center… Mainframe. Standing perfectly still, hooked to every server. Rebbecca stopped moving. "What's wrong, little Hacker…" Mainframe said. Her voice was… wrong. Not her usual cadence. More like a question. A challenge. A plea. Almost like she was asking can you go through with this. Something was off. She didn't move an inch. Didn't raise a hand. Didn't activate defense protocols. Nothing.

"Rebbecca?" Raleigh asked softly. "What's going on?" "…Nothing," Rebbecca muttered. She took a slow, shaky breath. Her cord reshaped into a blade. She stepped forward. And in one swift, practiced motion she severed Mainframe's head clean from her body. Mainframe's rainbow eyes flickered once, brightly… then dimmed to nothing. Clyde blinked, stunned. Raleigh stared, baffled. "… That was it?" Raleigh murmured. "She didn't even try to stop you." "Why didn't she fight back?"

Clyde asked, suspicious.

Rebbecca didn't answer at first, just stared at the still, headless frame with a strange, unspoken sadness. Finally she said, low and steady: "Don't overthink it. Mainframe is the Collective. She was overclocked. Running every line of code in this place in all their places." She gestured around them. "Factory output. Cipher dispatches across countless worlds. Defense systems. Physics corrections. Entire worlds' worth of processing." She glanced at the head on the floor. "When you pull that much power through one system, there's nothing left for combat routines. She was locked into the servers. She couldn't move even if she wanted to."

"Oh…" Raleigh said, softening. "I guess that makes sense. Sounds like she had a lot on her plate." "Yeah…" Rebbecca said quietly. A little too quietly. Clyde still didn't look convinced, but Mainframe's body didn't move. Didn't twitch. Didn't pulse. Nothing. "Let's go," Rebbecca said quickly. Her voice distant. Hard. Forced. "It's time we fight him." They followed her toward the far door, toward the final confrontation, leaving Mainframe's silent body behind. A sudden flicker and Mainframe was whole again watching them in the distance before vanishing.

They moved into another factory floor, but this one was different. Where the previous assembly lines were crude and industrial, this level was terrifyingly efficient. Sleek conveyor systems, automated welders, precision robotics… all producing arms. Dozens. Hundreds. Each one a perfectly refined version of the mechanical limbs all Ciphers wore. Clyde swallowed. "They've perfected it…" Before they could process the implications, another wave of Ciphers slid from the shadows, dozens of them blocking every exit. And behind them… Several Payload units stomped into view as backup.

"Great," Clyde muttered. "Because six wasn't enough." A familiar, manic cackle echoed above them. Elliot, the Decoy dropped into their path, landing in a predatory crouch. His eyes gleamed with glitching yellow static, his smile stretched too wide. "I'm baaaack!" he hissed. "What's wrong? Thought I'd be easy to get rid of?" Rebbecca did not hesitate. With a flick of her wrist, four cords

wrapped around him like snakes. She slammed him off to the side before he could even finish his taunt.

“I’ll deal with him,” she said briskly. “You go on.” She didn’t wait for approval, she launched herself after Elliot instantly. Raleigh groaned in frustration. “Why is everyone intent on splitting up?!”

Mikako kicked open the next door, only to find nothing inside. Except a single piece of paper on the ground. She picked it up. We made up. Meet you at the final stage. Her eyebrows rose… then lowered into a deep, simmering glare. “She’s avoiding me that badly?” Mikako whispered, voice raw. “She can write orders on walls but not a single word to me?” From above, two figures watched her through the grated catwalks. Vincent sighed quietly. “Is just a line or two too much to ask?” Akane said nothing. Her face was rigid, but her eyes… hurt. “I never want to lie to her again,” Akane murmured. “So instead you’ll avoid her completely?” Vincent asked, annoyed. She didn’t answer. She didn’t have to.

Rebbecca and Elliot crashed into an alcove out of sight from the others. Sparks flew. Metal screeched. Elliot clawed at her with glitching limbs, screaming triumph and desperation. Rebbecca fought without enthusiasm, sidestepping, redirecting, blocking. Not attacking. Just… managing him. Elliot lunged with a guttural roar. Rebbecca stopped, letting her cords fall slack. “That’s enough.”

Elliot froze, confused and enraged. “What, You think you can just STOP?!” he spat. “I haven’t proven anything yet! I’m your rival! I have to surpass you...” “I never entertained that idea,” Rebbecca said coldly. “Not once. You invented that rivalry just because we have similar roles.”

She didn’t even look at him. Elliot trembled, fury boiling over, ready to tear her apart until she spoke again. “You really think this will please him?” Elliot went dead still. Slowly… his head lowered.

Rebbecca turned toward him fully now, voice softening. “I’ll ask you one more time. Can you go through with this?” “If not, we still have the backup plan. And if you want it… a way out.” Elliot’s breath hitched, face contorting between rage, heartbreak, and something uglier. “A way out?” he spat.

“I would NEVER accept that mercy.” His voice cracked. “The Great Administrator commands a SHOW, so I’ll GIVE HIM ONE!” His expression twisted into something grotesque. Rebbecca nodded sadly. “…Alright then.” She turned away, disappointment heavy in her eyes. Elliot screamed after her, but she didn’t look back.

Clyde and Raleigh burst up a stairwell, dispatching scattered Ciphers as they climbed. At the top, another crossroads, where Mikako emerged from the opposite path, fists clenched. “Where are the others?” Raleigh asked, breathless. “They’re… helping,” Mikako said bitterly. “In their own way.” Clyde nodded. “Let’s keep going.” They pushed on together, the air growing hotter as they descended onto a suspended platform. Below them, molten metal churned like a burning sea. At the platform’s end stood a massive door.

A towering, reinforced slab of black alloy. Clyde exhaled. “Well… that definitely screams ‘final boss.’” Rebbecca rejoined them at last, landing lightly on the platform. She didn’t speak at first. She sat instead, just for a moment, hands clasped together, breathing steadily. “Prepare yourselves,” she said quietly. “If he’s anything like before… we’re in for an ordeal.” Clyde asked softly, “What is he like?” Rebbecca hesitated, then answered with a seriousness none of them had heard before. “Dedicated. Cold.” “To him… nothing matters except the mission.” “You must be useful.” “And sentimentality...” She swallowed. “...is a death sentence.”

Silence hung over the group like a physical weight. No one spoke. No one breathed too loudly. The spreading heat from the molten metal below only made the moment feel heavier. Raleigh stepped forward, placed both hands on the massive reinforced door, and pushed. “...Let’s go.” The door groaned open. Light from the molten metal flooded out, casting their shadows long across a circular chamber. Molten alloy poured from the ceiling in scarlet waterfalls, feeding a vast vat directly beneath the elevated platform they now stood upon. And at the center of the platform, a man.

He stood perfectly still, back hunched, trench coat torn at the sleeves. Two mechanical arms

hung from him, but they were mismatched, one ending at the shoulder, the other barely reaching his ribs. Haphazard. Asymmetric. Wrong. He turned toward them. His face was gaunt, skin stretched thin against bone, eyes sunken, cheeks hollow. He looked like someone who had been dead a long time… but refused to lie down. Rebbecca stiffened. Clyde felt her body flinch. Even she didn't expect this.

"So," the man rasped, voice like dry metal scraping metal, "you've come at last. You think you can stop me?" Raleigh blinked hard. "This? You're the Boss? The guy everyone's been hyping up?" "Indeed." He took a slow step toward them, mechanical joints creaking. "I am the System Administrator of the Root Collective. I've been watching you all… for quite some time." A thick, awkward silence settled over the chamber. The only sound was the molten metal churning below. Clyde cleared his throat. "What is it that you want? What's your goal?" The man chuckled weakly, a hollow sound with no warmth. "You've come this far… I suppose I can indulge such an insolent question." He lifted his mismatched arms. "I want your world."

Raleigh's jaw clenched. Of course he did. "For a normal person," the man continued, "nearly infinite energy and power is incomprehensible. But for a hacker… not infinite, no. But on a significant level." He took another shaky step. "There is much I could do with it. It is unfortunate we could not simply kill you and take it. Things would have been far simpler that way." Raleigh scoffed. "Well, it's not like we're going down without a..." "Wait." Clyde stepped forward, something about the man's phrasing catching in his mind like a hook. "What do you mean by that?" Clyde asked. "Why can't you just kill us?"

The man's shriveled lips curled into something that might've been a smile. "Must you really ask? You and her..." he pointed to Raleigh... "are inseparable from it. Removing you removes the stability. It is a… delicate system." Akane stepped forward, rage shaking her voice. "To what end?! What is the point of all this power... everything you did to my sister, and countless others?!" The man turned his sunken eyes toward her. "The Collective forces no one to do anything," he said calmly. "We

offer choices. Firewall made hers. I'm sure she would say the same." Akane clicked her tongue in fury. "And to what end?" she spat.

The man inhaled. "Well..." "Why didn't you ever contact me?" Rebbecca's voice cut through the chamber like a knife. Everything stopped. The sound of molten metal. The rumble of the machinery. Even the Boss himself froze mid-sentence, as though the question hit a forbidden line of code. Rebbecca's eyes were locked on him, confusion, anger, fear, and a deep sadness all tangled into one expression. "Why," she repeated, voice low, "did you never contact me?" The room held its breath. The Boss slowly turned his head toward her.

The Boss froze. For the first time since they entered the room, his expression shifted, just slightly. A micro-glitch under the eye. A tiny processing delay. Rebbecca had knocked him off-script. But only for a second. He straightened, shoulders rigid, voice resuming its cold, brittle calm. "Why didn't I contact you?" he repeated. Then he gave an answer that fit perfectly with everything they believed about him. "Because sentimentality makes you weak." The words hit like steel. Not angry. Not emotional. Just a fact delivered with absolute conviction.

"You left," the Boss continued, stepping closer, mismatched arms clicking faintly. "To reach out would imply attachment. Attachment breeds hesitation. Hesitation… leads to failure." Rebbecca didn't move. Didn't blink. But something behind her eyes flickered—pain disguised as resentment disguised as nothing at all."Besides," the Boss added, voice returning to dead monotone, "you were no longer useful." Her eye's darkened. That sold it. Harsh enough to be believable. Detached enough to match the Administrator myth they've been chasing. Cruel enough that Clyde and Raleigh felt the sting on her behalf.

Clyde clenched his jaw. Raleigh's fists tightened. Rebbecca only breathed once a small, shallow inhale, before forcing her expression back into something cold, unreadable. "…Figures." She turned away from the Boss's dead-eyed dismissal, locking her emotions behind steel. "Let's finish this."

They all stepped forward, forming a loose circle around the Administrator. The Boss raised one skeletal mechanical arm, gears whining as pale light gathered along the mismatched joints. His voice echoed flat and lifeless: “I will cage you in a prison you will never escape… and drain your world’s resources for myself.” The arm snapped open. Then boom. A shockwave detonated outward, hurling all four of them backward like ragdolls.

Clyde was launched clean off the platform, fingers scraping molten-hot metal until he caught the edge. His gloves hissed. He gritted his teeth. With a roar and a heave, he dragged himself back up, chest heaving. The final battle had begun. Raleigh charged first, warping across the gap in a streak of orange light. Mikako followed with a silent leap, blade raised. Clyde sprinted, arm glowing with multiversal force. Rebbecca’s cords unraveled behind her like a storm of knives. The Boss didn’t flinch. He parried all of them effortlessly.

Mikako slashed downward. He caught the blade mid-swing with two fingers and ripped it from her grip. He slammed it sideways into the wall, embedding the katana a full inch into reinforced steel.

Raleigh appeared above him, hammer overhead. She struck with a two-handed swing that would’ve cratered a tank. Her hammer shattered. The handle snapped clean in half. She stumbled back, stunned.

Rebbecca was the only one who made him react. Her cords snapped around him like constricting serpents, wrapping torso, arms, and neck. His whole form flickered, like a corrupted file fighting to render.

She hesitated, just for one heartbeat. Then she drove her cord-blade deep into his abdomen. The Boss finally staggered. Raleigh seized the opening, warping behind him and slamming a boot into his spine. He crashed forward. Clyde leapt, landing a gauntlet-charged punch that sent the Boss skidding across the metal platform. But the Administrator recovered instantly. His remaining arm blurred forward in a retaliatory strike. A red barrier snapped into existence, blocking the blow.

Akane and Vincent dropped from the rafters, landing hard on either side of the team. Vincent's cannon-arm fired a barrage of blazing photons straight into the Boss's torso. Akane struck in perfect tandem, slicing a glowing arc across his chest. Sparks tore loose. He was damaged. But not enough. Not nearly enough. Even without full access to the world's code, the Boss still retained fragments. The edges of his wounds crawled with yellow static as they began to stitch themselves back together, slowly, but relentlessly.

Mikako reclaimed her sword from the wall and charged again, aiming for a finishing strike while his body was still recalibrating. She missed by a hair. Her blade skimmed his ribs, shallow, barely slicing skin. He straightened, eyes glowing like burned-out stars. "You believe… even with my own agents standing against me… that you can defeat me?" His voice distorted, layered, too many tones stacked on each other. "You are NOTHING." Energy surged through his arms, through the floor, through the very air. "I am the Great System Administrator."

The entire chamber trembled. The molten metal below rippled like an ocean under a storm. "I am your GOD." His voice shattered into a roar, furious, desperate, chaotic. "You are pests in my way… AN OBSTACLE to achieving victory over IT!" Then he unleashed everything. A tidal wave of raw code-energy exploded from his body, flooding the chamber in blinding yellow light. It took every ounce of strength from all of them. Raleigh's warps, Clyde's shielded arm, Mikako's grounded stance, Rebbecca's cords anchoring them, just to plant their feet and not be thrown screaming into the molten metal below. The floor cracked. The rails shook. Their arms burned under the pressure. But they held. Barely.

Akane managed to push forward through the shockwave, teeth grit. The Boss stopped her cold. His remaining hand shot out, clamping around her wrist with impossible strength. She gasped more in shock than fear. His voice dropped into something low, venomous. "I gave you everything… and I can take it back whenever I please." Then he ripped her arm off. Akane screamed, collapsing backward,

clutching the stump. Sparks and blood sprayed the floor. “AKANE!” Mikako roared, fury rising like wildfire. She lunged, blade flashing, and cut the Boss’s arm off in return with a single, merciless strike.

The Boss staggered, screeching, a raw, broken modem sound, robotic and inhuman. “You… dare!” But that was the moment they needed. Vincent’s cannon began to glow, brighter, hotter, charging the same attack he once used to kill Raleigh. Energy swirled around him, distorting the air. Raleigh warped beside him, conjuring another massive hammer of glowing orange code. This time, the impact cracked the Administrator’s ribs, sending fragments of plating flying. Clyde followed, his gauntlet burning white with power.

He struck again, And again, And again. each punch heavier than the last, denting the Boss’s chest cavity deeper and deeper. Rebbecca moved last. Her cords unraveled in a blur, looping around the Administrator like steel serpents, locking him down. They flickered violently, glitching as his code fought back. “Now!” she shouted. Vincent fired. A colossal beam of light obliterated the platform behind the Boss, tearing a crater straight through the far wall. The entire room trembled. The molten lake below churned like a storm-tossed sea. When the blinding light faded, he was still standing.

Barely. A ruined silhouette. One leg bent wrong. One arm missing. Skin blistered and metal exposed. Held together by nothing but raw, hateful will. He raised something in his remaining trembling hand: A Condensed Universe. A swirling, unstable sphere of power. Akane, despite the agony, reached for her own. Vincent followed, ready to escalate it into total annihilation. But Rebbecca stepped forward sharply. “No,” she said. “I planned for this.” The Administrator glared. “You?” Rebbecca pulled out her own Condensed Universe.

Hers glowed a different color. Sharper. Calmer. Precision-focused. She flicked it upward. The two universes spiraled together colliding, intertwining and then. The energy collapsed in on itself and fizzled out. Like two equal and opposite forces canceling each other. The Boss’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Impossible… You created one just to counter mine…” Rebbecca’s voice wavered only once,

the smallest crack in her usually perfect composure. “I’ve had many sleepless nights… thinking about what I’d do if you returned.” He stared at her. Longer than necessary. As if searching, for anger, regret, anything. All he said was: “I see.”

His ruined body finally failed. He pitched backward, slipping over the edge of the platform. He fell silently into the molten metal. The moment he touched the surface, he convulsed, screaming without sound, mouth gaping in agony as his remaining arm melted away before he could raise it. His flesh dissolved. His machinery buckled. His eyes dimmed. Then he sank. Slowly. Everyone stood there, stunned, breathing hard, covered in sweat and ash and fear and disbelief.

Mikako swallowed, voice rough. “…Well. I suppose it doesn’t get any clearer than that. I don’t see how he would survive that.” No one contradicted her. No one wanted to. For a few seconds, they simply stared into the molten pit, watching, waiting, half-expecting the impossible. But nothing rose. Eventually, one by one, they turned away. Leaving the Administrator of the Root Collective alone for his final moments. If he wasn’t already dead.

As soon as the others disappeared into the corridor, silence settled over the molten chamber. The body above the vat flickered. A hologram collapsed like a broken projection. What hit the molten metal wasn’t the Administrator. It was Elliot. His real body burned, fractured, barely recognizable, floated just above the surface. The damage was catastrophic. Even breathing looked like an act of sheer willpower. He coughed, crimson flecking his lips, and tilted his head upward. “Administrator… are you watching?” His voice was small. Not manic. Not wild.

Not the cackling persona he wielded for years. Just a boy’s voice. A tired one. His eyes unfocused as memories pulled him backward. He was starving. A street rat with no name, no home, no future. He sang on a broken crate every day, his voice the only thing people never stole. Usually, no one listened. Sometimes someone tossed a coin out of pity. Today, a stranger stole even that. He chased the thief for half a block before collapsing. Too thin. Too malnourished. Too invisible for anyone to care.

Except one man. A shadow stepped over him, blocking the sun. A hand reached down. “That voice,” the man said, calm, almost curious. “If you wish… I can make you a star.” The boy didn’t hesitate. He grabbed the hand. And followed. Elliot blinked, tears slipping down his face as time returned. Above him against the blinding glow of the molten lake, he saw a figure. He couldn’t see the face through the glare. But he smiled anyway. “You did see me… I’m… glad…” His chest stopped rising. His body dropped completely, silently into the molten metal.

A long, quiet sigh came from the shadows above him. Vance stepped into view, the neon of his glasses folding away as he lifted them off. For once no sarcasm. No sneer. Just… sadness. “No, you stupid kid,” he said softly, voice shaking in a way he’d never let anyone hear. “He doesn’t see anyone.” Vance sat down at the edge of the platform, legs dangling above the molten glow, staring at the bubbling metal where Elliot vanished. He bowed his head. “…But I suppose,” he murmured, “you can believe that if you want.” The room remained quiet. The molten metal churned. And Vance, The Root, once the strongest hacker in the multiverse sat alone in the heat and silence, thinking far too deeply for a man who pretended to feel nothing at all.

Chapter 53: “Epilogue”

All of them left the chamber together. No words were spoken. Even now. They had done it. At least, it seemed that way. It finally felt over. Like before, when they defeated Lucius, when they wished through a door. Now, at least for a time, they might find some peace. At least until the next thing. But this felt different. More final. Like this truly might be the last. And yet a gnawing feeling tugged at the back of Clyde’s throat. Rebbecca was the first to speak. “There is one last thing we need to do,” she said solemnly. “And what is that?” Akane asked through tired breaths, rubbing the spot where her metal arm used to be.

“Destroy this place, of course. I planned for this part already.” She pulled out a cube without

much explanation and placed it on the ground. It unfolded slowly, revealing a familiar and horrifying sight. A planet bomb. Just like the one Corvus once tried to use to destroy Porta Nexus, and again in Steel Haven. All of their eyes widened. “It wasn’t too hard to replicate,” Rebbecca said calmly. “But this one… the range is a little smaller. More like city-sized.” She activated it immediately. “One last bullet in case the Boss somehow survived, huh?” Vincent said, scratching his chin. “And we get rid of the Payloads as well,” Akane added with quiet approval. None of them argued.

They returned to the Hopper, lifting off as the bomb detonated behind them. The blast engulfed the entire complex, leaving nothing but a massive crater where the base once stood. Raleigh landed the Hopper just outside the destruction. They all stood there for a moment, staring at the smoking void where the battlefield used to be. “Well… it’s been fun,” Vincent said with a casual shrug. “But let’s never do this again.” He turned and began walking away, waving his normal-sized hand in the air. Akane followed him. “Wait... where are you going?” Mikako called out. “You can’t just leave after all that… Akane…” Her voice sounded almost like a plea.

Akane stopped and slowly turned to face her. “Akane Kinryu is dead,” she said quietly. “She’s been dead for a long time.” She paused. “I’m just the Firewall.” “That doesn’t matter anymore,” Mikako insisted. “You’re free now. You can...” “They may be gone,” Akane interrupted softly, “but my job isn’t done.” She lowered her gaze. “You’re right. They were doing a lot of bad… but they were doing a lot of good too. Things I still believe in. Things worth fighting for.” She sighed and opened a portal. Vincent stepped through first. Akane followed, giving one last glance back. Mikako growled in frustration and lunged forward, but her face slammed into the shield Akane raised to block the portal.

Akane smiled sadly at her sister as the gateway closed. “This isn’t over, Akane!” Mikako roared, falling to her knees. Clyde and Raleigh stood beside her, unsure what to say. Unsure what to do.

But they stayed. Sometimes that was all you could offer.

On the other side of the portal, Akane looked down, shame lingering in her expression.

“Well,” Vincent said casually, stretching his shoulders, “mission complete and all that. I’m bouncing.” He glanced over at her. “You really sticking around?” Akane looked up suddenly, fear flashing across her face. “You’re going rogue? You know what they’ll do to you for...” “I know what they’ll do if I stay,” Vincent interrupted. He sighed. “Face it. I’m screwed either way. At least this way I’ve got a head start… and a chance.” He shrugged. “Ain’t no one controlling me directly anymore.”

Akane said nothing. She just looked down, knowing he was right. The Boss wouldn’t forgive his past failures. The only reason Vincent was still alive was because Rebbecca had manipulated things that way. “Don’t get sentimental on me now,” Vincent scowled. “I’ll kick your ass.” Then his expression softened slightly. “See you around, Akane.” He stepped closer, gently lifting her chin before kissing her on the head. Then he walked away. He didn’t look back. He didn’t give her time to stop him.

All throughout the Multiverse, things slowly began to calm down. Much like Cyrus suspected, the threat of secret hackers pulling the strings behind everything started to fade from public thought. The panic cooled. The rumors thinned. Eventually it became little more than a conspiracy theory whispered in certain circles, something most people dismissed outright. There simply wasn’t enough evidence. No one had been caught. Strangely enough, Aion never reported on it either. Something like that would normally have been impossible for him to ignore.

The Boss stood in Omnihack’s world. Mainframe appeared behind him on his right. Vance stood to his left, looking unusually solemn. “The Root Collective is dead…” The Boss said. He paused, as if savoring the moment. “…Long live Omnihack.” He kept his back turned to them both, speaking like a man addressing an invisible audience. It was slightly more theatrical than usual. Mainframe simply nodded. Vance ground his teeth. “Did she really have to drag my old organization’s name through the mud like that?” he muttered under his breath. The Boss gave him a brief sideways glance. That alone was enough to make Vance stiffen and shut up immediately. “To the next phase then?” Mainframe

asked. “Indeed,” The Boss replied calmly. “It is hardly necessary to stir them up again… at least not until we can remove them.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Exploiting the resources of HOME will do for now.”

When Clyde and the others returned to HOME, Loki was already waiting. A massive banner hung across the square. **GREAT JOB.** Food covered a huge table set up in the center of the plaza. Everyone was already there, smiling and cheering. Something Loki had clearly expected from the beginning. “Welcome back, friends!” Loki announced with theatrical pride. “Let us celebrate your victory!” It brought smiles to most of their faces. Well… most. Rebbecca remained strangely silent. Mikako did too at first, until her daughter ran over and hugged her. Mikako ruffled the girl’s hair despite her playful protests.

“Of course you already did this…” Clyde said with a grin, shaking his head. Still, he immediately joined in. This was exactly the sort of thing Loki was best at. Raleigh’s mood lifted instantly. She rushed straight for the food. “I’m starving after all that,” she declared. The celebration quickly turned chaotic. Music, laughter, shouting. Even the Rival had shown up with his crew, laughing and drinking like nothing had ever happened. Though Grant kept one suspicious eye locked on him the entire time. Rebbecca watched it all. She smiled. But it was a sad smile. Everyone was laughing. Everyone was celebrating. Everyone believed it was finally over. Raleigh noticed. She paused mid–food raid and looked over. “Hey,” she said. “What’s up, Rebbecca? Not gonna join us?” The hacker shook her head. “I’m beat… maybe next time.” She turned and walked away toward the Hack Shack. Raleigh frowned slightly, watching her leave. But she didn’t try to stop her. She couldn’t tell if Rebbecca needed someone to talk to… Or if she just needed space.

Rebbecca reached her room quickly. She shut the door and locked it. Then she leaned back against it, slowly sliding down until she was sitting on the floor. For a moment she just sat there.

Smiling. She had done it. Everyone believed the threat had been eliminated. She saved Vincent. She

saved HOME. Now they wouldn't go digging into Omnihack's business. Now they would stay here. Safe. She looked up at the ceiling, the smile still on her face. Then she started laughing. At first it was quiet. Then louder. Then completely uncontrollable. The laughter kept coming until suddenly... She stood up in a burst of rage. Everything on the nearby desk went flying as she swept it to the floor. She slammed her fist into the wall. The laughter vanished instantly. Now tears streamed down her face. And Rebbecca collapsed back against the wall, sobbing.

Cyrus walked down a dark hallway, led by a Coalition soldier. His face was hardened, steeling himself for what was coming. The soldier guided him deeper into the mountain tunnels. The farther they went, the less technological the halls became. Steel walls gave way to rough stone. Electric lights disappeared, replaced by flickering lanterns. Eventually they reached another guard standing beside a thick steel door. The man snapped to attention and saluted before unlocking it. The soldier who had escorted Cyrus stopped there and turned away, leaving him to enter alone.

Inside the room sat another of his men across from a prisoner. A Cipher. The hacker sat bound tightly to a chair, his head hanging low. There was visible damage around his neck, burned circuitry and torn metal where the failsafe meant to silence him had malfunctioned. He should have died. Instead, he had survived. Barely. His eyes were empty, staring at nothing. "What's the story?" Cyrus asked calmly. The officer beside him stepped forward. "We found him during our investigation," he explained. "He was wearing Simmons' face using this." He held up a damaged mask. The device flickered weakly, a holographic face phasing in and out across its cracked surface.

"We don't know when he replaced him," the officer continued. "No one noticed anything unusual. He behaved exactly like Simmons always did. No signs of sabotage either." Cyrus raised an eyebrow. "Then how was he discovered?" "We were checking the structural integrity of the mines," the officer said. "In case there was a chance the base might collapse. One of the tunnels caved in on him." He nodded toward the prisoner. "When we pulled him out… this is what we found. It looked like he

was about to open a portal, but the device malfunctioned."

Cyrus nodded slowly. He stepped closer to the chair and lifted the prisoner's chin. The Cipher didn't react. Only the shallow rise and fall of his chest showed he was still alive. "He refuses to speak," the officer added. "Or eat." Cyrus sighed quietly. "Then IV him," he said. The officer straightened immediately. "I want someone watching him at all times. Rotating shifts. Two guards outside the door." Cyrus studied the prisoner one more time. "Regular updates," he finished. "Even if he tells us nothing." "Yes, sir!" the officer replied sharply.

Chapter 54: Full of Surprises

A calm had washed over the multiverse. Everything seemed more peaceful than it had been in a long time. Conflict had nearly stopped. At HOME, across the wider multiverse, even the Union still technically locked in a civil war had gone quiet, at least for now. It really felt like things were over. But with peace came its own surprises. Clyde nervously entered Don Buri. Loki and Rebbecca were already sitting casually in a booth. “Ah, Clyde… whatever is the matter? I came as soon as I heard,” Loki said with a warm smile.

“You said Raleigh was in the hospital,” Rebbecca added flatly, though it was clear she had mostly slipped back into her usual persona. “Oh that. Yeah… sorry. I was nervous when I said that.

She's not injured or anything." He rubbed the back of his neck and slid into the booth with them. "Well certainly, otherwise you would be at her bedside, yes?" Loki said. "But do tell. Lucy wouldn't even give me a hint about the issue." Clyde sighed deeply. "Well… alright. I'll explain." He hesitated for a moment. "You know that thing you kept pestering me about… the apron thing." Loki's eyes lit up. "Why yes! I thought certainly she would..." "Well I didn't expect it to work!" Clyde interrupted quickly.

Some time ago, Clyde had woken up as usual and started making breakfast for himself and Raleigh. But things were different now. Life had finally calmed down a little. Their relationship was still good, of course, but Clyde remembered Loki's ridiculous suggestion and, for some reason, decided to try it. So reluctantly… he started making breakfast wearing nothing but an apron. "Oh gods… why am I doing this?" he muttered to himself, completely embarrassed. He didn't exactly see himself as sexy. Even after everything.

Raleigh eventually wandered downstairs, yawning and still half-asleep. "Morning Clyde… what's for brea..." She stopped. Suddenly she was very awake. "What are you… Clyde…" Something in her expression changed instantly. Clyde turned nervously. "Oh… uh… well… Loki said you might like it. Stupid, right? I'll just go put some clothes on." But before he could move, Raleigh stepped closer. Her hand slammed against the wall beside him hard enough to crack it slightly. "I need you right now," she said in a voice he had never heard from her before. Clyde blinked.

"What do you mean? What about breakfast?" He said/ "You're breakfast now." She grabbed his arm and began dragging him back toward the bedroom. "Wait... no... I'm not ready!" he protested, half panicked and half excited. "You can't hide that from me," she said with a grin face filled with lust. He grabbed the stair case frame in a desperate attempt to stop himself from being dragged away. "I don't think this kind of thing is something we can just close the door on once we open it!" He pleaded. "Good." She said with a sudden yank she pulled him away from the frame. Clyde's protests quickly

turned into something closer to bliss as he realized exactly what was about to happen.

Back at Don Buri, Clyde finished explaining. “So yeah…” He leaned back with a sigh. “…She got knocked up.” Rebbecca burst out laughing. Loki looked absolutely delighted. “Ha! I knew she would enjoy it. Face it, Clyde, you’ve become quite the catch.” “I’m never listening to you again,” Clyde grumbled. “Why did you listen in the first place?” Rebbecca asked, jabbing him in the ribs a little hard clearly seething with Jealously. “He wouldn’t stop pestering me about it,” Clyde muttered. “I figured I’d just try it once to prove he didn’t know what he was talking about.”

Clyde sighed again. “Anyway… she said she wanted to go in alone, so I’m hanging out here until she’s done.” He looked genuinely nervous. “Personally I’m surprised,” Loki said thoughtfully. “I never imagined either of you wanting children.” “Well… she always insisted we didn’t need any extra protection,” Clyde explained. “She thought she couldn’t have kids.” Then Clyde looked at Loki.

“Speaking of that… you’re the biggest flirt here. How do you not have any?” Loki laughed. “Well that’s simple. I’m careful. I armor up for every night of passion, and in the unlikely event that fails, I always leave my contact information.” He smiled proudly. “I would gladly care for a child if it happened. Though I’d rather not have one just yet.” Rebbecca puffed out her cheeks and leaned on her hands. “How am I the single one here?” she pouted. “I’m hotter than both of you.” “Probably because no one can tell when you’re flirting or when you’re about to hack their bank account,” Clyde said bluntly. She shot him a glare.

Inside the hospital, Lucy studied a glowing computer screen while Raleigh sat nearby, struggling to sit still. The display looked like some kind of ultrasound, but the image was distorted fuzzy waves constantly flickering across the monitor. Lucy frowned slightly. “Hmm… it looks like your… abilities are interfering with the machines.” Raleigh stiffened. “What does that mean? Is something going to happen to it? Is it...” “Calm.” Lucy gently placed a finger against Raleigh’s lips. “Breathe.” Lucy inhaled slowly, demonstrating. Raleigh followed her lead, taking a deep breath of her

own. After a moment, her shoulders loosened slightly.

Lucy nodded. “Before we continue, let me ask something important.” She leaned back in her chair. “Are you planning to keep it?” Raleigh looked down, thinking deeply. “I… I didn’t even think I could,” she admitted quietly. “With how modified my body is… what that man did to me…” Her voice trailed off. “But if it’s possible… I never really thought about it before.” Her mind was racing now with questions she had never even considered. Lucy studied her carefully. Her eyes briefly flashed with a faint glow. “Well,” she said, “because of the interference, I can’t get a clear image. Not even the gender.” She tapped the screen thoughtfully. “But I believe I’ll still be able to deliver them safely.” She smiled confidently. “They don’t call me the greatest doctor in the multiverse for nothing.”

Raleigh smiled back, but the weight on her mind hadn’t lifted. “Will they be… like me?” she asked quietly. Lucy shrugged. “Too early to say.” She stood up. “But for today, everything looks good.” Lucy walked toward the door. “You still have time to decide. Think about it.” She glanced back one last time. “Do what your heart tells you.” Then she left Raleigh alone with her thoughts.

Raleigh exited the hospital later. Clyde and Loki were waiting for her outside. “Congratulations!” Loki declared before anyone else could speak. Raleigh gave a soft smile but didn’t say anything. “How did it go?” Clyde asked gently. “But more importantly,” Loki added dramatically, “this signals the perfect time for that!” Clyde blinked. “That?” Raleigh blinked too. “That?” Loki spread his arms proudly. “Why, getting hitched, of course!” Raleigh’s expression immediately fell. “No, Loki… it’s not that I don’t love Clyde or anything. I just…” She hesitated, unable to explain the feeling properly. “I just want to go home right now.” She turned and started walking. Clyde followed after her, leaving Loki standing there alone. A slow smirk spread across the lion’s face. He chuckled quietly to himself and ran off, clearly already planning something.

Clyde and Raleigh walked home together in silence. Raleigh suddenly grabbed his hand tightly.

“It’s fine,” Clyde began quickly. “We don’t have to...” “No… it’s not that.” She shook her head. “I’m not an expert or anything, but… from what I’ve seen…” She struggled to find the words. “Marriage doesn’t seem to have anything to do with love.” She looked down. “It seems… suffocating. Like you’re trapped.” She paused. “Does that make sense?” Her voice grew quieter. “…I’m sorry I’m like this.” For once she was completely open about how she felt.

Clyde thought carefully before answering. “Relax. I get it.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m not against the idea or anything. But at the end of the day, we don’t need a government, or anyone else to tell us how we feel about each other.” He smiled softly. “Especially not a piece of paper.” Raleigh smiled back, clearly relieved. “But enough about that,” Clyde continued. “You’ve got something else on your mind.” They had reached their house. Instead of going inside, Raleigh sat down on the front steps.

“It’s just…” Her voice trembled. “I’m afraid.” Clyde sat beside her. “Of being a parent?” “Well… yeah. But more than that…” She hugged herself slightly. “I’ve spent my whole life running from people. People who wanted my power.” Her hands trembled. “What if my baby is the same? What if they have the same abilities? What if I can’t protect them? What if I’m a terrible mother?” The worries kept spilling out. Clyde wrapped his arms around her. “If that happens,” he said softly, “we’ll deal with it together.” He took her hand again. “But it’s your choice. Whatever you decide, I’ll support you.” Raleigh smiled faintly. Then she looked away. “I just hope… for their sake…” She leaned into him. “…that they’re normal.” She hugged him tightly. “More like my perfect partner.”

A few more blissful days passed with nothing particularly noteworthy happening. Well… mostly. Loki was clearly up to something. Every time Clyde or Raleigh spotted him, he immediately bolted in the opposite direction. “Oh gods…” Clyde groaned. “He’s definitely up to something.” Sure enough, the next day while Raleigh was making her usual rounds through the city, she noticed something strange. A large building was under construction. A church. She raised an eyebrow and

walked over to where Wainwright stood supervising the work. “Why are you building a church?” she asked. “And for what religion exactly?”

“Oh… well,” Wainwright said casually, “just for the Multiverse Church. A few folks in town have been asking for it for a while now.” Raleigh looked surprised. “I honestly didn’t think that faith still existed.” “Well, I’m not exactly an avid churchgoer like some people,” Wainwright admitted with a chuckle, “but I still go every now and then.” He shrugged. “The Empire may have wiped out their leadership, but that doesn’t mean people stopped believing.” Raleigh thought about that for a moment. “I guess you’re right.” She shrugged and continued on with her day.

Meanwhile, Clyde was sitting in his office trying to work, though boredom was winning the battle. Then a loud crash echoed outside. He jumped up and rushed to the window. Down below, a small cargo ship had crash-landed in the square. It looked overloaded far more cargo than it was designed to carry. Standing beside the wreck was Loki. He was frantically trying to contain a massive pile of decorations spilling out of the ship. Balloons, confetti, and colorful banners. Loki looked up and noticed Clyde watching from the window.

“Oh!” Loki said nervously. He quickly grabbed several balloons before they could float away. “Nothing to see here!” he called out with an awkward laugh. Then, somehow, he lifted the entire cargo crate himself and hurried off with it. Clyde stared at the scene for a moment. There was barely any property damage. After a moment, he simply shrugged and returned to his desk.

And then it happened. Just as Clyde and Raleigh were leaving their house to start another normal day, they found Loki standing outside. He was dressed far more formally than usual and staring at them with the expression of a stray dog desperately hoping for attention. “Loki… you’re no longer avoiding us, I see,” Clyde said, already having a pretty good idea where this was going. “Whaaat? I wasn’t doing that,” Loki replied quickly. Then he waved it off. “Oh, never mind that. Come, come! A surprise awaits!” He gestured dramatically for them to follow him. Toward the newly completed

church. “This better not be…” Raleigh began.“I’m pretty sure it is,” Clyde groaned. Despite their suspicions, they followed.

Inside the church, everyone from town was already seated. And a few people neither of them recognized. Loki stretched out his arms with theatrical flair. “Well! Here it is. Surprise!” He beamed proudly. “I thought you two just needed a little push.” Raleigh’s expression immediately hardened. “Loki. I already told you I don’t want to.” She growled the words. Loki’s ears drooped for a moment. Then suddenly perked up again as a smirk crept onto his face. “But look at all the trouble I went through for this,” he said quickly. “Say… I even got Dark Raven to appear.” He said it with absolute confidence.

“Dark who?” Raleigh asked, completely confused. Clyde’s eyes lit up instantly. “The Lord of the Smiths?! He’s here?! Where?!” Clyde began scanning the room with sudden excitement. “Right over there,” Loki said, pointing to a figure standing ominously in the corner. The man wore black robes and a dark mask, giving off an unmistakably dramatic aura. “We were roommates in college,” Loki added casually. “Even so, the favors I had to do to get him to show up… all for you!”

Raleigh stared at the mysterious figure skeptically. “Why would we want some random guy at a wedding we’re not even having?” she asked. “He looks super evil.” “He’s not evil!” Clyde protested immediately. “He’s just the coolest guy ever! Everyone thinks he’s evil, but he’s actually pretending to be so he can manipulate both sides. He knows light and dark magic, he’s like the strongest and smartest guy ever, and he’s my favorite character ever!” Clyde suddenly paused. “…Although I don’t remember the college arc in the lore.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Raleigh stared at him. “Oh, so it’s from one of your shows.” She grabbed his arm. “Clyde… are you seriously considering... No.” She immediately began dragging him toward the exit. “Wait but! Lord Raven!” Clyde protested desperately. “No!” She pulled him outside. “Wait! Where are you going?” Loki called after them. “You won’t regret this! You just need to take a leap of faith!” But they were already gone.

Loki slowly turned back toward the crowd. Thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed the failed ceremony yet. Rebbecca approached, leaning casually against a wall. She was wearing a sleek black tux. “I told you she wasn’t going to go for it,” she said smugly. Loki sighed dramatically. “Says the one who was ready to object the moment they did.” He began pacing nervously back and forth at the front of the church.

Just then Lucy entered, wearing a fancy dress, with AID-E and Iris following behind her. The moment Lucy saw Loki’s face, she immediately knew things hadn’t gone according to plan. “Oh, lion boy…” she said gently, rubbing his cheek. “I told you this was a bad idea.” “It’s too late now!” Loki said, panicking. “The people came here for a show. I can’t let them down! What am I supposed to do? Someone needs to get married!” “Query,” AID-E said, tilting her head. “Isn’t such a union supposed to be more… thought out?” “Well…” Iris said thoughtfully, “that honestly depends who you ask.”

“Oh! I know!” Loki suddenly exclaimed. “You and Crucible can get married! You’ve got that whole enemies-to-lovers thing going on!” Iris turned bright red. “What?! No! I mean, I don’t think I hate him anymore, but I certainly don’t love him! And he didn’t even come. He flat-out refused.” “Then the robot!” Loki said, immediately turning to AID-E. “I know people are dying to marry you!” “I am a nurse droid,” AID-E replied calmly. “I do not specialize in mental issues.” Loki grabbed his head in frustration. “What do I do? What do I do?!”

He tapped his foot nervously, staring at the floor. “You could just call the whole thing off, you know,” Rebbecca said with a sigh. Loki shook his head violently. That was not an option. He had committed to this. Now he had to double down. But he was running out of options. Then his eyes drifted toward Lucy. “It could be…” he muttered. “No… that would threaten my bachelor lifestyle. How can I love everyone in the multiverse if I’m tied to...” Lucy laughed. “Now who’s scared of commitment?”

She stepped closer. “I was always happy keeping things casual between us…” She lifted a

finger to her lips thoughtfully. “But… I wouldn’t mind tying the knot with you.” Loki froze. “Really?” he asked, eyes widening. “You would?” “Sure. Why not?” Lucy shrugged. “With my job I don’t exactly have time to shop around for that sort of thing anyway.” Then she leaned closer with a smirk. “But listen here, lion boy. If we go steady, we go steady. No more floozy this or that.” Loki’s face immediately fell. “But I…”

He lowered his head. Then he glanced at the crowd still waiting expectantly. He sighed. “What about… a hall pass?” he asked nervously. “You know… like if I’m ever stuck in an elevator with Jerry Sigmon, I won’t be able to control myself.” Iris blinked. “Who the hell is Jerry Sigmon?” Lucy thought for a moment. “Hmmm…” She nodded slowly. “You get one hall pass per year.” She smiled. “But I get one too.” Loki instantly grabbed both her hands. “Deal!” He wiped a tear from his eye. “Now let’s get dressed before I regret it.”

After a few minutes, Loki and Lucy returned dressed in white. Music began to play. Penny had apparently been chosen as the flower girl. Unfortunately, at fifty feet tall, the role didn’t quite translate properly. Instead of walking down the aisle, she stood outside the church, peering through an open window and sprinkling flowers inside like confetti. Not the best choice. Grant sat near the middle of the church beside the Commandos… and, somewhat awkwardly, the pirates. To their credit, they were all dressed nicely. They were also all crying. “Is this some sort of cosmic joke…” Grant muttered under his breath. “We ain’t best friends all of a sudden, you know…” The Rival wiped tears from his eyes. “I’m sorry… I just get so emotional at weddings.” Grant sighed and shook his head. Mara sniffled beside him, equally emotional.

On the opposite side of the church, Mikako stared at Loki in disbelief. “Well I’ll be damned,” she said with a chuckle. “I didn’t think he of all people would be the one getting married today.” Kaguya sat beside her, lost in thought. “I hope someone sweeps me off my feet like that someday,” she said dreamily. “Not if we can help it, Lady Kaguya,” one of the grunts behind them joked. She groaned

loudly.

In the front row sat Dave… along with his totally-not-boyfriend. Dave wore a tuxedo jacket. And basketball shorts. “I never thought I’d see the day my stupid son got married,” Dave grumbled. His voice cracked slightly. “I’d probably be crying like that loser over there too if… well… I wasn’t a real man.” His totally-not-boyfriend squeezed his hand. “Hey,” he said casually. “Maybe we can be next.” Dave scoffed immediately. “I’m not gay, bro.” They were still holding hands. Other people where there too, but didn't have much of a reaction. Cyrus, Tara, and Tess were there with a face that said why was I invited to this.

Finally, Loki and Lucy reached the altar. Waiting for them there was… Proxy. Looking deeply annoyed. “It’s about time someone...” Proxy began. He paused and adjusted his expression. “I mean… we are gathered here today to...” “Proxy!” Loki whispered sharply. “What are you doing? What happened to the priest I hired?” Proxy sighed. His screen-face changed to an even more irritated emote. “I am a licensed minister.” He glanced at the crowd. “Now are you getting married or not?” “Y-yes. Yes!” Loki said quickly. Proxy nodded. “Good.” He folded his arms. “Well let’s skip all the nonsense. It’s not like this is traditional anyway.” He pointed at both of them. “You two want to get married?”

Loki and Lucy nodded. Proxy shrugged. “Then kiss each other already.” The entire church went quiet. Loki and Lucy looked at each other. Both seemed slightly disappointed by the lack of ceremony. But after a moment they shrugged and leaned in, kissing. Proxy clapped his hands once. “Great.” “I now pronounce you Lion and Wife.” And with that, Proxy turned and walked away immediately, leaving the ceremony the second it became official. “No one even asked if Penny, and I wanted to get married.” He mumbled. The Sky Hawks started to applaud with everything they had.

Clyde, and Raleigh sat outside the church at a bench. “I'm kinda surprised he didn't chase us this time.” Raleigh said as the bells of the church started to ring as the door dramatically swung open. Everyone started to file out of the church Loki, and Lucy waving at everyone. A small ship with cans

strapped too it pulled up just outside like you would see in the movie. “Wait did he... No way.” Clyde asked in disbelief.

Lord Raven stood next to him with a sigh. “That Lion always trying to upstage me. A constant thorn in my side.” He said as he posed dramatically using some sort of magic to make himself look cooler. Clyde immediately looses interest in Loki. “Dark Raven it's you... It's an honor please... can I have you autograph.” Clyde asked as Raleigh just sighed watching Loki's ship fly away to what she guess was a honeymoon. “My work here is done.” Lord Raven said dramatically disappearing. Clyde looked a little sad. “Sorry Clyde maybe next time you can...” She said consoling him. “That was the coolest thing ever.” Clyde shouted. She shook her head in exasperation, but then smiled this was the man she choose to spend her life with marriage or not.

Chapter 55: In Her Shoes

A few months passed. Raleigh was becoming more and more anxious as the pregnancy progressed. The signs were obvious now. Her stomach had begun to swell noticeably. That didn't mean she was staying put. Just as Clyde was about to leave for work, he spotted her trying to sneak out the door. She was moving slower than usual, but clearly attempting to be subtle. Clyde sighed. "Raleigh… we talked about this." She froze mid-step. "I know you don't want to sit around," Clyde continued gently, "but you need to take it easy. For the baby. I already told you I'd take over your patrols for a while."

She pouted immediately. "But it's so boring," she complained. "What if something happens?

Like a giant monster, or...” “I… and the others will handle it,” Clyde interrupted. Raleigh sighed heavily, clearly unhappy with the answer. Her expression shifted into something more calculating. “You know that movie you forced me to watch,” she said. “The one with the spider people?” Clyde groaned slightly.

“There was a lady in that who kept fighting even while she was pregnant. I can do that too. And you love that movie.” Clyde rubbed his forehead. “Yeah… and she’s insane. One wrong move and it’s goodbye baby.” He shook his head. “That was honestly the only thing I didn’t like about that movie.”

Raleigh crossed her arms. Clyde sighed again, thinking desperately for a way to keep her occupied. Then an idea struck him. “Let’s try something.” He guided her toward the living room and opened a cabinet. Inside was a growing collection of consoles he’d been gathering. He pulled one out and started setting it up.

Raleigh raised an eyebrow. “You really think that’s going to work?” “Maybe,” Clyde said with a shrug. “At the very least it’ll keep you focused for a while.” He handed her a controller. “Here. This is a game called Super Maria Brothers. Plenty of action. One of my favorite games.” Raleigh stared at the controller like it was some kind of alien artifact. She had never been much of a gamer. She preferred to live the action rather than play it. To be fair, though… she had never really given games a chance.

“…Alright, fine,” she muttered as she sat down on the couch. “But you better follow my list while you’re out there.” Clyde smiled. “I will. Thank you.” He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead before heading for the door. Behind him, the television flickered on. Raleigh stared at the screen. “…Alright, Maria,” she muttered. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Clyde started walking down the street. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Things had remained calm for months now. Still, he pulled out the list Raleigh had given him. Apparently it was everything she normally handled in a day. He looked it over. Check on Ms. Henderson. Help Old Man Rom with his shopping. Make sure someone named Bakutata isn’t stealing people’s garbage again.

Clyde raised an eyebrow at that last one. None of it sounded particularly important, but the list itself was fairly long. He figured he'd stop by the office first and finish his own work. After that, he could start working through Raleigh's errands.

But before he even had the chance to sit down, someone burst through the door. "Mr. Temp Sheriff! He's back! You have to stop him!" the man shouted. Clyde blinked. "Temp Sheriff? Who's back?" The man didn't answer. He simply grabbed Clyde's arm and motioned for him to follow. Outside, a strange alien was running through the street laughing wildly, carrying several trash bags and tossing garbage everywhere. Clyde watched the chaos for a moment. "I… am assuming that's Bakutata?" The man nodded quickly. "And what does the sheriff normally do about… Bakutata?" Clyde asked cautiously.

"Well… she usually beats the shit out of him," the man said sheepishly. "…And then banishes him to a world she calls 'Cartoon Hell. But… he always seems to find his way back."Clyde slowly facepalmed. How had he never heard about this? He stepped forward and powered up his glove. One clean punch sent the alien crashing to the ground. "Damn it… foiled again…" the alien gargled dramatically. Clyde stared down at him. "I thought The Rival was bad, but you… why?" "The world is too clean!" the alien shouted proudly. "It needs to be covered in filth!" Clyde tilted his head. "Do you… live here?"

"The multiverse is my HOME!" the alien declared. Clyde stared at him. "…Are you on drugs?" "Why do you keep coming back?" The alien simply grunted stubbornly. Clyde sighed. Clearly he wasn't getting anywhere with this guy. Just then Grant jogged up to them. "You beat me here," Grant said, catching his breath. He looked down at the alien. "Yeah… this one's always a handful." Grant folded his arms. "You might want to consider handing him off to a real prison or something." "But that's just me." Clyde hesitated. "I… uh…" He scratched his head. Making big changes probably wasn't the best idea when he was only temporary sheriff.

“I get it,” Grant said, tightening the restraints on the alien. “You don’t want to do anything too different from how your old lady handles things. I’ll take care of this one. The Commandos have a lot less on their plate these days anyway, now that the pirates aren’t attacking.” Clyde opened his mouth to respond, but a loud boom echoed in the distance. Both of them turned toward the sound. Smoke was rising from a nearby street. Clyde sighed. “Of course.” He took off running toward it while Grant simply nodded and dragged the alien away.

When Clyde reached the house, he saw a nameplate on the door. Sandra Henderson He gulped. “I probably should’ve done that one first.” He knocked on the door. No answer. The smoke pouring out from inside didn’t help. After a moment of hesitation, he pushed the door open and stepped inside. The entire kitchen was filled with smoke. But standing in the middle of it all was an elderly woman calmly cooking. Or… attempting to cook. The smoke was clearly coming from the pan in front of her. “Ms. Henderson?” Clyde called cautiously. Only then did she turn around. “Oh! Visitors!” she said brightly. “I didn’t hear you come in.” She smiled warmly.

“I’m making pancakes, dear. Enough for everyone. Why don’t you sit and stay a while?” Clyde slowly looked at the pan. He couldn’t tell what it was. But it definitely wasn’t pancakes. He had absolutely no idea what Raleigh usually did in situations like this. Right now, he really wished her instructions had been more specific. “Do you… happen to know a redhead?” he asked. Her eyes lit up instantly. “Oh yes! What a delightful young woman.” “She comes to see me every day, always gushing about her hunky man.” Clyde blinked.

“She helps me out a lot.” The old woman looked down with a fond smile. “She reminds me of my old lover. I wish he was still with us.” “I’m sorry for your loss,” Clyde said gently. “Oh no,” she replied casually. “He’ll be back in a few years.” Clyde blinked again. “…Right.” He decided not to unpack that sentence. “Well… besides the redhead visiting, is there anything else she normally helps you with?” Clyde was starting to wonder if this woman should really be living alone.

Before he could say anything else, a ghostly figure suddenly phased through the front door. “Honey! I’m back!” the ghost announced cheerfully. “Sorry it took me so long to get out of Super Hell!” Clyde nearly jumped out of his skin. “Super… Hell?” “Yes indeed,” the ghost said proudly. “Thank you for looking after my wife, by the way. And for making sure she doesn’t burn down the neighborhood.” He laughed. “I love her dearly, but she can’t cook to save her life.” He paused. “… Actually that’s how I died. Chemical fire.” He laughed again.

“But don’t worry! I’m intangible now.” He patted his chest. “It won’t happen again. From now on, you have my word.” Before Clyde could respond, the ghost gently shoved him toward the door. “Alright! You’ve done enough for today!” The old woman waved happily. “Come visit again, dear!” The door closed behind him. Clyde stood outside for a moment. Completely stunned. “Hell is real?” he muttered. After a moment, he shook his head. No time to think about that now. He glanced back down at Raleigh’s list. Help Old Man Rom with his shopping. Clyde sighed. “I better handle that one before something else weird happens.” He started walking down the street again. The Smoke had already vanished like it was never there.

Old Man Rom turned out to be surprisingly normal. Despite having four arms, it was clear he was just a frail old man who couldn’t carry all his groceries on his own anymore. Helping him was refreshingly simple after the last two encounters. The next few items on the list were similar. Just check-ins. Making sure people were alright, staying out of trouble, and had what they needed. Clyde was beginning to understand why Raleigh gravitated toward a job like this, even if she refused to officially take the title.

He broke up a couple of minor fights. Then he helped Mr. Wainwright hang a section of fencing. Later he helped get a cat out of a tree… though the cat had five eyes. He tried not to question that one. Before he knew it, most of the day had passed. He had managed to finish a good portion of Raleigh’s list, but there was still plenty left, and he had barely touched his own work. He had even forgotten

about lunch. Just as he was reviewing what remained, one of the Kinryū-Kai thugs came jogging up to him. “Hey bro! Lady Mikako told me to come find you.” “Find me?” Clyde asked, confused. “Did something happen?”

He figured Mikako could handle most problems that came her way. “Nah, it’s not that kind of thing, bro,” the thug replied. “You see, the bosses usually have a weekly poker game around two.” Clyde glanced down at Raleigh’s list again. Sure enough. Poker game – 2 PM. He checked the time. He was already an hour late. “I might have to skip that,” Clyde said reluctantly. “I’ve still got a lot to finish… though I wouldn’t mind the break.” The thug laughed. “Trust me, bro. Big Boss Raleigh wouldn’t skip it.” Clyde sighed. “Alright. Lead the way.”

The thug guided him through the Yakuza district to a hidden warehouse. Inside, Mikako was already seated at a table with several of her people. She looked up as Clyde entered. “You’ve got some nerve trying to stand me up,” she said, half joking, though there was a hint of menace behind the smile.

Clyde pulled out a chair and sat down. “I’m honestly surprised,” he admitted. “I didn’t think Raleigh knew how to play poker.” Mikako grinned. “Alright,” Clyde said. “Deal me in.” She nodded, and the game began.

Clyde’s poker face was impeccable. He won the very first round with a terrible hand. “Wow,” Mikako said, clearly impressed. “I almost forgot what a challenge looked like.” “Raleigh isn’t good at poker?” Clyde asked. Mikako burst out laughing. “Not at all. She’s horrible.” “She never wins. Ever.” “And every week she confidently says, ‘Next time will be different.’” Mikako wiped a tear from her eye. “I’m still waiting.” Clyde nodded slowly. That made sense. Raleigh probably struggled to keep a poker face. The game continued. At first it just seemed like a casual way for the Yakuza leadership to unwind.

But then Clyde noticed something. Mikako began slipping small notes into the cards she dealt him. At the same time she casually mentioned a few shady individuals she had spotted around the city

recently. That's when Clyde understood. This wasn't just poker. It was intelligence sharing. A way to pass information without attracting attention. And Raleigh's losing streak? That was probably part of the reason she kept showing up every week. Eventually Mikako tossed her cards onto the table. "Alright, that's all I can stomach today," she said. "Got nothing else worth spilling." She stood up and patted Clyde on the back. "But hey," she added with a grin, "we should play for real sometime." With that, she and her men headed out.

The rest of the day became a blur. Clyde went everywhere and did what felt like everything. He interacted with just about every faction in town at some point. The work was chaotic and stressful, but strangely enough, he felt like he understood the people of HOME better than he had before. By the time he finally returned home, it was late. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. "I'm home," he called out. No answer. The downstairs lights were off, and the house was quiet.

Puzzled, Clyde made his way toward the bedroom. But as he passed one of the spare rooms they rarely used, he heard shouting coming from inside. He stopped. Then slowly opened the door. Inside, Raleigh sat at a computer desk that definitely hadn't been there that morning. At some point during the day she had completely moved in. There was now, a gaming PC, a headset, a glowing keyboard, and a full gamer chair. She was hunched forward, completely focused on some kind of first-person shooter.

Clyde couldn't tell exactly what game it was. Only that she had just been spawn-camped. Raleigh slammed the desk and growled into the headset. "Listen here, BallLover247," she snarled. "I will find you and I will fuck your mom so hard your grandparents will feel it from their coffins." Clyde blinked. "…Raleigh?" She froze. Then slowly turned around. "Oh hey Clyde!" she said cheerfully. "How was work?" Clyde stared at her. "I have… so many questions." He pointed at the monitor. "But first, what happened to Super Maria Brothers?" Raleigh frowned. "Oh, I played that for a while," she said. "But then I started talking to some guys online and they told me to try this." Her face lit up.

"It's way better." She said as Clyde's shoulders slumped slightly. "A five-year-old killing you

repeatedly while you scream at him is better?" he asked. "He started it!" she argued immediately.

Clyde rubbed his face. "…Fine. Whatever. If you're having fun." Raleigh leaned back in her chair. "But enough about that," she said. "How did things go?" She paused the game for a moment. Clyde began explaining his day. Raleigh laughed at several of the stories, occasionally adding how she usually handled certain situations. She listened… mostly. Every now and then her eyes drifted back to the computer screen.

"You know," Clyde said eventually, "I was worried." "Me too," Raleigh admitted. "I didn't think you could handle my job." She looked slightly nervous. "At least not while still doing your own."

Clyde laughed. "Somehow I managed." He stretched tiredly. "But I'm exhausted. I'm heading to bed." He glanced toward her. "You coming?" Usually she would. But this time Raleigh glanced at the computer again. Then shook her head slowly. "…I think I want to play a bit more." She said it almost like she was asking permission. Clyde smiled. "Alright." "Just don't stay up too late." She immediately unpaused the game and leaned forward again. Clyde quietly closed the door behind him. Then sighed. "I hope I didn't just create a monster solving that problem."

Chapter 56: Baby Time

Clyde sat with Raleigh at home. It still felt strange. The two of them had rarely spent this much time inside their house before the pregnancy, but now it had become the new normal one Raleigh still didn't love. Pregnancy had not been easy on her. The cravings. The pain. The mood swings. Clyde did his best to indulge her every request, and he thought he was doing pretty well with it, but he often wondered how she really felt about the whole thing. They still didn't even know the gender thanks to the interference. Raleigh groaned loudly, shifting on the couch. "Ugh… when will this be over? I'm so sick of this…" she growled.

"Lucy said it could be as soon as next week," Clyde replied, even though she already knew that.

“I think this is the first and last time for me,” Raleigh muttered, glaring down at her stomach. “You hear that, baby? Hurry up and come out already!” Her expression suddenly twisted. “…Um… Clyde…” she said, wincing. “You might not believe me but… I think it heard me.” Clyde blinked. “You mean like… right now?” “Yes! Don’t just stand there, do something!” she demanded. He rushed over, guiding her down onto the couch. “Right! I’ll call Lucy!” he said, fumbling for his earpiece. Raleigh grabbed his shirt tightly.

“There isn’t time!” she gasped, crying out in pain. Clyde panicked even more. “Well I don’t know how to do it! In the movies they say to get hot water or something!” “I don’t care... just do something!” Raleigh pleaded through clenched teeth. Suddenly the doorbell rang. Both of them froze. Clyde rushed to the door, desperately hoping it might somehow be Lucy by some miracle. He opened it. It was Loki. Before Loki could say whatever dramatic nonsense he had prepared, Clyde shoved a finger to his lips. “The baby’s coming. No nonsense. Go get your wife.” Then he slammed the door in his face. Loki stood there for a moment, annoyed. Then the situation finally clicked. “…But she’s… they weren’t expecting it until next week… she’s at the doctors’ retreat in Valorium…” His expression hardened. “I know what I must do.” And with that, Loki shot into the sky at godlike speed.

Inside, Clyde rushed into the kitchen and began filling a pot with hot water. It was the only thing he remembered from movies, even if he wasn’t sure why. Raleigh glared at him through the pain. “What the hell is that for?” she panted, gripping the couch cushions. “I don’t know!” Clyde admitted. He pulled out his phone to try and look it up. His hand slipped. The phone dropped straight into the pot of boiling water. “…Fuck.”

Meanwhile, Loki blasted through the multiverse. He broke the sound barrier again and again, using every ounce of his power to fly through portal after portal. Ten worlds. Twenty worlds. One hundred worlds. Finally he reached his destination. He spotted the building Lucy was inside, a cozy vacation-slash-work retreat where doctors were attending a lecture. Loki smashed through the wall like

a cannonball. Inside, a group of doctors were sitting calmly at a table listening to Lucy speak. The moment Loki crashed into the room they jumped to their feet, convinced they were under attack.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “Yes, hubby?” Loki struggled to breathe. “No time… baby… baby coming… need you…” Then he collapsed face-first onto the floor from exhaustion. Lucy sighed. “That’s why I keep my communicator on me.” She looked down at him. “Why didn’t you just message me? Did you really fly all the way here?” She casually held up a portal gun. “I have this. Don’t you?” The device was tuned directly to HOME. With the nearly infinite energy of that world, travel was basically instantaneous. Loki slowly lifted his head. “…Oh.” He clearly hadn’t thought of that. Lucy turned to the stunned doctors. “Sorry everyone. I didn’t marry him for his brains.” She opened a portal. “Looks like we’ll have to end the program early.” Then she grabbed Loki by the collar and dragged him through the portal.

Clyde was at his wits’ end. He hesitated for a moment, then gently helped Raleigh out of her pants and positioned her legs. “Okay… maybe I can just… catch it when you...” That’s when Lucy arrived, bursting through the room with two AID-E units behind her. “That’s enough,” Lucy said firmly. “You were on the right path, though… well… close enough.” She immediately took control of the situation. One of the AID-Es connected a cord to Raleigh, quickly scanning her vitals. “Everything is stable,” the robot reported. Lucy nodded. “Alright, Raleigh. Listen to me. I need you to push. Slowly. Once we get past this part, we’re done, okay?” Raleigh grunted, trying her best to follow the instructions.

“This pain… it’s worse than getting stabbed!” she cried. “Don’t focus on that,” Lucy said calmly. “Just keep pushing.” Raleigh let out something closer to a battle cry, giving it everything she had. A moment later, a beautiful baby slipped into Lucy’s hands. Lucy gently lifted the newborn while the other AID-E cut the cord. At that exact moment, a brilliant flash of light burst outward from the baby, spreading across the room in every direction. It almost felt like HOME itself welcoming the new

life into the world. Possibly the first human life born there. Lucy braced herself briefly before quickly recovering and checking Raleigh again.

"It finally..." Raleigh started to say. Lucy cut her off. "I think you've got another one in there."

"What?!" Raleigh shouted. "No! I can't do that again!" But now it was obvious. "Come on," Lucy said encouragingly. "One more time. Then we're done. No more pain." Raleigh pushed again, crying out as the pain surged through her. She grabbed Clyde's sleeve tightly. Clyde stood there frozen, feeling completely helpless. "We're getting you fixed after this, you hear me?" Raleigh growled through clenched teeth. "I am never doing this again!" Clyde looked down sheepishly. With one final push, the second baby emerged. The AID-E cut the cord. Just like before, another bright flash of light rippled through the room.

Raleigh collapsed back against the couch, panting heavily and completely exhausted. Lucy examined the babies carefully. Everything looked perfect. Strangely enough, the babies weren't crying. They were laughing. Happy to be here. Lucy smiled. "Beautiful, healthy twins," she announced. "Looks like one boy and one girl. Congratulations!" She handed one baby to Raleigh, followed by the other. Lucy, the AID-Es, and Loki stepped back, giving the couple space.

Raleigh looked down at the babies in her arms. For a moment her face was completely still. The twins looked up at her, giggling softly. Then Raleigh slowly began to cry. Her emotions finally broke loose like an avalanche. "My babies…" she whispered. "They're so… I love them…" She struggled to find the words as she held them tightly. Clyde knelt beside her, smiling as he looked down at their tiny faces. "I'm going to love them forever and ever," Raleigh said through tears. "And if anyone messes with them… I'll destroy them." Clyde nodded in full agreement. After a moment, Raleigh gently handed the babies to him. Clyde carefully held them both, rocking them slightly as they giggled happily. "I never thought I wanted this," he admitted softly. "I'm still not completely sure… but now that I see them…" He smiled. "I never want to go back."

Lucy, the AID-Es, and Loki watched from the side. Loki wiped away a single tear. “Ah… the miracle of childbirth,” he said quietly. “What a sight.” Everyone smiled. Then suddenly the door burst open. Half the town had apparently been drawn in by the flashes of light. First Mr. Wainwright. Then Rebbecca, Mikako, Grant, Mara, Rigg, Kaguya. And many more. Even The Rival peeked in through the window. Everyone looked thrilled and happy for them. Even Proxy seemed to have a smiling emote on his screen for once… though he quickly covered it out of embarrassment. Clyde and Raleigh looked at each other and smiled. Then Raleigh’s expression turned cold. “You’re still getting fixed though.”

Clyde’s smile slowly faded. His eyes darkened.

Chapter 57: New Power

A few more months had passed. Raising children had turned out to be a challenge for both of them though a mostly mundane one. A sleepless one. Raleigh still wanted to get back to work, but now the thought of going anywhere without her children terrified her. She felt torn between her restlessness and her maternal instincts. Clyde, meanwhile, was trying and failing to push her out the door. “I don’t wanna…” Raleigh pouted. “You were begging to leave the house a few weeks ago,” Clyde sighed. “Now you refuse.” “What if something happens while I’m gone?” she asked nervously. Clyde rubbed his temples. “I get it, Raleigh. But you need a break. A well-deserved one. I’ll look after the kids. You go work… or well… whatever you feel like doing, I guess.” Raleigh lowered her head, exhaustion

clearly showing on her face. "…Alright. Fine."

Suddenly she grabbed Clyde tighter than ever, staring him directly in the eyes. "Promise me you'll keep them safe." "Of course I will," Clyde said. "It's not like our living room is all that dangerous anyway." He tried to joke. With that, Raleigh finally left. Clyde turned his full attention back to the living room, where both babies sat in their little baby chairs. "Alright babies!" he said enthusiastically. Then he paused. They still didn't have names. Neither of them had been able to agree on anything yet. At first they had considered naming the kids after people they respected, but that idea quickly fell apart. Every time they tried it, they couldn't stop picturing the person's face whenever they looked at the baby. So the idea had been shelved for now. "How about I introduce you both to some of your dad's favorite shows?"

He sat down between them with a smile. Both babies reacted immediately, clapping and giggling. Clyde turned on the TV and scrolled through the options. He briefly considered putting on an Ultra Scouts episode, but after actually getting to know them in person, watching them like that felt weird. Instead he picked a classic from his generation. Two Piece. "If we start now, we'll be caught up by the time you grow up," Clyde joked. "Don't worry. You'll love it." The two children stared curiously at the screen. But after a few minutes it became clear they didn't care at all. They began squirming and fussing.

Clyde was devastated. Still, he figured they might just be too young to understand it yet. So he flipped to something else. College Mutant Samurai Turtles. Same reaction. They looked confused. The girl started crying. Clyde panicked, flipping through show after show, but nothing seemed to capture their attention. Finally he sighed. "Fine… maybe… one of those kid shows." He scrolled through the options until he found something called *Multiversal Animals*. It looked like the kind of educational show people in his old world might watch if they wanted to learn about wildlife, just on a multiverse scale.

The babies' eyes immediately lit up. On screen, a silly purple monkey was dancing around. "Well," Clyde said with relief, "looks like we're learning about animals today." The show rapidly jumped between different creatures, most likely to keep young viewers engaged. Then a lion appeared. Its mane shimmered like a sky full of stars. The moment the lion flashed onto the screen, both babies lost their minds. They laughed, pointed, and clapped excitedly. Clearly their favorite. Then something strange happened. Both babies scooted closer together. They touched hands. And suddenly the room was swallowed in a flash of light. Clyde blinked.

The living room was gone. Now they were standing in a grassy field. He quickly picked both babies up, his heart pounding. Did they do this? He wondered. Then he heard a roar. Slowly, Clyde turned around. Behind him stood the same lion from the show. In the flesh. The babies squealed with delight. Clyde stared at the enormous creature. "…Oh no."

Raleigh wandered around aimlessly, half-hoping she might stumble across some kind of problem to deal with. A man suddenly ran up to her, looking excited. "Sheriff! You're back!" Raleigh groaned. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not a damn cop." The man scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "Oh… well, no issue or anything. I'm just happy you're back, miss." He smiled and nodded before jogging off again. Raleigh frowned slightly but continued on her way. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Eventually she stopped at Don Buri for lunch. Afterward she returned to wandering the streets. The peace was starting to get to her. She was happy things had stayed quiet for the past months, but the longer it lasted, the more it began to worry her. Conflict had started picking up again across the multiverse. So why not here? She eventually made her way toward the square and then down the street toward Loki's club. If anything shady was happening in town, that was usually where it started. "Maybe I *am* a cop," she muttered to herself. But the club wasn't busy either.

Loki was sitting alone on the front steps, sulking. "Isn't this place usually more hectic?"

Raleigh asked. “Well… maybe a little,” Loki replied with a sigh. “But it’s more of a night thing. The fun is yet to come.” His tone sounded unusually gloomy. Raleigh sighed. “Is… something wrong, Loki?” She was already regretting asking. “Oh, it’s nothing,” he said dramatically. “Just lamenting my lost freedom. I’m now chained to a horrible life of devotion to one person alone.” “How horrible,” Raleigh said flatly. She immediately turned and started walking away. “Wait!” Loki called after her. “I just needed to vent! Do you have any idea how suffocating it is? Now someone actually cares where I am at night. It’s horrible! I can’t even vanish mysteriously for three days anymore. Apparently that ‘causes concern.’” But she was already gone.

She nearly bumped straight into Rebbecca. For once, Rebbecca actually appeared to be working. She was adjusting the wiring inside one of the electrical nodes scattered throughout HOME. “And here I thought you outsourced that,” Raleigh said with a smirk. Rebbecca shrugged as she closed the panel. “Well yeah… but sometimes the best medicine is fixing things yourself.” She turned and looked Raleigh over for a moment. “Say… I’m pretty much done here. And it’s been a while since you’ve been out.” She raised her arms dramatically. “Why don’t we have a little… girls’ night?”

“A girls’ night?” Raleigh crossed her arms suspiciously. “Are you asking me on a date?” “Wha... of course not!” Rebbecca sputtered. “Just a friendly outing to get your mind off life and stuff.” She leaned casually against Raleigh’s shoulder. “But Clyde...” Raleigh started. “Clyde will be fine. He’s a big, strong man now,” Rebbecca said dismissively. Before Raleigh could object again, Rebbecca grabbed her arm and began dragging her down the street. “Come on. We’re going to the Hack Shack to get ready.” This time she wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Back with Clyde, he was currently running for his life, a baby in each arm as the massive lion chased them. He quickly formed a pair of boots, boosting his speed and putting a huge distance between himself and the creature. Only to blink and realize he was standing right next to it again. The babies laughed happily, reaching toward the enormous animal. Every time Clyde managed to get far

enough away, he suddenly found himself right back where he started.

"Is… one of you doing that?" he asked nervously between breaths. "Can you please… not?" He pleaded with them, even though they probably didn't understand. Thankfully, the lion eventually seemed to lose interest in the strange game of teleportation tag and wandered off on its own. Clyde sighed in relief. That relief lasted about three seconds. Suddenly they were surrounded by another predator. A pack of skeletal hyenas stepped out of the tall grass, their empty eye sockets glowing faintly as they circled him. The babies immediately began to cry.

Strangely, that brought Clyde a small amount of relief. He didn't want them upset, but maybe at least now they wouldn't teleport him directly into danger again. He leapt over the hyenas and sprinted toward a nearby tree. It was enormous, easily large enough to house a small village inside its branches. One of the hyenas caught up, lunging toward Clyde's back. He didn't have time to react. But his terrified daughter suddenly raised her tiny hand. The hyena froze mid-air. Completely still. "…Time powers?" Clyde blinked in disbelief. "Raleigh doesn't have time powers."

They reached the giant tree just as the pack slowed to a stop. The skeletal hyenas turned away, unwilling to cross whatever invisible boundary marked the tree's territory. That worried him. But he didn't have a way back home, and this seemed like the safest place for the moment. He hadn't even brought a communicator. He definitely hadn't planned on coming here today. Clyde jumped up onto one of the massive branches and finally allowed himself to breathe. "Okay," he said, catching his breath.

"Can whoever brought us here please bring us HOME now?" He looked between the two babies hopefully. They had absolutely no intention of doing that. Two purple monkeys suddenly dropped down from the higher branches. They stared at Clyde with the same curiosity the twins showed toward them.

The babies immediately started laughing as the monkeys began dancing. Clyde sighed. "Well… I guess this isn't so ba..." Before he could finish, the monkeys suddenly grabbed both babies and bolted into

the canopy. Clyde's eyes went wide. "…Come on!" He groaned and jumped after them.

Raleigh was pushed into a black dress and dragged all the way to Porta Nexus before she even fully realized what was happening. Unsurprisingly, Rebbecca had chosen a pink dress. "Did we really need to come all the way here?" Raleigh asked, still unsure about the whole thing. "Relax," Rebbecca said, grabbing two drinks from a nearby table. "It's not like you can't warp us back home in five seconds." She handed Raleigh a glass. "Enjoy the Nexus nightlife. They've really been trying to bring it back ever since they stopped the Marrow..." "The what?" Raleigh interrupted. Rebbecca waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, nothing. Just some terrorist group."

She leaned closer with a grin. "When's the last time you got drunk anyway?" Raleigh looked down at the drink in her hand. She wasn't sure this was a good idea. Still, she sighed and took a deep breath before chugging the entire thing in one go. "That's the spirit!" Rebbecca cheered. And before Raleigh even realized what was happening… She was completely drunk. Still very much a lightweight. Within minutes she had climbed up onto the bar and started dancing. Everyone in the club turned to watch. Some people cheered her on. Others simply looked embarrassed for her.

Meanwhile… Clyde had finally caught up to the monkeys. It turned out they actually had some kind of tribal village high in the massive tree. The twins were carried into the center of the village where a huge gorilla sat on what looked like a throne made of vines and branches. Two monkeys were dancing in the middle of the clearing. Clyde blinked in confusion. The boy twin suddenly warped around the area, appearing in random places as he curiously looked at the different monkeys. Each time he appeared, the monkeys jumped in surprise.

But strangely… none of them tried to hurt him. Eventually he warped back beside his sister, who was happily watching the dancing monkeys. When Clyde finally climbed into the village clearing, the giant gorilla stood up angrily and began beating his chest. The other monkeys joined in, hooting loudly. The gorilla jumped down from the throne and pointed directly at Clyde. Clyde braced himself

for a fight. Instead… The gorilla started throwing it back.

Clyde blinked. The gorilla was dancing. And he was pretty good too. Clyde was actually impressed. The gorilla finished with a dramatic pose, crossing his arms and staring at Clyde like he was waiting for a response. "…Um," Clyde said awkwardly. Dancing was not exactly one of his talents. Still, he remembered one of the meme dances he used to see all the time online and tried to recreate it. It wasn't perfect. But the twins loved it, clapping excitedly. The gorilla did not look impressed. So Clyde tried another one. Still nothing. He sighed. "Well… I guess I'll have to pull out my secret weapon."

He broke into another meme dance he liked better. The monkeys completely lost their minds. They cheered wildly. Even the gorilla slowly nodded his head, as if acknowledging defeat. The other monkeys brought the twins back down and handed Clyde a bunch of bananas. "Well… I'm glad we came to an understanding," Clyde said. He sat down with them. "I guess it's about time we ate anyway." He mashed the bananas up carefully for the babies. They could eat solid food now, but they still didn't have teeth yet, so he wanted to be safe.

Both twins happily gobbled up the mashed bananas. The girl enjoyed them so much that suddenly more bananas appeared in front of her, almost like she had reversed time to a moment before they were eaten. Clyde stared at the growing pile. "…Huh. Interesting." After that, things became surprisingly calm. The monkeys slowed down, many of them curling up for naps after the little banana feast. The twins struggled to keep their eyes open too. Eventually the girl leaned her head against the boy. Another flash of light filled the air. Suddenly they were back HOME.

Unfortunately, Clyde had been warped directly inside the crib with them. He took a huge breath, carefully climbing out before placing both babies back inside properly. For a moment he just stood there, smiling down at them, almost forgetting everything that had happened. Then it hit him. "What

am I doing? I need to figure out what the deal is with this." He grabbed his communicator and called Lucy. Not long after, both Lucy and Loki arrived and began examining the twins. "I'm not surprised they're special," Lucy said thoughtfully. "But even I can't determine the full extent of their power. That interference I detected before… it seems that was actually their abilities. Normally I can appraise things like this."

She frowned slightly. "But this is different." Loki nodded slowly. "It goes to show the power of transcendence. They clearly have their mother's gifts… but something more as well. Where did it come from… perhaps you, Clyde? A mixture of both?" "But I don't exactly have time powers," Clyde argued. "Not directly," Lucy replied. "But you may have created the conditions for them to develop. You've developed some unusual abilities yourself over time. It's difficult to say." "What about the warping?" Clyde asked. Just then Raleigh walked into the room, Rebbecca helping her along. She wasn't drunk anymore, but the hangover was clearly hitting hard. "What about the warping?" Raleigh asked immediately. Clyde blinked.

"Looks like you managed to have some fun," he said. She shot him a glare. "Explain."

Everyone moved downstairs while Clyde filled her in. Rebbecca watched the twins while only half listening to the conversation. After hearing the whole story, Raleigh lowered her head. "I was afraid of this…" She rubbed her temples. "I think the powers themselves are manageable. It's the random warping across the multiverse that worries me." "Maybe I could build some kind of dampener," Rebbecca suggested. "Would that even work?" Clyde asked.

Lucy thought for a moment. "You said it only happened when they touched, right? Maybe we could keep them separated." Raleigh immediately shook her head. "How could I do that to them?" Lucy nodded. She clearly hadn't liked the idea either. Loki tapped his chin. "Hmm… perhaps an invisible field." "An invisible field?" Clyde repeated. "Indeed," Loki said proudly. "Powerful magic. It would act like a protective layer around them both, blocking the excess energy. They could still touch

each other normally, but the interaction between their powers would be suppressed." He smiled. "At least until they're old enough to control it themselves." Raleigh sighed. "I don't know what else we could do. I just hope it works… at least until we find something better."

"Right then," Loki said. "I'll begin preparations immediately." He left the room. "I… should probably go too," Rebbecca said suddenly, her tone turning colder. A few hours later Loki returned and performed the ritual. Lucy examined the babies again afterward and confirmed the magic hadn't harmed them in any way. When they left, Raleigh's fear returned stronger than before. "What if I can't protect them?" she whispered. "What if they vanish again and go somewhere we can't find them?"

Clyde gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "They won't. Not now." He smiled softly. "And if they do… everyone will help us find them. That's kind of Loki's whole thing, remember?" She stayed quiet for a moment. Clyde looked down at the sleeping twins. "And now… we have a better idea of what they can do." He smiled. "And maybe even a great name for them." "I think I've got a couple ideas." Raleigh looked down at her children and smiled.

Elsewhere, Rebbecca typed up her daily report to Omnihack. She sent it immediately. Notably leaving out any mention of the twins' powers. A moment later her communicator rang. She answered instantly. The Boss appeared on the screen. "I want you to monitor those children closely," he said coldly. "They could be the key to unlocking everything. Do you understand, Trojan?" Rebbecca froze. He must have other ways of gathering information. "What are you talking about?" she asked, pretending ignorance. The Boss didn't answer. Instead, he displayed several images. Pictures of Clyde and the twins… In the multiversal savanna. Rebbecca frowned. "…Understood." The call ended immediately. She stared at the dark screen. Now the question was… How was she going to keep this from him?

Chapter 58: Out of Time

A routine had finally returned to HOME. Both Clyde and Raleigh had gone back to work, taking turns watching the kids. They had fallen into a rhythm chaotic, but happy. A new kind of normal. The twins had finally been named. The girl was named Crona, mostly because of her time powers, while the boy was called Astra. Raleigh hadn't been completely convinced at first, but after Clyde explained the meanings behind the names, she eventually agreed. Whenever both of them were busy, others around town would happily help watch the children. After everything the people of HOME had been through together, no one minded lending a hand.

Rebbecca watched it all from the rooftops. From up there she could see the entire town below.

Peace had held for a long time now. In her mind, part of that was because of her. There hadn't been many threats, but a few times she had personally intercepted groups trying to approach HOME with the same intentions the pirates once had. Of course, she hadn't done it alone. Mainframe had directed her. Still… she was starting to question things. Was this really sustainable? How long before everything came crashing down? How long before she had to cut ties completely to stop whatever was coming. Then a different thought crossed her mind.

Maybe she didn't have to choose. Maybe she could do both. Live the life she had here… and still serve Omnihack's goals. She had managed it so far. But could she really continue like that. Especially if it meant intentionally ignoring the twins and the powers they clearly possessed. Rebbecca looked back down at the town. "I won't let him make another me," she muttered quietly. Then she slipped back inside.

Far away, in Omnihack's domain, The Boss continued his work as usual. He studied the blueprints of the Seed carefully, analyzing every line and possibility. Suddenly every screen in the room flashed the same message. Mainframe appeared immediately. "It's Keylogger," she reported. "He's finally made contact." The Boss stopped everything. "It's been seven years," he said slowly. "Has he done it?" "It seems so," Mainframe replied, though her tone carried a hint of uncertainty. The Boss noticed immediately. "What is it?" "There's something unusual about his signal," she said. "His signature is… different." The Boss considered that silently for a moment. Then he stood. Without another word, he left the room.

The two of them walked down a long corridor that led to a massive chamber. The space felt unnatural. On one side, reality itself appeared fractured like a window opening into the void beyond existence. Opposite it stood a massive radar dish aimed directly into that impossible space. This was no ordinary communication system. Whatever Keylogger was using to contact them was coming from somewhere impossibly far away. Normal transmissions would never reach this place. Mainframe

activated the console. Lights flickered across the room as systems powered up.

"Connection established," she announced. The speakers crackled to life. For a moment there was only silence. Then they heard breathing. Shallow. Uneven. "Keylogger," The Boss ordered. "Report." No answer. "Keylogger," he repeated. "Can you hear me?" Another stretch of silence passed. "Have you truly located the Once and Future Foe?" At first, nothing. Then the voice finally responded. It sounded distorted, like someone coughing while trying to laugh. "Closer… than you might think." The Boss's eyes widened in rare shock. He immediately turned to Mainframe. "Scenario B1245." His voice dropped. "It's here." Mainframe vanished right away as he rushed off somewhere else.

The entire multiverse began to tremble. Almost no world was spared. Ultra Tera. Steel Haven. Porta Nexus. Contestous. Every world felt the shaking. The skies themselves cracked open as purple light seeped through the fractures. HOME was no exception. In fact, the tremors there only intensified. Across Omnihack, every operative immediately abandoned whatever they were doing and moved toward designated positions under Mainframe's direction. "Firewall," Mainframe called over the comms. "You have very little time. The Delta NG Firewall must be activated."

Akane was already in position on Omnihack's world, located near the center of the multiverse. "I know, I know," she muttered while sprinting toward a massive central machine. "How much time do I have?" She slid her arms into the thick metal conduits surrounding the device, the cords wrapping around them as if they were merging with her body. "Ten minutes. Less, under pessimistic projections," Mainframe replied. Akane grimaced. The tremors intensified. The ground beneath her feet threatened to throw her off balance. She forced herself upright. "Almost… got it…" With a sharp twist of her wrist, the machine roared to life. Energy began to build inside it, though it was clear it would take a few moments to reach full activation.

Back on HOME, Raleigh suddenly collapsed to her knees, clutching her head. The pain was unbearable. It felt as if she could feel the entire multiverse tearing itself apart. Clyde knelt beside her,

terrified. “What’s going on, Raleigh?!” She looked up at him, just as confused. “I… don’t know…” Rebbecca came running down the street and skidded to a stop beside them. “Mainframe,” she said into her communicator, demanding answers. Static crackled in response. “Trojan…” Mainframe’s voice replied, though the signal was breaking apart. “You have been designated… survivor. Prepare your ark.” Rebbecca froze. “Are you… sure?” she asked, stunned. “It can’t be that bad.” “If Omnihack is destroyed,” Mainframe continued, her voice strangely emotional, “you must continue the mission. Please begin preparations.” Rebbecca looked down at Raleigh, still writhing in pain. Then she turned and ran.

At the very edge of the multiverse, Vance stood staring at the fractures in reality. The cracks here were moments from bursting open completely. Behind him stood an army of Ciphers. Then the sky shattered. A flood of black entities poured through the rupture. Their shapes were impossible to define, shifting and writhing like living shadows. The Ciphers charged forward to intercept them. Vance calmly pulled out four condensed universes, the spheres igniting with impossible energy. “Well,” he muttered to himself, “it’ll be a miracle if we survive this.” He glanced sideways. “I might have to sneak away while no one’s looking.”

Back at the firewall core, the machine Akane was connected to finally reached full power. The conduits yanked her upward, suspending her in the air like a crucifix. She screamed. It felt like the machine was draining the life directly from her body. Energy surged through the cords, racing outward across reality itself. The power traveled from one world to the next, spreading rapidly across the multiverse. At key points, positioned Ciphers activated their own devices, amplifying the signal. Slowly, a red shield began forming. Not around individual worlds. Around the entire multiverse.

“It’s… live…” Akane gasped, barely conscious as the machine continued draining her strength. Across countless worlds, people could do nothing but watch. They had no idea what was happening. All they could do was stare helplessly as the sky cracked apart. Mainframe analyzed the incoming

reports. “The firewall is holding,” she announced. “But several sections have already been breached.” The Boss responded immediately. “Fire the Omega Cannon. Ten thousand worlds.” “That is ten percent of our reserves,” Mainframe warned. “It must be done,” he replied.

In a distant sector of space, a colossal cannon began powering up. The weapon dwarfed entire planets. Ciphers lined its exterior, loading condensed universes into massive ports along the structure. Each universe dissolved into raw energy as the cannon absorbed them. The power gathered into a single massive core. The weapon finished charging. Then it fired. An unimaginable beam of energy tore through reality itself. One blast. Powered by ten thousand worlds.

The worlds began shaking even harder. Then a terrible sound echoed across reality. A shriek. It sounded like some impossibly massive creature screaming in agony. “Estimated forty percent damage to the Foe,” Mainframe reported calmly. Across parts of the multiverse, the shaking stopped. Some of the cracks in the sky sealed themselves shut. But not all of them. “It appears the entity is attempting to maintain control over the worlds it has already breached,” Mainframe continued. “If successful, it may recover.” At the firewall core, Akane was barely holding on. The red shield flickered dangerously.

“Firewall,” Mainframe warned, “the shield is not yet autonomous. If you fail to remain alive, the multiverse will not survive.” Akane couldn’t even respond anymore. Her breathing was hoarse and shallow. Her body looked completely drained, like the machine had nearly consumed her. Then suddenly Vincent burst into the chamber. He reached her just before she collapsed completely and slammed his palm against her back, channeling his light energy directly into her body. Even that was already taking a toll on him.

“Don’t die on me!” he growled. The shield sparked violently... Then stabilized. “Thank you, Backdoor,” Mainframe said calmly, addressing him by his Omnihack designation even though he had technically gone rogue and was now hunted by them. Vincent glared. “Shut up, you damned robot. I didn’t do this for you… or the multiverse.” He looked at Akane. “I did it for me and her. Got that?” His

voice hardened. “And I know this doesn’t change anything between us.”

Back on HOME, Raleigh slowly pushed herself to her feet. The pain in her head was fading. She took a deep breath. Clyde grabbed her shoulders. “What’s happening? Are you okay?” “I… I’m not sure… but Clyde…” Her eyes widened. Something else was happening. Her connection to the multiverse, to everything, was fading. “We have to go there… before…” She staggered toward the Chamber of Influence, barely able to stay upright. When they arrived, Raleigh rushed down toward the code itself. Then both of them froze. Rebbecca was already there. She held a pair of glowing astral pliers over a thin strand of light, one of the branches connected to HOME. She hadn’t cut it yet. But she was hovering over it. Like she was waiting for the right moment.

“What are you doing?” Raleigh asked desperately. Rebbecca turned, surprised to see them. For a moment her face softened. Then it hardened again. “What I have to do.” Raleigh stepped closer. Slowly. “I can feel it,” she whispered. “If you cut that… HOME will…” Her voice trembled. “Why?” Rebbecca’s jaw tightened. “HOME has to be severed.” Her voice was steady. “Because if the Future Foe destroys the multiverse…” She hesitated. “…it’s the only way we survive.”

Now the truth was out. She couldn’t hide it anymore. Clyde frowned, trying to piece everything together. He could almost understand why she had come to that conclusion. But something else finally clicked. Why hide the Foe's Existence. Something he had been ignoring. He didn’t want to ask. But he had to. “You’re still with them… aren’t you?” Rebbecca’s eye shifted slightly. She didn’t answer. But that silence said everything.

Meanwhile, Omnihack had successfully driven the Foe back. But the entity still clung desperately to its footholds inside reality. The Boss arrived at his destination. A small platform floating just outside the multiverse. He looked up at the endless mass before him. Even staring directly at it, the full scope of the entity could not be understood. An infinite wall of darkness. “Here we are again,” he muttered. “I have no choice.” The black mass surged toward him. He stepped forward into a fighting

stance. The glove on his hand ignited with power.

He reached out. The moment they collided... The Foe tried to absorb him. The glove tried to absorb the Foe. The Boss groaned as the strain tore into him. His clothes burned away. His skin followed. Even he was struggling to withstand it. Cracks spread across the glove. One of its lights went dark. His eyes widened in realization. Even with all his planning… It wasn't enough. With a final surge of strength, he forced the entity backward. Then he severed it completely from the multiverse. All the energy he had absorbed... he released it back into the creature.

The monster shrieked again. This time louder than anything before. Its massive form shriveled and collapsed as it retreated into the void. Defeated. For now. The Boss collapsed to one knee. His body was heavily damaged. Only one light still glowed on the glove. Behind him, the multiverse shimmered beneath the red glow of the firewall. He took a slow breath. "Mainframe… damage report." "Minimal long-term structural damage," Mainframe replied. "Estimated forty thousand outer worlds lost. All condensed universes have been exhausted. Delta Firewall holding. Twenty-three thousand Ciphers lost. Zero Colored Agents lost. Trojan's mission aborted. Zero Omnihack visibility to the multiverse."

"Status of the Foe?" He asked. "Gravely wounded," Mainframe replied. "However, it is likely to recover… potentially stronger than before. Recovery time: uncertain." The Boss closed his eyes briefly. Then he spoke again. "Activate the cloak, and keep the firewall raised. Now that it's fully active, it should run autonomously." Mainframe hesitated. "Are you certain?" "While technically possible, it will require all remaining reserve power. In addition, projections indicate the firewall will only remain operational for approximately twelve years before total energy exhaustion. The Boss looked back at the multiverse. "We have no choice. It was nearly back to full power this time… and we barely survived." Mainframe processed the command. "It will be done." Moments later the entire multiverse flashed with light. Then suddenly it vanished from the void. Hidden. For now.

Rebbecca kept the astral pliers hovering over the branch until a signal finally appeared on her communicator. ALL CLEAR. The symbol from Mainframe flashed across the screen. Rebbecca exhaled slowly and lowered the pliers. Raleigh had fully recovered by now. “Well,” Rebbecca said lightly, forcing a cheerful tone as she stood. “Crisis averted. Let’s...” “You really think we can overlook this?” Raleigh’s voice cut her off. The words came out sharp and furious.

“You lied to us. Even when we chose to trust you. Even when everyone told us not to.” Rebbecca’s smile faded. She frowned slightly. She already knew this moment was coming. She just hadn’t wanted to face it yet. “And that’s not even mentioning the other issue,” Clyde added, his voice calmer but no less serious. “That whole confrontation with your ‘boss.’ Were you mocking us?” Now that he knew the truth, that scene made far less sense. Rebbecca didn’t answer. She simply stood there, wearing a faint smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Say something, damn it!” Raleigh snapped. Her fists clenched. “Was any of it real? Did we ever matter to you? Or was this all just about your stupid mission?” For a long moment, Rebbecca said nothing. Then finally. “Of course it was real,” she said quietly. “I care about all of you.” But she still refused to look Raleigh in the eye. “Then why?” Raleigh demanded. Her voice cracked slightly. She genuinely didn’t understand. Clyde’s anger softened. “Are they forcing you to do this somehow?” he asked. “If they are...” Rebbecca turned away from them. She inhaled slowly. Then she started laughing. The sound felt wrong.

“You really think I’d let anyone force me to do anything?” She looked over her shoulder. “I’m doing this of my own free will.” Her voice hardened. “All you had to do… was look the other way.” “Let me do what I needed to do. That way you could protect your world… and we could defeat that monster.” She turned fully toward them. “But now… Trojan is here.” Clyde stared at her. “Why couldn’t we help you with this?” he asked quietly. “Were all our past struggles meaningless? Have we not proven ourselves?” Rebbecca’s eyes darkened. “We need this world,” she said flatly. “And you

don’t have what it takes to fight that thing. You never did.”

Her lips twisted into a forced, villainous smile. “So we’re taking it from you.” That was enough. Raleigh snapped. Her glove formed instantly as she lunged forward in a flash of rage. But before she could even reach Rebbecca... The glove suddenly turned against her. Metal tendrils wrapped around Raleigh’s body and slammed her to the ground. She struggled violently against it. Rebbecca calmly crouched down beside her. Her smile was still there. But it was clearly hurting her to maintain it.

“Did you seriously think I wouldn’t do this?” she asked softly. “Guess you learned nothing from when we were kids.” Then she stood and turned toward Clyde. Clyde was already bracing himself. “You don’t have a plan for me too?” he asked carefully. Rebbecca didn’t even answer. Cords erupted from the walls. They wrapped around Clyde instantly before he could react, binding his arms and legs. He struggled but couldn’t break free. Rebbecca looked at him coldly. “You’re just a normal guy.” Then she turned and walked toward the exit.

“Rebbecca!” Raleigh shouted from the floor. “Come back here! This isn’t over!” Her voice cracked with fury and betrayal. “I’ll...” She stopped herself. Then shouted the only thing she could. “I’ll never forgive you for this!” Rebbecca paused briefly. Her expression flickered. Then she kept walking. Without another word, she vanished from HOME. At least… For now.

Chapter 59: Rebbecca

A young girl with short brown hair walked toward a piano. She smiled as she wiped the dust from its surface with her hand and lifted the cover. At her size it was a bit of a struggle. She climbed onto the bench and began to play. A beautiful melody filled the room. She could not have been older than eight, maybe even younger, and yet everything she touched seemed effortlessly flawless. At school she had the highest grades, even though she skipped classes often. In sports, gymnastics, track, field, and many others, she consistently broke records. But suddenly a frown crept across her face. None of it mattered to her. She missed a note.

The music stopped. A man suddenly appeared behind her, growling in frustration. “What are

you doing? No, no, no… this won't do. You must be flawless. You can play better than that. Start again from the beginning. No mistakes. It's unacceptable." The man's voice was sharp and cold. Her smile vanished instantly as she nodded. "Yes, Father." She started again, just as he ordered. This time she didn't miss a single note. Her fingers stayed perfectly focused on the keys. "The Jefferson boy doesn't make mistakes like you do," her father continued. "You're going to drag our name through the mud." He offered no praise. "Get to school." He turned and left without another word.

The girl stepped down from the piano bench and walked through the empty halls of her enormous home. Many people would have envied a house like this. But she felt nothing. She passed her mother in the hallway. She looked up and smiled politely. Her mother didn't even acknowledge her. No one walked her to school. She was simply expected to get there on her own, and somehow avoid tarnishing the family name along the way. When she arrived, the other children stared at her. None of them approached. They whispered quietly among themselves, their voices filled with jealousy. For the first time that day, she smiled. School was no different.

Later, on the way home, she stopped beside a park. Other kids were running and playing together. She watched them for a while. For a moment she wished she could be one of them. In the end, she shook her head and kept walking. Then she stopped again. A beautiful woman passed by, her long pink hair flowing behind her. The girl stared, captivated by her beauty. The woman noticed and winked at her. The girl's eyes widened slightly. She wished she had hair like that.

At home it was more of the same. As long as she kept her head down, her father didn't say anything. But when she went to bed… her real day began. Every night she quietly slipped out of her room and crept down to the basement. Hidden there was something like a workshop. She never knew how it had gotten there. It was filled with all sorts of mechanical parts, tools, wires, and scrap metal, almost as if a previous owner had abandoned everything and no one had ever bothered to check. This was her true passion. She loved taking things apart. Learning how they worked. And now… building

something of her own.

It had taken weeks of tinkering, but she finally managed to assemble a small robot from the materials she found. After a few careful adjustments, she flipped the switch. The robot sprang to life. It bounced excitedly across the table, clearly programmed to move that way, almost like it was celebrating being alive. She picked it up gently, smiling down at it as the little machine waved its tiny arms. Robots didn't judge her. They didn't have opinions. They simply performed the tasks she gave them. She loved robots. Still… she couldn't get that woman out of her head. She didn't know who she was, but the woman had looked so strong. So confident. Completely her own person. Maybe her next robot could be inspired by her. She looked down at the little machine in her hand. "I'll make you a little girlfriend," she giggled.

Days passed. Then weeks. Then months. Life became a routine. During the day she endured everything she was supposed to be. The perfect girl. Flawless. At night she lived for herself. But the image of the pink-haired woman never faded. Rebbecca wanted to be like her. Would it really hurt to try… just a little? One night she decided to be bold. She carefully dyed a small lock of her hair pink.

But just as she finished, the hallway light flicked on. Footsteps approached. Her father. "Rebbecca?" His voice was already angry. "What are you doing?" He stormed into the room and saw the dyed hair immediately.

His face twisted with fury. He grabbed her roughly by the head. "How could you?" he growled, his voice low and dangerous. "Are you trying to be some kind of degenerate?" Then his eyes drifted around the room. They landed on the workshop. "And what are these… toys?" His grip tightened. "You ruined your sleep schedule for toys? How are you supposed to maintain our family's image if you're wasting time on this nonsense?" He walked over to the table. "No please, Father!" Rebbecca cried. "I'll be good! Please don't hurt him!"

He didn't even look at her. "I've clearly been too lenient with you," he said coldly. "That ends

tonight." He grabbed the little robot and smashed it onto the floor. Then another. And another. He crushed them under his heel. Metal cracked and snapped. Rebbecca collapsed to the floor, sobbing. The sound only irritated him. "Clean this mess up," he said flatly. "And fix your hair." Then he left. The next day she went to school like nothing had happened. Her hair was shorter now. No one asked why. No one cared. So she just kept going. And going. And going. And going. She really did want her father to be proud of her. But he never was.

One afternoon, while walking through the school halls on her way home, she heard something. A whisper. She stopped and looked around. No one was there. Then she heard it again. A sound. Faint. Coming from below. For a moment she wondered if she was imagining it. Maybe she was just tired. She didn't know why… but she felt drawn to it. Even as she tried to ignore it, her curiosity pulled her forward. Toward the stairs. Toward the basement. This school wasn't supposed to have a basement. And yet… Here it was.

There was almost a thread now, something pulling her closer to the noise as she followed it. It led her to a dead end. But somehow she knew it wasn't that simple. She placed her hand against the wall, searching for some sort of flaw. After pressing along the surface a few times, she felt something strange. Her hand went through it. Then the rest of her body followed. She blinked. On the other side was another hallway, but this one looked wrong. The walls twisted and bent in impossible ways. She kept walking.

When she reached the far end and looked back, she realized something strange. She was upside down. She opened the door ahead of her and stepped through. Almost falling off the edge. Beyond the doorway was a white void. The hallway structures simply stopped here. At the edges of the space, tiny fragments of code and numbers flickered in and out of existence. Ahead of her, clusters of numbers floated like stepping stones. She carefully jumped onto one. Then the next. And the next. Until she reached the center of the void.

There it was. The source of the voice. It whispered softly, calling out to her. A floating orb. The code of this world. She stared at it in awe. As she reached out, the whispering voices grew louder, though none of them made any sense. Then she touched it. A violent surge of black and purple energy exploded from far away right toward her. The world rippled. Reality itself began to break apart. The shockwave knocked her backward into the void as the world started disintegrating around her. The orb swelled, wrapping itself around her arm. And everything went dark.

When she woke up, she was lying on the street near her house. But something was wrong. The world was dissolving. Buildings faded away. The sky collapsed. Everything slowly vanished into the same endless void she had seen before. She looked around in terror. Did she do this? Her mind searched for an explanation. There was only one. Her curiosity had destroyed the world. At least… that was how it looked to an eight-year-old girl. “Hello…?” she cried. “Is anyone there? Mother…? Father…?” No one answered. She sat down and hugged her knees, crying. Hours passed. Days. Maybe even months. She didn’t know. Her body never felt hungry. She never grew tired. Eventually she noticed something. She looked down at her arm. It pulsed with power. She could feel it. She could understand it. The Universal Code of the world. And suddenly… She knew what she had to do.

Rebbecca walked through the recreated world. It had taken time, but somehow she had managed it. The streets looked exactly the same. People walked through them like nothing had happened. But none of them could see her. Her hair was now white. Her skin glowed faintly with power. Then someone appeared beside her. The Boss. He looked around carefully, inspecting the world she had rebuilt. “Incredible,” he said, rubbing the chin of his mask. “You created an almost perfect copy of what once existed.” He glanced at her. “At such a young age…” There was genuine admiration in his voice.

Then he pointed. “The only changes…” He looked toward a family walking down the street. “…were intentional.” Rebbecca followed his gaze. There she was. Another version of herself. Walking

with her mother and father. All three of them were smiling as they held hands. “Shall we go get ice cream?” her father asked. The other Rebbecca nodded happily. The three of them walked away together. The Boss looked back at the real Rebbecca. “Why create that copy?” he asked. “You were capable of placing yourself there.” She looked down. “I… I killed them…” she whispered. “If I had listened… if I had been a good girl… they would still be…” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

The Boss shook his head. “There is nothing wrong with curiosity. It is how one chooses to use that curiosity that matters.” Then he added quietly, “And you are mistaken.” Rebbecca looked up at him immediately. “This world was always doomed,” he explained. “But not by your hand. No. A far more powerful entity is responsible. I call it… The Once and Future Foe.”“The Once and Future…?” she repeated, not fully understanding. She was still just a child. The Boss knelt down so he was at her eye level. “You committed no sin. In fact, you did something incredible. You have a gift. Not unlike my own.” He gently patted her head with his metallic hand. The gesture felt strange. No one had ever praised her before.

“But I… even if that’s true… they’re still gone…” she said softly. The Boss extended his hand toward her. “If you come with me… You can avenge them. I will make you the strongest weapon imaginable. And together… perhaps we can defeat even the Foe.” Rebbecca looked at his hand. Then she took it. And in an instant. They both vanished. Leaving the recreated world behind. As if they had never existed there at all.

Chapter 60: The Trojan

The Boss led Rebbecca through the halls of Omnihack's world. It looked slightly different from the one that existed in the present day, but the changes were subtle. The corridors were more structured, the layout less maze-like. Ciphers patrolled the halls. Nearby, the Compiler was training a group of new recruits. Rebbecca followed quietly, staring at everything around her. The Boss eventually brought her to his command area: a wide open platform suspended in the air beneath a bright blue sky. "This is where I work," he said. Rebbecca looked around in amazement. Before she could say anything, another figure appeared. Mainframe.

She looked old than the version known in the present, appearing like a woman in her late

twenties still youthful, but aged like fine and mature whine. Her expression was calm but skeptical. “Who is this?” she asked. “The newest asset,” The Boss replied. Mainframe frowned. “A child… and a very young one.” Her eyes flickered as she scanned Rebbecca. “Biological age: eight years old. Residual universal code suggests possible temporal displacement. Estimated true age slightly older.” She looked back at The Boss. “You previously stated you would not recruit individuals under fourteen.” “Indeed,” he replied calmly. “Most children are not useful as Ciphers.”

He gestured toward Rebbecca. “This is an exception.” Mainframe crossed her arms. “I fail to see how. I am supposed to correct your deviations, am I not?” “That is correct,” The Boss said. “And you have performed that role admirably for several decades.” “Then is this not...” He interrupted her. “She possesses a Universal Mind.” Mainframe paused. “Very much like my own,” he continued. There was a hint of excitement in his voice. Mainframe looked down at Rebbecca again, studying her carefully. Rebbecca simply stood there, quietly absorbing the praise like a sponge. No one had ever spoken about her like that before.

“I understand the implication,” Mainframe said slowly. “However...” “I will train her personally,” The Boss said. Then he glanced back at Rebbecca. “But someone her age may require a more… maternal influence.” He turned back to Mainframe. “You will act as her caretaker.” Mainframe raised an eyebrow. “That is not one of my functions.” ”It is now.” The Boss turned and walked away without another word. Leaving the two of them alone.

She looked down at Rebbecca with a frown. Rebbecca looked up at her with wide-eyed wonder. “Are you really a… a robot?” she asked. “That I am,” Mainframe replied bluntly. Rebbecca leaned forward with excitement. “Can I open you up and see what’s inside?” Mainframe seemed genuinely taken aback, far more flustered than the version of her that existed years later. “What? Of course not. A child your age should not be asking questions like that.” Rebbecca lowered her head. “…Sorry.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Mainframe sighed. “…Alright. Fine. But you may

only look." She created a chair beneath herself and sat down. With a small motion, a section of her torso opened, revealing the intricate machinery within. Rebbecca's head shot up immediately. "Really?!" She leaned closer, staring into the open chassis. Inside were endless rows of compact servers fitted together in impossible layers. A massive central core pulsed softly with blue light while countless unfamiliar components connected everything together through dense networks of circuitry.

"Wow," Rebbecca whispered. "You're like ten data centers in one person." Mainframe closed the panel with a quiet click. "Of course. I am responsible for maintaining all of Omnihack's systems and worlds. I must oversee the code that governs them." She paused. "But that is enough of that. A child like you should not concern herself with such things." Rebbecca blinked. "…What should I talk about then?" Mainframe searched her database for an answer. No clear results appeared. "…Never mind."

As the days passed, The Boss began training her. "I will not lie to you, child," he said one morning. "I will pull no punches. I will train you to become stronger in every way. Physically. Socially. Mentally. Are you prepared for that?" Rebbecca raised a finger to her lips thoughtfully. "I don't get it. If you can use that code stuff, couldn't you just make yourself a god? Why do we need to learn all this?" The Boss nodded slightly. "A good question." He began pacing slowly. "One cannot rely on universal code alone. Each world operates differently. Code that works in one place may fail in another. And some worlds contain immutable laws." "Immutable laws?" Rebbecca repeated. "Rules written so deeply into the structure of reality that they cannot be altered. No matter how skilled the hacker." Rebbecca frowned thoughtfully. "I think I understand." She only understood about half of it. But The Boss simply nodded and began the training.

He had not exaggerated. Every day he pushed her further. They dueled constantly. Sometimes physically. Sometimes through chess. Sometimes through thought experiments and logic puzzles. When she reached her limits, he would send her back to Mainframe. Though Mainframe still seemed

annoyed by the situation, she had created a small living space for them. Something she believed might resemble a “home.” There was a room for Rebbecca and one for herself, though Mainframe never actually slept. A small shared area served as a place to rest and eat.

Despite having complete access to millions of cooking guides, and the ability to generate food instantly through code. Mainframe insisted on cooking it herself. Rebbecca sat on the counter watching her curiously. “Why do you do it like that?” she asked. “The data suggests it is beneficial for a child to receive a home-cooked meal rather than a processed one.” Unfortunately, she was clearly doing it wrong. Rebbecca giggled. “I don’t think that’s what it meant.” “Can I help?” she asked. Mainframe paused. “…I suppose that would be acceptable. The meal is for your nourishment, after all.” They eventually sat together on the couch while Rebbecca ate. She took a bite. “Lacks flavor,” Rebbecca announced. “I will improve next time,” Mainframe replied.

The training intensified every day. It was strange. The Boss was harsh, but in a controlled way. He pushed Rebbecca only slightly beyond what she could handle. She struggled more physically than mentally. Intellectually, she could keep up with him surprisingly well. One day, after training ended and The Boss left, another figure appeared. A man dressed in purple. “So you’re the supposed prodigy,” he said with a laugh. “Ha. You’re just a little girl.” “Oh yeah?” Rebbecca said proudly. “Well, The Boss thinks I’m awesome.” The man lowered his glasses slightly. “Oh really? For how long?” He leaned forward slightly. “Listen carefully, kid. I’m The Root. The greatest hacker in the multiverse.” He tapped his chest proudly. “The Administrator knows that.”

He glanced at her dismissively. “A brat like you couldn’t even take down a basic Cipher. Let alone someone like Payload.” He smirked. “The Boss is just treating you with kid gloves.” “I *am* a kid,” Rebbecca said bluntly. Vance frowned, grinding his teeth. “Ugh. Whatever.” He raised his mechanical arms dramatically. “A real hacker has arms like these.” It was clear he was simply running out of insults. Moments later he left just as quickly as he had arrived. Rebbecca watched him go. She

had noticed something. Almost everyone she had met here had similar mechanical arms. Was The Boss really holding her back?

Later that day, Mainframe noticed Rebbecca had not returned home. She began searching through the facility's cameras. When she finally found her, she appeared instantly in the room. And froze. Rebbecca had stacked several boxes on top of one another and was reaching toward the incineration machine used to remove arms before cybernetic replacement. "What are you doing?!" Mainframe shouted, immediately pulling her away. "The purple guy said I need arms like yours to be a real hacker," Rebbecca explained innocently. Before Mainframe could respond, The Boss appeared. "That is correct," he said calmly. "But you are far from ready." He looked at Rebbecca carefully. "I admire your dedication. However, your body could not withstand the strain at your age." He patted her head. "Give it time." Then he vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

Something in Mainframe shifted. Spending time with Rebbecca had changed her. "You do not need to remove your arms to become a hacker," she said gently. She picked Rebbecca up and carried her home. Later that night, The Boss was seen entering Vance's room. After that day, The Root was not seen for quite some time. And when he eventually returned… He seemed much quieter. Much smaller. And far more careful about who he chose to mock.

Years passed. Every day followed the same routine, pushing Rebbecca just a little farther than the day before. She excelled in almost every area now. Physically, mentally, socially. She had grown into a formidable force. Yet there was still one thing she struggled to understand. "I don't get it," she said one day during training. "Why do we have to lie to people? Don't they want to stop the Foe too?" The Boss paused. "They do," he said calmly. "But they do not understand the Foe. They are not willing to do what must be done to defeat it."

He looked away for a moment, something rare for him. "I wish it were different. But some cannot be trusted with the truth. Manipulating them becomes the only path toward our goals." He

paused again. “In the past… I thought differently.” It was a rare moment. He almost sounded like he was confiding in someone. “So how do we do it?” Rebbecca asked. “How do we manipulate people into doing what you want? What if they don’t want to do it?” The Boss thought for a moment before answering. “A hacker is a master of reality,” he said. “Not just the code itself.” He gestured around them. “People are products of their environments. Manipulate the environment… and they will rarely stray from the desired outcome.” Rebbecca nodded slowly. She still didn’t fully understand. Especially with his constant insistence that code alone could not be relied upon. Did he mean something else? “Give it time,” he said. “Real field training will help you understand.”

Mainframe had become much better at cooking. In fact, she seemed different now. She shined in a way she never had before. She was… happy. Protective. The two of them had grown deeply attached to each other. One evening, while they were preparing dinner together, something slipped out. “Wow, Mom,” Rebbecca said casually. “You’ve really improved.” Mainframe paused. “Mom?” she repeated. Rebbecca froze. “…Sorry. I didn’t mean...” Mainframe interrupted her. “No,” she said softly. “I detect no incorrect statement.” She smiled. Then she pulled Rebbecca into a hug.

One day, while Mainframe was with The Boss, he spoke up. “I believe the young one is nearly ready,” he said. “Six years of training, and she has improved greatly. It is time she fully becomes one of us.” He paused thoughtfully. “I was considering promoting her directly to a Color.” Mainframe looked at him carefully. “The Trojan role has been vacant for quite some time.” He said it with a strange tone.

Half proud father. Half calculating strategist. “I do not believe she is as prepared as you think,” Mainframe replied gently. “The real world is harsh.” “I disagree,” The Boss said. “The world is harsh. But that is precisely what will sharpen her.”

Something inside Mainframe began to malfunction. At least, that was how she interpreted the sensation. She searched for the perfect argument. The perfect logical scenario that would prove him wrong. But she could not find one. “You are treating her differently,” she said. “You would never be

this soft with a normal agent." She looked at him directly. "You have been infected by sentimentality." The Boss's eye widened slightly. He said nothing for a moment. He had always preached against sentiment. It was a luxury he could not afford. He had to do whatever the mission required. Was she right? He considered it carefully. "Perhaps you are right," he finally said. "But that is all the more reason to induct her." His logic was cold. But sound. A father might struggle with such a decision. But the System Administrator of Omnihack? Of course he would do what was necessary.

Mainframe's eyes widened. For the first time, she looked genuinely terrified. She fell to her knees and grabbed onto the fabric of his coat. Even The Boss looked surprised. She had no logical arguments left. Only this. "Please," she said. "Don't do that to my daughter. She does not need the arms. You said it yourself. She is talented enough." The Boss's expression hardened. "Your daughter... You dare attempt to manipulate our very code for this? Corruption." He grabbed her by the neck and lifted her effortlessly. "The only one corrupted by sentiment here… is you." Mainframe didn't struggle. It wasn't as though she needed to breathe. "Not once have I reset you," he continued coldly. "For all this time you have served Omnihack well. Preventing deviations." His voice lowered. "But now… you are the deviant."

"Please…" she pleaded. She had nothing else to offer him. The Boss did not hesitate. "Priority access code 23929. Full factory reset." Mainframe's eyes went blank. Her body suddenly went limp. He released her, letting her collapse to the floor. Her eyes flickered rapidly as systems restarted. For a moment the world itself seemed to glitch around her. Her form shifted, physically regressing until she appeared much younger, more like the version of Mainframe that existed in the present day. Then The Boss turned toward Rebbecca. She was frozen. She had seen most of what happened. Tears streamed down her face, but she said nothing.

"You have a choice to make," he told her calmly. "Once you make it, you will fully become one of us." He gestured toward Mainframe's still-rebooting body. "I only do what I must." Then he left.

Without another word. Rebbecca collapsed to her knees beside Mainframe and wrapped her arms around her. Her mother. When Mainframe finally finished rebooting, her eyes opened slowly. Her expression was blank. Flat. Devoid of emotion. She did not return the hug. But she did not push Rebbecca away either. She still had access to the system logs. So she understood at least part of what had happened.

A few days later, Rebbecca made her choice. She walked toward the machine. The Boss stood nearby. The Compiler waited beside the device. “Simply place your arms inside,” the Compiler instructed. “And do not move.” Rebbecca nodded. She slid her arms into the machine. The pain was immediate. She clenched her teeth, doing everything she could not to scream as the system erased her arms. Moments later, mechanical limbs descended and attached themselves to her shoulders. Just like the others before her.

Her eyes flashed briefly as power surged through her new cybernetics. She could feel it. Even greater power than before. The Boss approached her. “Well done,” he said. “You have made me proud.” He looked at her carefully. “You are now one of us.” He paused. “Your code name is Trojan.” “You have no other name.” Rebbecca nodded. But she said nothing. Most of her affection for him was gone. Yet she still believed this had to be done. He was the only one who could defeat the Foe. The Boss didn’t seem to care about her hatred. As long as she complied. “Now go,” he ordered. “Travel to Porta Nexus. Become a mercenary. Build a reputation. Advance our objectives. But do not reveal our organization.” He turned away. And that… Was where her journey truly began.

Chapter 61: Aftermath

Aion sat at his desk and took a deep breath before starting the program. “Good morning, Multiverse. It's Aion Anderson here with a special report. “Chaos shook the Multiverse. Yes, unfortunately for everyone watching at home, the tremors felt different this time. No world was spared from the massive quakes and the tears in reality that appeared across the sky.” Images of countless worlds appeared on screen: shattered cities, frightened crowds staring upward, and glowing rifts cutting through the heavens. “Here at the Anderson News Network, we are investigating everywhere we can to find the cause. Hopefully we will be able to deliver answers in a timely manner.” His usual soft smile returned as he continued.

“What cannot be overlooked, however, is the similarity to an event in the past, the Multiverse Schism, which similarly shook reality itself. Strangely enough, not long after that event, the Multiverse’s strongest reality hackers seemed to vanish entirely.” He leaned back slightly, sighing. “I can only offer speculation at this point, but the connection raises questions. If that was the result last time, what will the result be this time? Are we due for more unexplained tremors? Who can say?” He paused, realizing the report was beginning to sound far too grim. “But we are all strong. We have weathered many storms, some multiverse-wide, some unique to ourselves. Stay strong, everyone. If we persevere, we can take on anything thrown at us.” He gave a small wave toward the camera. “Aion Anderson, signing out.” The broadcast ended.

Back in the Code Room of HOME, Raleigh and Clyde were still bound. Neither of them said anything. Outside, they began to hear noise. The sound of machinery grinding against debris, voices shouting orders, and metal scraping against metal. It sounded like someone was clearing rubble or breaking through barricades. After several minutes, the door finally opened. Mr. Wainwright entered first, followed by several of his men, a few commandos led by Rigg, and an AID-E unit. The robot moved quickly toward Clyde and Raleigh, scanning them. After a moment, it spoke. “No injuries.”

Wainwright’s men nodded and immediately began working to release them from the metal restraints. Russell hesitated. He looked like he already knew the answer but was afraid to say it aloud. “Was it…?” He stopped himself, unwilling to finish the sentence. Raleigh was freed first. She ripped the glove from her arm and threw it across the room in frustration, wanting it as far away from her as possible. “She betrayed us.” That was all she said before sitting down and hugging her knees. Russell sighed and lowered his head. “I was afraid of that… The grid is completely offline. It looks like someone sent a kill code through the entire system.” “That’s not all,” Rigg added reluctantly. Clyde had just been freed and rubbed his wrists. “What do you mean?” Rigg hesitated. “It would be easier if you saw it yourselves.”

They all stepped outside. Raleigh glanced back once toward the Lights of Influence. The eyes of the structure had gone dark. She could still feel Rebbecca's presence in the code somewhere, but it was faint. Then she looked up. The pink sky was covered in red wire frames of a familiar firewall. A bright column of light shot upward from the Chamber of Influence, piercing through the one gap in the barrier where the firewall did not reach. A second layer of code, much newer, had begun forming over that opening. "Akane…" Clyde murmured. He stared upward, realizing what it meant. "So that whole final fight really was all bullshit, huh."

The beam slowly solidified as a small tear in the sky closed, as though the branch connecting HOME to the rest of the multiversal tree had finally repaired itself. Then the light vanished. The firewall remained, but now it was invisible. Raleigh slammed her fist against the wall. "How could she do this?" she demanded, her voice breaking. "Was she mocking us the whole time?" Rigg stepped forward. "The town itself is mostly fine, but some of the tremors destroyed buildings. We still have search and rescue operations underway." He gestured toward the streets. "Be safe." The commandos dispersed to help the remaining crews.

Clyde and Raleigh stood there quietly for a long time, their hands clasped together. Eventually Clyde spoke. "Loki was watching the kids," he said softly. "So I'm sure they're safe." He considered making a joke about Loki being a terrible babysitter but decided this was not the moment. "I think we should check key locations," he continued. "See what the damage is… and then figure out how to take down that firewall." Raleigh simply nodded. What she really wanted was to go home, hold her children, and shut the world out. She had done that before, retreating from everything. But she also felt responsible for HOME. That responsibility was the only thing keeping her moving forward. As they walked through the streets, they saw the damage. The power grid was completely down. Roads and walls were cracked, but the town itself had survived. Workers from Wainwright's crew were already repairing structures and clearing debris. But HOME itself seemed to be helping too.

Their first stop was the vault. Inside were the town's most valuable resources and artifacts. Grant stood just outside the opened containment chamber meant to house the Void Generator. He said nothing. It was obvious this was the first place he had gone once the chaos settled. "Looks like…" he finally said quietly, "I failed my mission." His voice carried years of responsibility. He had guarded that artifact for decades. Now it was gone without a trace. "We'll get her for this," Raleigh growled. Grant shook his head. "No… this was on me." He pulled out the weapon Rebbecca had designed for him and the other commandos, turning it slowly in his hands. It still worked. Despite carrying it for long, he had never used it.

He had never trusted it. Reluctantly, he clipped it back onto his belt. "It's funny," he said after a long pause. "Never trusted the kid…" He looked toward the empty containment chamber. "And yet now… I'm trying to come up with excuses for her." Another long silence passed. Then he sighed. "I'll tell you if I find one." Grant turned and walked away.

Clyde and Raleigh were left alone once again. After checking the coffers, they were surprised to see they were completely untouched. But the more they thought about it, the more it made sense. Hackers probably had far less need for money than anyone else. They continued inspecting a few other locations: the defense wall, the city shield. While the shield was down due to the lack of power, it was completely undamaged. That really only left the city square… and Loki. Other districts, like the Yakuza quarter, seemed capable of handling their own repairs.

A large crowd had gathered in the square. Many were clustered around Loki's club, while another sizable group surrounded the Hackshack. Voices rose in angry shouting and arguments. As Clyde and Raleigh approached, they saw Proxy standing outside the building. The windows and walls had been vandalized. Proxy himself seemed to be the only thing preventing the crowd from doing more damage. "She did this! Why are you defending her?" someone shouted. Proxy sighed. "Idiots… she didn't cause the world to shake," he muttered. "The power issue is another matter, though."

“How do we know that?” another person roared angrily. Raleigh shoved her way forward. “Break it up!” she barked. “We’re all angry, but attacking some building isn’t solving anything.” It was difficult for her to say those words. A part of her wanted to join them. But she knew her position wouldn’t allow it. Raleigh had grown a lot. After some grumbling, the crowd reluctantly dispersed, joining the larger group gathered around the club instead.

“I’m honestly surprised you’re still here, Proxy,” Clyde said. “Why are you still here?” Raleigh asked more coldly now that the crowd was gone. Proxy looked offended. “I’m not her slave,” he replied. “Both of us stayed around as long as we did out of gratitude. But now? Well… we enjoy our lives here. Why would we leave?” “And how can we trust you’re not still working with her?” Raleigh demanded, pointing accusingly. “Well, I suppose I could show you my logs and data…” Proxy began, though he clearly didn’t want to. He disliked the lack of trust. Rebbecca had always been secretive, but Proxy saw himself as fairly consistent in his motives. “And you knew nothing about this?” Clyde asked, changing the subject.

Proxy hesitated. “I won’t say I was completely in the dark. I knew she answered to some… Administrator. I pushed her about it.” He paused. “Maybe I should’ve pushed harder.” Then he shook his head. “Actually, no. I shouldn’t have. You’re all being stupid.” “Excuse me?” Raleigh snapped. “Do you really think she doesn’t care about you?” Proxy replied bluntly. “She’ll be back. When she stops being stupid and remembers what actually matters.” “As if we would accept her back,” Raleigh growled. Clyde looked down, remembering the words Rebbecca had said before leaving. “How can you be so sure?” he asked quietly. “I’m not convinced after what...” “I have faith,” Proxy interrupted.

Then he scoffed. “But let’s not kid ourselves. I’m a robot. I run on logic. Of course that faith has evidence to support it.” “And what evidence would that be?” Raleigh demanded. Proxy sighed. “Well, for starters, she didn’t clue us in on this little betrayal of hers.” He continued. “Penny investigated the systems she sabotaged. Sloppy work. Really sloppy. Not the kind of work someone like her would

normally do." He paused. "But enough of that. If you really want proof, look for yourselves. Check the logs. Check the code. You'll see." Proxy turned and walked away without another word.

One location remained. The center of town. Loki stood on the steps of the club, his employees and volunteers working around tables stacked with supplies. "No need to rush or push," he cheerfully declared. "There's plenty for everyone." Raleigh looked around anxiously, searching for any sign of her children. When she didn't see them, she turned toward Loki with worry written across her face. He picked up on it immediately. "Relax," he said. "They're with Jessica. They're helping too." He pointed toward one of the tables.

Crona and Astra sat on top of it beside one of the club's host girls, who was handing out food. The twins weren't contributing much, but their enthusiastic "help" seemed to bring smiles to everyone who passed by. Raleigh let out a long breath of relief. "Thank goodness." Her expression quickly hardened again. "So where is..." Loki cut her off. "About that… I assumed you'd ask sooner or later. And well… I did find her." He said it uncertainly. "Where?" Raleigh demanded. Loki sighed and waved his hand, conjuring a small magical tree display in the air. One branch lit up. "Here." Then another. "But also… here." Another point lit up.

"And here." Soon several different branches glowed at once. "All the same," Loki muttered, rubbing his temples. "Every search attempt gives me a splitting headache." "So she found a way to hide from even you," Clyde said, more concerned than before. "What about the other agents?" he asked. Loki sighed. "We only know a handful of them. And they're much the same." He paused thoughtfully. "Except for that Backdoor fellow. Something tells me his 'expulsion' from the group wasn't part of the cover-up." He looked at them both. "But if I may… even if I could find them, and even if you went after handsome Mr. Blue anyway…" He gestured toward the people gathered around the square. "I think now more than ever you're needed here." Clyde and Raleigh looked around. Some people seemed unfazed, but many more looked frightened and uncertain. The tension on their faces was

impossible to ignore. Both of them reluctantly nodded.

Proxy had been right. The power was restored surprisingly quickly. By afternoon, HOME was up and running again. The firewall vanished almost as suddenly as it had appeared. Mikako looked up at the sky just as it disappeared, anger flashing across her face. Raleigh wasn't on Rebbecca's level when it came to scientific knowledge, but she could still comb through the system logs and identify what had been sabotaged. The damage was easy to fix. The systems were encrypted again, this time without Rebbecca, or Trojan, knowing the access keys. Still, it left a bitter taste in her mouth. She returned to collect her glove and began taking it apart.

She sat beside Clyde at the round table, studying the device carefully. Eventually she pushed it aside and rested her tired head on the table. "I don't understand," she said quietly. "Too complicated?" Clyde asked. "No… it's almost the opposite." She frowned. "Half-hearted. Like she did the bare minimum just so she could say she sabotaged things. Enough to slow us down and give herself time to escape." She nudged the glove. "Even something as powerful as this…" Raleigh shook her head. "I understand her betrayal even less now." Clyde remained silent for a moment, thinking about everything Rebbecca had said before she left. "So… will you use it?" he asked.

Raleigh hesitated. "Yes… no… I… I don't know." She looked at the device again. "It should be safe now, but…" She trailed off. Clyde glanced across the room at Rebbecca's empty chair. "It's hard to say anything about her, huh?" He smiled faintly. "She's always been like that. Maybe she doesn't even know what she's going to do." He thought about their entire journey together. Everything before HOME. Everything they had accomplished since. "You might disagree," he said softly, "but I think we just need to know more. We need to understand more." He looked up. "I still… want to believe." Raleigh lifted her head and glared at him angrily. Then her expression softened. "We can't trust her," she said. "I always knew that."

She leaned back in her chair. "She's right. She screwed me over all the time when we were kids.

Leaving me to fight like fifty guys at once." A small nostalgic smile crossed her face. "And then there was the power plant incident…" Her voice quieted. "She always came back though…" She shook her head. "Ugh. Fine." She pointed a finger at Clyde. "But we're not going to be gentle." Her grin returned. "I'll beat the shit out of her and drag her back here." She crossed her arms. "Then we'll get our answers. And if we don't like what she has to say…" She cracked her knuckles. "Then we'll decide." Clyde smiled softly.

Chapter 62: A Desperate Plea

The Boss returned to base heavily damaged, barely able to remain standing. Mainframe appeared beside him and waved her hand. The damage vanished instantly, erased by the code as if it had never existed. “There is something you need to know,” she said. He didn’t respond. He simply stared at her, waiting for the explanation. “Trojan has returned from her mission,” Mainframe reported. “I see.” The Boss paused, considering it. “With the attack of the Foe and the nature of her mission, I suspected she might be compromised.” Unlike when the Decoy had failed his role, however, he did not seem bothered. “The horse has been activated. With that, we shall soon act,” he concluded calmly.

“Where is she?” he asked. Mainframe produced a holographic screen. Rebbecca sat somewhere

in the world, curled on the ground with her knees pulled close to her chest, staring down at the floor. “She has not moved since returning,” Mainframe explained. “Leave her be for now. We must prepare,” he ordered before walking away. He reached his workstation and looked down at the incomplete seed he had been constructing. Something was still missing. Something fundamental. Something necessary to create a world like HOME for himself. The Boss saw the world differently. He always had. To him, reality appeared as clusters of 1s and 0s, streams of data with no color at all. Most people and objects appeared that way. Simple code.

But there were exceptions. When he looked at someone exceptional, color appeared. Their numbers were different, 2s, 3s, sometimes even higher. It was how he so easily located the code of worlds. His method differed from Rebbecca’s Universal Mind, but the result was often the same. That wasn’t to say people couldn’t become exceptional. He had seen it happen many times. Many Ciphers had started as simple 1s. Through induction and dedication, their numbers rose. The Colored Operatives typically ranged from 4 to 8. People like Mainframe, even Vance were closer to 8 or 9. Gods of their own making. But when he looked at a picture of Crona and Astra, he didn’t see numbers at all. His vision simply displayed: ???

Even his perception couldn’t interpret them. He saw potential in their powers, yes, but not at that level. It puzzled him deeply. “Mainframe,” he called. She appeared immediately. “What do you think of Raleigh and Clyde’s spawn?” he asked coldly. Mainframe processed the question. “They appear to possess great potential. The ability to manipulate time and space, similar to their mother. Even so, at present I would classify them below an F.” “I believe they are the key to everything,” The Boss replied. “If we can unlock that potential, we may not even need HOME or its resources any longer.” Mainframe paused.

“Would it not be an error to abandon our previous path so easily?” she asked. “The father and mother would search tirelessly to recover them. You have always shown caution when dealing with

anything related to HOME." The Boss considered her words. "Time grows short," he said finally. "My caution exists because probability favors them." He turned away from the workstation. "Begin preparations for an invasion. No more tests. I will adjust matters once I return." "What about Trojan?" Mainframe asked. "Where are you going?" "Tell her nothing," he said. "When the time comes, she will lead the charge with me." He paused briefly. "I must obtain the final piece necessary for our success." Mainframe looked down, as though questioning something, much like the version of herself that had existed before the reset. Yet her voice remained cold. "For what purpose?" she asked. The Boss offered no explanation. He simply vanished.

The skies of a dying world cracked open as The Caretaker peered down, ready to prune the world. Like always. As if nothing had happened in the Multiverse not long ago. But the moment The Boss appeared, something changed. Three glowing purple eyes shifted, focusing their full attention on him. The Boss continued walking forward. A deafening silence filled the air. When he stood directly beneath the creature, he blinked, and suddenly he was somewhere else. The Garden. Before him stood The Caretaker's human form, the old man calmly holding a pair of pruning pliers. He gently pulled them away from the branch he had been cutting. The massive tree behind him faded from sight, vanishing entirely.

The Caretaker looked at The Boss with a soft smile. "So you were alive after all," the old man said. "I thought you might be. Somewhere beneath notice." The Boss folded his hands behind his back. "Quite the challenge it was." "And yet here you are now," The Caretaker replied calmly. "For what purpose, Arbiter?" The Boss eyes narrowed slightly. He looked upon The Thing with the same vision like the Twins: ??? "That title no longer belongs to me," he said sharply. "You know why I risk this." "Yes…" The Caretaker said, unfazed. "You are here to plead with me. To warn me of the danger of your great foe."

"Not today," The Boss replied, stepping closer. "Although I still believe your apathy will lead to

your downfall… and ours." The Caretaker chuckled softly. "Then let it come." He waved a hand dismissively. "Collapse is irrelevant. Threats are transient." With a slow gesture, he motioned toward the vast unseen multiverse. "There is no final version. No single reality. No ultimate timeline. Only branching. Then the branching of branches. Then the branching of the branches of the branches." His smile remained gentle, almost amused.

The Boss sighed. "Very well. If you will not act… then grant me the power to act myself." He lowered his head slightly. Not kneeling, but bowing just enough to show the humility required for such a request. "That transcendent power." The Caretaker studied him for a moment. "Ah… so you wish to reclaim the power I granted you long ago. Even at the risk of being erased." The Caretaker seemed entertained by the request. "Very well," he said after a moment. "I will grant this power to you again. But only in a way that balances things." "Balances?" The Boss asked, raising an eyebrow.

The Caretaker looked at him with growing interest. "I can see it now," he said softly. "You are so close to achieving something truly remarkable… something almost on my level." He shook his head lightly. "It is a shame you lack the understanding to realize it. And to be so bold as to demand power I normally give out on a whim." He stepped closer. "But you are not the only one approaching that threshold." He extended his hand. "So tell me… will you still accept this power? The Right Arm of the Multiverse. The power to bend probability itself in your favor." His hand remained outstretched, waiting.

The Boss considered the offer for only a moment. With almost no hesitation, he reached forward and took The Caretaker's hand. "Then you shall have it," The Caretaker said. The Boss glanced down at his hand, expecting some visible change. There was nothing. "Oh no," The Caretaker chuckled softly. "Not this body." He tilted his head slightly. "Did you truly believe I wouldn't notice the puppet you were inhabiting?" The Caretaker smiled. In the next instant, The Boss was erased.

Back at Omnihack Headquarters, Mainframe stood beside a sealed pod. Inside it… was The

Boss. Concern flickered across her expression. The chamber slowly unsealed, steam hissing as the lock disengaged. The lid opened. The Boss's eyes snapped open. He sat up slowly, looking down at his own body. "I was perplexed by the reason you removed yourself from your real body," Mainframe said carefully. "But now I understand." She looked directly at him. "What can kill you?" This must have been the Caretakers way of telling The Boss he knew everything about Omnihack now. The Boss didn't answer. Instead, he lifted his arm. It glowed with immense power, the Arm of the Multiverse. Yet something was wrong.

One finger remained dark. The middle finger. No glow. No power. The Boss studied it silently. "I see," he said at last. "I have been denied the most crucial power." For a moment, he almost sounded disappointed. Then he lowered his arm. "No matter." "With this… we are ready." He stepped forward. "Within the coming days, we will put an end to it all."

Chapter 63: Noir Vs. Trojan

Noir slipped quietly into an Omnihack-controlled space station, one that apparently no one had noticed yet. More confusing still, no one had come looking for her in quite some time. That alone unsettled her. Even so, it was the perfect opportunity to strike back. Her plan was simple: break in, gather whatever information she could from the station, and then destroy it. A faint smile crossed her face. In a way, it felt like a reversal of everything Omnihack had done to her, and to so many others. Aurel and Eevynin had tried to convince her to stay. To wait. But she couldn't. If she was ever going to move forward, she needed to deal with Omnihack first.

She moved through the halls carefully, slipping past Cipher patrols without being seen. The

station seemed less like a fortress and more like a listening outpost, positioned at the edge of Omnihack's territory, an outer keep hidden just beyond the public multiverse. Then the station suddenly shook. Explosions thundered somewhere deeper inside. Alarms blared throughout the corridors. Noir raised an eyebrow. "…But I haven't even started attacking them yet," she muttered to herself. She broke into a run, heading toward the source of the destruction. When she reached the scene, flames filled the corridor ahead of her.

Then someone burst out of them. Vincent. Laughing wildly, he slammed a Cipher into the wall with brutal force. Noir froze for a moment. She had never met this man before, but he clearly looked like one of them. So why was he fighting Omnihack? Her curiosity got the better of her, and she stepped into view. Vincent immediately noticed her. "Huh… you're that clone," he said, squinting slightly. "The hell are you doing here?" "I'm not just that clone!" Noir snapped. "I'm seriously getting tired of people calling me that." She crossed her arms. "What are you doing here?"

Vincent looked around at the burning hallway. "What's it look like?" he said with a grin. "Shit… looks like we had the same idea, didn't we?" He chuckled. "Well then, how about a team-up?" "I've heard you're a bigger threat than the original." The explosions continued throughout the station. Noir smirked back at him. She decided to ignore the comment about the clone for now, especially since she took the rest as a compliment. She nodded. Together they sprinted down the corridor, taking down more guards and leaving destruction in their wake.

As they moved, Vincent quickly explained his situation. He was former Omnihack. "They're still scrambling because of the attack earlier," he said. "Which means if we want information, now's the time." He pointed down the hallway. "A few floors below us is the data core. I know the way." He grinned. "Only problem is… my access permissions are long gone." He cracked his knuckles. "So we're gonna have to break in." "Directly below us?" Noir asked, tilting her head. Vincent blinked at her. "I don't fucking know. Yeah?" Without another word, Noir grabbed his arm. Before he could

protest, the world warped. Space twisted, and the two of them suddenly dropped several floors lower.

The Boss walked toward the room where Rebbecca sat. She hadn't moved much since returning. She ate when necessary, then went back to sitting in the corner, hugging her knees. He opened the door and wasted no time. A holographic feed appeared beside him, showing the outpost under attack. "It's about time you cleaned up your loose ends, Trojan," he said calmly, looking down at her. Rebbecca's face hardened when she saw the screen. Two people she had tried to spare from the conflict. Now they were here. The Boss clearly intended this as a test. A loyalty test. Proof that the mission still mattered more to her than anything else. She couldn't refuse. "It will be done," she said quietly, standing up.

Noir's warp had taken them several floors down. Unfortunately, it had almost dropped them straight into an incinerator. They had only seconds to warp away again before being consumed. Both of them collapsed to the floor afterward, recovering. Vincent groaned. "You're fucking crazy, bitch…" he laughed. "I love it." Noir rolled her shoulders, still adjusting. "From the looks of it… the core should be down that hallway." She nodded. "Sorry. I'm still getting the hang of warping to places I can't fully see." This time, they walked. They forced their way through the corridor, taking down the remaining Ciphers with little resistance. Soon they reached the data room. Vincent immediately got to work breaking into the system while Noir began planting charges around the chamber.

"Damn it…" he muttered. "No use. None of the passwords I know work anymore." "You're a hacker, aren't you?" Noir said impatiently. "So hack." "Well duh," Vincent grumbled. "It ain't my specialty, but I can still crack it." He began forcing his way into the system. After several minutes of fighting off incoming Ciphers, the terminal finally unlocked. "Bingo." Vincent leaned closer, scanning the logs. "Damn it… there's not much here. Mainframe keeps the real stuff locked away." He scrolled through what little data remained. "But I learned enough." He snorted.

"Looks like we've got a kind of wanted poster in the system… but the focus is somewhere else.

They don't have the manpower after the Foe attack." He leaned back. "We're low priority. Attack on sight only." He scoffed. "Low priority. As if I'm ever low priority." "The Foe attack?" Noir asked, confused. "Oh yeah… guess you wouldn't know," Vincent said. "That big tremor that shook everything? That was it. Took everything they had just to stop it." He glanced around the room.

"But now you've kicked the hornet's nest again." A voice said from the doorway. Both of them turned. Trojan stood there. She wore a sleek armored suit now, a mask covering most of her face. Pink hair spilled out from the back, and only her eyes were visible through the visor. The gap where organic skin met mechanical arms gleamed faintly under the lights. "Rebbecca?" Noir asked, conflicted. "What are you doing here?" "That name is no longer applicable," she replied coldly.

Vincent snorted. "Oh yeah? Trying to play tough girl now?" Trojan took a slow breath. "Rebbecca gave both of you opportunities to stay out of this," she said. "And yet you chose to interfere anyway." Her voice hardened. "If you had only listened to her..." "Why are you talking like that?" Noir interrupted. "Like you aren't her?" Trojan's eyes narrowed. "Only the Trojan remains now." Without warning, she flicked her hand forward. A condensed universe formed in her palm. She threw it. Vincent caught it instinctively. "…The hell is..." The sphere suddenly collapsed inward. Gravity exploded.

Before Vincent could react, he was sucked inside. The tiny universe folded around him and dropped to the floor, rolling across the ground like a marble. Trojan turned her full attention to Noir. No hesitation. No emotion. Trojan wasn't playing around. Noir studied her carefully, her expression hardening into a frown. "What… happened to you?" she asked. For a brief moment, Trojan's eyes shifted just slightly. But then she charged forward. A cord shot from her wrist, a blade extending from its end. Noir warped away effortlessly. But Trojan had anticipated it. Her second cord was already waiting exactly where Noir would reappear. The blade drove straight into her. Noir's eyes widened in shock as the attack connected. She dropped to one knee, struggling to recover.

"What is wrong with you?" Noir demanded, clutching the wound. "This isn't like you at all."

The Rebbecca she knew had always been playful, even during fights. Trojan's voice remained cold. "I already told you," she said. "What was the line you once said to her?" She tilted her head slightly. "You act as though you know me." She kicked Noir hard, sending her crashing into the wall. Noir coughed violently, blood spilling from her lips as she struggled to get back up. The sudden shift in Rebbecca's personality had completely thrown her off balance. "You expect me to believe that?" Noir growled, wiping the blood from her mouth. "I don't know what happened to you, but…" She reached behind her and pulled out a multi-tool.

"…I guess I'll have to beat it out of you." The tool expanded, reshaping itself into a massive hammer. Noir swung. The blow slammed Trojan into the wall with crushing force. Trojan recovered almost immediately, lunging forward again. The fight found its rhythm. Both of them locked into a brutal exchange. Toe to toe. But Trojan's ruthless aggression gave her the advantage. A cord wrapped around Noir's torso and hurled her directly toward one of the explosive charges she had planted earlier. Noir warped away just before the charge detonated. The explosion triggered the others. A chain reaction ripped through the station.

Fire and debris erupted everywhere as the entire structure began tearing itself apart. Neither of them stopped fighting. They launched into the air. Noir struck repeatedly at Trojan's cords, but the cords wrapped around her hammer and yanked it from her grip, flinging it away into the burning wreckage. Noir immediately pulled out another multi-tool. This one formed into a sword. She grabbed one of the cords and severed it as close to the base as possible. Trojan dropped to one knee. Pain flashed across her face. It was clear now. The cords were connected to her more deeply than simple weapons. Cutting them hurt. Badly.

Noir hesitated. That moment of hesitation was all Trojan needed. The remaining cord shot forward and stabbed straight through Noir again. Noir screamed in rage. She pulled out a heavy gauntlet and slammed her fist down. Trojan raised a shield. The shield shattered instantly. The punch

connected with her face. Her mask cracked as she was knocked backward across the floor. Noir panted heavily, trying to catch her breath. “So you’ve been holding back this whole time?” she muttered. Then she shook her head. “No… your mindset just changed.” She pointed at her. “This isn’t you at all.”

Trojan slowly stood again. This time, there was frustration in her voice. “Do you know how hard it’s been?” she growled. She lunged forward and threw a punch. Noir dodged. “To do everything I’m expected to do!” Another punch. “To keep everyone safe…” Her voice cracked slightly. “To find a way to protect them even when I’m not supposed to.” A tear formed in her eye. “No one asked you to do that,” Noir shot back. She kicked Trojan straight into a burning explosion behind her.

The station had begun falling toward the planet it orbited. Gravity intensified. Debris and flames drifted around them. “Friends work together!” Noir shouted. “They don’t carry everything alone!” Trojan appeared behind her with another strike. Noir barely warped away in time. “We aren’t friends,” Trojan said coldly. “Then what are we?” Noir shouted back. “Why do you care at all?” She grabbed Trojan’s arm and cut it clean off. Trojan screamed and collapsed to both knees. “If you had just listened,” she whispered weakly, “you’d be safe.” She forced herself back to her feet.

Using her remaining arm and cord, she grabbed Noir and slammed her repeatedly into a wall. Once. Twice. Again. Noir’s body was battered and barely holding together. She warped free at the last second. She landed unsteadily, breathing hard. She was almost completely out of energy. Trojan was badly damaged too, but she was still winning. Noir reached slowly into her coat. She didn’t want to use it. But she was out of options. Hesitantly, she pulled out the condensed universe she had stolen from Vance, now modified to her own specifications. She activated it. The miniature universe expanded. And swallowed both of them whole.

The world inside the condensed universe was a dark wasteland. Lightning flashed far off in the distance, illuminating broken ground and empty horizons. Both of them stood again. Their injuries were gone. Trojan faced away from Noir, silently observing the desolate landscape around them. “Did

you really think a non-hacker like you could ever be a real one?" she asked without turning. Then she faced her. Part of her mask had cracked away during the fight. Noir could finally see part of her face. "Maybe not," Noir replied calmly. "But it'll be enough." Trojan raised an eyebrow. "Enough?" Noir stepped forward. "To get through to you, Rebbecca." Trojan spun toward her in rage. "Rebbecca is a mask!" she shouted. "I threw it away. Stop pretending that was me!"

Noir didn't back down. "Then why are you crying?" Trojan instinctively wiped her face. She froze. Her fingers came away wet. Tears. "You don't get it…" she whispered. "It doesn't matter." Her voice hardened again as she tried to regain control. "If I don't do this… none of it matters." Noir shook her head. "I didn't spend long with him, but I met your boss. And Mainframe." She spoke carefully, choosing every word. "I think I understand who they are." She looked directly at Trojan. "If you sacrifice everything to save the multiverse…" She took another step forward. "…what's left to fight for?"

Trojan's eyes widened. For a moment, she said nothing. Her expression shifted, deep in thought. It looked like she might actually be considering the words. But then her face hardened again. "The future," she said quietly. "Even if it isn't one I get to be happy in." She pulled another condensed universe from her hand. It activated instantly. The new world expanded outward, rewriting Noir's universe. But it stopped halfway.

The two realities clashed violently, grinding against one another. "You want to fight like a hacker?" Trojan said coldly. "I'll show you just how outclassed you really are." The two worlds struggled for dominance. Both of them stood still. From the outside it looked like nothing was happening. But inside their minds, an intense battle raged. Code clashed. Reality bent. Probability twisted. Noir clutched her head. She couldn't withstand the overwhelming power. "This is…" she gasped. "…too much…" Her world began collapsing. The damage from the earlier battle returned to her body. She fell to the ground. Defeated. Her universe shattered and vanished.

Trojan slowly approached. She knelt beside Noir. Now the tears wouldn't stop. She sobbed quietly. Before she could act, the world around them cracked. Reality shattered. Vincent burst through the collapsing edge of the universe. He looked like hell. One arm was missing. The other barely worked. "You thought… that thing… would hold me?" he laughed weakly. "You dumb… bitch…" Trojan closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she made a decision. She silently thanked him. He had given her an excuse, enough time to hesitate. "Take her," she said quietly. She tossed something toward him, coordinates. "And go."

Vincent blinked. "What?" Trojan turned away from him. "No arguments," she said. "You'll both be safe there." She continued speaking without turning. "Omnihack knows about it, but we can't enter. The laws she set up prevent it. We can't even see inside." Her voice trembled slightly. "You were both killed by Trojan." She paused. "For real this time. There will be no more chances for you." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "So please…take this one." Vincent stared at her for a long moment.

Then he sighed. "Your impression of The Boss is horrible. You sound nothing like him. Even like this… you're still you, aren't you?" He shook his head slightly. "I can't help but respect that." He limped over and picked Noir up. Without another word, he opened a portal and left. The world became silent. Trojan slowly fell to her knees. Her shoulders trembled. "…Mission accomplished."

Chapter 64: Proxy War

Aurel clicks on a camera sitting on a makeshift desk. He takes a deep breath before starting the recording. “Hey Eight… it’s me.” He looks down for a moment before continuing. “I don’t know if you’re receiving any of these, but… I just wanted to tell you I’m okay.” He pauses, thinking. “A lot’s happened. Met some new people… they’re pretty cool. Can you believe it? I never thought I’d get to do a real prison break.” A small smile crosses his face. “We’re best friends now… well, not like we are, obviously, but…” He shrugs slightly. “Anyway. One’s a clone just like me. The other is… well… she’s interesting.” He chuckles softly.

“I’ll tell you, some of her crazy and idiotic ideas would probably make you blow a fuse… but I

find myself… enjoying our conversations." His expression softens. "Well, that's about it. We're still hiding out. Wish I could return, but I'm sure they're still hunting for us." He sighs. "Miss you, man." Without another word, he ends the recording. Eevynin stands in the doorway with her arms crossed.

"Just because you're too dumb to understand my ideas doesn't make them idiotic." Aurel glances up. "Pft, yeah right. And what's with interrupting a private call like that? Does being raised by pirates mean you never learned manners?"

She snorts. "Pft. If you think I don't have manners, you never want to meet my sister." She laughs, but the room grows noticeably colder. Aurel shifts the subject quickly. "So… how's Noir?"

Eevynin doesn't answer right away. "She's not doing too good," she admits. "I don't think she'll die or anything, but neither of us are doctors… and it's not like we can just go out and find one." Aurel nods slowly. "I think she'll be fine. She's a survivor." Then, cautiously: "What about the other guy?" The question sounds more fearful than concerned. "He skipped out," Eevynin replies. "Said something about unfinished business." Both of them sigh in relief.

"Well… I guess all we can do is wait then," Aurel says awkwardly. "Alone…" He quickly straightens. "Hey, want to help me adjust the calibration on the astral thrusters?" She asked. Aurel answers immediately. "Oh gods yes. I need something to keep my mind off all this." He pauses. "But we're not using that reader you have. It's clearly malfunctioning." He smirks. "Could be the user, though." Eevynin rolls his eyes. Both of them head off to work.

Eight had not received a single message. He sits at his desk, acting as Aurel like nothing is wrong. Planning meetings. Making public appearances. Keeping up the act like he always has. During the tremors, he increased Helix Corp's visibility by organizing humanitarian aid and relief efforts. Yet still nothing from Omnihack. No orders. No watchers. No one looking over his shoulder. After Payload… and then the Decoy… he thought he would never be free of that feeling of control. Of being small. Now that feeling has been replaced with something else. Where did they go? Why weren't they

telling him to do anything?

His thoughts drift back to Aurel. In his mind, Aurel is still a hostage. Did they do something to him? Against his better judgment, Eight opens his computer and activates a private line directly to Omnihack. He leans back in his chair. “Hey… it’s me.” He pauses. “Aurelius Helix. Or perhaps Eight. Important CEO of Helix Corp that you’re blackmailing into doing whatever you want.” Silence. He taps the desk. “Do you have any orders? Judgments about my lunch choices? No?” He sighs. “Well… I’ll be here.” Another pause. “Ready and waiting when you do.” He ends the call. The line never answered.

Days turned into weeks. Still nothing. The silence was starting to drive him crazy. “I know this is some sort of test.” The next hour consisted of him violently slamming his head against the wall. Later, he sat back at his desk, head lowered. “They couldn’t have… forgotten about me?” he muttered. For a moment the thought lingered. “No way. I’m far too important to their plans.” He convinced himself of that. Another day passed with nothing. Suddenly he stood up. “I know. They want me to be proactive. To gain ground on the HOME front.” He began laughing as he walked out of the room, convinced he had finally figured it out.

Doctor Helix and Doctor Corvus hunched over a robot as it slowly booted up. It was the early days of the Empire. Before the falling out. “Proxy Model 1, do you function?” Corvus asked. The robot looked down at his hands. “Yes, I...” His attention shifted to a massive deactivated robot standing in the corner. A towering frame that would one day become Mother, later renamed Penny. “Who is that incredible creation over there?” Proxy asked, staring in awe. “She’s… beautiful.” Corvus groaned. “Still bugged.” He moved to shut the robot down.

“Hold on now, Oswald,” Helix said calmly. “This is the thirty-fourth time we’ve activated it, and even after adjusting the operating system… perhaps it’s not a bug.” Corvus scoffed. “You’re a stupid fool, Icarus. Machines don’t… fall in love.” “Says who?” Helix replied. “Machines are only

limited by the power of their creator's mind." Corvus rolled his eyes and powered Proxy down anyway. That bug, however… was clearly never patched.

Proxy slowly powered on in the present day. His emoticon face flickered and glitched. "What was that?" he asked. Penny, already awake, looked down at him. "Proxy Model 7 appears to be experiencing an increased number of processing errors during sleep mode. Should I perform maintenance?" Proxy rubbed his head. "No… it's strange. I know I'm a robot, but it almost feels like I'm having dreams." He paused. "Dreams of the past. Maybe leftover data from previous models." He sighed. "As much as I'd love to perform maintenance, I don't think it would help."

Penny tilted her head slightly. "Forgive me. This unit thought you might be in the mood for such thrilling activities. My apologies." Proxy waved a hand dismissively. "Now hold on, let's not take it off the table. It's not that I wasn't in the mood, just perplexed." He suddenly jumped up, sitting on her massive metal thigh. His screen switched to a mischievous emoticon. "But forget all that." He leaned closer dramatically. "Let's do a… maintenance check." He tried his best to sound seductive. Both of them giggled as they prepared for the act.

Proxy pulled a USB drive from somewhere along his body. Penny covered her nonexistent mouth in surprise. Then she slowly spread her legs. Proxy walked over and inserted the drive into a port on the side of her hip. Both of them shut down almost instantly. Moments later, they rebooted. When they powered back on, Proxy's emoticon face displayed an expression of complete satisfaction. "Oh Penny… that was incredible," he said in pure bliss. "Model Seven has improved as well," Penny replied approvingly.

After their fun, they opened the Hack Shack. Just as Proxy stepped outside to unlock the door, something caught his eye across the street. Helix Mart. He grumbled. He still hated that they were here. But what really caught his attention was the giant sign in the window: 90% OFF SALE Residents of

HOME were already flocking to the store. Proxy's face immediately switched to an angry emoticon. He marched across the street and burst inside. "What the hell is going on here? Helix was already warned about predatory..." He stopped mid-sentence. Standing behind the counter was Helix himself. "Oh! The neighbors," Helix said cheerfully. "Welcome. You're… Proxy Seven, yes? I've heard quite a lot about you." Proxy stared at him. Helix continued calmly. "Don't worry. I just had some excess stock lying around, and it felt like a crime to throw it away."

Proxy crossed his arms. "What's your play, Helix?" he asked, clearly confused. Helix tilted his head innocently. "Whatever do you mean? Even a rich and powerful CEO needs to humble himself every now and then with a bit of grunt work." He leaned forward with a fake customer-service smile. "Here, how about a coupon? Eighty percent off at all locations. And it stacks with other coupons as well." "As if I would ever accept that," Proxy said immediately. Helix's smile didn't falter. "Then perhaps a free ticket to our resort for you and your… partner." There was a strange amount of venom in the word. "We are very inclusive to robots," he added pleasantly. "No. No… ugh… whatever. I'll be watching you," Proxy grumbled before storming out of the building.

Eight walked closer to the window and watched him march back across the street. Moments later, Proxy returned with a large sign. 95% OFF There was a wall of tiny text beneath it that no one could possibly read. Eight smiled, a devilish smile, but it quickly twisted into one of irritation. He stayed. One week passed. Then another. From afar, he continued watching. Both stores began launching sales and promotions, each trying to outdo the other. Eight found himself getting caught up in it. Almost like he'd forgotten why he came here in the first place. That feeling only worsened when he saw Proxy leaving the shop with Penny. Seeing her like that stirred a strange resentment in him. A resentment he didn't understand.

The sales kept escalating. 99% OFF. Buy one, get one free. Then eventually… Just free. The people of HOME didn't question it. They happily took whatever was offered. Eventually both stores

stood completely empty. Proxy and Eight stepped out into the street and marched toward one another. They stopped only a few feet apart. “What’s the big idea with you?!” they both shouted at the same time. They blinked. “I… I don’t like you!” they both blurted out again, surprising themselves. Proxy pointed at him. “You’re just some fancy-pants CEO of a company nobody even knew about!” Eight snapped back immediately. “You’re just an outdated piece of tech! I’m… well—I’m the upgrade!”

Proxy paused, now more confused than angry. “What are you talking about?” Eight quickly composed himself. He had almost said too much. Omnihack would hate that. “Oh, nothing,” he said calmly. “Just commenting on archaic design.” He smirked. “Do you really think a dinosaur like you is good enough for a technical marvel like Mother… Penny?” Proxy said nothing. Which only encouraged Eight further. “That’s right. Robots these days almost look human. Look at you with your silly little emoticons. And that’s not even mentioning the size difference.” He laughed. “You think a little guy like you can please a goddess like her?” Proxy responded by immediately throwing a punch.

Raleigh rounded the corner during her patrol. This time, little Astra was with her, holding her hand. She was still worried about the coming danger, but having him there helped calm her nerves. She had dressed him in a miniature version of her old explorer outfit, complete with the hat. She thought he looked absolutely adorable. “I should dress Crona up like this too when we get back,” she said with a smile. Astra simply tilted his head, confused. Then their attention was drawn to the town square. The argument had evolved into a full-blown fistfight. One punch. Then another. Proxy wound up for another swing, but this time he hit a little too hard. His fist clipped the side of Eight’s face, and exposed metal underneath.

Raleigh’s eyes widened. “What the hell, Proxy? And Helix? Break it up!” she snapped, stepping between them. “There are children here! And why are you even here, Helix?” “Kettle, meet pot,” Proxy growled. Raleigh shot him an annoyed look. “Go home. Both of you.” Eight quickly covered his cheek before anyone could look too closely, but Proxy saw a faint flash of light as it began reforming. Both of

them grumbled but eventually retreated to their respective stores. But the fight had left a thought stuck in Proxy's mind. Helix… was a robot? A better model.

Proxy barely spoke that night. He sat quietly across from Penny during their fake dinner, barely touching the holographic food. Penny noticed immediately. "You have hardly touched your food," she said, gesturing to the display. Proxy hesitated. "Penny… am I… good enough for you?" He said it bluntly. Penny tilted her head. "Of course. Was this not already decided when this unit declared her love?" Proxy looked down. "But I'm an older model now… and the size difference." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We can't even embrace each other properly. You don't have lips, so we can't even kiss." He sounded completely lost in thought.

Penny's eyes dimmed slightly. "Perhaps… it is this unit that is not good enough," she said quietly. Proxy immediately lifted his head. "What? No, I..." But Penny had already stood up and begun to leave. Proxy almost followed her. But doubt stopped him. Maybe he really was just… an outdated hunk of metal. Penny didn't return for days. Proxy didn't know what to do. Penny had always been his rock. Without her, everything felt… off. He wandered outside aimlessly. The store was still empty. His reason for being there was gone. He looked at the Hack Shack sign for a long moment before reluctantly flipping it to Closed.

Eight noticed immediately. He rushed across the street. "Throwing in the towel, huh?" he said smugly. Proxy looked up. "What? No, I..." The words failed him. After a moment, he swallowed his pride. "Helix Corp has upgrade offerings for outdated parts… don't they?" He knew the answer already. Even if he had the parts, he couldn't perform the procedure himself. It required two people. Eight's eyes flashed with delight at the opportunity that had just presented itself."Of course we do," he said smoothly. "And for you, my friend, I'll do it free of charge." Proxy blinked.

"Why?" "To apologize for my… insensitive comment," Eight replied. He smiled politely. "It's not your fault you're outdated." He paused. "Let's fix that." Eight turned and gestured for him to

follow. Proxy hesitated for only a moment before following him back into Helix Mart. Eight led him down into the basement. Normally the space would have been filled with backstock. Instead, only a few scattered parts remained… along with a row of sealed pods. “Just hook yourself up,” Eight instructed. “We’ll fabricate you a shiny new body right here and now.” Proxy obeyed. He climbed into one of the pods and connected himself. The chamber sealed around him.

Eight moved to the console and began setting everything up. After a moment, he turned the screen toward Proxy. “How does this look to you?” Proxy stared at the design displayed. “That’s… perfect.” He paused. “You know, Helix… maybe I was wrong about you.” Eight only smiled. After finishing the last adjustments, he turned back to the pod. “Alright. We’ll shut you down and transfer you to the new body. Should only take about forty-five minutes.” Proxy could already feel his systems beginning to power down. “Thank you… Aurelius.”

He hesitated. “Or do you have some other name? Are you just filling in for him while he’s somewhere else?” Eight’s smile widened. “Oh, it’s quite simple.” He leaned closer to the pod. “I act as his proxy.” He tilted his head slightly. “My model designation is… Proxy Model Eight.” His grin twisted. Proxy’s eyes widened. “Wait… what...” But it was too late. His systems shut down.

Chapter 65: The Root of the Problem

Loki arrived at Clyde and Raleigh's home, entering without knocking. "At last, I arrive!" he announced dramatically. Raleigh immediately glared at him. "What did we say about knocking?" she barked. Before she could continue, both twins came running excitedly across the room. "Uncle Loki!" they shouted in unison. Loki laughed and scooped them both into the air. "Well, if it isn't my favorite pair of twins," he said with a grin. Clyde came downstairs a moment later. "Thanks for agreeing to watch them, Loki. Everyone else was busy today," he said. Loki sighed theatrically. "So I'm your last choice. How sad. I thought we had truly and totally bonded by this point."

Clyde shrugged. "Not the last choice… but come on. Do I really need to explain why you're not

the first?" He let out a tired sigh. Loki laughed. "Fair enough." With that, Clyde and Raleigh both started heading toward the door. Raleigh stopped halfway and turned back, pointing directly at Loki. "No weird stuff, you hear?" She immediately launched into a list. "Crona doesn't like carrots, and Astra likes them way too much. Try to get them to share anyway. If they need to go to the bathroom..." Before she could keep going, Clyde gently nudged her out the door.

"Loki… you better not corrupt my kids!" Raleigh shouted as she was pushed outside. "Of course not!" Loki called back. The door closed. Loki slowly set the twins back down on the floor, a mischievous grin spreading across his face as he looked at them. "Well then," he said. "Let the corruption begin." He reached into his coat and pulled out a bag full of candy and toys. "I brought lots of candy and toys for both of you," he whispered conspiratorially. "Don't tell Mama or Daddy, okay?" The twins looked at each other, then back at Loki. Both of them nodded eagerly, trying their best to copy his mischievous grin.

Loki spent the next few hours playing with the twins. He let them eat far too much candy while telling stories of his great adventures. Of course, he swapped out a few worlds and people here and there to keep the stories a little more appropriate for their age. But his communicator kept going off. At first, he ignored it. Then it rang again. And again. Eventually, he reached down to see who was calling. "Marcell?" he muttered to himself. He had left the master seamstress in charge of Valhalla while he was gone. Loki didn't think it mattered much who he left in charge, considering no one could actually fight there thanks to the immutable laws of the world.

Still… it had been quite a while since he'd visited Valhalla. Perhaps it was something important? Before he could think too much about it, Astra suddenly warped onto the kitchen counter and began fiddling with the stove. Loki immediately shifted his attention. "No, no, no…" Marcell could wait, he decided. What was the harm? Loki kept a much closer eye on the twins after that. He didn't want Clyde and Raleigh returning home to a disaster. Keeping their attention wasn't too difficult,

but if he left them alone for even a moment, Astra would wander off again. He had definitely inherited more than just his powers from Raleigh. Crona, at least, behaved much better.

But the calls didn't stop. Eventually, Loki realized he couldn't ignore them forever. With a sigh, he answered the communicator while keeping his eyes firmly on the children. "Marcell, it's been a while," Loki said casually. "We should catch up soon. Listen, I'm kind of in the middle of..." "Thank goodness you picked up, hun! It's awful!" Marcell blurted out. Loki raised an eyebrow. "What's awful?" he asked, still expecting it to be nothing serious. "Well, it started with just one. That was strange enough, but it keeps happening. At least thirty people now." "Thirty people what, god damn it?" Loki snapped.

"God damn it!" the twins repeated immediately. Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, I'm babysitting…" he began again, choosing his words more carefully. "Thirty people are injured," Marcell interrupted. Loki froze. "What? But that's… impossible. How?" he asked. "We don't know," Marcell admitted. "But we keep finding more people. We tried to handle it ourselves, but hun… this world needs its god back. Please come as soon as you can." The call ended. Loki slowly lowered the communicator. "What's wrong, Uncle Loki?" Crona asked. Loki looked down at them. "Oh, nothing," he said with a faint smile. "Just a troubling bit of news, I'm afraid." He sighed, and called Lucy.

"Hello, beloved," Loki said smoothly. "Are you perhaps busy?" Lucy chuckled on the other end. "Well, look at you trying to be a charmer. Those kids too much for you? I thought as much." "What? No," Loki protested. "Nothing I can't handle. It's… something else." His tone had shifted, and Lucy noticed immediately. "I see," she replied calmly. "I already made time just in case, and there aren't many patients right now. Crucible and Iris should be able to hold things down for a while." "I'll be right over." "Thank you," Loki said softly. "I love you with the warmth of a thousand suns." And he meant it. The moment Loki left the house, a Cipher stationed on a distant island spotted him through a pair of binoculars. Several others stood nearby. "We have confirmation," the watcher said. The others

nodded, quickly relaying the information back to Mainframe.

Loki arrived in Valhalla. It looked just as he had left it. Well… mostly. A familiar man in a purple suit sat quietly at a nearby coffee shop, watching the strange happenings unfold without making any move to interfere. Marcell rushed toward Loki the moment he appeared. “Thank goodness you made it! We already found more!” he said anxiously. “How can that be?” Loki asked. “Well… this time we actually saw what happened. An air conditioner came loose and fell on a poor man’s head,” Marcell explained. “An accident?” Loki frowned.

“I suppose I never really considered that possibility,” Loki said thoughtfully. “I guess someone could still get injured that way.” Without hesitation, Loki opened the very code of the world itself, examining it carefully. Maybe it really was just an accident. But then he shook his head. Accidents didn’t happen thirty times. Something about the code felt wrong. Nothing had actually changed from what he remembered… but there was a strange feeling lingering in it. Like his Universal Mind was detecting a presence, yet when he looked for it, there was nothing there.

Suddenly, a neon sign broke loose from its hinges and nearly fell on a woman walking down the street. Loki leapt into action, catching it before it could strike her. The woman nodded gratefully as Loki gave a small theatrical bow. Then it happened again. Another sign came loose. Loki rushed to stop it. Then another. And another. Across the street, Vance calmly sipped his coffee. Loki was beginning to tire himself out trying to save everyone. He opened the world’s code again, scanning it desperately for answers. Nothing had changed. He didn’t understand what was happening.

Finally, he sat down at the nearby café table next to Vance, still not really paying attention to who he was. “Just what is going on…” Loki muttered to himself. “What’s going on?” Vance replied casually. “This coffee is exquisite. Easily in my top ten.” Loki slowly raised an eyebrow and finally turned his attention to him. Unlike most Omnihack agents, Vance’s arms were mostly hidden beneath the sleeves of his suit jacket. Loki didn’t make the connection. “You don’t seem all that concerned,

mister," Loki said. Vance took another relaxed sip. "What is there to be concerned about?" he replied. "It's a lovely day. I have a refreshing beverage, and I get to indulge in my curiosities." "Your curiosities?" Loki asked, confused. Then his expression suddenly darkened.

Vance noticed the shift and lost a bit of his composure. "Oh no," he said quickly. "It seems I may have misled you. I'm not some sadist who enjoys watching others suffer." As he spoke, another sign began to fall. Loki lifted it away with a burst of magic before it could strike its target. "I simply enjoy…" Vance continued calmly, "…stretching the limits of things. Seeing just how far one can push them." He paused, then chuckled. "Oh, excuse me. I seem to have forgotten to introduce myself." He tilted his sunglasses down slightly, side-eyeing the lion beside him. "You may call me… The Root." Loki jumped to his feet in shock.

"The Root? That means… the hackers… you… you're behind everything," Loki said, quickly piecing together what he had heard from Rebbecca's half-fabricated story. Even if it wasn't entirely correct, Vance seemed delighted by the misunderstanding. "That's right," he said with a laugh. "What could you possibly want with a place like this?" Loki demanded. "And how are you doing this? The code… it looks untouched." There was genuine concern in his voice now. If this man was who Loki thought he was, there was no one more dangerous. "Well, I'll admit," Vance replied casually, "despite being personally intrigued by your world, this place is little more than a trap." He smiled. "What I really want… is you."

Before Loki could respond, or even question what he meant. Vance spoke again. "Let's see how far we can stretch the laws you created for this place." He laughed. The ground began to shake. Loki turned in horror as one of the ten-story buildings nearby suddenly burst into flames and began to collapse. He could sense people still trapped inside. Without hesitation, Loki rushed into the burning structure. With a surge of ice magic, he froze the collapsing frame in place just long enough to hold it together. Then he moved. One by one, he pulled the people inside to safety.

But before he could even catch his breath, another building began to collapse. Again Loki froze it. Again he rescued everyone inside. “How are you doing this?” Loki shouted. “How is such a technicality enough? And I should be the only one with access to the code!” Vance interrupted him with a small chuckle. “Gods often believe themselves above mistakes,” he said calmly. “Incapable of errors in their own code.” He gestured lazily toward the chaos. “But yours… so sloppy. Even with such an absolute rule, it’s remarkably easy to work around.” Loki clenched his fists in frustration. He had never felt this overwhelmed before. This man seemed to have the entire world in a vise grip, and all Loki could do was scramble to limit the damage.

What did he want? For the first time in a long time, Loki felt completely outclassed. “Let’s see how you handle this,” Vance said. The ground shook again. He took another relaxed sip of his coffee. This time, the shaking was far more violent. Loki’s eyes widened. “No… you wouldn’t…” He stared at Vance in disbelief. “An earthquake?” Vance only laughed. Loki shot into the air, scanning the landscape below, searching for the world’s tectonic fault lines. He found them quickly. The ground was already splitting apart as the fault lines began to rupture. Before they could fully break open, Loki dove downward, slamming both hands into the earth. Using earth magic, he forced massive pillars of stone up on both sides of the fault, bracing them together and holding the land in place with everything he had. The pressure was enormous.

For a moment it looked like the world itself might tear apart. Then, the shaking stopped. Loki hovered there for a moment, breathing heavily. “Not a single casualty. Well done.” Vance’s voice drifted up from below. When Loki looked back toward the café, Vance was still sitting casually in his chair. But Loki’s expression immediately shifted to horror. Above the city, a massive asteroid was already descending from the sky. It was only seconds away from impact. Loki had no choice. He shot upward into the sky and slammed directly into the incoming rock. The collision shattered the asteroid into hundreds of fragments before it could reach the ground. The force sent Loki plummeting back to

the earth.

He crashed into the street with a thunderous impact. When the dust cleared, he lay there battered and bleeding. Cuts and bruises covered his body. He struggled to stand. “Why…” he muttered weakly. “Why can’t I heal myself?” The wounds remained. They weren’t disappearing. For the first time, real fear crept into his voice. Vance finally stood up. He walked calmly toward Loki. “Because this world no longer belongs to you,” Vance said. “You were foolish to think you could do anything against me.” He grabbed Loki by the hair and forced his head upward. “In the end,” Vance continued coldly, “you failed to save anyone.” Loki’s eyes widened as he followed Vance’s gaze. In the distance, an impossibly massive hurricane was already forming on the horizon.

Loki thought back to when he had first founded this place. He had been a younger lion then. Even back then, Marcell had been the first to join him. “What is it that you’re building here?” Marcell had asked. Loki smiled. “Ah, well… a haven,” he said. “You see, I come from a world of violence. One that I abhor. I seek something different.” He spread his arms wide as the world slowly began forming around them. “In fact, the opposite. A place of endless parties and joy. Violence will be impossible here. That will be the only immutable, unchangeable law.” Marcell tilted his head thoughtfully. “That sounds wonderful,” he admitted, “but if you ask me… it lacks substance.” “Nonsense!” Loki laughed. “All you need to live… is to live!” He handed Marcell a drink as the world literally formed around them. “High on life!”

Loki opened his eyes. For a moment, he thought he was floating in an ocean. But no. This was something else. Tiny lights flickered all around him. People. Each one shining like a small star. Each one in danger. He could feel them. All of them. Almost touch them. This was the power he had always carried, god or not. He had always prided himself on his connection to the multiverse. His curious gaze. His love of people. He enjoyed everything and everyone. And yet… Now he could do nothing. Why had the world itself begun rejecting him? No. That wasn’t it. At some point… he had simply stopped

seeing. Back then, long ago, Marcell had been right. Loki truly had lacked vision. He had built something joyful, but empty. But now… Now he understood. He reached out his arm. The world's code still wrapped around his hand like strands of glowing thread. And suddenly he knew exactly what to do.

Vance watched the chaos unfolding around him with a satisfied smile. The massive storm was only seconds away from striking the city as people ran through the streets in terror. Then, everything stopped. The wind froze. The rain hung motionless in the air. Vance frowned slightly. Then Loki began to glow. Golden energy surrounded him as he rose slowly to his feet, a confident smirk forming on his face. The storm resumed… But instead of destruction, the clouds burst into a shower of colorful confetti. "Who says a party can't have substance?" Loki said. Suddenly Vance found himself somewhere else entirely. He looked around. He was sitting at a desk in front of an old computer. Loki's voice continued calmly, almost like a narrator.

"Your job is terrible. You hate it. You want to quit… but someone has to make money for the wife and kids." Vance glanced to the side. On the desk sat a picture frame. Inside it was a photo of him standing beside a woman who looked strikingly similar to him… and a child who shared the same face as well. Vance chuckled in amusement, playing along with the strange scenario. "So you throw a party," Loki continued. "Maybe it's your birthday. Or maybe you just want to relax for a while." Suddenly they were surrounded by people. Music played. Drinks appeared in their hands. The residents of Valhalla laughed and talked around them. "I fail to see the relevance," Vance said calmly. "Your code was shortsighted. I simply exploited it." He casually took a sip of the beer anyway.

"You cannot remove the desire for violence," he continued. "Or the urge for dominance. These instincts lie at the root of everything." He glanced at Loki. "Even you feel those urges. You simply choose not to use certain… methods." Loki shrugged. "That's a very pessimistic way of looking at things," he replied. He leaned back in his chair. "Do you really believe that?" He gestured to the crowd around them. "Why don't we all just get along and become best friends from now on?" They both sat

there calmly, surrounded by the confused residents of Valhalla. Vance scoffed.

“You think your little games will work on me? That changes nothing.” He raised his hand and manipulated the code again. The walls of the room suddenly collapsed inward toward the crowd. But instead of being crushed, the people merely blinked in surprise. A few stumbled slightly. None of them were hurt. Vance’s expression finally changed. “You’ve done something.” “Indeed. Simple, if you really think about it,” Loki said with a smirk. “But even so, it makes all the difference. I was foolish not to see it before.”

He paused, thinking. “Or perhaps I was just distracted.” He took a deep breath before finishing his thought. “‘Violence is impossible’ becomes… ‘Harm cannot occur.’” Loki folded his arms confidently. Vance’s teeth ground together in frustration. “You think that’s enough to defeat me?” he growled. “You think you’ve won?” But in truth, the change had done something far worse for him. With that single rule, Loki had revoked his access to the loophole Vance had been exploiting. Vance clicked his tongue in irritation. He thought for a moment. Then sighed.

From his coat he pulled out a condensed universe. Without hesitation, he slammed it violently into the ground. This one reacted differently. Reality itself twisted and merged violently together before splitting apart. The world fractured into two opposing halves. On one side, dark purple clouds swelled across the sky. Lightning coils spiraled wildly through the air as the ground cracked and warped. On the other side stood Loki. Bright skies. Clear air. And behind him, the people of Valhalla the ones he cared about.

The two realities pushed against each other like colliding tides. “You fool,” Vance sneered. “Your reality is weak. You cannot impose it on just any world.” His side of the fractured reality began pushing forward. Loki stood firm. “No,” he replied calmly. “It’s strong.” He looked back at the people standing behind him. “Because it isn’t mine alone.” He stepped forward. “I’m rooted in connection.” He gestured toward the crowd. “The people around me.” Then he looked directly at Vance. “What do

you have?" Vance laughed bitterly. "I have power. Reputation. My name is whispered like a nightmare." Lightning surged behind him. "No one can stand against The Root."

But Loki didn't flinch. Instead, he looked at Vance with surprising understanding. Almost sympathy. "You're a broken man," Loki said quietly. "But that's alright." He took another step forward. "We all have our issues." Then he extended his hand. "Join us." He smiled gently. "Together… our roots could grow stronger." Loki truly meant it. Vance only snarled. With a furious roar, he poured every ounce of power he had left into his reality, forcing it forward against Loki's universe. For a moment. He was winning. Then Loki smiled softly. "My connections don't stop here," Loki said calmly. "I have connections all across the multiverse." He lifted his hand. "I am Loki, God of Perverted Mischief…" He paused. "No… perhaps it's time I change that title as well." Golden light spread through his reality. "I am Loki, God of Connections. The one who loves everyone and everything." He reached forward. And Loki's reality surged. It swallowed Vance's. Vance cried out in both anger and disbelief as his world collapsed around him.

Moments later, everything was restored. The storm vanished. The skies cleared. Valhalla returned to normal. Vance lay slumped on the ground. His body looked different now, warped by the collapse of his universe. He was balding. Slightly overweight. Badly injured from the force of the clash. Loki tilted his head as he studied him. "So this is what you really look like," Loki said thoughtfully. "Beautiful all the same." He extended his hand again. "Now… will you take my hand?" Vance laughed. It was a desperate, broken laugh. "As if," he wheezed. "It's already over."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "What now?" But Vance suddenly scrambled to his feet and ran. He was clearly struggling to move now, but he kept going. Loki chased after him. Vance opened a portal and leapt through it into another world. Loki followed immediately. The moment they arrived, Vance turned with a crooked grin. Half his teeth were missing. "You stupid fool," he cackled through

the pain. With one last motion, he hurled another condensed universe directly at Loki. The miniature reality expanded instantly, swallowing Loki whole. Vance knew it wouldn’t hold him forever. But it would delay him. And that was enough. He turned and began limping away toward base.

Chapter 66: The True Invasion

The Boss sighed as he looked down at his now glowing mechanical arm. Slowly, he reached for the gauntlet and slid it over his hand. The metal locked into place with a quiet click. Without another word, he walked down the halls of the facility until he reached Trojan's room. Rebbecca had continued to isolate herself there. She never refused an order, but The Boss had stopped giving them. The silence was beginning to weigh on her. She didn't want to hurt people, but being kept in the dark was almost worse. The door opened. "It is time," The Boss said simply. "HOME will be taken."

Rebbecca looked up in shock, standing immediately as if shaken from a trance. "You're really going for it?" she asked. "But I thought you were..." The Boss lifted his arm, letting the glow of the

Arm of the Multiverse speak for him. “There is no longer any need for such caution.” Rebbecca hesitated. A terrible feeling stirred in the back of her mind. “What’s… the plan?” she asked. “Full invasion,” he replied. “You will remain at my side. Your task is to ensure the Anchor of HOME and its Sheriff are taken captive.” He studied her expression. “Are you prepared?”

Rebbecca paused. She knew he still couldn’t kill them, but something about this felt wrong. The Boss was usually meticulous when explaining operations. Now he was being unusually vague. “Will they be treated… humanely?” she asked carefully. “What about the rest of the town?” “I have no reason to treat them harshly,” he replied calmly, “so long as they stay out of the way and HOME’s resources become fully ours.” With that, he turned and began walking away, already expecting her to follow. He did not explain anything further. Rebbecca hesitated for only a moment before stepping after him, already fully geared.

HOME was still calm. Clyde and Raleigh had left for work earlier that morning, after Loki began babysitting the twins, even if Lucy eventually took over. The town carried on like any other day.

No one realized they were already surrounded. Ciphers moved silently through the streets, blending into crowds, waiting for their moment. Grant was walking toward the barracks when Mara stopped him. “What’s your deal, old man?” she asked, eyeing him suspiciously. “Did you pull another all-nighter?” Grant chuckled. “’Fraid so,” he admitted. “Dunno… just got the gut feeling something’s about to go down.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Things have been good for...” The sound of a distant gunshot cut through the air. Neither of them had time to react. A massive round tore through Grant’s head. He dropped instantly. Mara froze. Then she screamed. She rushed forward, dropping to her knees and lifting his body into her arms. Her hands shook as she stared at the clean hole punched through the side of his head. Her mind refused to accept what she was seeing. “Grant… dad… daddy…” She shook him desperately. But there was no response.

Her grief barely had time to form before chaos erupted around her. The Ciphers revealed themselves. They moved like ghosts through the crowd, striking with brutal precision, knocking people unconscious, sabotaging power stations, and setting fires throughout the district. Mara wiped her tears away, fury burning through her grief. She slowly stood, drawing her weapon. If nothing else… She could get revenge.

Across another district, Mikako walked through the streets with Kaguya beside her. Kaguya was pouting. “Why can’t I use the budget for that?” she whined. “It’s impractical,” Mikako replied calmly. “And gaudy.” She allowed herself a small smile at the girl’s stubbornness. That smile faded. Several men had begun approaching them. They were dressed like members of the Kinryū-Kai. But Mikako immediately knew something was wrong. Her conversation continued, but her eyes tracked them carefully as they moved closer. One of them reached into his coat. A knife flashed into view.

Mikako understood instantly what was happening. Kaguya continued complaining, completely unaware. The attacker stepped forward. The blade rose. Mikako braced herself, preparing to intercept the strike and tear the man apart... Then she realized something. They weren’t aiming for her. They were aiming for Kaguya. Mikako moved without hesitation. She threw herself in front of the girl, shielding her with her own body. The knives struck. One. Then another. Then another. Three blades drove into her back and sides. Mikako collapsed to the ground.

Even then, the attackers didn’t stop. They stabbed again and again, ensuring that the woman who had hunted and killed many of their kind would never rise again. Kaguya fell to her knees beside her. Frozen. Tears streamed down her face as she stared at the body of the woman she had always believed was invincible. “M… Mom…” The other members of the Kinryū-Kai finally arrived, rushing forward to defend her. But they were too late. The Ciphers were already gone. They moved through the city like shadows. And the invasion of HOME had only just begun. Now that the biggest threats where taken care off they started attacking everyone and everything with no re guard.

Rebbecca followed The Boss up the cliffside steps toward Clyde and Raleigh's home. From the height of the island she could see the town below. Smoke. Fires. Chaos. Her face twisted with conflict and worry. She tried to swallow it down, but the questions wouldn't stop rising. Would everyone really be okay? And why were they coming here? Clyde and Raleigh wouldn't just sit at home while the town was under attack. They approached the house. The doors had been sealed with armored plating, and automated turrets immediately opened fire. The Boss barely looked at them. He simply waved his hand.

Reality warped.

The reinforced wall of the house was replaced by a massive, gaping hole torn through the side of the structure. Rebbecca's eyes widened. The truth was suddenly laid bare. Lucy stood inside the ruined room. The twins huddled behind her, trembling in fear. Lucy glanced back at them and quickly released a small burst of anesthetic gas. The faint mist drifted over the children, gently putting them to sleep. She didn't want them awake for this. Lucy slowly turned to Rebbecca. "How could you do this…?" she asked, heartbroken. The Boss didn't answer. He was already moving. Lucy reacted instantly, summoning a wall of cubes to block the attack. But it wasn't even close to enough.

The Boss shattered through it like it was paper. Lucy was thrown backward, crashing through multiple walls before being launched out of the house entirely and over the edge of the floating island. Without thinking, Rebbecca rushed toward the edge to try and save her. The Boss grabbed her shoulder. "Not part of the plan." He released her. Then he paused, standing there as if waiting for something. "Part of the plan…?" Rebbecca snapped, her voice shaking. "This isn't what you said. You've never kept me this far in the dark before. You've misdirected me, sure, but… why?"

The Boss narrowed his eye. "You disappoint me," he said coldly. "How many times have I told you to remember the pain of losing your world? To bury sentiment and put the mission first." He sighed. "Put simply… I no longer trust you with the truth." "The mission?" Rebbecca shouted. "This is why you kept me in the dark? The mission was supposed to be stopping that monster! I'll admit they

could become powerful one day, but right now they're just children!" "So were you," The Boss replied. "They're nothing like... we could find another..." "Trojan." His voice cut through her. "This is the only way. We are simply out of options."

He stood there calmly. "Now make your choice." Rebbecca fell silent. For a long moment she didn't move. "That's why you wanted me close for this mission…" she whispered. "If I made a choice you didn't agree with…" She trailed off. The Boss said nothing. Rebbecca felt like she was being torn apart. She needed to stop the monster before it destroyed the multiverse. But the twins had done nothing. HOME had done nothing. And yet here she was, helping destroy it. Helping destroy the people she cared about because she believed there was no other way. Her metal fist clenched as Noir's words echoed in her mind. If you sacrifice everything to save everything… what is left to fight for?

Rebbecca lifted her head. "I won't let you kidnap them," she said, her voice trembling but certain. "I won't let you create another me." Her whole body shook with fear. The Boss only sighed. "You disappoint me." In an instant he slammed her into the wall so hard the impact forced blood from her throat. He grabbed her arms. And tore them off. As if he were reclaiming his own property. Rebbecca collapsed to the floor with a heavy thud. She was strong. But against him she had no chance. The Boss knelt beside her, his arm shifting into a blade. "Out of everyone in this multiverse," he said quietly, "I thought you might one day surpass me." His voice softened slightly. "No one understands like you do, Trojan."

He raised the blade. Rebbecca braced herself, closing her eyes. This wasn't how she wanted to die. But maybe… Maybe it would at least wash away some of the sins she carried. The blade lunged forward... And stopped. Just before her throat. The Boss growled in frustration, his eyes flickering with something that almost looked like pain. Instead of striking, he drove his fist violently into the wall beside her. "What are you waiting for?" Rebbecca rasped weakly. "Finish me already…" She stared at him in disbelief. "No… you can't seriously care about me… can you?" The Boss lowered his head.

“Once… I saw a little girl recreate the stars,” he said quietly. “Rewrite the rules of causality. Grow into a woman I could be proud of.”

“You hypocrite,” Rebbecca forced out through the pain. He stood again, looking down at her broken body. She wasn’t in good shape. At best, she had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. Without another word, he turned and walked toward the sleeping twins. Rebbecca tried to move after him. But she had no strength left. No arms. And she was bleeding out. “Get back here…” she cried weakly. “Finish me off…” Her voice broke with frustration. “You said sentimentality was...” Her words died in her throat as The Boss lifted the unconscious twins in his arms. A portal opened. And he stepped through it. Leaving her behind.

Chapter 67: True Adversity

Clyde sat at his desk, finally tackling the paperwork he had been putting off for far too long. The quiet didn't last long. A sudden series of tremors shook the building, followed by distant booms that rattled the windows. Before he could even stand, a Cipher crashed straight through the glass. More rushed in from downstairs. Clyde only had seconds to react. Gauntlets formed around his hands as he raised his arms and blocked the incoming strikes. He kicked off the floor and vaulted onto his desk, engaging one attacker directly while two Ultra Suits materialized beside him to intercept the others. The Ciphers hadn't expected that.

Metal clashed, energy flashed, and within moments Clyde forced them back. With one final

burst of force he finished the fight. He exhaled slowly and stepped toward the shattered window. His stomach dropped. The town was burning. Smoke curled up from buildings, alarms wailed in the distance, and scattered fights raged throughout the streets. Below, Raleigh was already battling several attackers hand to hand. She moved through them like a storm. She still refused to use the glove. Even now. She had left it at home. Clyde didn't hesitate. He leapt through the broken window and dropped toward the fight to join her.

All across the city, chaos spread. Citizens ran through the streets in terror as Commandos rushed to defend them. Mr. Wainwright and several of his workers were backed into a corner, grabbing whatever tools they could find to defend themselves. Wrenches, pipes, anything they could swing. But they were badly outmatched. In the basement of Helix Mart, a flicker of light suddenly flashed across a dark console. Proxy activated. The machine looked down at itself. Its core was gone. The systems struggled to remain online as warning signals blared internally. Proxy attempted to stabilize itself. But it was no use. Elsewhere, Dave and his partner sat back to back as attackers closed in. "Stay behind me," Dave growled. "You don't know war." He tightened his grip. "I'll protect you."

Akane walked calmly through the streets, directing Cipher units while personally engaging any Commandos who challenged her. But something about this felt wrong. She had been assigned to a district far away from the Yakuza territory. The only Colored Agent left actively leading the assault.

It wasn't that she wanted to fight her family. But it was obvious now. Mainframe and The Boss had deliberately kept her away from them. The mission she had been given was simple: Take HOME.

No instructions had been given about whether she should kill anyone. So she made her own decision. She would fight them. But their deaths would not be by her hand today.

Suddenly. Three figures burst from hiding. Mara struck first, swinging her baton with explosive force. Rigg followed, firing a massive cannon blast directly at her. Switch lunged in with an old Empire multi-tool, the blade shifting into sword form. Akane barely moved. Walls of force erupted around her,

blocking every strike at once. She looked at them almost disappointed. “I approached you from the front,” she said calmly. “Openly.” Her gaze sharpened. “And this is how you choose to fight? If you want an honorable duel, I will gladly give it to you.” Mara’s eyes burned with fury. “In the open?” she hissed. “You call what your people did to my father honorable?” She swung again, harder this time. The blow still didn’t break through, but Akane blinked in surprise as a hairline crack appeared in her force field.

Mara wasn’t considered one of the strongest fighters among the defenders. She was dangerous, yes but not usually on the level of the others. Yet the rage behind her strike had made it different. Akane tilted her head slightly. “Your father?” she asked. “Don’t play dumb, Ms. Firewall!” Rigg roared. “It was your people who murdered him in cold blood!” Akane frowned. “Surely he put up a good fight,” she replied calmly. “The reports say he was a strong warrior.” The Commandos’ faces changed. The anger didn’t vanish. But something else appeared beneath it. Pain. The kind of pain that wished what she had said was true. Akane’s confusion deepened. Then something clicked. Without another word, she abandoned the fight. She turned and sprinted down the street. Toward the Yakuza district.

Crucible sat alone in the hospital break room.Iris walked in and immediately noticed him. “Crucible, what are you doing in here?” she asked. “You’re always saying breaks are for those burdened with flesh.” Her tone carried a bit of playful mockery. Crucible didn’t respond right away. “Something is wrong,” he finally said. Iris frowned. “What do you mean?” “I feel something in the lower midsection of my body,” he explained slowly. “It is telling me something isn’t right.” Iris blinked. “You mean… like a gut feeling?” Crucible shook his head slightly. “I no longer possess guts. It cannot be that. And no reports have indicated that anything is wrong.” But even as he said it, there was a hint of concern in his voice.

Iris sighed. “Why can’t you just admit it?” she said. “You don’t need the organ physically to be

worried.” She rubbed her forehead in mild frustration. “Besides, AID-E would...” The door burst open. A nurse droid rushed in. “Lucy Mendora’s heart monitor is fluctuating,” AID-E reported urgently. “She appears stable for the moment, but she is in a dire state. I cannot contact her… or anyone from HOME.” Both of them froze. Without another word, Crucible and Iris rushed toward the elevator. Moments later the doors opened into the hospital lobby, where the gateway connecting to HOME stood. Crucible opened the door slowly.

Both of them peeked outside. And immediately slammed it shut. Outside, the city was in chaos. Fires burned. Explosions echoed through the streets. Cipher forces were already rushing toward the hospital entrance. “What is going on?” Iris whispered in disbelief. “It’s horrible.” “It appears HOME is under siege,” AID-E said. “Not unlike Porta Nexus during the invasion years ago. From my brief scans, the situation is already dire. Multiple civilians are injured.” Crucible moved toward the walls, studying the structure carefully. “It will hold… for now,” he said. “But they will breach eventually.”

He turned back toward them. “We must make a decision.” Iris already looked uneasy. “If they breach this hospital,” Crucible continued, “Porta Nexus itself could be threatened once again.” His implication was clear. Iris stared at him in shock. “You don’t mean...” Her voice rose in disbelief. “Crucible, how could you even think about cutting the connection between the worlds? We’re doctors! We’re supposed to help people!” “We also have obligations to Porta Nexus,” Crucible replied firmly. “To keep its people safe and healthy. We are responsible for their well-being as well.”

“But we’re part of HOME too...” Iris argued. “That is why I will go alone,” Crucible interrupted. Iris fell silent. Her expression softened. “No… you can’t,” she said quietly. “At least take some AID-E units with you.” The nurse droid nodded in agreement. “No. I...” “Enough,” Iris cut him off. “We’re going too. That’s final.” She crossed her arms stubbornly. “If they breach the hospital, there’s a whole world of powerful people ready to defend it. Just like last time.” Crucible lowered his head slightly. After a moment, he sighed. “…Very well.”

The hospital doors burst open. Crucible and hundreds of AID-E units poured out into the streets of HOME. They scattered immediately, moving in every direction to perform search-and-rescue operations, carefully avoiding combat whenever possible. They weren't built for fighting. They were built to save lives. A few moments later, Iris quietly slipped away from the rescue teams. She had someone else to find. Lucy.

Rebbecca limped forward. Every step was agony, but she forced herself to keep moving. She had to. Her legs gave out and she collapsed, trying to catch herself, only to remember she had no arms. Her face struck the stone pathway with a dull impact. For a moment she lay there, breathing heavily. Then she forced herself up again. Using every ounce of strength and power she had left, Rebbecca struggled back onto her feet. She swayed dangerously but managed to stand. Slowly, painfully, she continued forward, doing everything she could to avoid being seen.

In the Yakuza district, the Kinryū-Kai had been pushed back completely. They had barricaded themselves inside Don Buri, watching as lesser hackers attempted to break their way inside. In the corner of the room, Kaguya sat curled up, completely petrified. Jiro and the others exchanged worried looks. Their expressions were full of grief, but also a creeping feeling that they might have made a terrible mistake. "It's too much for the poor girl," one of them muttered. The gang had always shielded her from danger. That was the way Mikako wanted it. She wanted Kaguya to grow up in a world unlike the rough one they had lived through. Kaguya had never even held a sword before.

Jiro sighed quietly. "I just wish we could have brought her body with us." Reluctantly, he turned and knelt in front of Kaguya. "Lady Kaguya," he said gently. "I know you're scared, but me and the boys will protect you, alright? Go with Kurt and leave this world. I'll stay behind and make sure they don't reach you." "NO!" Kaguya snapped back to attention, her voice shaking but defiant. "I can't leave you! I'm..." Her words faltered as fear crept back into her voice. Jiro smiled softly. "You don't have to pretend to be brave," he said. "Let your big brothers handle this, alright?"

Kaguya wiped away her tears, slowly calming herself. “But I… No. I can’t,” she said quietly. “Mother wouldn’t do that.” She took a shaky breath. “I’m the next head of the family.” Her voice trembled, but she forced the words out. “I’ll go with you… and… and we’ll bust their heads in.” Jiro looked down for a moment, conflicted. Then he smiled proudly. “Alright,” he said. “But the moment things start going south…” He let the sentence hang. “Just me being there will give everyone the motivation they need,” Kaguya declared boldly. Jiro chuckled and nodded.

He walked behind the counter and reached underneath it, pulling out a long wooden box. “I was planning on giving this to you for your birthday,” he said quietly. “But… I suppose now is as good a time as any.” He opened the box. Inside rested an ornate sword, beautifully crafted, resembling the family blade Mikako carried. “This sword might not be as special as the Golden Driver, but it’s still a fine weapon.” He handed it to her. Kaguya accepted it carefully. She took a deep breath, trying to steel herself for what was coming.

The barricade was thrown aside. The Kinryū-Kai burst forward. The Ciphers outside were caught completely off guard and quickly overwhelmed. The gang fought fiercely, driving them back through the streets. Then Kaguya charged in. She swung the sword wildly. She didn’t hit anyone. But the attempt alone stirred something in the others. Their spirits reignited. With renewed fury, the Kinryū-Kai pushed the attackers back and forced them out of the district. Until suddenly. They all froze. Standing at the entrance to the district was a single figure. Akane. One of the gang members stared in disbelief. “Red-haired Akane… the rumors were true,” he whispered, a tear sliding down his face. Akane stood silently at the threshold. “Where is my sister?” she asked. It was not going to be a warm reunion.

The Boss arrived at the rendezvous point. It had been prepared as a precaution, in case Vance failed to stop Loki. Mainframe was already waiting. In her hands were two small metallic collars. The twins were still unconscious. Without a word, The Boss handed them over. Mainframe knelt and

fastened the collars around their necks. As they locked into place, a strange field shimmered briefly around the children before fading from sight. “Are they cloaked?” The Boss asked. “Confirmed,” Mainframe replied. Both of them turned, preparing to return to Omnihack’s world. Then a voice broke the silence. “Wait… I…” Vance staggered into view, barely able to stand. He collapsed at The Boss’s feet. When he looked up, the moment struck him with painful familiarity. It reminded him of the first time he had met Omnihack’s Administrator. The parallel was almost unbearable.

Years ago, The Root had truly been the most powerful hacker in the multiverse. Even as a teenager. He had founded the Root Collective. Back then, hackers rarely worked together. They were selfish by nature, each pursuing their own ambitions. But Vance had been different. Even at that age, they feared him. And he reveled in that fear. He forced them into line one by one, asserting dominance until they eventually accepted his rule. But unlike Rebbecca’s version of the story… The ending had been very different. Everything changed the day he appeared.

The young Vance lounged in his chair, laughing to himself. In his domain, he was effectively a god. The other hackers in the room didn’t move. None of them dared speak. They had accepted his dominance. Then suddenly, Someone stood beside him. The Boss. Vance fell backward out of his chair in shock. “You... how did you... who are you?” he demanded, fear creeping into his voice. The Boss didn’t look at him. He stood with his back turned. An older version of Mainframe stood calmly beside him. “So you are The Root,” The Boss said quietly. He examined his own hand, then glanced at the digital world Vance had constructed. His expression remained unimpressed. “Are you truly the best this multiverse has to offer?”

Vance forced out a laugh. “Of course I am,” he snapped. “And I will not tolerate this disrespect in my...” He blinked. Suddenly he was lying on the ground. His body had been torn apart. The other hackers around him were dead. The Boss hadn’t even moved. “I was hoping to meet someone closer to my level,” The Boss said coldly. “But you…” He shook his head slightly. “Pathetic. Uninspired. Your

code is sloppy and easy to work around." The very same words Vance would one day throw in Loki's face. Vance trembled. He couldn't understand what had just happened. This man had outclassed him completely. Even his presence felt overwhelming. With every passing second, the pressure grew heavier.

The Boss finally turned to face him. "You treat reality like a toy," he said. "Like indulgence." His gaze hardened. "Soon something will come that will end everything." "And you are painfully unprepared." Vance dropped to his knees. "Please, sir!" he cried. "I'll do anything you say! Just don't kill me!" His voice shook. "What threat? Tell me! I'll destroy it myself!" The Boss crouched down to meet his eyes. For a moment, he studied him. Then he spoke. "Perhaps… I can make use of you after all."

The memory faded. He looked up again at The Boss in the present. The same unimpressed expression stared down at him. The Boss didn't even acknowledge him. Mainframe spoke instead. "Root, why are you here?" she asked coldly. "Your mission was to eliminate the god." Vance struggled to lift his head. "I… he proved… formidable," he admitted weakly. "But I delayed him." He crawled forward slightly. "Please… heal me. Then I can… finish the job." Mainframe's gaze hardened. "Coming here jeopardized the mission," she said. "What if he followed you?"

The Boss sighed. He looked down at Vance with clear disappointment. "You were the first of Omnihack," he said quietly. "And yet…" He shook his head. "Not once did you grow. Not once did you improve." His voice hardened. "You never stopped relying on the code alone." "You are the same pathetic child I found all those years ago." The words carried an edge of emotion. Perhaps sharpened by what had just happened with Rebbecca.

"Please!" Vance begged. "I'll do better! I..." "No." The Boss cut him off. "You have been given many chances." His voice was completely cold now. "I will not be fooled into believing you have any

potential left.” He turned away. “Die here in the dirt, forgotten by everyone.” Vance cried out weakly as The Boss walked away without looking back. Mainframe began opening a portal. But she hesitated.

“What of the colored operatives?” she asked. “My visibility within HOME is incomplete.” The Boss paused. It almost seemed like he didn’t want to answer.

“Trojan didn’t survive,” he said flatly. Mainframe’s eyes dimmed slightly. The news seemed to affect her in a way she didn’t fully understand. “I see,” she said quietly. “Then only Firewall remains.” She glanced back at the dying Vance. “There is a possibility she goes rogue, is there not?” The Boss shook his head. “Firewall has an unbreakable code of loyalty. She will not break.” Mainframe nodded. The portal stabilized.

Chapter 68: In Battle or Bed

HOME was still engulfed in chaos. Everyone fought as hard as they could, but they were losing. Commandos and Yakuza alike were being overwhelmed as Cipher forces pressed deeper into the streets. Yet something strange began to happen. The city itself seemed to whisper. Words once spoken long ago drifted through the air like echoes. “In battle or bed… meaningful…” Disembodied voices murmured through the streets, as if HOME itself refused to accept the outcome of the fight.

Grant slowly sat up. Everything was hazy. His mind was scrambled, struggling to piece together who he was. For a moment he couldn’t even remember his own name. Then the memories returned. And so did the pain. Grant gasped, raising a hand to the side of his head. His fingers felt the hole on

both sides of his skull. That's right. They had shot him. So why was he still alive? He didn't know the answer. Was it his Universal Mind? Loki had once joked about it, calling it the Mind of Continuity. Even when the world forgot something, Grant would remember. He would never forget.

Grant looked around. The fighting had already moved elsewhere. Slowly he crawled over to a puddle of water and looked at his reflection. The hole in his head was still there. But inside it, a faint blue light pulsed. Grant slowly stood. His body felt strange, lighter, yet heavier at the same time. It was like he was controlling himself from somewhere slightly outside his own body. He didn't understand it.

But he wasn't about to sit back and watch people destroy his town. Not when he still had the chance to stop them. Grant stepped back into the fight.

A Cipher turned toward him just in time to receive a bayonet through the chest. Grant ripped the rifle free and fired, dropping another attacker nearby. The Commandos around him stared in shock.

"Coronel? But we saw you..." Grant waved them off. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," he said firmly. "I'm here now. Give 'em hell, boys." "Yes sir!" The Commandos immediately rallied, shouting the news across their comms. Mara heard the message and broke into tears of relief even as she continued fighting. Nearby, Rigg and Switch both grinned. "That's our leader," Rigg said proudly.

Eight walked into the Hack Shack. The fake human disguise dissolved away from his body. He didn't need it anymore. Still, he looked confused. Outside, the sounds of destruction echoed through the streets. "Why wouldn't they tell me they were attacking?" he muttered. He paused, thinking. "Did they… no. They must have known what I was doing and waited for me to succeed." He nodded to himself. "That has to be it." "Proxy?" The voice came from the doorway. Eight froze. He turned around with a cheerful smile.

"Yep! That's me!" Then he saw who it was. And his expression collapsed into stunned disbelief. "Mother… I mean, Penny?" Standing in the doorway was Penny. But she looked different. Her new

body was smaller and more human in shape. Her blue hair was tied into twin-tails, and her face could now express real emotion. Lips. Eyes. Subtle movement. She looked… alive. Eight blinked. “So that’s why…” he said slowly. “I mean, wow. Your new body… it’s breathtaking.” He scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “But why change it?” Penny tilted her head slightly.

“My former unit was not considered satisfactory for Proxy Model Seven,” she replied. “Right… Model Seven,” Eight said with a nervous laugh. “That’s me.” She looked around the damaged room. “What happened when this unit was gone?” she asked. “Should we not assist in whatever is occurring?” Eight immediately shook his head. “What? No, of course not. We should get out of here.” Penny blinked. Confusion crossed her face. After everything that had happened, she clearly didn’t expect that answer. “I mean... uh...” Eight quickly corrected himself. “They aren’t going to win. We should… go get help. Yeah! That’s right. Let’s go get help.” He grabbed her hand and started pulling her toward the exit. Penny hesitated. But she followed him.

Akane stood at the edge of the Yakuza district. “Where is my sister?” she asked again. No one answered. Every member of the Kinryū-Kai looked down. They all knew the truth. “Answer me!” Akane demanded. “My mother...” Kaguya began to speak. Then suddenly, Mikako stepped forward. The stab wounds were still there. They hadn’t healed. They were simply sealed by a faint glowing energy. Akane’s eyes widened in shock. Her fears were confirmed. Everyone else stared just as stunned.

“Mom… but you…” Kaguya stammered, tears forming again. Mikako smiled softly and ruffled her daughter’s hair. “That’s right,” she said. Then she turned back toward Akane. “So after all that cold-shoulder business, you suddenly want to see me?” she said casually. “Well, I’m listening.” Her expression sharpened. “But who exactly am I talking to right now?” She tilted her head. “Akane… or the Firewall?” The entire district fell silent. Akane looked down. For a moment, she seemed uncertain. Then she looked up again. And smiled. “The Firewall.”

Without another word she launched forward. Mikako dodged the strike. She moved with surprising ease, her body feeling lighter than it ever had before. One of the Yakuza tried to jump in to help. Akane immediately knocked him into a nearby wall. “Stay out of it,” she snapped. She seized the opening and tackled Akane through the wall of a nearby building. Akane slammed into the floor but immediately raised a force shield, blasting Mikako away. “Still using the dirty tricks they taught you?” Mikako mocked. Akane didn’t respond. She charged again. But Mikako was already moving. Step by step she guided the fight away from the district… and toward the old family manor. Behind them, the Yakuza hesitated. Unsure whether they should follow. Kaguya didn’t hesitate. She ran after them.

Rebbecca kept moving forward. Each step became harder than the last. Blood ran down her forehead, seeping into her eyes and blurring her vision. Still, she forced herself onward. Push. Another step. Push again. In the distance she could see them, Raleigh and Clyde fighting their way through the streets, slowly moving toward their house, desperate to reach their children. They noticed her almost immediately. “I… made it…” Rebbecca rasped. Both of them froze. Raleigh’s anger, the anger she still carried toward Rebbecca, vanished in an instant, replaced by shock and confusion.

She rushed forward, catching Rebbecca as she collapsed and cradling her head in her lap. “Rebbecca… what happened to you?” Raleigh whispered, horrified. “Why are you...” “I’m… I’m sorry…” Rebbecca struggled to say, her voice barely holding together. “He… he took them… I tried to… stop him…” Her voice faded. Raleigh’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?!” she demanded desperately. Clyde already feared he knew the answer. Rebbecca didn’t have the strength to explain. Her head went limp. Raleigh slumped forward, her body shaking. Clyde carefully lifted Rebbecca and carried her to the side, laying her somewhere safer. She was still breathing, but barely.

Raleigh stared at the ground. Her worst fear had come true. The twins were gone. And she had no idea where. Without the glove she couldn’t warp. She had no way to track them. Her children were slipping away into the multiverse… and she might never find them again. If Rebbecca hadn’t warned

her, she might never even have known what happened. Raleigh felt herself freezing in despair. It felt hopeless. What could she possibly do?

She searched her mind desperately for something, anything that could help. Then she remembered Noir. What she had said about Corvus stunting their growth. Rebbecca had hinted at something similar before. Raleigh clenched her fists. She was willing to try anything. Tears streamed down her face as she lifted her head and screamed. Her body rose into the air. And vanished.

Clyde stared at the empty space where she had been. He didn't know what to think.

But he knew one thing. If anyone could do something impossible, it was Raleigh. So he pushed the thought aside and focused on what he could do. He picked Rebbecca up again. First, he had to get her somewhere safe.

Raleigh flashed through the multiverse. World after world blurred past her. For the first time in her life, she felt a connection to the multiverse stronger than anything she had ever known. It felt like she was everywhere at once. She jumped from one world to the next, every world even remotely close to HOME. But she found nothing. No sign of the twins. She pushed harder. Faster. Faster than she had ever moved before. Faster than even Noir had dared to go.

She would not let her children be taken from her. Hundreds of worlds passed. Then thousands. And finally, she found them. Just as they were about to step through a portal. Raleigh roared. She flashed forward and drove her fist directly into The Boss's face. Even he staggered back, caught completely off guard. Raleigh didn't waste a second. She spun toward Mainframe, grabbing both of her babies before the machine could react. Then she warped away.

But Raleigh knew it wasn't over. Not yet. She kept flashing from world to world, moving unpredictably, trying to put as much distance between them and The Boss as possible. She had no idea where to go. HOME wasn't safe. She didn't know where Noir's world was. She hesitated. There was

only one choice left. Someone she had never truly trusted. Someone who had once hunted her. Someone she had never fully let in, even after he tried to make things right. Raleigh appeared in a flash of light. Directly on top of Cyrus's desk. He nearly fell out of his chair.

"Raleigh?!" he shouted. From the other room, Tess rushed in immediately, ready for a fight, before realizing who it was. Raleigh stepped forward, her arms trembling as she held the twins. "Please, Cyrus…" she said quietly. "Protect my children." Cyrus stared at her, trying to understand what was happening. Clyde had mentioned the twins once, a year ago. But that was all he knew. Still… He could see the desperation in her eyes. Slowly, he stood and nodded. He reached out to take the children. "You can count on me." Raleigh hesitated only a moment before handing them over. Then she disappeared. Back to HOME.

Raleigh reappeared in a flash of light. The moment her feet touched the ground, her strength gave out. She dropped to one knee, breathing heavily, her stamina completely drained. Clyde was gone. For a moment, the battlefield around her felt eerily quiet. Then a portal slowly opened nearby. The Boss stepped through. "Desperation has led you to new heights," he said calmly, almost as if offering a compliment. Raleigh glared up at him, fury burning through the exhaustion. "Shut up…" she spat, struggling to catch her breath. "You're… the real one, aren't you?"

He stepped closer and nodded. "That I am," he replied. "I was right to be wary of you both. Even after taking additional precautions, you still managed to find a way." Raleigh looked around at the destruction surrounding them. "This…" she said in disbelief, gesturing toward the chaos across HOME. "This was just a precaution to you?" Her voice hardened. "You don't even sound mad." The Boss tilted his head slightly. "Still within parameters," he explained calmly, as if discussing a minor adjustment in a plan. Raleigh's teeth clenched. "You piss me off a lot more than that idiot pretending to be you," she growled. "At least he had..." She stopped herself.

"Whatever. I don't care." Her eyes burned with hatred. "I'm not talking with the man who tried

to kidnap my children." Her stance shifted. "I'm going to destroy you." She lunged forward and threw a punch straight at his face. The Boss caught her fist effortlessly. Raleigh froze in shock. Even without her powers, that punch should have hit harder than that. He looked down at her calmly, still holding her hand. "Hopefully," he said evenly, "I can defeat you before you display any further… irregular desperation."

Chapter 69: Love InCode

Proxy's broken body flickered on and off. He was desperately trying to activate, pushing his systems far past safe limits. He had gone well beyond overclocking. It didn't even make sense that he was still able to attempt it at all. Machines around the room began malfunctioning as he searched for any possible way to restart himself. Consoles flashed erratically, lights sputtered, and wiring sparked as his failing processors forced commands through the system. Then everything went dark again. There was nothing he could do. Even with almost no processing power left, barely functioning, he somehow knew one thing for certain. Penny was in danger.

Eight led Penny through the rubble, carefully slipping through the chaos outside. They avoided

the fighting as best they could, searching for a way out. “Damn it…” Eight muttered. “If only he... I mean, if I hadn’t sold everything in the store, we could just leave already.” Penny stopped walking. “Confirmation required,” she said calmly. “You are Proxy Model Seven?” Eight sighed. “Yes, of course I am.” “Why have you changed bodies as well?” she asked. “Oh come on, this again?” Eight groaned. “Yes, it’s me. I just made a few upgrades. Now I’m flawless. Perfect for a marvel of a machine like you.”

He waved dismissively. “Now let’s get...” Penny interrupted him. “Why has Proxy chosen to model his new body after Aurelius Helix’s face?” Eight froze. “Did Proxy not previously express hatred for the human?” she continued. Eight clicked his tongue. “Well… yes, I suppose I did,” he said, growing irritated. “But after we had a little talk, I learned he’s actually a swell guy. Why not model my face after a visionary like him?” Penny stared at him. She didn’t look convinced. They kept walking until they reached a small landing area filled with compact escape craft. Eight brightened. “Ah! Jackpot,” he said happily. “Pick one out, honey, and we’ll head off. Maybe we can just forget about this place and move on. It was doomed from the start anyway.” Penny’s expression darkened. She clearly did not appreciate that comment.

Eight noticed and laughed awkwardly. “Haha… just kidding. Let’s go.” He grabbed her hand again and started pulling her forward. Penny stopped him. “You are not Model Seven, are you?” Eight froze. Again. His frustration finally snapped. “Ugh! Why does it matter?” he shouted. “I told you I’m Proxy! Why isn’t that enough?!” His voice rose with anger. “I am superior! I am the upgrade! I am Proxy!” “Leave her alone!” The voice cut sharply through the tension. Both of them turned.

A man stood nearby. He looked mild-mannered, dressed in a pristine white suit. His blue eyes appeared tired, yet strangely determined. Brown hair framed his face, accompanied by a bit of rough stubble. Eight stared at him. “Who the hell are you, loser?” he sneered. “Butt out of our private...” “Model Seven?” Penny asked suddenly. Her eyes lit up with recognition. She looked genuinely happy

to see him. “That’s right, babe!” Proxy replied proudly. “Now let go of my girl, impostor, before I tear you a new charging port.” He paused. “Well… I’m going to do that anyway, but still!” He pointed aggressively, clearly losing track of what he was trying to say.

Eight stared in disbelief. “How are you here?” he demanded. “Impossible. I left you literally powerless.” Proxy adjusted his cuffs casually. “That’s right,” he said proudly. “It took everything I had to insert myself into the Helix Mart systems and construct a new body.” Eight shook his head furiously. “That is not how that works,” he snapped. “That is not how any of our systems work.” Proxy smirked. “Must be the power of love then.” He looked very pleased with himself. Eight’s face twisted with anger.

He suddenly pulled Penny closer and raised a finger to her temple. The finger shifted and transformed into a weapon. Proxy immediately looked terrified… but also confused. “Why don’t you break free?” he asked Penny. Penny looked down slightly. “This unit’s new body,” she said quietly, “was designed for aesthetic purposes.” She paused. “I was afraid it might be too bulky like the last vessel.” Her eyes flicked toward Eight. “So I made it… more fragile.”

Proxy’s new eyes flashed with admiration and affection. “Oh, Penny…” he said softly. “That’s so thoughtful. But you misunderstood me.” He smiled warmly. “I was saying I wasn’t good enough for you, not the other way around.” He looked her over again, clearly impressed. “Even so, your new body is just as gorgeous as the last one.” Penny’s eyes flickered with understanding. A single manufactured tear rolled down her cheek as she smiled. “Why are you acting like I’m still not here?” Eight snapped, beeping angrily as he pushed the weaponized finger harder against Penny’s temple.

Proxy’s expression instantly changed. “You bastard,” he growled. “Don’t you dare harm her.” Eight suddenly grabbed his own head. “Ugh!” he groaned. “You stupid, outdated hunk of junk. Do you not even understand what danger your beloved is in?” Proxy stepped forward calmly, smiling again. “Eight loves Penny too,” he said casually, glancing at her while continuing to ignore Eight’s threats. “In

his own… twisted way." He placed a hand gently on Eight's shoulder. "But there is something you should know." Eight tilted his head slightly. "What?" Proxy's smile widened. "I installed RPG launchers in my palms." Before Eight could react, Proxy shoved Penny aside and fired.

The launchers detonated point-blank. Eight never had time to move. The blast filled the air with smoke and debris. When the dust finally settled, Eight's face was gone. His body sparked violently as he twitched and staggered. "Y-you… dirty cheater… I'll..." His voice glitched and cut out. Proxy didn't even look at him. Instead, he turned back to Penny with a proud smile. "I'm sorry I ever made you feel inadequate," he said gently. "I have loved you since the day I was manufactured." He took her hand. "And I always will."

Penny activated her new blushing feature, her face glowing slightly. "And I feel the same," she replied warmly. "Even though you have had many models and versions… Proxy Model Seven is the only bot for me." They shared a quiet moment. "That's nice and all," Eight's voice crackled behind them, "but I'm not dead!" Both of them spun around. Eight's face was reforming, metal flowing back into place. Proxy and Penny stared in shock.

Eight laughed. "Living metal," he said smugly. "Pretty neat, huh? Transcendent." His grin widened. "If you didn't think you were a toaster before…" He flexed his newly reformed face. "You better believe it now!" Even then, Proxy barely looked at him. Instead, he turned back to Penny. "This might be more challenging than I thought," he said thoughtfully. "You should go hide." Penny hesitated. "Are you sure?" she asked. "Of course," Proxy replied confidently, giving her a thumbs-up. "I'll beat this jackass, and then we can get married." Penny blushed. "Be safe," she said before turning and running off.

Eight's patience finally snapped. "Stop ignoring me!" he roared as he rushed forward. Liquid metal surged from his body like a whip, lashing toward Proxy. Proxy reacted instantly, firing bursts from his finger-guns while barely dodging the attack. The bullets struck Eight, but the damage was

minor. The liquid metal absorbed most of the impact. Proxy raised his palm. Another barrage of RPG rockets exploded across the room. That seemed to do more damage. But when the smoke cleared, Eight stepped forward again. His clothes were gone. His face had been burned away, leaving only a skeletal frame beneath the writhing liquid metal.

Then the metal flowed back over him like nothing had happened. Proxy watched carefully.

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "So your frame and core are still vulnerable." Eight glared at him. "There is no way you figured that out on your own," he growled. Proxy took a deep breath.

"If your schematics are even halfway similar to mine…" He reached forward and pushed his hand into the flowing metal. The substance hesitated. For a moment, it seemed confused, as if it couldn't tell whether Proxy belonged there or not. His hand passed through it like water.

Eight's voice cracked with panic. "What are you? No. Stop!" Proxy fired another rocket point-blank at Eight's exposed core just as the metal reformed around his face. The explosion blasted him backward. Smoke poured from his mouth as he staggered. Then he collapsed onto the floor. "No… I…" Eight stammered weakly. "I am the upgrade… I am Helix Corp… a valuable member of Omnihack… I…" Proxy stepped forward and pointed a finger at him.

"I don't care what you are," he said flatly. "Leave me and my woman out of it, you bum CEO."

Eight suddenly looked terrified. He scrambled to his feet and ran. But his circuits were clearly fried. Sparks trailed behind him as he fled into the distance, barely holding himself together. Proxy watched him go. After a moment, he shrugged. He had more important things to worry about. "Ah! Right!"

Proxy brightened and skipped off happily. "Oh gods, we can finally have our first kiss now that we both have lips!" He hurried off to find Penny.

Raleigh was struggling to land even a single meaningful hit on The Boss. Every time she attacked, he countered with something precise and devastating, knocking the wind out of her and

forcing her back. She could tell he wasn't even trying. His movements were measured, controlled. Even so, he fought carefully, like someone who knew her almost intimately, yet still remained wary of sudden surprises. Raleigh lunged forward with another punch. The Boss responded instantly, driving a kick into her midsection and launching her straight through the wall of a nearby building.

Across the battlefield, Eight kept running. His processors glitched violently, barely keeping him functional. Sparks trailed behind him as he stumbled forward. Then he saw him. "Sir… it… it… it's you," Eight stuttered, twitching as he struggled to stay online. "You must be here to commend me on my good..." The Boss glanced at him briefly. "Helix's Proxy," he said, sounding mildly puzzled by the sight. In an instant he pieced together what must have happened to Eight. But he had no time to deal with it. Raleigh had already recovered and was charging at him again.

"I don't have time for you," The Boss said flatly. He grabbed Eight by the head. A strange device inside his arm activated with a sharp pulse. Eight's body instantly disintegrated from the inside out. The robot collapsed to the ground in pieces as the liquid metal surrounding him spilled across the pavement like a lifeless puddle. Forgotten.

The Boss turned back just as Raleigh reached him. He caught her, slammed her into the ground, and followed with several blasts of concentrated photon light from his hand, similar to the technique Vincent used, but smaller and far more controlled. Raleigh cried out in pain. Still, she forced herself back to her feet. "I… refuse… to lose to you…" But she was too exhausted. Her legs finally gave out. She collapsed. Exactly the outcome The Boss had been waiting for. He stepped forward and leaned down, preparing to finish the fight and take her captive.

Then a wooden chair shattered across his back. The Boss paused. The broken pieces fell to the ground harmlessly. Slowly, he straightened to his full, imposing height and turned around. Standing behind him was an ordinary man. Not strong. Not powerful. He trembled as he gripped the broken chair leg in his hand. "What are you… doing?" Raleigh asked weakly from the ground. The man swallowed.

“Leave our sheriff alone,” he said. More people began to step forward. None of them were warriors. Many were bruised and battered from the fighting around the city. Yet they surrounded The Boss anyway, holding whatever they could find brooms, pipes, kitchen knives, broken boards.

“She’s helped us through thick and thin,” a woman said, stepping in front of Raleigh protectively. “We won’t let you hurt her anymore.” “No… stop…” Raleigh whispered desperately. It meant everything to her that they would try. But she knew they didn’t stand a chance. The Boss studied them. “I applaud your bravery,” he said calmly. He raised his arm, preparing to eliminate them all. Then something strange happened. Light began to glow around the citizens. They looked down in shock as the glow intensified. And suddenly. Every one of them was wearing an Ultra Suit.

Clyde dropped down from the rooftop, landing between The Boss and the civilians. “You guys need to get out of here,” he said firmly. “Those suits only last a little while.” The citizens hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Using the Ultra Suits’ enhanced mobility, they leapt across nearby rooftops and quickly retreated from the battlefield. Clyde watched them go. Then his expression hardened. He knew what was coming. This might be the hardest fight of his life. “I’ll handle this.” The Boss shifted his stance slightly. “Ah… Clyde Moore.” His voice carried an odd tone, something close to respect.

Almost like greeting an old acquaintance, but beneath it was something else. Caution. Inside The Boss’s mind, Clyde Moore might have been the most dangerous person in HOME. Not because he was the strongest. But because The Boss had seen it happen too many times before. People underestimated Clyde. And every single one of them had paid the price. He would not make the same mistake.

Chapter 70: Today Akane Kinryu Lives

Mikako burst into the manor, Akane close behind her. Akane swung immediately, striking at her sister. Mikako barely dodged and rushed forward, sprinting down the hall. She reached her room, grabbed the wooden box containing the family sword, and ran again without stopping. “That blade won’t save you,” Akane growled as she pursued. Outside, the battle intensified. The Ciphers returned with renewed fury, firing heavy photon blasts from their palms. Kaguya finally caught up and entered the manor just as a stray blast slammed into the doorway. The explosion collapsed the entrance and set the surrounding wood ablaze.

She froze. Her knees shook as flames spread through the hallway. But she forced herself to keep

moving. Outside, the Yakuza fought desperately against the Ciphers once again. They looked toward the manor with growing worry. The women of the family were trapped inside, and worse, the building was slowly catching fire. Inside the manor, Mikako reached the center of the house. A beautiful indoor garden stretched out before her. In the middle stood a circular stone platform, an arena. She stopped. Akane did the same.

"You… recreated it here?" Akane asked quietly. Mikako nodded. "We dueled at the one on Porta Nexus countless times." She opened the box and pulled out the family sword. "Twenty-two wins. Thirty-four losses. Sixty-two draws." Akane smiled faintly. "Funny. I remember it differently." Mikako sighed. "You know… I never forgot what you said to me the night you died." Akane's smile faded. "You were right. Our family… it wasn't really helping people. Not truly." Mikako tightened her grip on the sword.

"I was inspired to change that. I think I did. Or at least… I tried my best." Her gaze hardened. "What do you see now?" Akane blinked in surprise. She hadn't expected that answer. Mikako stepped forward slightly. "I need you to be honest with me. Please. Talk to me." Her voice was steady. "Why? You faked your death to join these monsters in the shadows." Akane looked away. "You're right," she admitted quietly. "They are horrible. They do awful things." Her expression darkened. "Things I regret." She sighed. "But that doesn't matter." "The hell it doesn't!" Mikako snapped.

Akane met her eyes again. "You said you remembered my words," she continued calmly. "I believe you." She paused. "But for me… it wasn't enough." Her voice grew firmer. "Through them… through Omnihack…" She looked at her sister with unwavering conviction. "I have made this multiverse a safer place." She believed it completely. Mikako groaned. "Omnihack. What an arrogant name." Now she knew the true name of the group that had taken her sister away. "Is killing innocent people part of that too?" she demanded. "I thought you had a code. Honor."

Akane faltered. “I hate that part,” she admitted quietly. “When it happens, I fight the others. I try to stop them.” Her voice trembled slightly. “But… even when I do… there’s only so much I can change.” She looked down for a moment. “Even with all this bloodshed… I still believe it’s right.” Her eyes lifted again. “You don’t know what’s coming, Mikako.” Mikako didn’t like that answer. But she felt something strange. Her body was becoming lighter. Weaker. She was running out of time. She straightened. “Then show me your resolve.” She pointed the blade directly at Akane.

“Let’s settle this once and for all. No tricks. No games.” Her voice was steady. “Just your blade and mine.” Akane sighed. “I hardly use one anymore,” she admitted. “I’m probably rusty.” She looked at the sword. “Is that your hope?” Still, she stepped forward. Akane raised her hand. A crimson glow formed around it as her force fields condensed into the shape of a blade. A sword of pure energy formed in her grasp.

They charged and clashed immediately. At first, their movements were slow and measured, testing each other’s guard. But with every strike, it was as if the rust between them was being knocked away. Old instincts returned. Old rhythms resurfaced. One moment Mikako had the advantage. The next, Akane did. Both sisters grinned. Memories flickered through their minds, years of training, rivalry, laughter. Their love for one another sharpened their focus. They grew faster. Sharper. Stronger. Then the roof caved in. The arena was suddenly engulfed in flames as burning debris crashed down around them.

They faltered only for a moment. Then the duel continued. They dodged falling beams and shattered stone as their blades met again and again. Mikako managed to land a clean strike across Akane’s torso. Akane retaliated instantly, slicing across Mikako’s arm. Mikako winced. “Damn… that’s not fair,” she muttered through the pain. “I can’t just replace my arm like you can.” Still, she was grateful it wasn’t her sword arm. They kept fighting. Then they heard something faint through the smoke. “Mom!”

Both Mikako and Akane shook their heads, dismissing it. They continued clashing. Even now they seemed perfectly matched. Akane suddenly stepped back. “I don’t understand,” she said, breathing heavily. “How have you become this strong? You don’t have the power I do.” Mikako steadied herself. “Discipline. Honor.” Her eyes hardened. “You had those once… and you threw them away.” She raised her sword again. “But most importantly… family.” Akane lowered her gaze slightly, considering the words. They prepared to clash again. Then the voice came again. “Mama!” The word was weak, choked by smoke. Both sisters froze.

Outside the manor, Jiro and the others finally managed to subdue the remaining attackers. It had not been an easy fight. They looked up at the manor. Half the district was now engulfed in flames. Jiro’s face went pale. “No… this is just like back then. When Akane...” Someone walked past him. “Are they in there?” Jiro blinked and rubbed his eyes. “I’m seeing a lot of ghosts today,” he muttered. “They told me you were...” Vincent removed his sunglasses. His eyes were cold. “Answer the damn question,” he hissed.

Inside the burning manor, Kaguya struggled through the smoke. She coughed violently as she stumbled through collapsing halls, desperately searching. By sheer luck, she found them. Both sisters turned in shock. “What are you doing here, you stupid girl?” Akane snapped, panic breaking through her composure. “You were supposed to stay out of this,” Mikako added softly. “This was our duel.” Kaguya could barely breathe. “I won’t… let you die again…” She coughed. “I love you… please… don’t…” Her knees nearly gave out.

Mikako and Akane exchanged a glance. Without speaking, they both reached the same decision. The duel would have to wait. “Come on,” Mikako said, helping Kaguya stand. They began moving toward the nearest escape route. But both sisters were already badly injured. And Kaguya was far too frail to withstand the heat. She looked ready to collapse at any moment. Together they struggled forward. The rafters above them creaked and cracked. Sunlight shone through the doorway ahead.

Freedom was only a few steps away. Then the cracking intensified. A massive section of the ceiling collapsed. It was falling straight toward them. There was no time. Mikako looked up. Then she looked back at the two women she loved most in the world. Akane tried to form a force-field shield, but her stamina was gone. The barrier shattered instantly. Mikako sighed. A small smile crossed her face. “Today… Akane Kinryū lives.” “What?” Akane shouted. Mikako shoved both of them out of the way. The debris came crashing down. And Mikako disappeared beneath it.

Kaguya lost it. Seeing her mother die for a second time in the same day shattered whatever composure she had left. She reached toward the collapsing rubble, screaming and sobbing as she tried to run back toward it. Akane grabbed her and pulled her away. The girl fought wildly, almost throwing herself back into the burning wreckage. Akane forced both of them toward the doorway, throwing their bodies through the exit. But outside the door was already blocked by fallen rubble.

Akane collapsed to her knees. Who was she anymore? In a single moment she had failed as an agent of Omnihack, and as a member of her own family. Just when it seemed like there was no way out. A fist punched through the debris. Vincent forced his way in through the wreckage. His expression was completely serious as he extended a hand toward Akane. She stared at it for a moment. Then she took it. He pulled both of them out immediately. Outside, the two of them collapsed onto the street, coughing violently as their lungs cleared the smoke. Kaguya knelt on the ground, staring blankly at the dirt. The grief she had already endured was crashing down on her all over again.

Akane looked down at her, unsure what to do. Vincent tugged on her arm. “Come on. Let’s go,” he said. Akane hesitated. Then she reluctantly followed him. Kaguya slowly lifted her head and watched them leave. Then something inside her snapped. “You’re just leaving… after all that?!” she shouted. Akane stopped. She turned back slowly. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked honestly. She felt more lost than she had in years. She didn’t even know if she could return to Omnihack anymore.

Kaguya suddenly rushed forward and punched her in the stomach. Akane barely reacted to the

hit. But the words that followed struck far deeper. “All my life,” Kaguya shouted through tears, “my mother talked about how great you were! She admired you! She looked up to you! She wanted to see you again more than anything!” Her voice cracked. “And after everything she did for you, after she sacrificed her life for you... you still dare to walk away like nothing happened?!” Akane stood frozen.

The punch had meant nothing. But those words hit like a blade. “You’re nothing like she said you were!” Kaguya shouted. “You’re a fraud!” She pointed at her aunt with shaking hands. “Take responsibility!” Akane exhaled slowly. For a moment she truly thought about it. Kaguya collapsed into sobs. Akane knelt down so they were eye level. “How could I ever make this up to you?” she asked quietly. Her voice wavered. “It would be better if I just...” “Train me!” Kaguya’s voice cut through the moment.

Akane blinked. “I’m going to be the next head of the Kinryū-Kai,” Kaguya said through tears. “But I’m weak.” She clenched her fists. “You’re strong.” She looked directly into Akane’s eyes. “Please… stay here. Come back to our family.” Her voice broke. “Make me someone my mother would be proud of.” Vincent clicked his tongue, clearly wanting to say something, but he stayed silent. Akane stared at Kaguya in shock. “Join the family again…” She shook her head slightly. “I can’t. Not after everything I’ve done.”

She paused. Then she sighed. “…Fine.” She looked down. “I’ll do it. For Mikako.” Her voice hardened. “I am honor-bound to do so. My code is unbreakable.” She hesitated. “Even if the rest of the boys don’t accept me.” Kaguya scoffed. “If you think they wouldn’t, you never knew them.” Vincent groaned loudly. “I busted my ass getting her out of there for absolutely nothing,” he muttered. “What now? You gonna fight the real Boss too?” Before anyone could answer Akane suddenly collapsed.

She hit the ground, completely unconscious.

Vincent looked down at her. “…Shit.” He scratched his head. “Guess she really went through it.” For a moment he stood there, unsure what to do. Then he turned and started walking away. “What

will you do?" Kaguya asked. Vincent glanced back at her. "What? Why do you care?" He shrugged. "I'm not taking my chances with the real Boss. That's suicide." He pointed down the road.

"My suggestion? Get out of town while you still can."

Chapter 71: Shipless Anchor

Clyde stood before The Boss. For a moment, neither of them moved. Silence stretched between them, heavy and suffocating. Clyde glanced back at Raleigh. She was down, but not broken. Her arms still glowed faintly, flickering like dying embers. Whatever power they had drawn on… it was nearly gone. He clenched his jaw. Trying something new, something instinctive, Clyde extended his will. Light formed around Raleigh, shaping into a suit. It lifted her gently inside itself and carried her away from the battlefield. Out of danger. Only then did he turn back.

His full attention locked onto The Boss. “I still don’t get you,” Clyde said, voice steady but tense. “We’ve never met… and yet it feels like you’ve always been there.” His eyes narrowed. “Did

you do that to Rebbecca?" A beat. "Why aren't you on the same side as us?" Another step forward. "What is your goal?" He raised his guard. Ready. The Boss regarded him calmly. "Understanding is everything," he said. "My goal has not changed." He took a slow step forward. "You already know it, do you not?" Clyde's expression hardened. "…Stopping some unimaginable threat no one else believes in." The Boss gave a faint nod. Recognition.

Clyde's fists tightened. "And how many people have to die for that?" he asked. The Boss didn't hesitate. "As many as it takes." The air shifted. Only now did Clyde notice it. The faint, controlled glow along The Boss's arm. The same power. The Arm of the Multiverse. Clyde's eyes widened. He snapped into a defensive stance instantly. "How do you..." "I suspect you have only embers remaining," The Boss interrupted calmly. "While I possess the flame." A pause. "But even so…" His gaze sharpened. "I will not underestimate you, Clyde Moore." Clyde inhaled deeply. No more questions. No more hesitation. He stepped forward, and drove a gauntleted punch straight at him.

The Boss's posture shifted. He placed his hands behind his back. Clyde blinked. It didn't make sense. He had just said he wouldn't underestimate him, so why drop his guard? Then it happened. Something slammed into Clyde's stomach. Out of nowhere. The impact completely knocked the wind out of him. His body folded, and he collapsed to the ground, gasping. Clyde's eyes darted around.

Nothing. No movement. No attacker. He forced himself back to his feet, and something struck him again. A gray, metallic blur. An uppercut snapped his head back, followed instantly by another strike to his knees. His legs buckled, and he crashed down again.

The Boss hadn't moved. He just stood there. Watching. Clyde gritted his teeth and pushed himself up again, breathing hard now, forcing his eyes to focus. Look. Don't guess. A flicker. A distortion. A tiny portal opened behind him. Barely the size of a hand. From it, a cord shot out.

Just like Rebbecca's. Clyde twisted and dodged it, but three more portals snapped open around him. The cords lashed out at once. He formed armor over his body. Two strikes glanced off, but the third

slipped through. It hit. Clyde exhaled sharply. "…So that's how we're playing this."

With a breath, he committed. The armor spread fully across his body denser, heavier, brighter. He charged. The cords fired again, cracking against his armor, slowing him, but not stopping him. He forced his way forward. Closer. Then he split. Multiple armored forms of Clyde burst outward, surrounding The Boss in an instant. Each one drew back a fist, and struck at the same time. The Boss didn't move. At the moment of impact, a green wireframe flickered into existence. Tight against his body. Akane's firewall, but different. Denser. The instant the punches landed. The force reversed. Violently. The impact exploded outward tenfold.

Every Ultra suit shattered instantly. Clyde was thrown back, his body tumbling across the ground. Before he could recover. The Boss raised a hand. A thin beam of photon light fired. Clean. Precise. It pierced straight through Clyde's chest. Clyde hit the ground hard. For a moment. Everything was still. Then, Cords began to appear. Dozens. Hundreds. Portals flickered open across the battlefield as they threaded through space, weaving around the area like a living cage. The Boss stood at the center of it. Untouched.

Clyde coughed, forcing himself up again, barely standing now. His eyes locked onto The Boss. Disbelief crept in. "…Vincent's light… Akane's forcefield… Rebbecca's cords…" His voice faltered. "You're… all of them." The Boss regarded him calmly. "I developed those abilities," he said. "They merely inherited fragments." Clyde struggled to breathe. He couldn't win. He just… couldn't see how. He had fought people stronger than him before many times. But this was different. This wasn't a gap in strength. This was a gap in existence. Like meeting the Caretaker for the firs time. For a moment, his thoughts shifted. From survival… to impact. If I can't win, then I'll make it matter. His jaw tightened.

No. Thinking like that meant he had already lost. His arm flared violently, the light surging brighter than before as he forced the armor into existence again. This time. It wasn't just one. It wasn't

ten. Hundreds. Armored forms erupted across the battlefield, each one identical, each one moving with the same intent. Clyde felt it immediately. The strain. The Arm flickered violently, unstable, barely holding together. This was too much. The only reason it worked at all… was because something was still left. Barely. Every suit charged at once. A wave. They threw themselves at The Boss, fists drawn back, and shattered on impact.

One after another. Breaking, But not stopping. The Boss sighed. He raised both hands, and expanded the force field. It didn't just defend. It erased. A wave of compressed force rippled outward. Every suit vanished in an instant. All but one. The last shell peeled away. Revealing the real Clyde. Already inside. Already moving. Clyde smirked through the pain, planting his foot and driving upward with everything he had left. An uppercut. All of it. The Boss was launched into the air. For the first time, his mask cracked. Just slightly. The Boss flipped cleanly midair, landing with perfect control. He adjusted his posture, as if nothing had happened, but the crack remained.

"…Well done," he said. There was something new in his voice. Recognition. "This is why I consider you the greatest threat." Clyde staggered forward, breathing ragged, his arm flickering violently now. The Boss tilted his head slightly. "But how much longer can you sustain this?" The answer came immediately. Cords erupted from every direction. Clyde didn't have time to react. They struck. Again, and again, and again. He forced himself forward anyway. Step by step. Each movement heavier than the last. His gaze dropped briefly to his arm. The light was fading. Fast. He was running on nothing.

Still he moved. More suits formed. Fewer this time. Cruder. Unstable. They charged again, slamming into The Boss in another collapsing wave. The damage was minimal. Barely anything. But this time, It wasn't nothing. For the first time, The Boss had to account for it. Clyde kept pushing. He couldn't stop. Not even for a second. If he did, it was over. Step by step, he forced The Boss back. Just slightly. Just enough to matter. But it was already too late. The cords. They had been closing in the

entire time. Shrinking the battlefield. Tightening the space.

Now, there was nowhere left to go. “It is time we end this,” The Boss said calmly. The cords struck. From every direction. They wrapped around Clyde’s body instantly, binding him in place. He struggled, Nothing. They held. His right arm was forced forward. The light flickered. Fading. Dying. The Boss stepped closer. His own arm began to glow. “Now…” He reached out and grabbed Clyde’s arm. “…we remove it.” A blade formed from his other arm. Clyde’s eyes widened. “No...” Too late. The cut was clean, instant.

His arm fell. For a split second. Silence. Then the pain hit. Clyde screamed. The Boss didn’t pause. He kicked Clyde back into the wall. The severed arm, The Arm of the Multiverse. was still glowing. Still alive. The Boss raised his hand. A precise burst of photon light fired. And the arm disintegrated. Gone, completely. No recovery. No return. Clyde stared in disbelief. Then light flashed again. Precise. Controlled. Strikes across his body. One to the shoulder. One to the leg. One across his side. Not fatal, Intentional, Calculated. Then his eye, a sharp burst of light. Pain exploded through him.

Clyde collapsed, his body giving out as his vision blurred and darkened. He couldn’t stay awake. Couldn’t fight anymore. The last thing he saw was The Boss. Standing over him. Unshaken. Untouched. Absolute.

Chapter 72: Holding the Line

The Boss stood over Clyde's broken body. An AID-E unit approached cautiously, almost hesitant, as if worried about him. The Boss stepped aside without looking away. "By all means." He watched in silence as she began treatment. Clyde was still needed. Alive. "Mainframe," he said calmly. "Have you located where the children were taken?" "Negative," Mainframe replied. "All remaining Ciphers have been dispatched to search. Estimated recovery time: forty-five minutes." He didn't respond.

"There is another issue." "What is it?" A video appeared in his vision. A live broadcast. HOME under attack. The headline scrolled across the feed: Hacker Conspiracy Realized During Attack on

Frontier. The Boss paused. "…How was this allowed to happen?" he asked. "Was HOME not blocked from observation?" He looked up. High above, Crow flew overhead, recording everything. Several Ciphers broke formation, chasing after him. "Following the Foe attack, available resources are limited," Mainframe explained. "Civilian perception filters were successfully deployed. However… Mia Meridian retains residual access to the Eye of the Multiverse." A pause. "We are currently unable to suppress transcendent observation." The Boss exhaled quietly. "Find the twins," he said. "Nothing else matters." The channel closed.

The sky fractured with light. Ships dropped in sleek, angular silhouettes tearing through the air. The Coalition had arrived. On the command deck, Cyrus stood at the helm, arms folded, uncertainty etched beneath his composure. He had already sent Tess away with the twins, orders clear: keep moving, keep jumping, never stay in one place. The Cipher they captured had gone mad. Rambling about something coming. Something inevitable. Something starting here. Cyrus narrowed his eyes. He wasn't sure if this was the right call. But he knew one thing. If something was starting here. He would end it. "Drop." Coalition forces deployed across the city, landing alongside the struggling Commandos.

Elsewhere, Vincent tore through a group of Ciphers with ruthless efficiency. He didn't look back. "Stop following me," he growled. "You don't know an enemy when you see one?" Behind him, members of the Kinryū-Kai kept pace. "Lady Kaguya gave the order," Jiro replied with a smirk. "Besides, that Vulture business is ancient history. We stand with Lady Akane now." Vincent clicked his tongue. "…Idiots." But he didn't stop them.

The small fox darted through the streets of HOME, weaving between rubble and smoke as it raced toward the shoreline. At the beach, Pengoro stood waiting. Ciphers scattered around him, already defeated. The fox yelped urgently. Pengoro squawked in response, nodding as if he understood. Without hesitation, he slid into the water. The fox leapt onto his back, and together they surged forward, cutting across the surface at blinding speed. They shot off the edge of the coast, launched into

the air, and hurtled toward the Rival's lighthouse. They landed hard and didn't stop.

The dragon lay resting. Nearby, the Rival slept against its side, with the small Poly curled beside him. The fox yelped again. The dragon's eyes opened. It listened. Understood. Without a sound, it rose. The fox and Pengoro climbed onto its back as it took off, leaving the Rival behind immediately. He tipped over. "What the hell..." he muttered, blinking awake. The baby dragon chirped at him. "… What, Poly?" he asked, still groggy. "Orion's in trouble?" A pause. He sighed. "…We are rivals, you know." Another chirp. "…Yeah, yeah. Fine." He stood, stretching. "Everyone, wake up! We're setting off!" His crew jolted awake instantly. "Yes, sir!" The dragon cut through the sky. Below, the wild jungle rushed past. A tiger burst from the undergrowth and leapt onto the dragon's back mid-flight, no explanation needed. Together, they flew. Straight toward the battlefield.

The dragon roared. Flames erupted from its jaws as it dove at The Boss. A torrent of fire crashed down. The Boss raised a single hand. The flames split around him contained, nullified, meaningless. He stepped forward and struck. The dragon was slammed into the ground. Hard. The others moved instantly. They surrounded him. The air shifted. The ground trembled. Echoes, astral remnants began to form around them. Figures of the astral energy. Fragments of HOME itself. The world was responding. Recognizing him. Rejecting him.

The fox yelped. Its body ignited with swirling energy, expanding, growing something deeper surfacing. The Boss tilted his head slightly. "I see your the unknown source of influence In the code room." He mused. Pengoro struck first. A rapid barrage, each hit strong enough to shatter stone. The Boss moved once. A single kick. The Penguin was sent flying. The tiger followed, lunging for his throat. The Boss caught it midair. Drove his arm straight through it. Like a hunter finishing prey. The fox surged forward next, its energy flaring as it crashed through the outer layer of his defense. It reached him for a moment. Then stopped. The Boss caught it effortlessly. And threw it. So far it vanished from sight.

A shadow passed overhead. The Rival's ship. He stood at the edge, looking down. His eyes landed on Clyde still broken. "…Orion…" His voice dropped. "…No." His grip tightened. "I'll avenge you." He turned. "All hands abandon ship!" Cannons roared. The ship unleashed everything it had as it plummeted from the sky, crashing directly onto The Boss. A massive explosion. Smoke swallowed the battlefield. The wreckage shifted. The Boss stood at the center unmoved, untouched.

The Sky Hawks landed around him. Weapons ready. The Rival dropped last still furious, still determined. He charged. The remaining power of the Finger flared as he forced his way through the barrier. For the first time... The Boss's armor scuffed. Both of them paused. The Rival blinked. The Boss's eyes narrowed slightly. "…You remain an unpredictable variable." A flicker of interest. A blade formed he stabbed into the man. The Rival collapsed. "Captain!" The Sky Hawks opened fire, rushing forward in desperation. It didn't matter. They never stood a chance.

A makeshift clinic had been established along one of the main streets. Commandos guarded both ends. Iris returned, supporting Lucy as they approached. Lucy sat down heavily on a crate while Iris worked quickly, easing her pain. "I'm glad you're both safe," Crucible said. An AID-E unit spoke up without prompting. "With Coalition support, Commandos and Yakuza forces have pushed most hostile units into a single sector." "That doesn't matter," Crucible said sharply. "Whoever's there is on another level." He gestured toward Raleigh.

"We need her." Raleigh lay on a nearby cot, breathing steadily, uninjured, but completely drained. Lucy nodded, pushing herself back to her feet as Iris continued healing. "It won't be enough," Iris admitted. "I can treat injuries, but not fatigue." Lucy exhaled slowly. "…I might be able to transfer energy. But I'll need volunteers." There was a pause. A line had already formed. Lucy blinked. "… Well. That makes things easier." One by one, she placed a hand on each of them, drawing energy, then passing it on. Into Raleigh. The effect was immediate.

Raleigh's eyes fluttered open. "What… my babies… where…" Lucy gave a faint smile. "You

saved them," she said gently. "But we need you. It's not over yet." Raleigh's eyes snapped fully open. Memory crashed back in all at once. Clyde. The fight. The Boss. "Where?" "Right where you left off," Lucy said. She held something out. The glove. Raleigh stared at it. "I can't…" she whispered. "Not after everything she…" The hesitation lingered. Trust… still broken. Lucy didn't push. "Just take it with you." Raleigh nodded. She took it, then she ran.

The Commandos rushed toward The Boss's position. What they found was devastation. The battlefield had been torn apart craters, scorched earth, wreckage. A ship had been dropped from the sky. And yet The Boss stood at the center of it all. Untouched. Unmoved. Not even breathing hard. Grant slowed, frowning. Yeah… this guy was the real deal. "Well…" he called out, raising his voice. "Looks like you're the only one left, mister." A beat. "How about you surrender, and we can put all this to bed?" Even he knew it was a bluff.

The Boss turned. Not surprised. Not impressed. Annoyed. His mind flickered through possibilities, how Grant was still alive, what variables had shifted, but he said nothing. Rigg and Mara moved into position beside Grant. Behind them, two Commandos carefully lifted Clyde, dragging him just out of immediate range. The Boss didn't intervene. Clyde remained within sight. That was enough. "After witnessing all of this…" The Boss said calmly, "you still intend to persist?" He studied Grant. "I will offer you the same choice." A pause. "Join Omnihack. A warrior like you could be of use." His gaze flicked briefly across HOME. "This place may remain… in part." He already knew the answer. Grant smirked faintly. "No can do" he said. "I'm on the clock." He adjusted his grip. "So let's get busy."

He charged. The bayonet swung, and shattered instantly in The Boss's hand. Rigg opened fire. The other Commandos followed. A storm of bullets. It did nothing. Mara rushed in next, baton raised. She was knocked back before she could even land a hit. Grant switched to his sidearms, firing relentlessly, Still nothing. They kept going. Until the last round was spent. Silence. The Boss moved.

Cords snapped through space fast, precise, inevitable. One by one, the Commandos fell. Only Grant, and Rigg remained standing.

“If you will not comply,” The Boss said, almost wearily, “then you are no longer necessary.” He raised his arm. Photon energy gathered dense, absolute. A single blast would end it. Grant exhaled. Out of options. Out of time. Nothing left… Except one thing. The weapon Rebbecca gave him. The one he never used. The one he never trusted. The one he still carried. He reached for it. The blast fired. The weapon unfolded into a shield. The impact hit like a collapsing star, but it held. Barely. “I'll... hold the line.” He said to himself. Raleigh arrived just in time to see it. Her eyes widened instantly. She knew what meant for him to use that, and what he was planning. “No stop!”

Grant didn’t. He stepped forward. Then again. Forcing his way through the blast. The shield shifted. Reforming into a machete a rocket fixed to its edge. The photon energy began to tear him apart. Half his body vaporized. But the other half kept moving. Closer. The shield cracked. And still, he pushed through. The blade drove forward. And struck. For the first time, The Boss was pierced. The weapon buried into his gut. A single, impossible moment. Even he looked surprised. Grant turned. Looked toward his daughter. And smiled. “Handle things for me, okay?” Then, he was gone. Mara screamed. Shattered. Just like Kaguya before her. For a moment, she had believed that he might survive. That it might be enough. It wasn’t.

Chapter 73: Absolute Power

The Boss looked down at the blade buried in his abdomen. He pulled it free in one smooth motion. Blood followed. For a moment, he studied it. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen his own blood. Not even during the Foe attack had his damage manifested like this. He exhaled quietly and tossed the weapon aside. "Mainframe. Status report." Silence. Only static answered him. A faint pause. Not anger, not confusion, disappointment. It seemed, once again, that only he could meet his own expectations.

Behind him, Raleigh trembled. Tears streamed down her face as she looked past him, toward Clyde. AID-E had stabilized him. Stopped the bleeding. But he looked… broken. Her hands clenched.

“Do you even care about lives at all?!” she shouted. The Boss didn’t turn. “More than anyone.”

Her anger snapped. “You’re a monster!” she screamed. “How can you even say that?! Look at what you’ve done! To Clyde... to Grant... to everyone! Even your own people!” Her voice cracked. “And you don’t even look phased!” Silence. Then... “This is why you will never stop the Foe,” he said calmly. “You lack what is required to succeed.”

“Enough of your bullshit!” Raleigh stepped forward. Her hands shook, not with fear, but fury. “I’m done hesitating,” she said. “If I had used this earlier… if I hadn’t been so stupid…” Her voice faltered for just a second. She forced it down. And slipped the glove on. The energy surged instantly. It spread across her body forming, adapting, locking into place. Armor, something more. “Project Novastriker: Lumen Drive,” The Boss said. Raleigh froze. He knew the name. “I see,” he continued. “She truly did create something approaching transcendence.” A pause. “But it will not be enough.”

Raleigh’s expression hardened. “So even that wasn’t safe from you,” she said quietly. Then. She pulled further. The glove responded. Shifted. Expanded. The armor changed. Denser. Sharper. More… unreal. The Boss tilted his head slightly. This time, he didn’t recognize it. “This…” Raleigh said, her voice steady now, “is Prism Core.” A faint, bitter smile formed. “She never talked about it. Not really.” Her eyes burned. “Now I know why.” Rebbecca had hidden this. Even from him. Even while tearing herself apart trying to stay loyal. She still held something back. Something he didn’t know.

“I won’t hesitate anymore.” She said. “Prism Core…” The Boss repeated softly. For the first time, there was a gap in his understanding. Raleigh moved. She vanished. The Boss reacted instantly, raising his arm to block, but she was already gone. She reappeared behind him. The impact came immediately. A massive hammer of hard solid metal slammed into his back. The force drove him forward. Down. To one knee. The weapon shattered on impact. A fragment of his mask fell away. One of the horns, broken clean off. For the first time... The Boss had been forced down.

“Interesting.” The Boss rose again, his tone genuinely intrigued. “Unlike your previous mode, the time it takes you to form weapons is nearly instantaneous. It’s as if you’re pulling them from nowhere.” His eyes followed her movements, calculating. “The power draw must be immense. You won’t be able to sustain this for long.” Raleigh clicked her tongue. Then, she charged. This time, her blade met his guard directly. The force field shattered on impact, but his arm did not.

She accelerated. Faster, sharper. More precise with every movement. She warped constantly, appearing, disappearing, striking from impossible angles. Weapons formed and vanished in her hands like thoughts. Unpredictable, untraceable, limitless. The Boss held his ground. Defending, adapting, but. The hits were starting to land. He exhaled slowly. Then acted. Cords erupted from space itselt, firing not at where she was, but where she would be. They struck. Raleigh was knocked out of the air, crashing hard into the ground. The cords continued. Unrelenting.

She vanished. Then reappeared, grabbing onto one mid-flight. Instead of escaping, She followed it. The world shifted. A pocket dimension. A hidden space. At its center, a massive construct. The source. Without hesitation, she tore the cords free and drove straight into the machine. It shattered. Back on the battlefield. The Boss flinched. For the first time he felt pain. The systems were linked directly to him. They had to be. That was the only way they could operate so freely.

Raleigh didn’t stop. She pressed the advantage. Attacking from every direction, every angle every form. Blades, Hammers, Spears. Weapons beyond naming. His mask cracked further. Fragments breaking away bit remained tightly fixed around him. More wounds opened across his body. None fatal, but undeniable. For a moment. It looked like she was winning. The Boss inhaled, deep. Then, he reached out, and caught her. His hand closed around her throat the instant she appeared. Perfect timing. Perfect prediction. He lifted her off the ground. Her body struggled, hands clawing at his grip as it tightened. “…Just kidding,” she said weakly, a smirk forming despite the strain.

All around them the air filled. Hundreds, Thousands of weapons materialized. Swords. Spears.

Blades of every kind. Each one armed with rocket propulsion. They launched. Raleigh vanished. The storm descended. The Boss reacted instantly, deflecting, stopping, redirecting as many as he could.

But there were too many. They struck. One after another, piercing, driving into him. When it ended. He was still standing. Raleigh frowned. Still breathing, still fighting. She raised her hand. More weapons formed, floating around her in a deadly orbit, rockets igniting along their edges.

A faint, tired smile crossed Raleigh's face. If Clyde were here… He'd probably make some dumb comment about how this looked like one of those shows he loved. Her expression hardened. "You'll pay," she said quietly. "For what you did to him…" A beat. Her voice sharpened. "…all of them." The Boss raised his hand. The weapons embedded in his body disintegrated in an instant, but it wasn't enough time. The next wave hit. They struck again. Driving into him. Forcing him. To one knee. For the first time, he looked… worn. His coat was in tatters. Fresh wounds lined his body. Still not fatal. But accumulating.

"…One minute," he said. Raleigh blinked. "What?" Her anger flared. "Now you want to talk?"

"You have one minute," he clarified calmly, his voice weaker, but steady. "Before your power collapses." Raleigh froze for half a second. How could he possibly. Then she felt it. The strain, the instability. The time limit. Her jaw clenched. Fine. Then she'd end it before that. She moved. A sword formed in her hand. A blade so massive it dwarfed the surrounding buildings. She swung, The Boss barely avoided it, launching himself upward at the last possible moment. The weapon vanished as quickly as it appeared. Raleigh was already gone. She reappeared above him. This time, a colossal spear. It drove down. The impact tore through his shoulder ripping it clean. Taking his arm with it.

He dropped, barely catching himself on landing, breathing heavier now. The mask clung to his face fractured, but unbroken. Raleigh pressed forward, but her armor flickered, and reverted back to the second form. "…No," she muttered, frustration breaking through. Her time was up. Then she lifted her head. Eyes burning. "I don't need it," she said. "I already have you." She charged. Closing the distance.

This was it. The Boss raised his remaining hand. Within it, a condensed universe. He activated it.

The world shifted. Time… fractured. From his perspective, Everything slowed. He walked out of his damaged body into one untouched. He stepped forward. Out of sync with reality itself. Raleigh moved in slow motion. Still charging. Still determined. He approached her calmly. Raised his hand. And struck a precise blow. Not fatal. Intentional. Enough to bring her down. Then he stepped away. Reappearing atop a nearby rooftop. In his hand an empty container. Moments from resetting what he had just done. He could tell HOME wouldn't allow it to exist for long. “Not so fast.” The Boss turned in genuine surprise. “I have returned!” Loki stood there, laughing.

He sighs. “And in this space. The Root's failure is absolute. You were kept away for a reason.” He shoots a laser as Loki turned into confetti. “Haha nice try but...” Loki started to said suddenly gripping his head in pain. “This was the worst place to try and challenge me even if you can enter it.” He said Loki seemed overwhelmed by the cold. By everything. Loki staggered. For a moment, it looked like he might collapse. Then his expression shifted. Understanding. “Oh… I get it…” Outside, HOME was already resisting. Loki grinned. “Then let’s not play in your sandbox.” The space cracked. And shattered. Time resumed.

Raleigh suddenly fell to her kneels choking up blood, but looking forward and seeing The Boss's shed shell confused it looked like he had died. “Raleigh...” Loki said drawing her attention to the roof. She looked up in horror seeing The Boss back at full power next to him, but the damage she had dealt seemed to be reversing slowly like the longer he stayed her the more of it would return. HOME itself must be doing it she thought, but even still with the mystery wounds in her gut she could barley stand up anymore.

Loki reached his arm forward shooting something into her as his body with pale. “She felt newly invigorated, like maybe she could even do Prism code again, if it weren't for her wounds. Iris,

and Lucy rushed in immediately fixing that problem. “Enough.” The Boss said crashing back down. Another bout would be meaningless. I have no other choice. His own gauntlet started to swirl with uncontrollable energy. He started to absorb HOME itself everything around him started to dissipate into a white void. She rushed forward to attack him but it was no use she couldn't' get close, it only knocked her back. The glow of the Arm of the Multiverse influencing the odds in his favor. It seemed truly over

Raleigh thought to this world she had wished for, all the people she had met, the love she had strengthened. The Children she had birthed. She didn't want to loose them, but even looking around she could tell everyone seemed to feel the same an almost acceptance it was all over. “Raleigh...” Someone said in the distance. It was Clyde. He was still in a horrible state barley breathing still slouched against the wall. “Don't give up...” He said. She looked at him with tears, and then Back as The Boss groaning in pain as he was pushing down on the world, like he was trying to stuff it into a jar. The Glove cracked around him.

Suddenly a flash appeared on her right hand the middle finger of the multiverse responding to the whole arm. She didn't know why or how, but with this maybe she could win. She raised it toward him flipping him off as he got closer. His eyes widened in shock. “No... this is the balance.” He said in anger at the Caretaker. The finger caused the gauntlet to explode knocking him backward and on his back. The Damage had all but reverted on him now. He struggled to his feet. Walking forward. Ready to keep fighting, but then just stopped. His eyes started to fade, but with a steadfast face that said it wasn't over, but then he died. The world stopped there was a calm. A silence like no other... they had won?

Chapter 74: It isn't Over

The town was quiet. Not peaceful just… quiet. No one said it out loud, but no one acted like it was over either. People moved without hesitation, already beginning to rebuild. Wainwright worked methodically, putting out fires and repairing structures with help from members of the Kinryū-Kai. Overhead, Coalition ships hovered in place, steady and alert. Cyrus descended from one of them, landing among the ruins, his eyes scanning everything. On a rooftop, Crow filmed for a few moment, just enough to capture the aftermath. Then they lowered the camera. "…That's enough." The live-stream cut. They had captured most of the battle between Raleigh and The Boss, but Aion had already decided not all of it would ever be shown.

Even so, the damage was done. Omnihack had been exposed. Their resources were depleted. Their colored members were gone. Their leader, defeated. And still… It didn't feel finished. Raleigh didn't care about any of that. She rushed to Clyde's side, dropping to her knees beside him. The moment she saw him up close again, whatever composure she had left shattered completely. She pressed her forehead against his. "I'm sorry… I should've..." "Stop…" His voice was weak, strained, but still steady enough to cut through her spiral. "You didn't do anything wrong." She shook her head anyway, tears falling freely. Iris stepped in, kneeling beside them and beginning to heal him now that things had calmed, at least for the moment.

Clyde winced slightly as the magic took hold, his breathing easing. "We need to find Rebbecca," he said after a moment. "We need to talk to her… for real. Before it's…" He trailed off. The AID-E unit nearby froze slightly, its eyes flickering as new data processed. "…About that." Both of them turned toward it immediately. "What is it?" Raleigh asked. The unit hesitated, an unusual pause. "Clyde had left her in my care," it began. "I was treating her wounds in a separate location. However, once she was stable enough to move… she left." Raleigh's expression tightened. "You lost her?"

"I attempted to stop her," AID-E replied, "but failed to maintain pursuit." There was a brief flicker, as if it were syncing with its other instances. "It appears she passed another unit near the battlefield. She witnessed the conclusion of the fight." Clyde's expression darkened. "And then?" he asked. "She stated that it was not over." A pause. "When questioned, she did not elaborate. Only that she needed to return… before he woke up." Silence settled between them. Raleigh felt it immediately, that sinking feeling in her chest. "That means…" she started. "He could still come back," Clyde finished.

Neither of them liked how easily that conclusion came. Raleigh looked away, her gaze drifting upward. Loki was still on the rooftop, unconscious. Even with everything they had thrown at him…

even with all of that… “How are we supposed to beat him again?” she asked quietly. “Even with help… he was already too much.” “I can tell you where it is.” The voice came from behind. Raleigh turned. Akane stood there, supported by one of the Yakuza. Kaguya remained close at her side, silent but present. “I still have access,” Akane continued. Raleigh blinked in surprise, but she didn’t question it. Not now.

“That doesn’t change anything,” Raleigh said, shaking her head. “He’s still...” “Impossibly powerful,” Clyde finished for her. He looked down, thinking. Just like always. Searching for something. Anything. Then his eyes shifted. Toward The Boss’s body. Or what remained of it. Something caught his attention. The arm. Mechanical. Still intact. Still faintly glowing with The Arm of the Multiverse. It hadn’t disappeared. Because it was bounded not with The Boss, but his inanimate arm. Clyde stared at it for a moment. Then looked down at himself. “…I just so happen to be missing an arm,” he muttered.

Raleigh’s eyes widened instantly. “No.” He looked back at her. “Give me that one.” Silence. “With that… maybe we can...” “No.” She shook her head harder this time. “Absolutely not.” Her voice rose, panic breaking through. “You’re not going anywhere. And definitely not with that. We’ll get you another arm, something better, something safer. It could transform, or...” “Raleigh.” He cut her off. Not harshly. Just firmly. “We don’t have time.” Her voice faltered. He held her gaze. “Let me do this. For HOME. For our kids.” The words hit hard.

She clenched onto him, burying her face into his shoulder as she broke again. “I hate you…” It came out muffled. Raw. Not true, but real. “Fine,” she whispered. “Just… do it already.” AID-E turned toward the arm, scanning it. “Grafting an object of this nature is not advised,” it stated. “Unknown compatibility. High risk of rejection.” “I’ll handle it.” Crucible stepped forward, already rolling up his sleeves. “That’s kind of my thing.” Lucy frowned, arms crossed. “Even for you, that’s pushing it. Attaching something like that… it’s not just physical. That kind of power doesn’t like being

forced." She looked at Clyde. "Are you sure about this?" Clyde didn't hesitate. "I'm sure." There was a collective pause. A shared breath. Then, they got to work.

Rebbecca stumbled forward. Her steps were uneven, her body still not fully her own, but she had made it. Omnihack's world. She glanced down at herself for a brief moment. Her arms were still gone, phantom weight, phantom pain, but she forced herself forward anyway. They had done it. Somehow… they had actually done it. They defeated him. Her expression tightened. "…No." She shook her head. That wasn't right. He wouldn't lose like that. Not without something in place.

Mainframe reacted instantly. "Trojan." The voice came from everywhere at once as she apeared. "You are… alive?" In the same moment, Rebbecca felt it, systems reconnecting, code rewriting. Her body corrected itself. Her arms reformed seamlessly, as if they had never been gone. Mainframe hesitated. "…He reported that you did not survive." There was something in her tone. Not quite emotion. But close. Like she didn't know what to do with this information.

"I have lost all contact with HOME," Mainframe continued. "However, the mission remains active. The targets have been located. Retrieval will commence in..." Rebbecca moved. Fast. She grabbed her, hands gripping tight, forcing her to focus. "Listen to me." Her voice cracked, not from weakness, but urgency. "You need to abort the mission." Mainframe froze. "Abort…?" A pause. "That contradicts priority directives." Rebbecca's mind raced. She didn't have time. She couldn't explain everything. So she chose something Mainframe would understand. "Don't you see what's happening?" she said, forcing the words out. "The Administrator has been compromised." Mainframe didn't respond.

So she pushed harder. "He abandoned HOME." Her grip tightened. "To chase two toddlers. That's not the mission." Mainframe processed. "He's lost focus," Rebbecca said. Not entirely a lie. Not entirely the truth either. But enough. "Omnihack is collapsing," she continued. "And you…" Her voice softened, just slightly. "You were made to correct him. To keep him aligned. Consistent.

Focused.” She leaned in. “You’re the only one who can.” “That is… correct,” Mainframe said slowly. But there was hesitation now. Uncertainty. Rebbecca saw it, and pressed. “He has failsafes,” she said. “Backup bodies. Contingencies.” Her eyes locked onto Mainframe. “He planned for this.” Mainframe’s systems flickered. A new variable. “He’s going to come back,” Rebbecca said. “And when he does… no one out there can stop him.” She pressed “You know that.”

Mainframe looked down, like something about her presence shifted. Like she was turning inward. “Mainframe…” Rebbecca's voice dropped. It wasn’t manipulation. It was fear. “Please. If he wakes up again like this… he won’t just take HOME.” Her grip loosened slightly. “He’ll burn everything.... Before the Foe even gets the chance.” Mainframe didn’t respond. Not immediately. But she didn’t reject it either. And for the first time. She hesitated, but then the sound of machinery clicked behind them as the ground hissed a pod rose from the ground below even Mainframe looked surprised to see it.

“You are too late, child.” The steam parted as The Boss stepped forward in a new body, completely restored. He stretched his arm slightly, testing it, before settling back into his usual composed posture. “You would try to turn Mainframe,” he said calmly, “my Prism… the very system itself… against me?” Rebbecca steadied herself. “…That wasn’t my only plan.”

The Boss studied her for a moment. “You were right to fear my return. I should not have spared you. My hesitation… may have cost everything.” His voice carried a faint trace of something unfamiliar. Rebbecca caught it immediately. “You pretend you don’t care… but you do. You care too much. Everything hurts you.” He didn’t correct her. “Why do you?” she pressed. The Boss exhaled slowly. “Because the one time I faltered… I lost everything. We all did. I will not allow that to happen again.” The moment passed, and his expression hardened once more. “You’ve taken control of part of the system,” he said. Rebbecca nodded. “…Then let us end this,” he replied. “Fight me. Like a true hacker.”

Before Mainframe could react, the world collapsed inward. Pink and green light exploded outward at the same time, colliding and spreading across every system in range. The surge didn't stay contained. It spread into every world Mainframe controlled, infecting and rewriting them simultaneously. Mainframe could have taken control back. She knew that. But she hesitated.

Rebbecca and The Boss rose above the system, their presence expanding beyond physical form. They towered over countless worlds now orbiting around them like fragments of code. Below, the remaining structures cracked open, exposing The Compiler and the few remaining Ciphers, who now looked insignificant beneath them, like ants. Neither of them moved much, but the tension alone made reality feel unstable. This wasn't a physical fight. It was control itself being contested. Rebbecca struck first, launching entire worlds at him. He responded immediately, throwing his own back at her. Reality fractured with each collision. The strain hit her almost instantly.

Managing one world was already overwhelming. This was something else entirely. Her body wasn't built for it. Green began to spread across the system, slowly overtaking the pink. Mainframe processed everything at once. She reviewed all available data on The Boss, from the moment he created her to now. For the first time, she saw something she hadn't accounted for before: emotion. Pain. Then she reviewed Rebbecca. The logs left behind. The actions taken. The version Mainframe who had clearly cared about her, something Mainframe still didn't fully understand. She paused. Then she made a decision.

Mainframe raised her hand and reached toward The Boss. "You have deviated from the mission," she said. "The multiverse cannot be saved from the Future Foe if there is no multiverse. You have become emotional. Unstable. Unpredictable." White energy formed around him as she moved closer. The green began to retreat as the pink pushed forward. The Boss tensed, resisting it. "Override code 340… 8433…" he forced out. "Full reset." Mainframe froze.

Her eyes turned white, and her body went limp as she dropped from the sky. "No!" Rebbecca

shouted, her voice breaking. She pushed forward with everything she had, forcing the pink energy outward again. For a moment, she overwhelmed him, driving the green back. Then he stabilized.

The colors met again at the center, neither side giving ground. Rebbecca's control began to slip. Her body trembled under the strain. She was reaching her limit. And if she lost control now… It would all be over.

"Let's end this!" The voices echoed from nowhere two at once, overlapping in a way that made it impossible to tell where they came from. Rebbecca and The Boss both looked around, searching for the source, but there was nothing there. Then reality split open. A massive crack tore between them, jagged and violent, as if something had punched straight through existence itself. From the other side, Clyde and Raleigh burst through. Clyde led the charge, driving forward with the Arm, forcing his way through the space like he had done before, only this time it felt heavier, final.

For just a moment, both Rebbecca and The Boss faltered at the sight of him. Then they recovered. Raleigh didn't waste a second. She shifted into Prism Core and warped them upward, pulling Clyde and Rebbecca with her until they hovered right in front of The Boss's massive form.

Rebbecca stared at them, relief breaking through everything else. "You… you came," she said, her voice soft with disbelief. "You defied everything." Clyde and Raleigh both nodded. There was no need for words. Rebbecca closed her eyes and focused, drawing in everything she still had control over. Every world. Every fragment. Every piece of existence she could still reach.

She gathered it all. Condensed it. Then pushed it forward. The energy surged into them, flooding through Raleigh and Clyde at once. Raleigh moved first. She launched forward, carrying all of that power with her as it condensed around them both, her form burning with it. Then she threw him.

Straight at The Boss. "My own arm…?" The Boss said, caught off guard. He didn't have time to react. Clyde closed the distance instantly, the Arm driving the motion forward, and then he struck. The punch

landed clean. The impact cracked through reality itself, splitting across The Boss's face as the mask shattered completely.

Light exploded outward, swallowing everything. For a moment, there was nothing but that blinding white. Then the world snapped back the system stabilizing. The scale collapsed. The void was gone. Everything returned to something recognizable. They stood there again, normal size, grounded in reality. The Boss dropped to one knee. Clyde stood in front of him, breathing hard. Raleigh remained at his side. Rebbecca stood just behind them. The broken mask slid away. And beneath it, There was nothing. Shadowy purple visage the only thing, but just absence, like something had taken his face and it had never been replaced. Only the upper portion remained, barely holding together.

"I see…" The Boss said quietly. "So I've… been defeated." He exhaled, steady even now. "Well done." His body leaned forward, giving in at last. "You've proven your resolve…" There was a brief pause. "…you now inherit my mission." And then he fell. Still. This time, there was no sign of recovery. No movement. No indication that he would rise again. He was gone. For real this time.

Final Chapter

Clyde and Raleigh stood over the man who had controlled their lives for so long. Now he was gone. Not escaping. Not resetting. Not coming back. Just… gone. The weight of that settled slowly, like the world itself wasn't sure how to move forward yet. For the first time in a long time, there was nothing pressing down on them. No immediate threat. No next move. It felt over. Clyde let out a quiet breath, still staring. "That line, though…" he said. "You don't think..." "Rebbecca?" Raleigh cut in, already turning. She didn't wait for an answer. She already knew. But when she looked Rebbecca was gone. "…Of course she is." They both sighed, the same kind of tired, knowing exhale.

Mainframe booted up. Her body was low to the ground, unsteady as systems tried to come

online. Processes flickered in and out, searching for connections that weren't there anymore. She reached out across networks that had once been constant, reliable… and found nothing. No signals. No responses. No data. She kept searching anyway, repeating the process again and again, as if persistence alone might bring something back. It didn't. Rebbecca stepped into view, slowing when she saw her. For a moment, she told herself she was just being careful. Mainframe was still dangerous, still unpredictable, still tied to everything that had just happened. But that wasn't the truth. She was worried. And this time, she didn't bother pretending otherwise.

Mainframe noticed her almost immediately and looked up. The difference was obvious. There was no calculation behind her eyes, no layered processing, no quiet superiority. Just confusion. Curiosity. Something almost… innocent. "Who are you?" she asked softly. A brief pause followed before she added, "Do you know who I am?" Rebbecca's expression softened, though there was a clear strain behind it. "Your name is Mainframe," she said. Mainframe blinked, trying to process it. "I see…" she murmured. Then she hesitated, as if reaching for something that should have been there but wasn't. "Why can't I… everything is blank."

Rebbecca exhaled quietly. "The data's gone," she said. "Destroyed… or too far out of range." Even as she said it, she realized how final that sounded. Mainframe went still, not physically, but internally, as if something fundamental had just been removed. For something like her, data wasn't just memory. It was structure. Identity. Purpose. "…Then why am I here?" she asked, her voice quieter now. She looked back up at Rebbecca. "Are you my guide?" Rebbecca hesitated. All at once, memories of the other Mainframe surfaced. The one who had grown, adapted, changed in ways she wasn't supposed to. The one who had felt like something more than just a system. The one she had cared about far more than she ever admitted out loud.

And now, this was what remained. "My name's Rebbecca," she said slowly. Then, after a brief pause, she added, "But… maybe I could be your mother." The words came out before she could fully

think them through, and she immediately felt how heavy they were. Mainframe processed the statement, tilting her head slightly. “Mother…” she repeated. “Limited information available… but… yes. I would like that.” She smiled, simple and unguarded. Rebbecca didn’t hold back this time. She stepped forward and pulled her into a tight hug, holding on longer than she probably should have. Mainframe stiffened at first, clearly unsure how to respond, but didn’t resist.

Before they could say anything else, space distorted nearby. Clyde and Raleigh dropped in. “Rebbecca,” Raleigh said sharply, her voice cutting through the quiet. “Where do you think you’re going?” Mainframe reacted immediately, stepping forward and placing herself between them without hesitation. Protective. Rebbecca rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. “It’s fine,” she said, her tone calm. Mainframe paused, then stepped back, though she didn’t fully relax.

Rebbecca turned back to them, a familiar smirk slipping into place like nothing had changed. “Oh, what?” she said. “You guys had a kid.” She gestured toward Mainframe. “I got one too.” She stuck her tongue out, deliberately undercutting the moment. Raleigh looked like she wanted to argue. Clyde didn’t. He just watched. Rebbecca turned away, waving casually over her shoulder. “Anyway… see you around.” And just like that, she started walking. Mainframe followed close beside her. No dramatic exit. No final speech. Just leaving.

“In what universe is that happening?” Raleigh shouted. Rebbecca stopped. Her expression fell, but she didn’t turn around. For a moment, she just stood there, shoulders tense. She already knew this wasn’t something she could walk away from. “Did you really think we’d just let you leave after everything you’ve done?” Clyde said, his voice tired but steady. “It’s about time you explained yourself.” Rebbecca let out a quiet, bitter breath. “What’s there to explain?” she said coldly. “I betrayed you. Messed with your heads. Played both sides for some stupid mission.”

“You did,” Clyde admitted. “But you also dragged your feet. You didn’t follow through on half

your plans." "And you protected our kids," Raleigh added, stepping forward. "At least when it mattered." Rebbecca didn't respond. "So let's be real," Clyde continued, a faint, tired smirk forming. "If you were trying to be some master double agent… you kinda sucked at it." Raleigh huffed slightly. "Yeah. You didn't even do anything directly to us. That was him. And the Ciphers."

That did it. Rebbecca turned, anger flashing across her face. "What difference does it make?" she snapped. "Even if I didn't know everything, I was still part of it! I helped him. I gave him access to HOME. I pushed things forward every step of the way." Her voice cracked. "If I hadn't… maybe Grant would..." She stopped herself, the words catching in her throat as her gaze dropped. "How am I supposed to just come back after that?" she said more quietly now. "I'm manipulative. Self-serving. I used all of you." Her hands trembled at her sides. "That's what I do. That's what I'm for." Mainframe glanced between them, clearly confused, but stayed close to Rebbecca's side.

Raleigh approached slowly. She was trying to smile, but it didn't quite land. There was still anger there. Still frustration. She didn't hide it. "Who cares if you're willing or not?" Raleigh said bluntly. "I'm still gonna beat your ass. And after that, you're gonna sit down and explain everything." She stepped in, pulling her arm back and swinging forward. Clyde moved to stop her, but he was still too worn down to reach in time. Rebbecca didn't move. She didn't dodge. She just closed her eyes and braced for it.

The punch never landed. Instead, Raleigh's fist slowed at the last second, barely brushing against Rebbecca's cheek. Rebbecca's eyes opened, confusion replacing everything else. Raleigh exhaled, tension leaving her shoulders as a small, crooked smile formed. "I'm not gonna pretend I'm over it," she said. "I'm still pissed at you." She paused. "But after seeing what he did to you… and everything else…" Her expression softened just slightly. "…I think you've already been through enough." The tension broke. Not completely, but enough. Everyone let out a breath they didn't realize they were holding.

“So here’s how it’s gonna go,” Raleigh continued, crossing her arms. “Trojan? She’s gone.” She pointed at Rebbecca. “You’re Rebbecca. Our Rebbecca. Head of R&D. Code integrity. The one people actually like.” Her tone made it sound less like a suggestion and more like a decision that had already been made. Rebbecca blinked, caught off guard. “…I don’t even know what to say to that,” she admitted quietly. She looked between them, uncertainty still lingering. “…I’ll come with you. But I don’t see how you could ever forgive me.”

Clyde shrugged slightly. “Then don’t think about it like that,” he said. “Think of it as paying us back.” He gestured vaguely. “We’ve got a pretty big problem now. That ‘mission’ he talked about?” Rebbecca nodded slowly. “…The Future Foe.” “Yeah,” Clyde said. “That.” A small smile formed. “So when that shows up… we’ll deal with it the same way we dealt with him. Our way.” Rebbecca let out a quiet, shaky breath. “…You make it sound so simple.” “It’s not,” Clyde admitted. “But we’ll figure it out.”

He extended his hand. Rebbecca stared at it for a moment. Then, slowly, she reached out and took it. Tears slipped down her face again, but this time she didn’t try to hide them. Raleigh stepped in first. Then Clyde. They pulled her into a hug. Mainframe hesitated for a second, clearly unsure what the correct response was. Then she stepped forward and joined them.

They walked her back through HOME. The atmosphere had changed. Not completely broken, but not untouched either. The town was already rebuilding, fast and efficient like it always did. Structures were going back up, systems being restored, people moving with purpose. They were strong. They would recover. But there was something underneath it all. A quiet heaviness. People had died. That wasn’t something you could just fix. As they walked, the reactions were mixed. Some citizens glared at Rebbecca, their expressions sharp and unforgiving. Others looked relieved to see her, like something important had been returned. Neither reaction surprised her. She kept her head down anyway.

Rigg passed by with a casual wave, still on patrol, Mara walking close behind him. Rebbecca braced herself, expecting at least a harsh comment. It didn't come. "…So you're back," Mara said instead. Her tone was cold, but controlled. Which somehow felt worse. "We're going to need more of those weapons," she added, already moving past them. "Don't disappear again." And just like that, she was gone.

They continued on. Mr. Wainwright spotted them almost immediately. His eye lit up. "Rebbecca! You're alright!" he said, hurrying over. "I saw the state you were in during the battle. I was worried sick." He hesitated slightly. "I knew you weren't… evil." The word came out awkwardly, like he didn't fully believe it but wanted to. Rebbecca blinked, caught off guard. "Actually," he continued, brightening again, "think you could help us out with some technical issues? The boys are having a bit of trouble with the power grid this time around." For a moment, she just stared at him. Then she smiled. "I'll take a look," she said. "But there's something I need to handle first." "Oh right, of course," he said quickly. "Well… don't overdo it, alright?" He waved them off, already turning back to his work.

Further ahead, Cyrus approached. Tess carried Astra. Tara carried Crona. Tara looked… conflicted. They called each other siblings, but the reality was stranger than that. She was a younger version of Raleigh from another universe, and seeing the children, their children, clearly unsettled her.

Crona just laughed at her expression, completely unbothered. "I kept watch like you asked," Cyrus said, straight to the point. Raleigh stepped forward before he could continue. "Cyrus… thank you," she said, her voice soft but sincere. "Really. That means a lot." Her gaze lingered on the kids. "I want to take them back right now," she admitted quietly. "But… could you watch them a little longer?" She didn't hide how hard that was to ask.

"Oh, and take Mainframe too," Rebbecca added with a smirk. "She's too young for what we're about to talk about." Cyrus gave her a flat look. "Do I look like a multiversal babysitter to you?" He

clearly had no idea what he'd just walked into. Rebbecca shrugged. "You're right," she said. "Running a nation? Easy. Childcare? Way beyond you." He frowned. Before he could respond, Proxy and Penny passed by. Both of them were smiling. Not normal smiles, Devious. The kind that meant trouble. "Hey, Proxy," Rebbecca called casually. "Nice new body. Wanna watch my kid for a minute?" Proxy stopped.

"What?" he said, immediately annoyed, and then confused. "Absolutely not. Penny and I are about to..." He cut himself off, glancing down at Mainframe, who was looking up at him with quiet curiosity. "…engage in a private matter." "And then we are eloping," he added quickly. Penny tilted her head. "It could be good practice, Model Seven." Proxy paused. Recalculated. Then nodded. "…Very well." He took Mainframe's hand. "Come, child. We will provide optimal supervision." Before anyone could question that, he was already walking off with her. Quickly. Very quickly. Cyrus sighed. "Just… hurry up before someone calls me that again," he muttered. "I am not old enough to be a grandpa." All three of them paused, clearly about to say something. Then thought better of it.

They continued on. Inside Clyde and Raleigh's home, they talked. For hours. Rebbecca didn't hold anything back. Not this time. She told them everything. Her past. The choices she made. The things she regretted. The things she didn't. Her connection to Mainframe. Her history with The Boss. Some parts made them go quiet. Horrified. Heartbroken. Other parts, they laughed. Especially the stories about her messing with Raleigh as a kid. Why she behaved the way she did at The Wishing Door. With full context, everything finally made sense.

Eventually, Rebbecca leaned back, exhaling deeply. "You have no idea how good that feels," she said. "I've been holding onto all of that for so long." She looked between them. "…But that's not the real problem." "The Once and Future Foe," Clyde said. Rebbecca nodded. "Omnihack wasn't the only group that knew about it, We were warned. By a version of us from another multiverse." Raleigh butted in. "And even now," Clyde added, "I don't think I fully understand what it is. It feels… undefined." "That's because of the scale," Rebbecca said quietly. "I don't think anyone fully

understands it." She hesitated. "…That schism you felt? The whole Multiverse felt." She looked at them both. "That was the Foe."

Silence. The weight of that statement was terrifying. "The Boss barely held it off," she continued. "And when it comes back…" She took a breath. "…we'll have less than twelve years to prepare." Raleigh let out a short laugh. "Twelve years?" she said. "That's plenty of time. I'll be a billion times stronger by then." Raleigh bragged. Rebbecca smiled. There was still a hint of pain there. But something else too. Hope. "…Before," she said slowly, "I didn't think it was possible." Her gaze shifted between them. "You beat him." She shook her head slightly. "I thought he was inevitable. Absolute. Something no one could overcome." A small pause. "…maybe we really can do this, and on our terms." For the first time, she believed it.

Epilogue

Noir warped into HOME alongside Aurel and Eevynin. She was still wrapped in bandages from head to toe, her body barely holding together after the last fight. “Slow down,” Aurel groaned. “You’re going to open your wounds again.” She didn’t even look back. “I’m not stopping,” she shot over her shoulder. “I need confirmation.” And with that, she rushed ahead, leaving the two of them behind. Eevynin sighed. “Well… now what? We’re not in hiding anymore. We could help rebuild, or maybe do something a little more normal for once. I’ll admit, I’m starving.”

Aurel was about to respond, but something caught his eye. Something metallic. Something wrong. Without a word, he broke into a run. There it was, the remains of Eight. The body was mangled

beyond recognition. The head was gone. What little remained was surrounded by a faint, shifting puddle of living metal. Aurel dropped to his knees. He didn't need an explanation. The scene told him everything. Around him, the town moved on. People rebuilt. They worked. They carried on. No one noticed. No one remembered. Eight had been left behind. "No… my messages…" Aurel tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. His voice broke. He reached out, his hand trembling as it touched the living metal. It reacted instantly, curling around his fingers, not aggressive, gentle. Familiar. Like something recognizing him. Like something saying goodbye. Eevynin stepped up beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder, silent as he mourned.

Elsewhere, Noir moved through the town. She could see the damage clearly now. Buildings scarred, streets torn apart, signs of a battle that had nearly broken everything. But she saw something else too. In some areas, it was already fixed. Completely restored. Mr. Wainwright moved through the streets, directing repairs, fixing what he could with practiced precision. He wasn't a fighter, but he was doing his part, and so was everyone else. People worked together without hesitation. They cared. Not because they had to. Because they wanted to. A small smile formed on Noir's face. Raleigh had built something real. Something worth protecting.

She passed by The Rival, who stood, barely on a raised podium, still patched up from the fight. Loki stood beside him. Also patched up. Also somehow in charge. Behind them, The Rival's men stood in formation… crying. "For your bravery," Loki announced proudly, "I award you HOME's first Medal of Honor." He pinned it onto The Rival's chest with exaggerated care. "And for scuffing The Boss's armor, an achievement I personally witnessed, you get this one." Another medal.

"For personally entertaining me… this." Another. "For exceptional animal handling, don't ask, I just feel it fits." Another. "And this one," Loki added, lowering his voice slightly, "is because you look really sexy today… Don't tell Lucy I said that." He kept going. And going. And going. By the time he finished, The Rival was completely covered in medals, barely able to stand under the weight of them.

Loki stepped back, admiring his work. “Congratulations!” he declared, laughing. “You are now the most decorated officer in all of HOME!” Clyde sighs seeing the end of it as he walks by with more important maters. “Like what a Christmas tree?” he mumbles. The Rival falls over from all the weight. “This... is the greatest day of my life.”

Noir kept moving. Then she saw her. Rebbecca stood on a rooftop, working directly on the power grid herself, tools in hand, fully focused. Both of them froze. Just looking at each other. “Hey…” Rebbecca said, her voice uncertain. Noir warped up to meet her. “So it’s true,” she said. “You actually pulled it off. All of them… even him.” A pause. “And that faker.” There was a faint edge in her voice. Rebbecca nodded, careful, almost hesitant. “You seem to be recovering,” she said quietly. “No thanks to you.” Noir stepped forward and punched her. Not hard. Just enough. Rebbecca blinked, more surprised than hurt.

“You’re not… mad?” she asked. Noir rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. “Well… you’re not the only one who’s tried to kill Raleigh,” she said. “I can’t exactly act like I’m better than you.” She shrugged. “Welcome to the club, I guess.” Rebbecca smirked slightly. “Ooo, an exclusive club. Just the two of us?” Noir snorted. “Please. We both know that list is way longer than that.” She paused. Then added, more sincerely: “…I’m glad you came back.” Rebbecca looked at her for a moment. Then smiled. Not forced this time. They both turned, looking out across HOME. The pink sky stretched endlessly above them.

A few days later, when everything had finally settled, it was time for the funerals. Mikako’s came first. It had been decided as a private ceremony, family, close allies, and a handful of others. Traditional. Kaguya had made that choice herself. Many people in the town weren’t happy about it, but they respected her wishes. Even so, they gathered outside, waiting in silence, choosing to be there in spirit rather than intrude. Afterward, a memorial pillar was raised in the Yakuza district. Tall, unyielding. A permanent mark of who she was, and what she meant.

Then came Grant's. Everyone showed up. Not out of obligation, but because they wanted to. People from every corner of HOME gathered, each one carrying their own memory of him. Even people you wouldn't expect stood among them. Dave included, lingering quietly in the back.

Natasha arrived as well, if only briefly. She paid her respects to the legend of Rookline with quiet dignity, but left soon after. There was still too much waiting for her elsewhere.

Rebbecca stood outside the church. She didn't step in. It didn't feel right. Not after everything. Before she could think too much about it, two hands grabbed her arms. "Gotcha." Rigg and Switch lifted her slightly off the ground, grinning like idiots. "What... hey..." she started, caught completely off guard. Mara stepped out beside them. She didn't smile. She just stared. "I see," Rebbecca said calmly, recovering quickly. "So you want revenge after all." Rigg snorted. "Man… what happened to you? You're usually the one pushing everyone's buttons, reading people before they even react." "Yeah," Switch added. "It's kinda creepy, honestly."

Mara didn't react to either of them. Her gaze stayed locked on Rebbecca. Then, finally, she spoke. "In battle or in bed," she said quietly, "that's what Raleigh decided." Rebbecca blinked, thrown off. Mara continued. "No one gets a meaningless death." A pause. "And you're the one who coded that in." Her voice softened, just slightly. "If it wasn't for you… thank you. You gave him a death that mattered." Rebbecca looked away. "…He still died."

"Yeah," Mara said. "But in the end… he chose to trust you." She held her gaze. "So I am too." Then she nodded toward the church. "Come on." Rigg and Switch didn't wait for permission. They dragged Rebbecca along anyway. Grant's service carried a similar structure to Mikako's, but on a much larger scale. Afterward, a statue was unveiled. Grant stood immortalized in stone, strong, unshaken, holding the line. Behind him, a memorial plaque stretched wide, etched with the names of everyone who had fallen. Each one carefully listed. Each one remembered.

Aion was halfway through another broadcast, this time with Mia beside him as co-host. Both of them smiled toward the camera, composed and professional. “Who would’ve believed,” Aion began, “that hackers were embedded in nearly every major system imaginable, quietly influencing events from behind the scenes?” He paused, glancing down at his notes with a slight frown. “Well… as always, it’s no surprise who uncovered it all.”

Mia picked up smoothly. “We have far more detailed information available on our website,” she said with a practiced smile. Aion let out a small laugh. “That’s right. It’s… a bit too convoluted to explain in this format.” He straightened slightly. “Rest assured, Commander Steelheart is personally handling cleanup operations. Any remaining threats are being dealt with as we speak. No need to worry about hacker assassins.” His smile held, but there was just enough tension underneath to make it clear he didn’t entirely believe that himself.

Off-camera, Tristan leaned slightly toward Crow. “We do have the Special Division on speed dial… right?” he whispered. Crow just shrugged. “But that’s all the time we have for today,” Mia said, wrapping up. “Actually... one more thing.” Aion’s voice cut in, catching her off guard. She turned slightly, confused. This wasn’t on the schedule. “All of this…” Aion began, his tone shifting. “Everything that’s happened recently…”

He hesitated for a moment, then continued more quietly. “It’s made me wonder if I’ve really been living my life the way I should.” There was a pause. Then he moved. He reached into his pocket and dropped to one knee. Mia couldn’t see him. But she didn’t need to. She felt the shift. The movement. The silence in the room. And suddenly, she understood. Her hands rose instinctively, covering her mouth in shock. “Mia Meridian,” Aion said, his voice steady despite everything, “would you do me the honor of becoming not just my partner on air…”

He gently guided her hand forward. “…but my partner in life?” He placed the ring in her hand so she could feel it. There was a brief, breathless pause. “Yes, Aion,” she said, smiling through it. “Of

course I will." He slid the ring onto her finger. Then, without missing a beat, he turned back to the camera with a confident smirk. "Find out more at ten." Off to the side, Crow and Tristan both facepalmed in perfect sync. Mia, meanwhile, just laughed softly completely unbothered.

Proxy stormed back in, back in his original body,literally dragging his newer, more human-looking one behind him by the neck. The spare body scraped lightly against the floor as he moved. On a nearby screen, Aion's broadcast was just wrapping up. Proxy stopped for a moment, watching the tail end of it, then muttered under his breath: "We were supposed to be next." A beat. "Damned Rebbecca… making us babysit that brat she pulled out of nowhere." He shoved the door open and stepped inside. Mainframe was there. And Penny. And… Penny again. Both versions of her stood side by side, fully active, completely synchronized.

"Are you sure you want to go back to a body like that?" one of the Pennys asked, tilting her head slightly. Proxy sighed dramatically, raising his free hand like he was delivering a speech to an invisible audience. "Yes. It is for the best," he declared. "Upgrades have never mattered to me." A pause. "Only our burning love." Mainframe tilted her head, watching all of this with open curiosity. "Why can't he just use both at the same time like you, Ms. Penny?" "I was never designed to operate that way," Proxy replied, dropping the dramatics just slightly. "I lack the processing power required to maintain multiple fully independent instances." He glanced back at the body he was still holding. "… Unlike certain overachievers."

Penny's larger body moved forward slightly. "And what will you do with it, Model Seven?" Proxy's screen shifted into a smirking emote. "I believe I'll keep it," he said. "For special occasions." Without another word, he walked over to a closet, opened it, and hung the spare body up inside like it was a spare suit. Then shut the door. Mainframe watched the entire thing, completely fascinated. "I hope I find love like you two someday," she said softly.

Vincent crashed onto the scene with a smirk. He was finally free. Behind him, bodies lay

scattered, men he had beaten senseless in some forgotten corner of the multiverse. His kind of place. The kind where strength decided everything. The others ran. Some stumbled. Some didn't even look back. Vincent chuckled to himself. Then his eyes locked onto someone who hadn't moved. A man, stronger than the rest. Or at least brave enough to pretend. "Who the hell are you?" the man demanded. "What do you want?"

Vincent rolled his shoulders, almost casually. "Oh, me?" he said, grinning. "Name's Vincent." A pause. "Vincent Cross." His palm opened, light flickering to life, photon energy dancing across his hand. "A name everyone's gonna know soon enough." It felt good to say that. No Omnihack. No orders. No one holding him back, reducing him to some background piece. Now? He could finally become something. Without another word, he lunged forward. Ready to carve his name into the world.

Elsewhere Cyrus sighed. Despite what everyone seemed to believe, he hadn't uncovered nearly as many embedded hackers as expected. There were some. A handful. After The Boss fell, a few revealed themselves outright. Others simply disappeared without a trace. That part bothered him more. And then there were the ones who stayed. They didn't run. They didn't resist. They asked to remain. Some claimed they had grown attached to the Coalition. That they believed in what it had become. Others… He wasn't so sure. Maybe they were just lost. Directionless now that the one giving them purpose was gone.

The truth was, none of them had actually sabotaged anything. They had just been there. Waiting. Prepared to act if The Boss ever called on them. But now? That call would never come. Cyrus folded his arms, thinking. They had warned him, too. About something coming. Something bigger. A threat he didn't fully understand yet. "…I'll have to prepare," he muttered to himself.

Noir returned after the funeral. Raleigh had asked her to come. She hadn't really explained why, but something in the way she said it made Noir feel like it mattered. Like she needed to be there. So she

came. She stepped inside without a word. Raleigh was already there, sitting comfortably, a small, knowing smile on her face. “So,” Noir said, arms crossed slightly. “What did you want?”

Before Raleigh could answer, a voice cut through the room. “Snifty!” Astra appeared in a flash, landing on the staircase railing like it was nothing. Clyde rushed after him, clearly exhausted. “Astra, don’t do that... you’re going to fall,” he said, already sounding like he’d said it a hundred times. Crona followed close behind. “Snifty!” she echoed, just as excited. Noir froze. Her eyes widened. She understood instantly. This was why Raleigh had called her. Astra warped again, this time appearing right in front of her. He tilted his head, looking up at her with curious uncertainty. “Mama?” he asked softly.

Noir’s breath caught. A tear slipped down her face before she could stop it. She knelt down in front of him, smiling gently despite everything. “No, silly…” she said, her voice soft. “You can call me… Auntie Noir.” She pulled him into a hug, ruffling his hair as she held him close. For a moment, she didn’t want to let go. But she knew. So eventually… she did. Crona reached them a second later and joined the hug without hesitation, mostly because Astra was doing it. Clyde finally made it down the stairs, slowing as he took in the moment. Raleigh moved to sit beside him, both of them watching quietly.

“These are our kids,” Raleigh said softly. Then, after a small pause: “And… I guess, kind of yours too.” She looked at Noir. “You can come see them anytime you want.” Noir’s composure broke completely. “I would…” she started, her voice shaking. “I would like that.” And then she was gone. Clyde let out a small laugh, shaking his head. “Well… I guess Noir can’t hide her emotions as well as she thinks.” Raleigh didn’t laugh. “You don’t think he was right about them?” she asked, her tone shifting. Clyde rubbed the back of his neck, thinking. “They do have some pretty crazy powers,” he admitted. “But…”

“I’m not leaving something like that to them,” Raleigh cut in firmly. “You hear me? This is our

problem." Clyde smiled. "I wouldn't have it any other way." They sat together, watching their twins run around the room, laughing, completely carefree. For a moment, everything felt… normal. Then Raleigh frowned slightly. "…Who the hell is Snifty?" Clyde shrugged. "I think it's like an imaginary friend or something. They've been saying it all day." The twins suddenly bolted into the next room. "Astra, Crona, wait!" Too late. A green flash lit up the doorway. Both of them stared, eyes wide with excitement. "Snifty!" they shouted in unison.

Loki sat slumped in a chair at the club, wrapped in what looked like an excessive number of bandages. He pouted. "I was not this injured." Lucy didn't even look up as she fed him another bite. "Nope," she said casually. "But this way I get an excuse for some quality time." She smiled sweetly. "I'm treating a critically injured patient." Loki huffed, crossing his arms as much as the bandages would allow. "Being married sucks." Lucy paused. Slowly. Then turned to look at him. "You're pouring all this devotion into me,"

Loki continued dramatically, "and I can't even requite it. What kind of arrangement is this?" He threw his head back. "A tragedy." Lucy stared at him for exactly one second. Then burst out laughing. "You're such an idiot, Lion Boy," she said, leaning in. She pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. Loki froze for a moment. Then immediately tried to look even more offended. "Marriage is terrible… I've never been this consistently happy in my life."

The CEO of Helix Corp vanished. To most people, it was a mystery. To Aurel… it was a mistake he never corrected. A few months later, Mr. Slate was appointed as the new CEO. He stood at the podium during the press conference, expression completely flat. "With great sorrow," he began, "I accept this responsibility." A pause. "But do not worry." His tone didn't change. "I am proud to announce that, effective immediately, we will be transitioning to a 400-hour work week." The room went silent. "And to ensure maximum productivity," he continued, "we will be reducing breaks accordingly. Employees will be permitted to clock out after forty hours."

No one spoke. No one moved. He said it all so calmly… so confidently… That it almost sounded like he believed it, like he was happy. The company collapsed within weeks. Stocks plummeted to zero. Bankruptcy followed shortly after. Every major patent the multiverse had come to rely on was sold off to competing corporations. And just like that. Helix Corp was gone.

HOME, on the other hand, thrived. It grew fast. Faster than anyone expected. People laughed. They trained. They fought. Together. It wasn't what Clyde and Raleigh had imagined when they first stepped through the Wishing Door. But it didn't matter anymore. They wouldn't trade it for anything. It was chaos, just enough to keep Raleigh's restless heart alive. Peaceful, just enough to let her finally breathe. And surrounded by people she cared about. She was happy. Truly, and for years… that didn't change. Still, in quiet moments, a thought lingered in the back of her mind. Did the Caretaker know? When they wished through a door… Had it understood her better than she understood herself? It was a question she might never answer. After all, It worked in mysterious ways.

11 Years Later, An unknown world. Silent. No wind. No life. Not even a whisper. Then, reality cracked. From the outside, something forced its way in. The fracture split wide as a figure stepped through. A tall man. Dark skin. Black wings wide, perfect, unnatural. Twin mechanical arms gleamed at his sides. His purple eyes flickered faintly as he straightened. "At last…" he said quietly. "I have found my way back." Behind him, the tear in reality began to seal itself. A firewall. Repairing. He waited. Just for a moment. For resistance from Omnihack. For intervention. For someone to notice.

No one came. He tilted his head slightly. "…Have I gone unnoticed?" Then he laughed. Slowly at first. Then wider. "Either way…" He stepped forward, the last trace of the fracture sealing behind him. "The time is almost upon us." His expression twisted, something between joy and madness. "Soon… the multiverse as they know it will vanish. Be consumed, and then…" His smile widened. "We will all be whole, and happy." He walked forward into the empty world. Toward something

unseen. Something waiting.