

Art Series



“A thing isn’t beautiful because it lasts.” - Vision

Chapter 1

To Wish Upon a Star

It was a late summer night when Tara and Arthur were together staring at the stars. They laid on a plaid blanket taken from Tara's room. While they were resting on a hill just down the street from her house, it felt as if they were miles from home.

Tara looked over to Arthur who was staring at the sky and looked at his eyes. The starlight reflecting off them made the accents of blue even more beautiful than usual. His warm hand was intertwined around hers. When she imagined her first boyfriend as a little girl, she always thought his skin would feel like sandpaper. His skin wasn't rough.

She held tightly to him as the socks on her feet slipped against the blanket beneath them keeping her from laying down on the hill without sliding. He was tall enough that his feet were firmly planted in the grass anchoring them down.

She pushed her dark hair behind her ears and said, "I think that one is the Big Dipper."

He turned to her, and they locked eyes. His nostrils flared slightly which was a sign he was about to make a joke.

"You mean 'Big Debra'?" he questioned.

"My bad," she said.

She loved the fact they had inside jokes. Tara squeezed his arm tight, then loosened her grip. She repeated this two more times and in return he flexed his arm three times. Arthur pulled her closer as a shooting star shot across the sky.

"Care to make a wish?" he asked.

"I don't even know what I would wish for," she said as she smiled.

Tara was safe as long as she was beside Arthur. He was the best person she had ever met, and she trusted every decision he made.

"You're not going to ask me what my wish is?" Arthur prodded.

"What is your wish?" Tara asked. His nostrils flared.

"When we get our first dog together it has to be a border collie."

"Fine, but I get to pick his name," Tara said as she ran her hand through his hair.

"What would you name it?" he asked.

"Maybe something like Gonzo. I always liked that name," Tara said.

"Don't play with me like that. I'm not going to make it all the way through college just to name my dog 'Gonzo'," he said with a smile.

“You can’t edit a wish. I read that in a--Wait. Do you see that? Is that star getting bigger?” Tara asked as she pointed to the sky.

A star slowly began growing larger and larger. Upon further inspection it began to glow a tint of red and was heading straight towards them.

“TARA! TAKE MY HAND!” Arthur shouted. He extended his hand and pulled Tara up the hill. As they got onto the street the meteor collided into the ground where they once laid.

The grass had singed and was now a dim gray. Tara peered into the crater and saw a green anklet laying in the dirt. She could easily make out the dark, raised ridges that cut vertically across it. As she watched it, the ridges glowed a lime green briefly before fading to black again slowly, as if the piece of metal breathed occasionally.

Tara began to approach it.

“Tara, stay back! We don’t know what that is!” Arthur shouted.

Tara paused to look over at him.

The anklet flew forward as if it was magnetized to her. ***Clink!*** It closed around her ankle. Green metal burst out from around her and encased her body in a cocoon. Arthur ran towards her and began slamming his fists against the metal plating.

“Tara! Are you okay?” he shouted.

The cocoon broke open to reveal Tara curled up on the ground. She was covered in lime green metal from head to toe. Dark green lines jutted across her plating. She had two antennae sticking out of the top of her head. He lifted her up and Tara stood there quietly. The panel on her face molded to form two eyes.

“Tara? Are you there?” he asked.

The metal at her fingertips turned into a thick liquid as a sword molded at the end of each of her hands. ***Schink!*** She swung forward and Arthur dove to the right.

“WOAH! Be careful!” he shouted as he fell to the ground. She had cut a hole in his shirt but did not contact his skin. She continued her attack.

Inside the suit, Tara watched through the eye sockets.

Welcome, host. May I ask for your name?

A voice echoed in Tara’s head.

“STOP SWINGING AT MY BOYFRIEND!” Tara shouted.

“Yeah! I agree!” Arthur said as he continued to evade her attacks.

Invalid name. Human names only have two words.

“Tara Wen.”

Thank you. Pleasure to meet you, Tara.

“Stop swinging the sword!” she shouted.

“I firmly believe actions speak louder than words,” Arthur said. Tara could see his nostrils flare as he spoke.

As you wish.

Tara stopped moving.

Iron levels sufficient to continue bonding. Body is young and able to withstand attacks.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“No, I’ve definitely told you that before,” Arthur said.

“Not you. The suit is talking,” Tara said.

“Ah. A good boyfriend knows when to stop adding his two cents.”

How long do you wish to share this body?

“How long? Share? This is my body!”

Doesn’t appear that way currently.

“What do you want from me?”

To continue to live which cannot be done without a host.

“Why should I let you stay with me?”

If you let me stay with you, I will grant you powers to keep you safe. These powers would let you be a hero like your father was.

“How did you know that?”

I have access to all your memories.

Arthur walked around collecting the stuffed animals they had brought out stargazing as Tara spoke to the suit.

“Fine. But we are going to have to create some ground rules,” Tara said.

Acceptable.

“Let’s start by getting this armor off me,” Tara said.

Immediately, the green metal rescinded back into her anklet. Arthur dropped the stuffed animals and embraced her.

“Tara! I thought I lost you!”

Tara looked down at the rip in his shirt, "I'm so sorry about your shirt."

"Don't be," he said as he kissed her on the forehead, "I am just glad you're safe. I don't know what I would do without you."

Six months later, Tara was approaching a train to perform another routine criminal takedown. The green metal encasing Tara's body molded at her hands. Spears formed, and they dug into the roof of the train.

You don't have to be out fighting crime so soon after. You aren't mentally well yet.

"I'm fine! Just cut me a hole so I can get in there and take out the bad guys!" she shouted over the wind. Her left arm ripped off a chunk of the roof and she fell into the train car. Four men with crowbars stood waiting.

"We could see the spears sticking through the ceiling. Not a great way to sneak on board," one of the men said.

"Who said I was sneaking?" Tara asked as her left arm molded into a blaster. A blast of energy flew out and knocked the man against the wall.

"Tear that suit off of her!" another man shouted as they ran forward.

Her right arm molded into a hammer.

"Woah. We don't need a hammer for these guys. I was thinking more along the lines of a bat."

Stop making this fight longer than it must be.

"Yeah! Give us the hammer! We are a hammer level threat!" the third man shouted. ***Ka-Thunk!*** Her arm swung forward and collided with the man. He rocketed into the side of the car. The train rocked back and forth.

"You almost knocked the train over!" Tara shouted.

"I think that was you," the second man said.

We are not here to beat up criminals. We thwart their plans then move on. They aren't punching bags and treating them as such is a waste of our energy.

"I'm not using them as punching bags. I just don't want to kill anyone. You're always too forceful."

"I agree," the fourth man said.

Don't use mercy as an excuse for you to exact the opposite. I know why you really want to use a bat.

“It’s my body. I get to make the calls.”

Like I said before. It isn’t your body.

“You just want control.”

I don’t. But I will take it if I must.

Tara lost control of her limbs and watched from the visor as her arms molded into blasters. The eyes on her suit turned red. Two energy shots burst out from her hands and into the men. They went flying through the side of the cars.

Whoops. Did not mean to hit them that hard.

“What did you just do?” Tara shouted.

Got the job done.

“You can’t just kill people like that!”

They didn’t die. I only expect they will need five surgeries.

“We don’t do that.”

For as long as you avoid the underlying issue, I will continue to take control in situations like this.

“Whatever.”

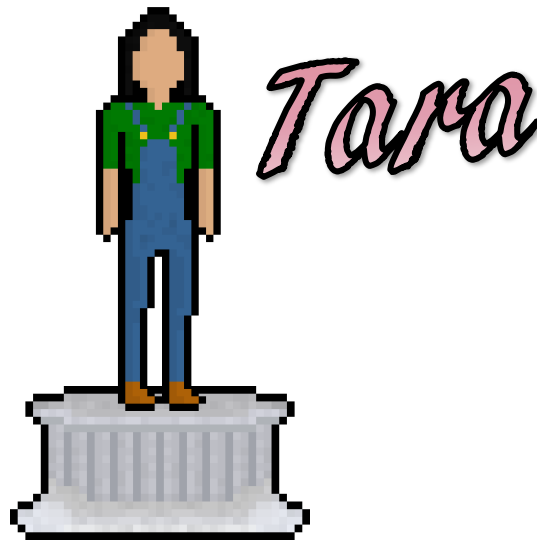
Wind rushed past the holes in the wall as Tara stood quietly in the empty train car.

Chapter 2

April Showers



Tara sat in the passenger seat of her family's brown car as her father drove her farther and farther away from the city. She glanced ahead at the dirt road they were driving down. It felt weird to look ahead and not see gray asphalt. She couldn't help but wonder how long this road would remain functional if no one maintained it. Idly, she thought of how you would even maintain a dirt road. Would you add more dirt? Does it sustain itself?



"You excited at all for this?" her father, Mr. Wen, asked as he looked over from the driver's seat.

"I guess. Just nice to get away," Tara said as she briefly glanced over. Her father kept his hair neatly trimmed, perhaps as a way to disguise there being a little less of it year by year.

"I think it would do you some good to get some distance from the hometown after what happened with Arthur. We're lucky they're even willing to see us. I just know they can help you get that thing on your ankle under control."

"I don't need help living with the anklet, Dad. With her, I can save people. She's a gift."

"I know that. But the criminals you fought the other day would beg to differ. You can't just leave people in critical condition. If you're going to be a hero, which trust me that is not an unfamiliar concept to me, you need to be able to control that anklet. You can't be like those that came before you," he said.

"I understand."

“When I was out there back in the day, I knew the type of hero that would put people in the hospital. They were not good people. Those types of people are why things like S-Day happened. That thing on your ankle is going to turn you into that if you aren’t careful,” he said.

“I’d prefer if you stop referring to the band as a ‘thing’, Dad. She’s a living creature,” Tara said as she crossed her arms and turned toward the side window. She watched the dust kicked up by their tires in the side view mirror

“We don’t know squat about that thing. It could be living, or it could be a machine,” he said.

The anklet hummed.

“She doesn’t like it when you accuse her of being a liar,” she said.

“This is like having another teenager in the car with me. Tell your friendship bracelet to simmer down. I didn’t say it is lying per se. It is just that everything you think you know about this . . . item is only the stuff that the aforementioned item has told you. As your mom used to say, ‘Trust, but verify.’ We need a new set of eyes on the situation and the place we’re headed is the only lead I’ve got.”

“Fine,” Tara sighed, “You sure we’re not lost? How much deeper are we headed into rural America?”

“I lost the GPS signal a couple minutes ago but she warned me that I would. If her directions are correct, we should be there . . .”

The car turned left past a grove of pine trees and the woods opened to reveal a large farm with a weathered auburn house immediately ahead. A rusty silo and a large turbine spinning slowly sat behind it.

“. . . soon.”

The brown car pulled up to the old farmhouse. A woman waited at the foot of the stairs to the porch. She wore a red shirt like the color of a rose. A pair of goggles sat high enough on her forehead to push her graying bangs out of her eyes. She was working on some device attached to a wooden pole. As the car pulled up to the house, she made one more adjustment with a screwdriver then stood up and stuck the item into the ground. It began whirring in the breeze.

Once Tara and her father stepped out of their car, she reached over to lift a large, white backpack resting on the stairs and put it on. The backpack had a long, gray polyester tube that

extruded from the bottom right corner of it. The tube was coiled and tied to the underside of the backpack.

“Welcome! Tara, I presume. Better be or I would have to kill you for seeing this place,” the woman said.

“Erm. Yeah. I’m Tara,” she said as she pulled at her collar.

Her anklet hummed.

“Not yet,” Tara muttered.

She extended a well-manicured hand to Mr. Wen.

“My lawyer calls me Tori Michaels but most just call me Tinkerer. Pleasure to meetcha!” she said with a wide smile.

Fwooshhhh BOOM! A man in blue and gold spandex flew out of the air and landed on the ground next to Tinkerer.



“This the new member, honey?” he asked. His voice was deep. Tara would have found him scary if not for his use of the term ‘honey’ or his cape the same color as the liquid.

“Sure is.”

“Pleasure to meet you! Name is Stupendous Man, but you can call me John,” he said as he extended his arm forward before shaking both of their hands. His grip was like nothing Tara’s father had ever experienced before.

“Well . . . not a new member just yet,” her father said, “I want to see around a bit first.”

“My apologies for the presumption. With your permission, I hope you provide us with the opportunity to show you what we can do for extra-talented youth like Tara,” he said.

“So, there’s more kids like me here?” Tara asked as she looked around.

“Well, there’s nobody like you,” Tinkerer said with a smile, “But . . . you can say that for everybody here.”

“Let me muster up the kids,” Tinkerer said.

“Mustard?” Tara asked.

“Muster. It means to gather,” Stupendous Man smiled, “Each word has its own power in the right circumstances. It pays to have the right one for the right time.”

“KIDS, get out here!” Tinkerer shouted.

A window on the upper floor slid open and a stout green figure dove out of it. It landed on the ground and stood up. He had a green skin complexion, long tail, tiger stripes on his back, and golden rings around his arms. He had a dark green mask with large horns and tiny carved teeth covering his face. A blade was slung over his back.



*Teen
Demon*

“Teen Demon. Also known as . . .” He started clicking his tongue and screeching, creating what seemed like random noise.

“Most people cannot say that, so I just go by TD. Nice to meet you,” he said as he faked a salute.

“Nothing wrong with taking the door,” a boy said as he walked through the front door of the building. The screen door squeaked as it swung open. He wore a pink suit under a gray trench coat. His hair was parted down the middle.



A shiny, white robot hovered behind him pushing the screen door out of the way with its bin-shaped torso. Attached to the torso were two cylindrical arms and what could roughly be described as an upside-down bowl for a head. The upside-down bowl had a black visor stretched across it where yellow lights blinked.



The boy walked up to Tara and extended his arm. His hands were gloved.

“Names Mindmeld and this over here is Mark-3. She likes to be called Markie though.”

“Assessment of my desires accurate,” Markie chirped out before spinning around then extending her arm forward so Tara could shake her metal cylinders.

“Wow, you are a colorful group of . . . people,” Tara’s father said, pausing just long enough before saying people for everyone to realize he wasn’t sure of his word choice.

“We pride ourselves on our diversity here,” Tinkerer said.

“Yeah, not every place has a demon and a robot,” Teen Demon said.

“Why don’t we take your stuff inside then show you around,” Tinkerer said as she nodded at Stupendous Man who then picked up all of Tara’s luggage with one finger and flew inside with them.

Mr. Wen followed Stupendous Man and Tinkerer as Tara trailed behind. In the distance, Teen Demon was chasing after Markie who hovered just out of his reach. Mindmeld read quietly in the rocking chair on the porch. They walked around the outskirts of the house.

“How long have you guys been established here?” Mr. Wen asked.

“Roughly four or so years by this point. After spending so much time protecting Rosewood, John decided to settle down and we built this house,” Tinkerer said.

“We had wanted kids, but considering the whole me an alien and her a human thing, it didn’t quite work out. So, we decided to start mentoring talented individuals,” Stupendous Man said. He walked with his arms folded behind his back and over his cape.

“Have you ever had any other students?” Mr. Wen asked.

“Nope. Markie is ours. Teen Demon has been here for nearly three years. We started working with Mindmeld about two years ago,” Tinkerer said.

“We try to be pretty picky about who we decide to train. After what happened in Hope City there isn’t much room for heroes anymore nor is there any room for those ill fit for the role,” Stupendous Man said.

As they walked, Tara peeked in through the windows. She saw numerous pieces of old, wooden furniture spread throughout the house. Blue and white striped wallpaper lined the room she was looking into.

“And you think Tara is cut for this kind of life?” Mr. Wen asked.

“I do. I have seen what she is capable of, and her powers are near limitless if properly controlled,” Stupendous Man said.

“We spoke over the phone about how the anklet has been giving her difficulties and I think I can work to understand the anklet. I am quite proficient with electronics,” Tinkerer added.

“I remember hearing stories about you, John. I am glad to know you are just as great in person. You seem plenty capable. What do you think, Tara?” Mr. Wen asked as he looked back.

Tara looked over to him and said, “Sure! Why not?”

“Incredible!” Stupendous Man said.

“Care to stay for dinner, Mr. Wen?” Tinkerer asked.

“No. The wife is cooking my favorite meal, so I got to be heading home. Plus, this is Tara’s journey,” he said.

“Excellent. Well, you can make sure Tara is settled in before you head off. No rush at all,” Tinkerer said. She and Stupendous Man walked off hand in hand. Mr. Wen turned around and put his arm on Tara’s shoulder.

“I trust you will be safe here. These people can help you learn to work with your anklet because we both know she can get feisty. You make the family proud here. I didn’t raise a nineties hero!”



Later that evening, after Tara’s father had left, they all sat around the dinner table together. A large clock on the wall ticked loudly. Something about it was comforting. The walls were lined with old, colorful wallpaper which had pictures of fruit spread across them. Tara looked at the table to see what was being served. Macaroni and cheese, broccoli, bread, and a large jug of iced tea sat ready to eat.

Once everyone had sat down, Stupendous Man passed the food to his left. He did not give himself any food. Stupendous Man and Tinkerer sat at opposite heads of the rectangular table.

“So, let’s go over everyone’s powers really quick. Will be helpful for team dynamics. I can fly and have super strength,” Stupendous Man said.

“It seems I age slowly enough that the average human would perceive me as immortal. Plus, I know my way with a sword,” Teen Demon said. He lifted his mask just high enough to slide the fork underneath.

“I am a robot,” Markie said.

Tinker sat up, “Markie, what have we said about advocating for yourself?”

Markie’s head pivoted toward Tinkerer then back to Tara, “I am a robot that can fire energy blasts as well as compute massive amounts of information. I also hover via an attenuated repulsor field which does not permit pure flight but does keep me from getting muddy.”

Tinkerer nodded, “And . . .”

“And . . . I play the theremin.”

Tinkerer looked over at Tara, “We’re working on developing her creativity and not just her logic.”

“The theremin? Is that an instrument? I’ve never heard of one before,” Tara said.

“Ohhh . . . you will.” Mindmeld said.

“Indeed. Repeatedly,” Teen Demon added.

“Hours before sunrise when normal living creatures might be sleeping . . .” Mindmeld added.

“Boys . . .” Tinkerer cautioned before turning back to Tara, “As for me, I wasn’t born with powers, but my mother used to say that she felt like any mechanical thing would tell me its troubles if I worked with it long enough. A couple engineering degrees and a twist of fate or two later, John entered my life and with how much John was in the thick of it back in the day, I wasn’t about to let him have all the fun on his own, so I built my own super suit.

That backpack I have on allows me to absorb metals and turn them into a semi-liquid state which I can then retrieve and mold to my liking,” Tinkerer said.

“I still do not understand what she does,” Teen Demon said to Tara, “It is unnatural.”

“It is simply state-of-matter manipulation, Teen Demon,” Mindmeld said, “By breaking down the electromagnetic bonds between and or within molecules, she is able to override the natural bonding tendencies of elements with low electron affinity and . . .”

“You talk and yet the words are refused entry into my brain. Perhaps you should stop wasting your breath showing off all the scientist minds you absorbed,” Teen Demon responded.

“Just trying to grease the cogs of understanding. As TD spoiled, I copy the minds of others when I touch them. Although, anytime I touch someone it sends me into a spasm so that’s why I wear the gloves. But I am trained in martial arts, EMS, physics, etc.”

“Why physics?” Tara asked.

“Why not? Physics is cool,” Mindmeld said.

Stupendous Man added, “We encourage our students to develop not only their powers, but also themselves. Over reliance on one’s extra-abilities and failure to develop the being within is a path that becomes narrower until you find yourself stuck with no way forward.”

“Fair enough. In battle I go by ‘Emerald Earwig’. I believe that my anklet is of alien origin and upon command it forms a suit around my body. I can fly, form any weapon, and do all kinds of stuff.”

Teen Demon snickered to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Tara asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Ear. Wig. An unexpected combination of syllables, is it not?”

“It’s a type of bug. Listen, you might have been able to pick the mask you wanted from the Halloween store, I didn’t get to pick how the suit looked,” Tara said.

Mindmeld looked over, “Can you do it on command, like right now?”

“Probably not the best idea,” Tara said.

“All in good time,” Tinkerer said as she poured more iced tea into Tara’s glass.

“Perhaps now would be a good transition to our daily focus. Andy, please give us the next term from the bottom of the remaining list this time.”

Mindmeld sighed, leaned back in his chair, and looked up at the ceiling deep in thought. As Mindmeld racked his brain, Tinkerer spoke.

“To counteract his cascading memories Mindmeld has a list of words to memorize. It’s a way to test his ability to choose what he remembers. Each time he successfully learns a list we add on another word. If he gets this, it is on to eighty-seven.”

He leaned his chair back in, "Loss."

Everyone but Tara looked to Markie who responded, "Correct."

"Great work!" Tinkerer said as she held her thumbs up.

"It isn't a foreign concept, even to extra-talented people like us," Stupendous Man said.

"Would anyone like to go first and share what loss means to them?" Tinkerer asked.

"As an individual, I am lost after being suddenly pulled from my fiery hellscape of a home almost a decade ago now. Since that point in time, I have been trying to figure out how to survive on this plane of existence. While home was not ideal, I have not seen any entity like me since my arrival here. Sometimes I wonder where other beings like me are," Teen Demon said.

"Alright, no one said you had to get dramatic calling your home a 'fiery hellscape' and stuff," Mindmeld said.

"I was not. I never said those things were bad," Teen Demon said.

"I don't know if that makes me feel worse or better. I suppose the loss I have experienced is my identity. With all these minds merged into mine it's hard to keep track of what I have actually experienced," Mindmeld said as he put his fork and knife crossed over each other on his plate, "When it comes down to it, what are we but our memories?"

"Thank you for sharing that, Mindmeld. I'm lucky. I haven't experienced loss of the superhero kind, just family members that have passed on, same as anyone else. I guess it makes me care more for human life," Tinkerer said.

"That was beautiful, dear," Stupendous Man said. Teen Demon rolled his eyes.

"Tara, how about you?" Tinkerer asked.

"Oh, me? I guess I just recently broke up with my boyfriend. That's been wearing on me a bit."

"YOU BROKE UP WITH YOUR BOYFRIEND? THAT IS ALL!?!?" Teen Demon exclaimed.

"How long had you two been dating?" Mindmeld asked.

"About two years," Tara responded.

Teen Demon groaned as he leaned back in his chair.

"Pfft. I have lived for over three thousand years. That is . . . Markie, can you tell me what two divided by three thousand is?"

"Sure, give me one second," Markie said as her boosters activated and she flew over the table towards Teen Demon. Her thrusters blew away all the plates and Tinkerer's hair ruffled in the wind.

"No flying on the table!" Tinkerer shouted out as Markie landed on the other side.

"Sorry," Markie chirped as her chest plate flipped around to reveal a calculator.

"You are telling me I have to type it out myself! Everything in this house is automated but the buck stops with the flying robot?" Teen Demon exclaimed.

"It is zero point zero zero zero six six," Mindmeld said.

"Alright, I was just about to type it myself over here. Show off . . . Point being, this is not that big of a deal, Tara," Teen Demon said.

"So, I am going to listen to what a demon thinks?" Tara asked.

"Hey, that is rude," Teen Demon responded as he pointed one of the three fingers on his hand at her.

"Teen Demon, you are not helping. We all experience loss in our own way. No one is invalid because their problem could be perceived as less gruesome to others, the same as another person would not be more valid for suffering a greater amount," Tinkerer said.

"Loss is defined as the fact or process of losing something or someone," Markie said.

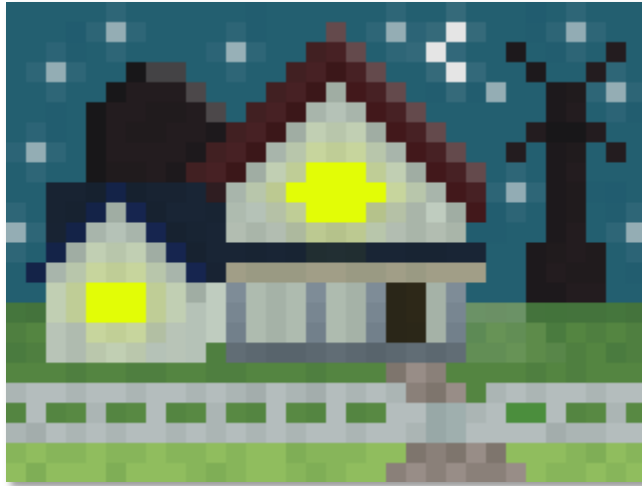
"Sounds like the robot agrees more with me," Tara said.

"Whatever," Teen Demon said.

"Alright! Enough bickering. You are all here because you are incredibly capable. It is no secret we have had a dry spell in heroes recently. But you all are more powerful than the heroes of old. You are here to be trained to not make the same mistakes of those that came before us," Stupendous Man said.

"Then arguing would not be in our best interest," Mindmeld said.

"Correct. But that does not mean conversation is not appreciated. You all spoke well tonight, and your chemistry is admirable. It is the working of a competent team. I am heading to bed, and I expect to see you all up and ready at eight tomorrow for training," Stupendous Man said as he stood up.



Tara finished emptying her suitcases with the help of the house which automatically folded all her clothes. Her room was towards the top of the barn and her ceiling was slanted as it also was the roof to the barn.

She laid down on her bed which was covered in intricately detailed comforters and numerous green pillows. She threw all of them off the bed except for the two normal looking pillows at the bottom.

Tara put in her headphones and turned on her phone. She sat on the lock screen and stared at the picture of her and her boyfriend. In the picture, she was hugging him in his graduation gown. The deep blue of the gown was accentuated by the bright sky on the sunny day. She didn't have anything else to change it to, so it remained. The final bastion of a once glorious creation.

"Why'd you have to go and leave?" she asked.

She turned on music. "Two Weeks" by Grizzly Bear played quietly as she began to sob on the bed.

Her anklet hummed.

"No, don't do anything. I am meant to feel this."

It hummed louder.

"We're not fighting something. Just leave me be," Tara said as she wiped her eyes.

But we are fighting something . . .

Outside of the room, Tinkerer approached the door to Tara's bedroom with a tray in her hands. Two ceramic teapots and a kettle rested on the metallic rectangle. Markie floated by her side with a one-pound bag of sugar on her head.

"I don't think we will need that much," Tinkerer said.

"We do not know if she likes sugar in her tea yet so we may need it all. I hear sad people consume many beverages to cope," she chirped.

"Alright. You make a good point," Tinkerer said as she smiled.

Tinkerer paused a few feet from the door once she heard sobbing. Markie kept floating forward.

"Wait up, Markie."

Markie immediately stopped and the bag of sugar fell off her head and splattered on the ground.

"You hear what I'm hearing?" Tinkerer asked.

"I do not possess long distance hearing sensors."

"Okay, well I hear crying. Let's just leave this at her door."

Teen Demon opened his door on the other side of the hallway. He sniffed heavily as he panned his head across the surroundings. He spotted the spilt sugar and ran over to it. He dove down and started filling his pockets with it. He paused to look up at Tinkerer.

"Do not judge me. After thousands of years, you build up an impressive immune system."



Meanwhile, Mindmeld sat in a graveyard by a tombstone. On it, the name “Mark Harold” was engraved.

“There’s a new girl today. I think you would like her.”

The wind blew quietly around him.

“Da--er Stupendous Man told me about her. She is going to be a monumental asset in the field.”

Crickets chirped between sentences as Mindmeld thought of what to say next.

“I noticed Tinkerer used something called ‘validating’ today. I read about it online not too long ago. I think I will try it myself. I hear it is comforting. Not that I’d know . . .”

An airplane flew overhead.

“I helped Mary with her college essay. I think she stands a good chance to get in. I know it's what you’d want, and you’d be proud of her for how she is doing.”

He stood up and said, “I hope you’d be proud of me too.”

Guilt

One more text in the morning

One more hello

One more drive in moonlight

One last goodbye

One more syllable

Memories

Chapter 3

Blindsided by Choices



Tara stood behind the farmhouse. In front of her, Markie and Mindmeld battled in a makeshift arena. Four wooden posts sat in the ground with rope tied around them to form a square.

Yellow blasts fired out of Markie's arm as she flew through the air. Mindmeld flipped across the field to avoid them.

"Excellent work, you two!" Tinkerer shouted from the sidelines.

Tara's morning had flown by quickly. Most of the house was automated. Mechanical arms flew out from the walls in the kitchen and made her breakfast. When she went to brush her teeth, she stood still as a flurry of arms spun around her. One wielded a toothbrush, another floss, and a third had a cup of mouthwash. She now found herself waiting to scrimmage with Teen Demon.

"You guys will be up next. Remember that anything goes. Just don't kill each other," Stupendous Man said. The alarm on his phone rang and he stopped it with his thumb.

"Alright, time! Great form, you two," Stupendous Man said.

"Who won?" Mindmeld asked.

"Tie," Stupendous Man said.

"Sufficient performance."

"You two are up," Stupendous Man said. Tara and Teen Demon entered the arena.

"I shall not go easy on you, newbie," Teen Demon said.

"Wouldn't expect it," Tara said as she stretched out.

"In combat, the mind matters as much as the body. I have you bested on both--" Teen Demon started to say.

"START!" Stupendous Man shouted, hoping to cut off Teen Demon's comments.

Tara's anklet hummed and green metal expanded out from it. *Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink.* Her legs were covered in metal plating. The coating spread to her upper body and covered her face. Two antennas hung from her forehead.

Morning, Tara.

The suit's voice echoed in her head.

"Let's get this done," Tara said.



“Alright, I did not know she had armor and now she is talking to herself. I think I would prefer to have bowl cut as a sparring partner,” Teen Demon said.

“Not a bowl cut,” Mindmeld noted.

A thruster formed on Emerald Earwig’s back, and she flew forward at Teen Demon. He unsheathed his sword and held it up in defense. Earwig’s left arm molded into a sword, and she swung forward. **CLANG!**

Teen Demon stood his ground. They paused as their swords both pushed forward. Teen Demon grabbed Tara’s leg with his tail and flung her off him. She adjusted herself with her thruster as she slid to a stop against the ground.

“I am feeling some anger here. Are you aware that is the second stage of grief?” Teen Demon said.

He’s trying to get in our head. The green one knows he can’t beat us physically.

“I know that,” Tara said.

“I do not think talking to yourself shows up though. You may want to get that checked out,” Teen Demon said.

Tara morphed her hand into a blaster and charged it up.

Tinkerer walked over to Stupendous Man.

“Honey, he can’t say stuff like that,” she said.

“Just let it play out,” he said.

Blasts of green energy flew toward Teen Demon. He deflected each one with his sword as he closed the distance. Once within range, he leapt into the air and flew down at Tara with his sword extended. She lifted her arms in the air and they molded into a shield. **CLANG!**

They continued to battle as Stupendous Man watched. **Clang. Boom. Blast.**

Teen Demon stood across from Tara as they caught their breath.

Your iron levels are high, I suggest we utilize All Out Mode and finish this briskly.

“No, we don’t need that to beat him,” Tara said aloud.

“Cease the internal discussion and let us wrap this up,” Teen Demon said.

“Ready when you are,” Tara said as her hands morphed into swords. She braced herself to charge forward.

“Arthur is probably sleeping with someone else as we fight!” Teen Demon shouted.

Tara’s armor rescinded from her body and back into her anklet. Her breathing became irregular as her throat began to tighten.

Wait. What’s happening. What are you doing . . . ?

The suit’s voice faded. Each breath grew deeper, but no oxygen was absorbed. Tara’s fists clenched tightly, and her tongue felt rough against the roof of her mouth. She blinked her eyes and everyone around her disappeared. When she blinked again a wave of thoughts crashed through her mind.

She opened her eyes and was watching over a party in a fraternity house. A number of kids partied below her as music played in the background. Arthur was among the crowd. His face was sweaty, and his cheeks were flushed red. He tapped a girl on the shoulder and grabbed her by the hand.

The woman followed him upstairs and he opened the door to a room. She stepped in.

Tara stood quiet as Teen Demon watched. He pretended to throw his sword forward but paused and dropped it to the ground before saying, “I win.”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Stupendous Man said.

Tara shook her head and looked at Teen Demon.

Alright, I’m taking control.

“It’s already over. I . . . I have to go,” Tara muttered before running off into the woods.

“That was a really horrible thing to do,” Tinkerer told Teen Demon.

“It is legal though,” he said.

“You follow after her and apologize right now or I make you run laps till tomorrow morning,” Stupendous Man said.

“But that would kill me,” he said.

“Good. Then you can be reborn, and you’ll start with a fresh set of muscles to keep running with,” Stupendous Man said.

Teen Demon rolled his eyes before darting off into the forest on all fours.

Tara sat on a moss-covered boulder in the forest. She faced away from the farmhouse. Her anklet hummed quietly.

“No, I’ll be alright,” she said.

She heard rustling in the bushes and turned around to see Teen Demon standing behind her.

“Did they make you come out here and apologize to me?” Tara asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll just come back. I don’t really want to hear what you have to say.”

“Good because I . . . Alright, that was pretty unpleasant of me. I apologize,” Teen Demon said.

Tara sat quietly. She contemplated what she felt like sharing.

“I have a song I sing to myself when I start thinking like that. It’s from the last movie we watched together. I don’t really know why it helps. It just overwhelms my thoughts for a bit. It gives me a chance to reset. Music is very powerful to me. It can shift my emotions so effortlessly,” she said.

“Yeah, I understand that. I listen to AJR to get myself excited sometimes.”

He brushed off a small spot on the boulder and sat down next to her on it.

“I ever tell you the specifics of how I got here?”

Tara did not respond.

“Of course, I have not. You just got here yesterday--” Teen Demon began to say.

“How did you know his name?” Tara interjected

“I simply checked your social media. His name is over everything.”

“Is he with someone else already or did you just make that up?”

“What did you see when you were having an anxiety attack back there?” Teen Demon asked instead of answering her question.

“It was nothing,” Tara responded.

“I’m sorry. I did not mean to do that to you. I thought it was just going to trip you up, so I made all that up.”

Tara looked away.

“May I finish my story?”

“Carry on,” Tara said.

“Well, before I was here, I was in the bad place. Not the one you think of . . . that is such a . . . Christian way of looking at it. It was a lot like a dessert, but on fire. My kind would roam these plains endlessly attacking each other fighting for territory. It was primal.

One day, this beautiful woman flew down from the sky and grabbed me. She took me to this realm of existence and told me I was brought here to assist her. But she just disappeared one day before she could teach me how to live in this world.

I consider myself a teenager because it was fourteen years ago when she arrived for me. In your world, I have been the equivalent to an infant discovering the new rules of this place by trial and error. For such short-lived creatures, there is a lot to learn from you all.

About a year ago, Stupendous Man found me and offered to let me stay here. I figured it would only make sense to align myself with other strong individuals. I slowly made progress on my own, but my path became much easier when I had the opportunity to come here.”

“How is this supposed to make me feel better? I just feel like I read the back of a book,” Tara said.

“Because there is a moral which is that things just happen out of nowhere. One second, I had no purpose, the next I am being whisked away to this realm of existence. Once I was here, miraculously, Stupendous Man found me. I know you are struggling with this breakup but if you keep moving something good may happen,” Teen Demon said.

Tara scoffed then said, “Alright, that was good enough. I’ll come back.”

In reality, this had done nothing to help her mental state, but she decided she didn’t want to listen to his autobiography anymore. They both got back up and turned back to the farm.

“Make sure you tell the big man you said that,” Teen Demon said as he followed her.



That evening, Tara sat on her bed as she stared out the window watching the sunset. Her hair was still soaking wet from her shower. She had recently started growing it out longer and was surprised by how much longer it took to dry.

What happened earlier.

“I . . . I don’t know.”

I wasn’t able to form around your body during it.

“It won’t happen again.”

Things have been different since you broke up with Arthur. Our bond is not like it used to be.

“It is going to get better.”

I could always just take over before your emotions overwhelm our systems like I did on the train.

“You can only take down low level grunts on your own. We are in the big leagues now and we both know you function at your best when I’m behind the wheel. You couldn’t even hit Arthur when you were in control.”

It was because it was our first time.

“Or a hammer? Seriously? That’s as innovative as we get?”

Knock. Knock.

Tara looked over to see Tinkerer standing at the door. She had a rusty box full of tools in her hands.

“I’m sorry if I am interrupting anything, but I was wondering if you would let me take a look at the anklet. I wanted to see you in action before I investigated,” she said.

“Sure,” Tara said as she laid down on the bed. She pulled up the leg to her plaid pajama pants to reveal the anklet.

Tinkerer walked over. She set a cloth on the bed then her toolbox on top of the cloth. The toolbox creaked as it was opened. She pulled down her goggles and looked at the anklet.

“Wow. I wonder if it gets smelly underneath there. Does she ever come off?”

“Not yet,” Tara said.

“Interesting. Do you mind if I fumble around with her? I’ll be gentle.”

Yes. I do mind.

“Nah, she says it is all good for you to dig around in there,” Tara said.

Tinkerer carefully unscrewed one panel and peered into the innards of the anklet. She held the screwdriver in her mouth as she analyzed. Quiet noises of inquisition escaped her lips as she delved deeper.

“While this is alien technology, I don’t immediately see anything wrong with the electronics to explain your problems,” she said. Tara was able to interpret the words even though her mouth was still clenched on the screwdriver.

Tinkerer flicked a knob on the side of her goggles and looked again at the anklet.

“Hmm. When would you say you and the anklet started to come into conflict?”

“We were fine for the first five months or so. She started acting on her own a little over two weeks ago.”

“Was there anything that changed about two weeks ago?” Tinkerer asked.

“Arthur and I broke up. That is about all that has changed,” Tara said.

Tinkerer put the panel back on Tara’s anklet and put her screwdriver back in her toolbox. She lifted up her goggles and stroked her chin.

“Intriguing. I can’t see how these two things would be related. All I can say is we aren’t working with a hardware issue as far as I can tell. I know you probably wanted something more, but that’s all I can say for now,” Tinkerer said as she locked up her toolbox.

“I know there isn’t anything wrong with the anklet. We’re just going through growing pains. It’s my dad who thinks something is wrong.”

“Well, I saw what happened today. If that were to happen while you were out on the field, you would have been killed. It is only a matter of time before a villain tries to use your greatest weakness against you. Most of us aren’t lucky enough to have a green rock or the color yellow be what brings us to our knees. For many, it is something much more complicated and invisible to the eye.”

A theremin began to hum “Over the Rainbow” by Harold Arlen in the background.

“Oh, Markie. It is almost eight. Teen Demon is going to throw a fit,” Tinkerer said as she scurried off.

Perhaps you are the one that is broken?

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I may have some issues right now but my ability to fight isn’t one of them.”

Today would say otherwise.

“Here’s a thought. If I’m slipping away, why don’t you snap me out of it instead of taking control?” she asked.

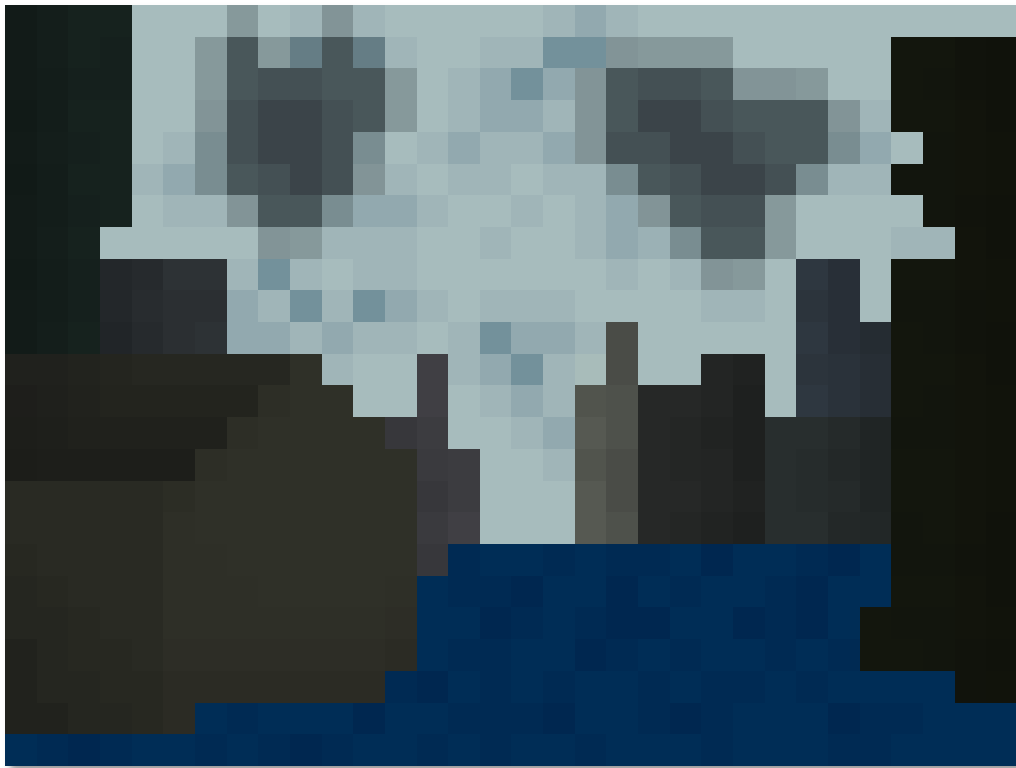
I wouldn’t know how.

“How about you ponder that one.”

Teen Demon opened his door and shouted, “MARKIE! IT IS NIGHTTIME. SOME OF US HAVE TO SLEEP!”

Chapter 4

Questioning Decisions



Tara followed the rest of the team out of their ship onto the roof of a house. The ground around them was covered in water from Hurricane Rogers. A fire marshal stood on the house comforting a family. A building over twenty stories tall loomed over them. Its shadow cast on the roof as the building creaked quietly.

Stupendous Man approached the fire marshal then asked, "How can we help?"

"I--I don't know. It's all a mess. I reckon we are looking at hundreds of casualties if not more. My people are scattered across the city. We need to prioritize the location of anyone still alive."

The fire marshal's face was covered in grime. His mustache was littered with dirt, but his beard was clean from the constant worried stroking. He stared blankly at the horizon.

"You heard the man. Tinkerer, see if you can work on his boat and provide some upgrades. Markie, scan for any life sources. Mindmeld, follow Markie and provide any medical support. Emerald Earwig, I want you searching roof to roof for anyone stranded. I am going to work on tearing down that tower as it is compromising our position. Teen Demon, I want you in the water searching for anything that has a pulse," Stupendous Man said.

"You can't go in the water. The debris will tear you to shreds," the marshal said.

"Not of concern," Teen Demon said as he dove into the water.

Mindmeld hopped on Markie's back and they took off into the sky.

The father on the roof approached Tara. Grime stained his matted, brown hair.

"I have someone I need you to look for. My daughter, Taylor, is about ten minutes by car north of here. She got caught out in the storm with her boyfriend and I need to know she is safe," he said.

"On it," she said as she took off north.

Tara looked down below her and saw countless buildings in shambles. The water spotted with garbage ebbed throughout the streets. Nothing living moved below her. Off in the distance, she saw a girl sitting quietly on a roof. She was about fifteen years old, and her brown hair was in knots after drying from the rain. Tara landed next to her.

"I'm here to save you, Taylor. Hop on my back!" Tara said.

"Not without Jake. He is still stuck downstairs. I couldn't reach him myself," she said. She looked up at Tara, who noticed Taylor's eyes were inflamed red.

“Hold on,” Tara said. Her arms molded together to form a drill and she cut a hole in the roof. **KERPLUNK!** Tara dove into the water.

“Scan for any heat sources, suit,” she said.

Her visors changed to show infrared. Everything around her was covered in a cold blue.

“Switch to night vision.”

Tara moved through the water as she frantically panned her surroundings. A cabinet floated towards her. She cut it in half and pushed it to the side. In the corner of the room, she saw a body floating. Tara pushed off the floor and swam towards it. She grabbed it and moved upward.

Fwoosh!

Tara flew out of the water and back onto the roof. Taylor ran over to Tara.

“Jake, are you okay?” Taylor asked.

“He will be. Get on my back. I have people that can help,” Tara said. His limp body was heavy in her arms.

Tara took off back to where their ship landed.

“Markie, I need you to return to the point of landing. I have someone in need of resuscitation. Mindmeld, I need you on standby,”

“Roger,” Mindmeld said over the coms.

I checked his vitals. There were none. He’s dead, Tara.

“Shut up. He’s going to be fine!” Tara said.

Taylor looked at her boyfriend motionless body in Tara’s arms. His skin was wrinkled and discolored. The flesh was peeling off his fingers and cuts from glass lined his body. She closed her eyes and looked away.

You’re wasting the team’s time. He is gone, Tara.

“Quit talking or take control. I’m not stopping,” Tara said.

“Who are you talking to?” Taylor asked.

I’m not going to take control. I want you to see that this is a mistake. You’re giving her false hope.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t talking to you,” Tara said as the arrival spot came within view.

Tara landed on the ground.

Fwoosh! Markie descended and skid to a stop next to them.

“Alright, set him down,” Mindmeld said as he knelt on the ground. Tara set Jake down. Taylor’s family and Tinkerer gathered around. Mindmeld put his palms together and started pushing down intermittently on Jake’s chest.

“One. . . two . . . three . . . four . . . I need you to take off his shirt and dry his chest. I can’t use the defibrillator if he is wet. Twenty . . . twenty-one . . . When I say go, I need you, Taylor, to pinch his nose and breath into his mouth. GO!” Mindmeld shouted.

Taylor pinched Jake’s nose and took a deep breath. She pushed her air into his lungs. Jake’s chest rose then fell. She repeated. As Taylor did this, Tara cut off his shirt.

“Suit, give me a heat ray,” she said.

It’s a waste of our energy.

“I don’t care. Give me it,” Tara said. Her arm molded into a glowing, red rod. She held it over Jake’s chest.

Mindmeld reached into a back compartment on Markie and yanked out two cords. He jabbed them into Jake’s chest.

“Everyone, get back!” he shouted.

“Now!”

The cords lit up yellow and Jake’s body shook.

“Again!”

Jake’s body rocked up and down.

“Alright . . . we--we keep it going,” Mindmeld said as he crawled back over to Jake.

“One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .”

Stupendous Man flew down from the half torn apart building and landed next to them.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

“We’re trying to resuscitate this kid,” Tara said as Mindmeld mumbled numbers in the background. Mindmeld nodded at Taylor, and she pushed a breath into Jake’s lungs again.

Stupendous Man looked down at Jake.

“I’m sorry. There’s no pulse. Everything is cold,” Stupendous Man said.

“NO! We can’t stop,” Taylor said.

“I can’t stop. Not yet,” Mindmeld said as he kept pressing down on Jake’s chest.

“Hit him again, Markie!” Mindmeld shouted.

The cords lit up yellow and Jake's body rattled on the ground. Mindmeld began to move to continue compressions, but Stupendous Man pulled him back.

"Let me help him!" Mindmeld shouted.

"There isn't anyone to help, Andy," Stupendous Man said.

Taylor put her hands together and started pushing down on Jake's chest. Her father knelt next to her and whispered into her ear.

"WHY DIDN'T WE COME EARLIER! I--I ate breakfast today while this was happening. We could have gotten here sooner!" Tara shouted.

"We couldn't. The storm was too strong earlier for the ship. We got here as soon as we could," Stupendous Man said.

"What about you? I thought you were supposed to be the strongest man in the world? Why didn't you come earlier?" Tara questioned.

"I couldn't."

"WHY?"

"I just couldn't!" he said.

Tara stepped away and looked at the water below. She clenched her fists as anger flowed through her body.

"Go ahead! Say something, suit. You were right!" Tara shouted to herself.

Taylor stared at Tara scared. She quietly ran her hand through Jake's wet hair.

The suit did not talk back.

Everyone stood quietly as water continued to quietly swirl past them.

After the military arrived to help, the team left and went to eat after a long day of helping the locals. They landed their ship next to a Wendy's. Stupendous Man flew in and returned a few minutes later with a pile of food. They all sat down in a patch of grass next to the parking lot.

Mindmeld ate alone as Tinkerer spoke quietly with Stupendous Man. Markie saw the food and popped out a solar panel before shutting down. Teen Demon sat down next to Tara.

"How are you doing after today? I heard about what happened," Teen Demon said.

"Please don't talk to me," Tara said.

"I have no ulterior motives at the moment. I just wanted to check in as a frie-- acquaintance."

“I guess it was a lot to see Taylor crying like that. I feel stupid for ever breaking up with Arthur over some petty disagreements. Our relationship worked most of the time so why cut it off?”

“Do you think you made a mistake?” Teen Demon asked.

“No . . . why do you ask?”

“Well, humans are prone to mistakes,” Teen Demon said.

“Says the demon.”

“I will ignore your attempt at deflection via stigmatization and push forward. Do you?” he asked. His tail curled around a stone and lifted it into his hands. He rolled it back and forth on his palm.

“I did at points. But I know I made the right decision at the end of the day,” Tara said as she looked up to the sky.

“Did you really though? Consider that your boyfriend goes to another school for a few months, and he suddenly changes to this thing that you cannot date. You dated him for almost two years before he went off. He could not have changed that much. Either you did not know him as well as you thought, or you overreacted.”

“I resent the fact people assume I didn’t know my boyfriend well. I talked to him every day for nearly one thousand days. I spent almost one ninth of my entire life with him. I knew everything about him. I knew when he was mad, when he was lying, when he had something he wanted to say, his true desire in life, and even his favorite dog breed,” Tara said.

“It is not that hard to know someone’s favorite dog breed. For example, I like those small, white dogs with the crusty hair around their eyes,” Teen Demon interjected.

“Point being, I could see the difference in him. It was the way he carried himself. It was his new friends that walked over him. It was the new jokes he thought were funny. It was what he thought was okay. No one else in the world will ever see the difference, but I did, and I know it was there.”

“Or perhaps you just didn’t know him as well as you thought you did,” Teen Demon said.

“You know you aren’t that good at emotions.”

“My name is not ‘Teen Therapist’, is it?”

“Do you have anything helpful to tell me?”

“Well, we all make mistakes so do not let them weigh you down,” Teen Demon said.

“I’m not saying it was a mistake. I felt things were different and that’s why I broke it off. It’s just--I don’t know if someone would be crying over my body if I washed up.”

“I’m sure your parents would,” Teen Demon said as he was pushing fries into his mouth.

“They don’t count. I want someone who chooses to care about me, not someone who is mandated to,” Tara said as she stared blankly at the grass beneath her. The blades had been folded into the ground from her stepping on them.

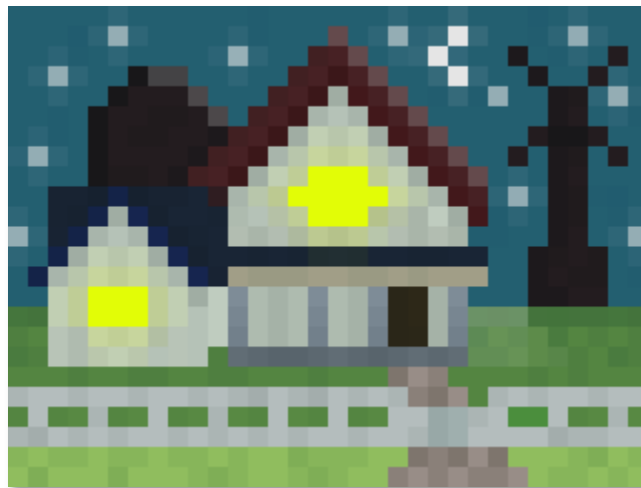
“Do not tell Mindmeld that one,” Teen Demon said as he laughed to himself. He reached for his third burger then said, “Speaking of, you see him right now? He does not look too good. I’m going to keep being emotionally supportive. It makes my chest hurt and I like pain.”

Teen Demon got up and walked over to Mindmeld. Tara watched as Mindmeld sat quiet even as Teen Demon pestered him.

Stupendous Man and Tinkerer stood up. Stupendous Man said, “I’m sorry about today, everyone. It was supposed to be a straightforward support mission. I didn’t know it was going to be so bad. I know we saw the worst of it, but it’s important to keep in mind we did a lot of good too.”

No one responded.

“Everyone, take it easy tonight. Tomorrow is going to be a rest day. I have a lot of fun stuff planned!” Tinkerer said.



To relax, Tara spent the night in her room listening to music. “Superboy & Supergirl” by Tullycraft played quietly as she laid in bed.

Downstairs, Stupendous Man and Tinkerer were sitting at the table together. Tinkerer had a cup full of warm tea in front of her. Stupendous Man's cup was empty but he kept it out so he could pretend. He stared at the table as he remained deep in thought.

"I messed up by bringing the kids into that. I thought it would be boring," he said.

"It's okay. We are allowed to make mistakes too," Tinkerer said. She picked up his hand and rubbed it between her hands.

"What would I do without you?" Stupendous Man asked as he looked into her eyes.

"You probably wouldn't sit around with an empty teacup," Tinkerer said as she kissed him on the hand.



Meanwhile, Mindmeld returned to the Dilaberentur Cemetery so he could speak with those who only lived in his head. He knelt next to a stone with the name "Don Moench" on it.

"I know what you're going to say. I know I tried my best. I know that he was dead even before Tara scooped him up. I just feel guilty cause we're superheroes--I guess I feel I should be able to do something more. Maybe something more than an average man could do.

Although, I suppose even with my powers I am still just a man depending on the philosophy you ascribe to."

Mindmeld looked down at his hands. His palms were bruised from smashing into Jake's chest.

"I hope Taylor won't hold that against me. Your EMS skills were some of the best, but it wasn't enough. Sometimes I feel like I can't really do anything right.

Eh, I'm being too hard on myself."

Mindmeld itched the bottom of his nose with the back of his hand then said, “Don’t worry about your grandson by the way. Markie helps me hack into the school database. He is doing alright. I may have gotten Markie to bump up his chemistry grade a few percentage points. Please put me out of my misery if I ever absorb a chemist’s knowledge.”

Mindmeld rubbed his eyes. It was now one in the morning, and he had been awake for hours. Plus, he had to get some rest for the fun events tomorrow.

Death by A Thousand Cuts

A mercy killing

Don’t look at me that way

This is for the best

Blood is not on my hands

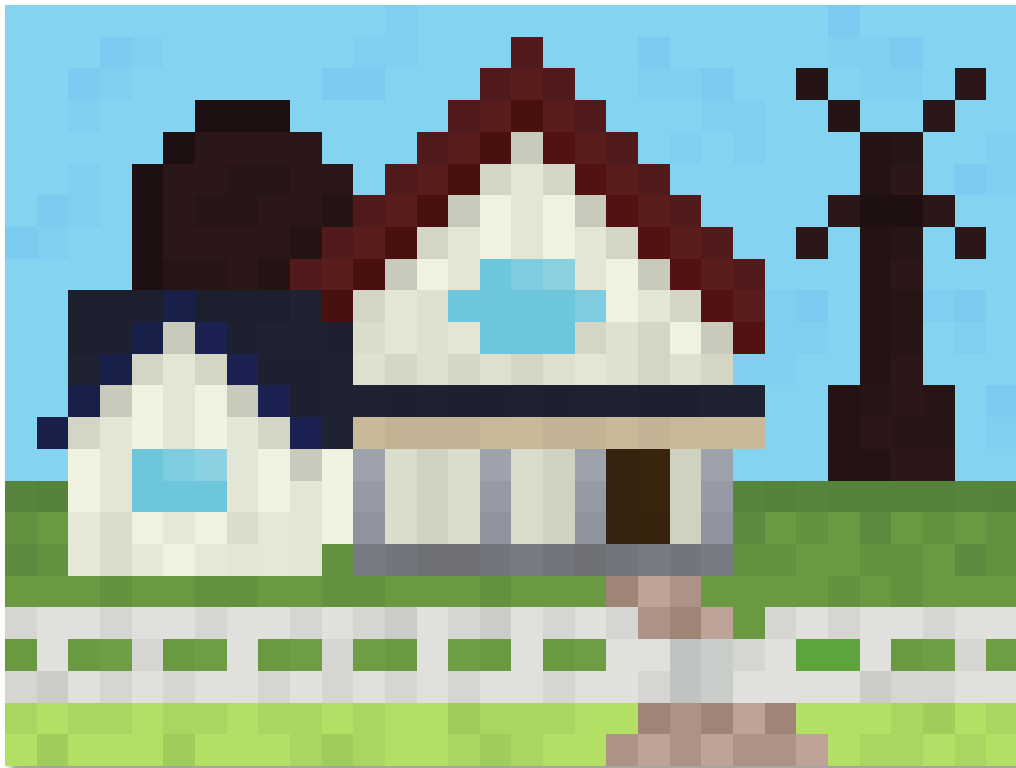
Yet they hold the gun

The look on your face

Don’t make this hard

Chapter 5

Agonizing Associations



The next day, Tara stood in the kitchen helping Tinkerer cut apples.

“Doesn’t this enforce gender norms?” Tara asked as she jammed the slicer through the fruit. As she did this with her arms, the suit protruded two more arms that rapidly peeled apples behind her.

“Clearly you haven’t been paying attention enough. John cooks half the meals and does half of all the other chores. You must miss it because of his super speed,” Tinkerer said as she filled a pot with water.

Through the window, Tara could see Teen Demon playing tag with Markie. Mindmeld read quietly underneath the shade of a tree.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Tara. How are you doing?” Tinkerer asked.

“Fine.”

“I saw how you were acting yesterday and when you were sparring with TD. This kind of stuff doesn’t go away if you don’t talk about it,” Tinkerer said.

“Trust me, talking about it isn’t my problem.”

“Well, then talk.”

“It’s hard to describe. Do you know those scenes in a movie where someone has a gun fired near their ear and everything goes silent except for a ringing?” Tara asked.

Tinkerer nodded in understanding.

“It’s like that but all the time. People talk to me all day, but I hear nothing. I’m just walking through life in a daze waiting for the ringing to stop.

It feels like a nightmare. Every time I sleep, I wake up relieved that breaking up with Arthur was a dream. Then I realize my life is the nightmare.

Things I used to love bore me. TV doesn’t interest me. Games seem pointless. Music is stale.

I have a gaping hole in my chest. A part of my everyday life is now absent. I wait for an alert from a text sent by him that will never come. I get ready to send him a video talking about my day, but then I realize there is no one that cares anymore. What I miss most of all is our friendship. I just wish I could talk to him about his day one more time.”

“I’m sorry,” Tinkerer said.

“It’s also a little hard to think about him kissing someone else . . . among other things.”

“Why does that bother you?” Tinkerer asked. She carefully put the apple slices into a pan on the stove.

“I guess it seems like our love was less valuable if he kissed someone else so soon. Like maybe I’m less special or something,” Tara said.

“That’s understandable. I think in a certain lens it is a win-win. Say he moves on quickly, then we know what kind of a person he is. If he waits, then you must have been a pretty good girlfriend,” Tinkerer said as she sprinkled sugar on the apple slices. She then placed the pan in the oven and set a timer for ten minutes before sitting down at the dining room table.

“There’s some cream cheese and sliced pears in the fridge. Care to pass me some?”

“Eww. I’ll pass it to you, but I won’t partake,” Tara said as she reached into the fridge.

“Just try one,” Tinkerer asked. She spread some cheese on a slice and passed it over. Tara took it and chewed quietly. The pear crunched in her mouth and the cream cheese slid across the roof of her tongue. It . . . wasn’t bad exactly.

Tara swallowed then said, “I guess I don’t want him to find someone better than me. Maybe that makes me a bad person. Luckily, he’s at E.L.U. Slim pickings there,”

“What makes you say that?” Tinkerer questioned as she held out another covered slice of pear.

“E.L.U. is the equivalent to the bread aisle at Transaction Tavern. Everyone there is bland and when you start looking closely mold is everywhere. It’s like a bread aisle without the fun cinnamon swirl bread. It’s the kind of place that is so run down you can’t even tell when you’re on campus.

It represents everything wrong with my life. It’s the place he shouldn’t have gone to. East Langsle University is full of the most mediocre people in the entire world. Everyone there is a bad influence, and they just want to be idiots. They all think they’re hot stuff but if their college didn’t have their location in the name no one would know where it is,” Tara said as she reached out for the slice.

Tinkerer gave it to her then said, “I’m not sure if that’s a great way to think.”

Tara made a straight face.

“Listen, I get that it isn’t great I think that. I just can’t describe how much I hate that school. I hate all of Langsle now. What a crappy, life sucking place. I even hate the letters E, L, and U next to each other.”

“Do you think Arthur is being an idiot at college?” Tinkerer asked.

“Yeah, and I know why. It’s because he has all these bad influences around him.”

“I think it wouldn’t hurt to remember that Arthur can think for himself. I know you like to tell yourself that it’s the college changing him, but I think we should consider the option that he knows what he’s doing and maybe his actions are truly reflective of himself.

I worry you are blaming E.L.U. and using it to justify how Arthur is acting. It’s true college changes people, but he didn’t lose the ability to think there. I’m not saying Arthur is a bad person now, but if you don’t like who he is let’s not confuse why.”

“Well, he still isn’t going to find someone better than me there,” Tara said with a frown.

“I understand your frustration. Are you sure he couldn’t find someone better there? Not a single soul?”

“Logically, there probably is someone. I just think they’d be hard to find. Hard to even find someone who washes their hands around those parts.”

“I don’t think there is such a thing as someone ‘better’ or ‘worse’,” Tinkerer began to say.

“We are each the best our partner will ever have. Every human is a beautiful mix of experiences, passions, and thoughts that no one can ever recreate or top. When we date someone else it is just someone different, not better,” Tinkerer said.

“That’s a nice way of putting it. How did you and Stupendous Man meet?” Tara asked.

“I first met him in high school, but we didn’t connect until a class reunion. I was much cooler than him back in the day. Poor guy couldn’t see much through his thick glasses.”

“We met in high school too, although I actually dated Arthur then.”

“I guess John and I are evidence you can find your partner in high school. All that matters is you really invest in the other person, which isn’t always easy.”

Ringgggg.

“Oop, I’ll get these ready to go. Why don’t you go outside and wait with Andy and the rest of them?” Tinkerer suggested.

Tara stepped outside and sat down on the ground by Mindmeld.

“What book are you reading?” Tara asked him.

“I’m reading--” Mindmeld stopped speaking as something covered the sun above them. Tara looked up and saw a large circular object blocking the light.

The object moved to the side to reveal two elderly women each floating in their mechanical orbs.

“Gahahahaha. We’ve finally found you, Prototype 616,” the lady with green glasses and short, white hair said.

“Mwuahahahaha. Hand over the green anklet and we won’t have any issues!” the second woman said. Her blonde hair was permed giving her numerous curls.



Teen Demon stopped chasing after Markie. He looked up then said, “Are we under attack by the . . . geriatric?”

“How did you guys find us across the cosmos?” Tara asked.

“Cosmos? We just came from two states over,” Ellie said as she cackled quietly to herself.

“Suit, I thought you said you were from space,” Tara said.

The anklet hummed.

Funny story. I lied.

“I wonder what it’s saying,” Mindmeld asked.

“WHY’D YOU LIE?” Tara shouted.

“Guess I know,” Mindmeld said. He delicately folded the corner of his page in then closed his book.

Because it is slightly illegal to be bonded with me and I needed someone to merge with. We can discuss this later, but I can’t go back. They don’t treat me like I’m living.

“Enough chit chat! Prototype 616 is being confiscated by E.L.U. on behalf of the government. Mwuahahahaha!” Lauren said.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tara said.

“That stands for Ellie Lauren United!” Ellie said.

“I thought it was Ellie Lauren Ubiquitous?” Lauren questioned.

“That doesn’t work as well,” Ellie said.

“Debatable,” Lauren said.

“Who cares what you think. Two elderly people will be the easiest beat down of this century! Hoo-RAGHH--” Teen Demon was cut short mid battle charge by a sedative dart fired at him. He quickly tripped forward and fell asleep.

Tara suited up then said, “I’ll take Ellie. You and Markie take Lauren.”

“That’s not fair. Markie could bounce between the fights,” Mindmeld suggested.

“No, this is personal,” Tara said as she contemplated what weapon to form at her fingertips.

Personal for me, not you. Let’s distinguish that.

Tara shrugged then flew into the air. Her arms molded into pincers, and they pierced into Ellie’s ship. Behind her, Markie shot blasts toward Lauren’s ship.

“So brutish!” Ellie said. Two mechanical arms popped out from the side of the ship. At the end of each of them were large green boxing gloves. ***Tham!*** The right glove flew into Tara and knocked her back.

Tara flew through the air briefly before regaining her balance. She boosted forward and spiraled to the left to avoid another jab. She grabbed the second boxing glove as it flew toward her and stopped it midair.

“Hragh!” Tara flung Ellie’s ship into the ground. Legs popped out from her ship and Ellie started skittering on the ground.

Mindmeld turned to Ellie who was now on the ground and within range.

“Emerald, give me a boost into the cockpit and I can dismantle it from there!” he shouted.

“Stay out of my way, this one is mine!” Tara shouted as she flew past him and toward Ellie.

“Gahahaha! You’re never going to ca--” Ellie began to say as Tara blasted past her ripping off the ship’s legs. Her ship fell to the ground and Tara skid to a stop. Tara lunged at her

and a glass dome with “E.L.U.” printed on it popped up over the cockpit. **THAM! THAM! THAM!** Tara’s arms molded into hammers, and she smashed down on the glass. Each time her arms crashed down on the dome it glowed green before dimming again.

“I think I’d like to fight one of the less feisty heroes if that’s acceptable,” Ellie said from inside her bubble.

“I’m **THAM!** finding **THAM!** this **THAM!** a **THAM!** little **THAM!** cathartic **THAM!** actually,” Tara shouted.

“Well, that makes one of us,” Ellie said as she fumbled with the tools inside her ship.

*I sense energy absorption on this surface. **THAM!** We should find another tactic. **THAM!***

“QUIT HITTING IT, EMERALD! You’re feeding it!” Mindmeld shouted.

THAM! THAM! THAM! THAM!

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” Tara said. Markie and Lauren continued to trade blasts in the background.

That’s it. I am taking control.

“No! You’re not!”

Tara froze hunched above Ellie as she fought for control over the suit. Her eyes flashed white and red.

“You should listen to your friend more,” Ellie said. **Zip!** The dome popped off and Ellie pointed a laser with numerous coils wrapped around it upward. She flicked a switch and waves of energy pulsated out of it. Tara was knocked back and onto the ground.

Her arms formed a shield and she dug it into the dirt. It scraped backward slowly as her thruster pushed forward. The pulsating waves continued to push into her. Tara’s body grew increasingly hot as the energy washed across her.

“Nothing like some kinetic energy manipulation. GAHAHAHAHA!” Ellie cackled.

“That doesn’t even make sense!” Mindmeld said as he pulled out the cord to the laser. He then put Ellie in a chokehold.

“Go to sleep . . . ideally only temporarily!” Mindmeld grunted out as Ellie struggled.

Eventually, she slumped over.

“I could use support team!” Markie chattered.

Fwoosh . . . BOOM! A rocket flew through the air and into Lauren's ship knocking it to the ground. Lauren was knocked out of it and into the grass where Markie quickly disarmed her. Tinkerer stood at the door to the kitchen with a bazooka on her shoulder.

"I'm going to have to ask you guys to get off my property," she said.



Later that evening, everyone, including Ellie and Lauren, were eating dessert at the table. Ellie and Lauren were tied by the waist to wooden chairs. Teen Demon passed the apple pie to the left after Mindmeld cut it.

"You should have seen it, Stupendous Man, I took them both by myself," Teen Demon said proudly.

"Hardly, you got knocked out in the first minute of that fight," Mindmeld said.

"I think I was the most impressive as I almost single-handedly took down my opponent." Markie said.

"Personally, you really scared me. We're lucky you froze up," Ellie said as she looked over to Tara. She had not been listening to the conversation as she was enjoying the pie. Its filling was gooey and warm, but the apple slices maintained their rigidity. It was divine.

"It was obviously personal for you to act so irrational out there," Mindmeld said.

"What do you mean by that?" Tara asked.

"They made your suit, so I imagine she wasn't too happy seeing them. That's what Andy means," Tinkerer said.

“Oh . . . yeah, sorry the suit kind of took over for a bit there.”

Way to throw me under the bus.

“Happens to the best of us,” Tinkerer said.

“Wait, how many of you have our old tech merged into your body?” Lauren asked.

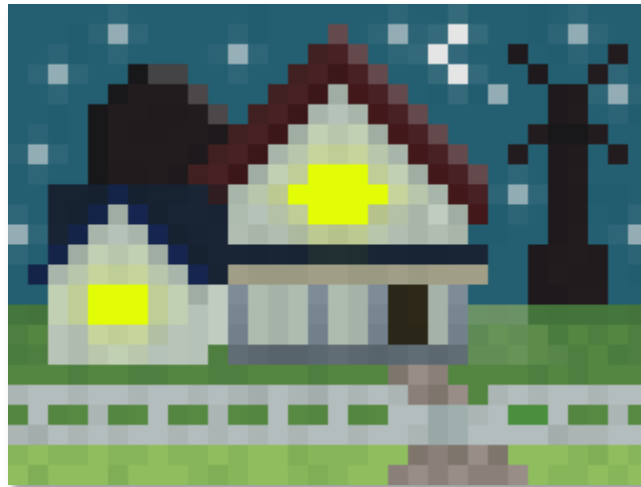
“All of us actually,” Teen Demon said, not understanding what he was lying about. On his plate, he left the crust after scooping out all of the filling.

“Wow, we really knocked on the wrong door then. Sorry. Government just sent us over. If you’d prefer, we can disable the trackers in all the tech and you guys can mind your own business,” Ellie said.

“Now that we know Stupendous Man lives here, we definitely won’t try anything else,” Lauren said.

“You were planning on?” Tinkerer asked.

“Really nice apple pie!” Ellie interjected.



That night, Ellie quietly worked on the anklet attempting to remove the tracker as Tara sat at the bed.

“You know, I talked with Tinkerer for a bit. She’s a smart cookie. If anyone can figure out what’s up it’ll be her.”

“What is the suit? She told me she was of alien origin, but you guys are saying you created it.”

“It was a half-lie. The anklet is of alien origin, but we were working to turn it into a weapon before she escaped,” Ellie said.

“The government isn’t going to track her down any longer, right?”

“Correct. Can you pass me the screwdriver?” Ellie asked as she blindly reached her hand out.

Tara handed it over then said, “Do you think I should text my ex-boyfriend?”

“What? Bit of a change in topic. Why are you asking me?” Ellie questioned.

“Because I know all my friends would say it’s a bad idea, but I’ve been thinking a lot about it. I just want to talk with him. It’d be nice to hear how he’s doing. I hope he misses me, and I bet he hopes I miss him. Maybe talking could bring closure?”

“It doesn’t sound like closure is what you seek,” Ellie said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know what I mean. Pass the wrench.”

Tara passed the wrench then said, “It’s hard to go from one hundred to zero so quick. I think talking would make me feel better, although I know no one else would think that. But they don’t really get it. They aren’t me. They don’t know what this feels like.”

“What does your heart say?”

“To text him . . . maybe.”

“Well, I’ve found in my life the heart rarely lies. Life’s too short to play little games with others. If you like him then text him.”

“Okay, so you think I should text him?” Tara asked.

“I didn’t say that. I just said to follow your heart no matter how frequently it shifts directions. Do you like him?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Well then that settles it. Let’s hold off for now.”

They sat in silence as Ellie continued fussing with the anklet. It hummed louder and louder in protest as Ellie touched it more and more.

“Would you be a darling and play some music? I can’t stand the noise,” Ellie said.

“Any preference?” Tara asked.

“Whatever your broken heart desires.”

Tara pulled out her phone and started playing “Fade Into You” by Mazzy Star.

Ellie listened for about thirty seconds before speaking up.

“I get you’re sad, but you don’t have to bring me down with you. I changed my mind. Play something else . . . maybe ABBA.”

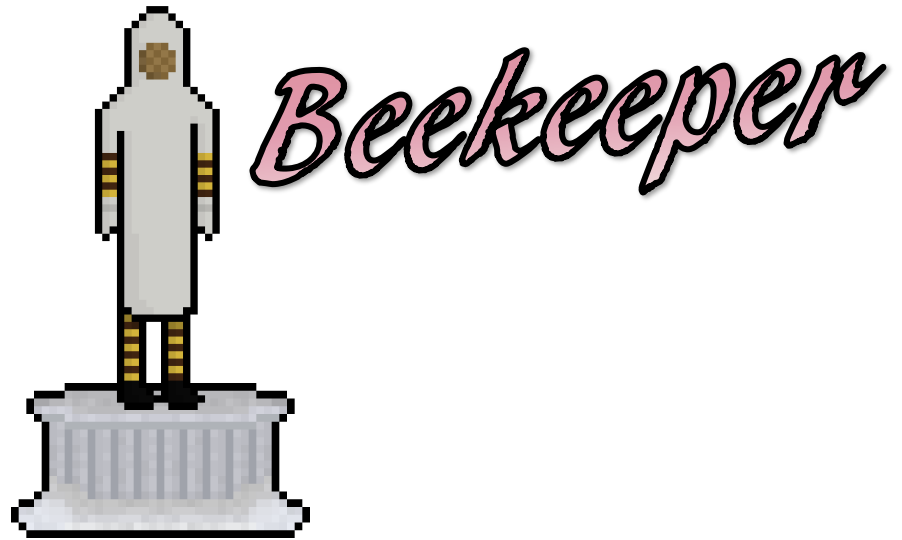
Tara looked at ABBA’s top songs on Spotify and picked one at random. “Chiquitita” by ABBA played as Ellie continued to work on the anklet. She did not request for another song change.

Chapter 6

Seeing Through the Clouds



“Dive to the right, Mindmeld!” Stupendous Man shouted as a wave of bees flew towards his student. Stupendous Man stood calm as none of the stinger could pierce his skin. He had picked up Beekeeper who was in the middle of a bank robbery and whisked her away to their home so his students could duel her.



“I hate bees!” Mindmeld shouted as he dove to the right. Yellow and black ripples coursed across the sky as little striped bees swarmed through the air.

Markie and Tara calmly blasted into the hoard of buzzing insects as Teen Demon slashed aimlessly.

“We aren’t making any progress! We have to find whoever is controlling this!” Tara shouted.

“Speak for yourself! I have killed at least one thousand of these boisterous bastards!” Teen Demon shouted.

“If we lose out on a fruit it’s cause of you,” Mindmeld said as he continued to dart across the field.

“How would that be my fault?” Teen Demon asked.

“Do you have any idea how pollination works?” Tara questioned as she shot pulses of energy off.

“Are you referring to sex?” Teen Demon asked as he tried to remember what pollination was. He had read about it in a biology book roughly one month ago.

“Well . . . I guess,” Tara said.

“Quit yapping and get to the center of this storm. If I have to absorb any more of these bees’ memories I am going to start drinking from flowers!” Mindmeld shouted.

“Lend us a hand, old man!” Teen Demon shouted over to Stupendous Man.

“This wouldn’t be training if I helped, now would it.”

“I AM MORE THAN A TRAINING SESSION. I WILL GIVE YOU THE BBBBEATDOWN OF A LIFETIME!” a voice from the swarm echoed out.

“The bees are talking now! I think we should expedite this victory!” Teen Demon shouted.

“We haven’t made any progress on locating our adversary!” Markie chirped as she spun throughout the air. Yellow energy spilled from her hands across the waves pushing them back.

“Wait! Mindmeld, you said you had their memories! They should know where their controller is!” Tara said as her arms molded into heat rods. She drilled through the horde of bees.

“You want me to read their memories? That’s in—Actually, that might work. Give me one second!” Mindmeld shouted. He ripped off his long coat and let the bees encase him.

“Northeast!” Mindmeld said over the intercoms.

“Which way is that?” Teen Demon asked.

Markie dove into the hoard. ***Boom! Blast! Zap!***

The hoard of bees faded to reveal Markie hovering over a body. It was covered in white cloth from head to toe. Her pants and the ends of her sleeves were striped brown and yellow. A straw plate covered her face.

The bees flew off from Mindmeld to reveal him unstung.

“How did you get out unscathed?” Tara asked.

“I spoke to them.”

“You have got to be messing with me,” Tara said.

“I’m not.”

“That is miraculous!” Teen Demon said. He smiled beneath his mask.

“Great work out there! That was an excellent idea with great follow through. I’m incredibly proud of you guys. Tie her up for dinner,” Stupendous Man said.



Later, Tinkerer met with Tara behind the house. The windmill cast a tall shadow from the setting sun.

“Why’d you want to meet out here?” Tara asked.

“After speaking with Ellie and Lauren I have decided I want to test a hypothesis.”

“About my suit?” Tara asked.

“Indeed. Would you be so kind as to shoot these discs?” Tinkerer asked as she pulled a pile of clay pigeons out of her backpack.

“Should be simple enough,” Tara said as the suit expanded across her body. Blasters molded at her fingertips.

“Let’s hope so. I’ll throw them one at a time without warning,” Tinkerer said as she tossed one into the air.

Zip! A blast of energy flew through the air smashing the disc.

“Excellent. Do you mind if I start the experiment now? I am going to use triggering language. I think it will tell us what we need to know, but only if you are okay with it,” Tinkerer said.

“I trust you,” Tara said.

Tinkerer pushed her goggles over her eyes as she said, “Here goes nothing. Know I don’t mean what I’m about to say.”

“Arthur loves another woman more than he ever loved you,” Tinkerer spit out before throwing a disc into the air.

Tara briefly stood stunned before firing off a blast of energy. *Zip!* The disc shattered into pieces.

“What was that for?” Tara asked.

“Arthur has already been on dates with at least three other girls,” Tinkerer said before throwing another disc into the air. It soared across the sky. As it descended to the ground, Tara shot a blast of energy out. *Zip!* The disc crumbled.

“Why are you being so mean?” she asked.

“Arthur will never be the person you want or need him to be,” Tinkerer said before throwing another disc into the air. It crossed the sky and landed on the ground.

“You are in love with the idealized version of someone,” Tinkerer said as she tossed another disc up. *Zip!* A blast of energy flew into the pile of discs on the ground.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to shoot near you!” Tara said.

“Tara? Are you in there?” Tinkerer asked. She looked over to see the suit’s eyes were now red.

“Yeah. I’m still here!” Tara shouted from within the suit. It lunged forward at Tinker who rolled out of the way. Pincers pierced the ground where Tinkerer once stood.

“She isn’t a threat! Stop attacking her!” Tara shouted.

“Interesting. What’s the suit saying right now?” Tinkerer asked as she pulled liquid metal from her backpack. She molded it into a shield.

“It keeps saying stuff about eliminating the aggressor!” she shouted as the suit lunged again. Tinkerer bashed her shield forward and knocked Tara to the side.

“Take back control!”

“I’m trying!” Tara said as she stood back up.

“You’re not trying in the right way. Don’t fight the suit. Just breathe. It only wants to protect you.”

Tara took a deep breath. Her eyes flashed white briefly.

“Good. Think about us. Think about your family. Think about the people that will always be there for you,” Tinkerer shouted.

Her eyes blinked white, and the pure color remained. Her suit rescinded back into her anklet.

“Great work, Tara!” Tinkerer said as she hugged her.

“I’m so sorry for attacking you. What happened there?”

“It’s the suit! She has just been trying to protect you this whole time. She took control on the train because you were about to waste the iron in your blood. When you were fighting Ellie, she attempted to take over because you were being self-destructive. Just now she took over to protect you from what I was saying,” Tinkerer said. She was giddy thinking about how her hypothesis had been proven true.

“How come she didn’t take over when Teen Demon taunted me?”

“That is precisely why she does take over. If your emotions reach a breaking point, she is unable to communicate with your brain and your connection severs temporarily.

Although it appears when your suit does take over, your physical capabilities are severely dampened. I think that’s why she uses it as a last resort.”

“So, my breakup is what is causing this? I just thought it was the suit thinking she knew better than me. I never viewed it as her trying to help,” Tara asked.

“I think the suit only wants what is best for you. Do you think you are working through the breakup?” Tinkerer asked as she put her arms on Tara’s shoulders.

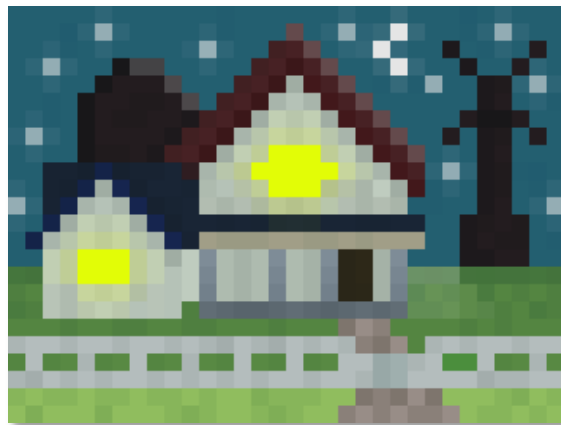
“Maybe. It depends on the day. I have good and bad ones.”

“Have you been talking to other people about it?” Tinkerer asked.

“A bit with Teen Demon,” she said.

“Surprising, but good. Just because we learned this is a problem doesn’t mean you have to rush through it. We’ll be here to support you in the scenario the suit takes over again. But hopefully we can work on teaching you how to take back control.

You can head back in. We did great work today!”



That night, Teen Demon sat cross-legged on Tara's bed talking to her as she scrolled on her phone.

"Why do you keep hanging out with me anyways?" Tara asked.

"Your suffering amuses me. I have never met someone so perpetually downtrodden," Teen Demon said.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should. What are you looking for? Are you seeing if he posted something with another girl?" Teen Demon asked.

Tara set the phone down, "No. I was just looking around."

"Why is he so entangled in your mind anyways? Can you not just be happy on your own?"

"I can be happy on my own. I am right now. I just feel there is only a certain level of happiness you can reach on your own," Tara said.

"Sounds a bit like commensalism," Teen Demon responded.

"Do you mean codependency?" Tara questioned.

"No. I mean commensalism."

"Maybe a little. What's wrong with that? I like sharing my life with someone else."

"I do not think you should be with someone else until you can say you're truly happy on your own. You do not date to fix each other. You should want to date to share your happiness. I read that in a marriage book a while ago," Teen Demon said.

"That's not a half bad thought."

"Well, some people call me Teen Therapist."

"I doubt that."

"Want to break something together? I have found it helps me process emotions," Teen Demon said as he stroked his head with his tail.

"I--Yeah, I would like to hit something," Tara said as she got up.

"Follow me, I know a place. I like to find the kilns in the local elementary schools and smash all of the kids' pottery," he said while giggling.

"Maybe not that," Tara said as she followed him out the window.

Below them, Stupendous Man and Tinkerer washed dishes from dinner together. On the radio, “Cemetery Gates” by The Smiths played. Tinkerer washed food off the last plate on her side of the sink.

She looked over to Stupendous Man who was quietly humming to himself and asked, “Care to dance?”

“What do I have to lose?” he pondered.

“You have nothing at all to lose,” Tinkerer said as she extended her arm forward.

They swayed back and forth together quietly.



In the cemetery, Mindmeld sat quietly in front of around fifty small holes now refilled. Each was about as big as one scoop from a hand shovel. Above each were two twigs tied together to form a cross.

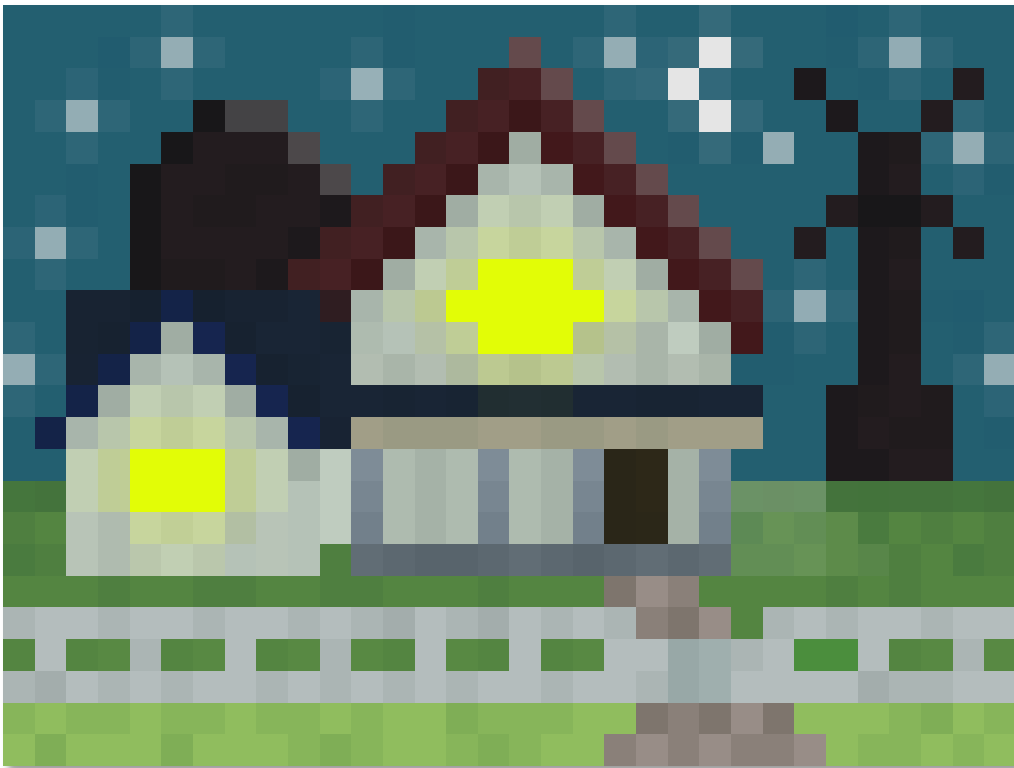
“Bzzz. Bz . . . Bzzzzzzzzz,” Mindmeld said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a jar of honey. He unscrewed it and left the jar in front of the graves. Mindmeld stood up and paused. He did a quick dance wiggling his arms up and down before walking off.

*I've never been good at poetry
Perhaps you need to suffer first
Does it count if the pain was rehearsed?
A cage of my own machination
This was my destination
Now I will sit and weep
I have sowed and I will reap*

Chapter 7

Immovable Objects



“Then, I knocked the disk out of his Plinko board before it could reach the bottom. He was so stunned that Mindmeld was able to get the best of him,” Teen Demon said with food in his mouth. He spit out pieces of meatloaf as he spoke.

“It was insane. He could barely fight once I got up close,” Mindmeld said excitedly.

“That’s great! I’m really proud of you both,” Tinkerer said.

Tara scrolled quietly on her phone as they spoke. She was looking through her feed on Instagram. Tara paused to stare at the photo on her screen. She pushed out her chair and ran into the bathroom.

“Something wrong, Tara?” Tinkerer asked.

Tara opened her mouth over the sink and heaved. Something was caught in her throat, but she couldn’t get it out.

“It’s nothing!” Tara shouted back with the bathroom door ajar.

“I saw she was scrolling vertically at a consistent pace. That could only be one thing. She was on Instagram,” Mindmeld said.

“What did she see?” Tinkerer asked.

“I have a suspicion, let us check out her ex's account,” Teen Demon said.

Tara could hear the muffled conversation in the other room, “His account is privated. You couldn’t see his photos even if you wanted to!”

“I followed him on a burner the day you got here,” Teen Demon said.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tara shouted over.

“I did too,” Mindmeld said.

“I didn’t, for the record,” Tinkerer said.

“What’s an ‘Instagram’?” Stupendous Man asked.

“It is okay, old man,” Teen Demon said.

Tara continued to try and expel this entity from her esophagus as the others discussed in the dining room.

Teen Demon tapped his screen a few times then paused.

“Oh yeah, that is most definitely it. Share it with the class, Markie,” he said.

Markie projected the post from her faceplate. In the image, three men stood together in tank tops. The center one held a basketball in his hands. The caption read “Ballin” with a basketball emoji after it.

“‘Ballin’? That’s it?” Mindmeld scoffed.

“What a seductive outfit. There is clear sexual energy being given off,” Teen Demon stated.

“Why are we looking at a picture of three kids?” Stupendous Man asked.

“Oh, this was clearly posted with the intention of Tara seeing it. I can smell it,” Teen Demon said.

“That is an incredibly toxic way to think. I’m sure Tara’s posted stuff too. He’s allowed to live his own life,” Tinkerer said.

“Do not tell me about toxic! My stomach has been grumbling ever since I consumed tonight’s meatloaf,” Teen Demon said as he rubbed his belly.

“Watch your mouth, TD!” Stupendous Man said.

“How’re you doing in there, Tara?” Tinkerer shouted.

“Still trying to throw up!” Tara said.

“Why do you want to throw up?” Tinkerer asked.

“I just need to! I need to get this out of my system,” she responded.

“Think about children smiling or maybe a joyous giggle!” Teen Demon said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Would my music calm you down?” Markie chirped.

“No, I do not think that would help right now. But it is a great thought, Markie,” Tinkerer said.

“I can help her,” Stupendous Man said.

“Just this once,” Tinkerer said hesitantly.

He reappeared in the bathroom next to Tara.

“Alright, I can shake you very fast if you’d like. Are you sure you wish to vomit?” Stupendous Man asked. He looked down to see Tara’s phone on the sink. The picture of Arthur was resting at the center of her screen.

“Just do it, please,” Tara said. Stupendous Man put his arms on Tara’s shoulders, and she rapidly rocked back and forth. He let go of her and she leaned forward.

An unpleasant fluid expunged itself from her mouth. Granular pieces of meatloaf covered in a mix of putrid green phlegm and corrosive stomach acid trickled into the sink. Bubbles festered on the top. It splattered against the white porcelain and droplets covered the image on

her phone. She inhaled and held her breath. She opened her mouth again and paused. Tara breathed in and exhaled.

“I’ll just get that for you,” Stupendous Man said as he leaned around her to turn on the sink. He made sure to avoid touching any of the vomit.

“Why don’t you clean yourself up. I’ll have Tori make you another meal,” he said before leaving the bathroom.

Tara wiped the droplets off the front of her phone and stared at the screen.

“Yuck.”

Tara sat back down at the table and started to eat her dinner for the second time.

“You are going to eat this meal twice!?!?” Teen Demon exclaimed. Stupendous Man shot him a glance.

“Actually, my head is starting to ache too. I think I must lay down,” Teen Demon said.

“Don’t be so dramatic. No one leaves till everyone is done eating dinner,” Tinkerer said.

“No, I am serious. My head is pounding right now,” Teen Demon said.

“My cooking isn’t tha--**POP!**”

Zip! Zip! Zip! A woman in a mechanical suit erupted from his head. Green blood sprayed across the room. Teen Demon’s headless body rolled out of his seat. Her suit was a rich copper color. Little metallic balls lined her wrists and ankles. The pieces of metal that formed her eyepiece, boots, and gloves were silver.

“Tonight, Microcosm shall finally distribute justice for the death of Micro Man!” she said.



“House, activate intruder protocol!” Tinkerer shouted. The walls whirred loudly as panels flipped around to reveal laser guns. Microcosm threw one of the balls in the air. Copper wings erupted from it. **Zip! Zip! Zip!** She disappeared as blasts of energy flew past where she was.

“Where did she go?” Mindmeld asked.

Fzz. Fzz. Fzz. The guns on the wall crackled before shutting off. Markie stopped hovering and fell to the ground.

“She can shrink. Stay alert!” Tinkerer said. Tara’s suit formed around her.

THAM! Mindmeld went flying backwards. He toppled over the dining room table and tumbled into the wall. Tara’s arms molded to form blasters.

I don’t detect anything. If she can shrink, it’s small. I can detect up to a particle of dust.

THAM! Tara flew up into the wall and began to fall to the ground. **THAM!** Tara flew through the wall of the dining room and skid to a stop against the ground.

Zip! Zip! Zip!

Microcosm reappeared in front of Tinkerer.

“My dad died because your husband was too scared to fight,” she said.

Stupendous Man flew toward Microcosm. She threw a microbot at him and he disappeared.

“What did you do to him?”

“Temporarily condensed his atoms. He’ll be fine. I just wanted time alone with you before I got to him.”

“I know what you’re talking about. But the man that did that isn’t here anymore. You’re fighting a battle in a war that ended years ago,” Tinkerer said.

“I don’t care what you say. My dad’s dead,” Microcosm said.

She threw one of her microbots toward Tinkerer.

“House, backpack now!” Tinkerer shouted. She rolled to the side with her arms extended upward. Tinkerer’s backpack sprung out from the walls and onto her. The microbot stuck to the dining room table and began blinking red. Tinkerer sucked it up in her backpack. The metal turned to fluid and spit out into her hand. She molded it into a knife.

“That’s an antique, for the record!” Tinkerer declared.

Microcosm lunged forward and slashed at Tinkerer. She molded the knife into a spear to block the attack. Tinkerer pushed Microcosm back.

“I was twelve years old when he went off to fight Atomsplitter. **TWELVE!**” Microcosm shouted. Agony gripped at her vocal cords as she choked out these words she had wished to say for so long.

“I saw it all happen on the news. I’m sorry,” Tinkerer said. She molded the spear into a bola and threw it forward. It tangled around Microcosm’s legs. Tinkerer ran forward to tackle her to the ground. **Zip! Zip! Zip!** As Microcosm began to shrink out of her trappings, she was pushed to the ground. Tinkerer pinned her to the ground and began to absorb bits of the copper suit into her backpack.

Droplets of metal floated up from across Microcosm’s suit before she was able to kick Tinkerer off her. Her eyes were now visible through the holes in the suit.

“Do you know what it does to a kid watching your dad die on the news in front of everyone? People were placing bets on who would win!”

Microcosm swung her legs in the air and used the inertia to pick herself up. She tackled Tinkerer to the ground and began pummeling her.

Her teeth gritted as she spoke, “I saw his blood!” **THUNK!** Red blood spilled out of Tinkerer’s cheeks. She looked up into Microcosm’s eyes and saw nothing but rage.

“And you know what’s even worse? People forgot about him! He gave his whole life to save the world, and no one cares about him. All they ever talk about is when Justice swooped in to save the day!”

Microcosm’s metal gauntlets echoed off Tinkerer’s skull.

“I’m sorry . . . about . . . all of that,” Tinkerer said.

“**YOU DON’T GET TO BE SORRY!**” Microcosm said as she put her fists together and slammed them down. **KA-BOOM!** Stupendous Man reappeared and rocketed into Microcosm. He flew forward and threw her to the ground a mile away from the farm.

“If it’s me you want then fight me and stay away from my family,” Stupendous Man said. His voice boomed through the air. The moon shined above them, and stars twinkled in the sky.

“I wouldn’t be here if you cared about anyone else’s family,” Microcosm said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb! **ATOMSPLITTER! WHERE. WERE. YOU?**”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Stupendous Man said.

“Hmph. It doesn't matter anyways,” Microcosm said as she flung out two microbots that hovered in the air in front of her. She ran forward and used them as steps to ascend into the air. She jumped off and spun around so her leg collided with Stupendous Man's jaw.

CRACK! The plating around her legs shattered and she toppled to the ground.

“You're not going to beat me,” Stupendous Man said.

Microcosm threw a microbot at Stupendous Man and he sidestepped it.

“I'll fight to my last breath just like my dad did,” Microcosm said.

“There won't be any death here.”

Microcosm ran forward and reeled her arm back before uppercutting Stupendous Man.

CRACK! Her gauntlet shattered and her hand twisted backward.

“I'd stop hitting me if I were you.”

“Why won't you just die!” Microcosm shouted as she collapsed to the ground. Her head began to throb from the overload of emotions.

“I am truly sorry to hear about your father.”

“I am tired of people being sorry! I don't want people to feel bad for me. I! JUST! WANT! MY! DAD!”

Spit covered the inside of her helmet as she shouted.

“Loss is a powerful thing. It cuts through any facade we put forward and digs into our core. It reveals the deepest part of ourselves,” Stupendous Man said.

Microcosm sobbed on the ground.

“You're welcome to stay with us for a bit if you'd like. I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I'm sure you're a great person on the inside.”

“THAT'S IT!” Microcosm said. **Zip. Zip. Zip.**

Stupendous Man paused. He felt a tickle on his ear and said, “If you're going to try and explode my head it isn't going to work.”

He stood quietly for a few seconds. **Zip. Zip. Zip.** Microcosm stood before him once again.

“Oh my god. You're . . . it can't be . . . I can't be here . . .”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Stupendous Man asked.

Zip. Zip. Zip. She disappeared. Stupendous Man reappeared in the dining room to find Teen Demon with a newly grown head helping Tinkerer up.

“What was that all about?” Teen Demon asked.

“I’m not sure,” Tinkerer said. She molded metal from her backpack into a crutch.

“Did we win?” Teen Demon asked.

“I took care of her. She won’t bother us again,” Stupendous Man said.

*I think I’m trying to wear myself out.
My head is swirling with doubt.
I like understanding how I think
if only I’d stop almost vomiting in the sink.
I’m not intentionally skipping any meals
except for when I find myself in my feels.
Two nights ago I walked aimlessly for hours
just so I wouldn’t think about what was ours.
I have a hunch that I’m losing weight
it’s because I’m past my last date.
Sleeping in my empty bed until one
my day starts and is quickly done.
Sad songs always play on repeat.
I can’t put myself back on my feet.
These hurdles I put up only bring me down.
I don’t do it with the intention to drown.
You’d be right to question why I do this.
It is far from a healthy way to reminisce.
I keep trying to do something
hoping that it will change this nothing.*

Chapter 8

Pink in the Night



Markie, Tara, Mindmeld, and Teen Demon marched through a forest. Tara led as her suit tracked a heat source ahead of them. Fog floated above the ground preventing them from seeing more than a few feet ahead.

"The weather forecast did not include fog," Markie said.

"This is giving me the heebie jeebies, as you humans would say," Teen Demon said.

"We haven't said that since the seventies," Mindmeld said.

"Why are you scared? Aren't you supposed to be a demon from the underworld?" Tara questioned. She molded her suit's arms into an ax to cut a branch out of her way.

"On the path to reformation. Let us not forget," Teen Demon said.

"Aren't you just living with us because it is simply the most advantageous position to be in?" Mindmeld questioned.

"So focused on the cons when there are pros. Maybe, I would prefer if we just got attacked by the villain right now so they could start critiquing me too. Let us just get it all out of our systems," Teen Demon said.

"That would not provide a tactical advantage," Markie said.

"I know that . . . obviously . . ." Teen Demon muttered.

"You know, I did some research into what Microcosm was talking about. She's right. Micro Man did die all those years ago when Tokyo was attacked. I can't vouch for the rest of her story, but at the very least some of it stands true," Mindmeld said.

"Do you guys normally get attacked out of the blue like that?" Tara asked.

"It has never happened before," Mindmeld said.

"I've been meaning to ask. What did it feel like having your head explode?" Tara asked.

"It felt a lot like listening to your voice," Teen Demon said.

"Ooh. Zinger." Mindmeld said as he delicately pushed a branch out his way.

"I still detect one heat source ahead. Let's just keep moving," Tara said as she rolled her eyes.

Teen Demon pulled a branch out of the way and once he passed by, he let it go. It snapped back and thwacked Mindmeld in the face unbeknownst to Teen Demon.

"This fog gets me thinking. What are your guys' worst fears?" Teen Demon asked.

“I worry that as I copy more and more people’s memories, I will continue to lose pieces of myself until at some point I am a quilt composed of pieces from everything except myself,” Mindmeld said.

“I was going to say ferrets, but that works as well. How many people are up there anyways?” Teen Demon asked as he pointed to Mindmeld’s head.

“I’ve lost track. Probably eight or so,” Mindmeld said as he rubbed his hands together to keep warm.

“Incredible. What about you, Tara?”

“That I will never find myself and be lost in this nebulous place. I’m scared because I don’t know why I can’t decide what I want. Some days I miss him and others I don’t. I always feel like I must keep moving cause if I don’t, I will drown. Even worse, now I know my suit is being affecting by it and I don’t know when this will stop.”

“Someone would not pass the Bechdel test,” Mindmeld noted.

“I enjoy hearing you complain. It is what gives me meaning in life,” Teen Demon said.

“Very funny. Hey, wait. The heat spot just split. What do we do?” Tara asked.

“We split up. Obviously,” Mindmeld said.

“Woah. Have you ever seen a horror movie? There is ominous fog and now we have to split up? Are you insane?” Teen Demon asked.

“I thought you were invulnerable?” Mindmeld questioned.

“Fair enough. I want to go with Tara. She is the one with the heat vision or whatever,” Teen Demon said.

“Sounds good. Markie, the second heat source is moving forward at twenty-three degrees north. Just go straight in that direction,” Tara said.

Markie beeped and started flying off. Mindmeld followed her.

“What could cause a fog this thick?” Mindmeld asked. He squinted his eyes to keep watch on the ground for roots popping out of the soil.

“I’ve scanned the database of villains. All weather manipulation capable individuals are no longer active,” Markie said.

“That’s just lovely. I suppose if we discover something new, we get to name it. That’s how it works, right?”

"We could name it Mark-4," Markie said.

"What? Whatever is doing this isn't another robot. You're one of a kind."

"But the three in my name indicates two came before me."

"Hmm. I never thought of that. I wonder what happened to them."

"I hope they have friends like me."

"If they're anything like you, I'm sure they do."

Teen Demon screamed out as he fell to the ground. Tara's arms molded into a blaster and the barrel lit up green. She pointed her cannon towards him.

"My bad, just a root. I hate nature," Teen Demon said as he picked himself up. He brushed off his legs.

"Do you actually hate babies and stuff or is that just like a gimmick?" Tara asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know, like a gimmick. You just sort of do it to be funny."

Teen Demon stared blankly as he thought.

"What would be funny about it?" he asked.

"Oh my . . . you are serious," Tara said. She shivered as a chill ran up her spine.

"I rarely joke. I have not had time to learn about that yet."

"Made sure to fit in narcissism though," Tara said.

"Stop using big words. I have not reached the back half of the alphabet in the dictionary. I must urinate. You wait for me, okay?"

"Gross. Just be quick. Make sure you take quite a few steps into that fog. I don't want to be present for that."

Mindmeld pushed his arm against the throat of a beast. The monster had him pinned to the ground and its jaw rapidly snapped open and close attempting to rip his head off. Saliva dripped off its pointed teeth and into Mindmeld's eyes.

"GET THIS OFF ME, MARKIE!" Mindmeld screamed.

Markie shot sparks of yellow electricity from her hands into the back of the beast. It had no effect against its coarse, pale skin. Gray hairs were spread out in random patches across the

beast's body. It was similar in shape to a wolf, but instead of possessing a lean form, muscles bulged at the creature's legs.

"It's not responding to any attacks!"

"Get more creative!"

Mindmeld kicked it in the chest and the beast howled. It leapt off Mindmeld and he hastily picked himself up. Mud stained his clothes and spit had dried in his hair.

The beast's stomach molded in front of Mindmeld's eyes. The flesh convulsed to form a hole where he had kicked it.

"What is that thing?" Mindmeld asked.

Markie's arms lit up yellow as she charged another blast of energy.

Teen Demon came back out of the fog and wiped his hands together.

"That was a top three urination. Something about poisoning the tree with my own fluids fulfills a part of my soul . . . whatever is left of it."

Tara nodded quietly.

"I know I did not wash my hands. It is not like we are going to be shaking them soon. I will wash them when I get back home," Teen Demon said.

Tara stared at him.

"You are creeping me out. Let us keep moving forward."

Ravens squawked as they flew overhead. Teen Demon walked forward as Tara followed behind him. Slowly, Tara's jaw unlatched, and her maw grew wider and wider. Her teeth grew sharper and sharper as her neck stretched closer to Teen Demon. Drool dripped to the ground.

"You think Mindmeld and Markie already caught the villain?" Teen Demon asked as he turned back to look at Tara. Her face snapped back to normal.

Tara nodded her head up and down.

"It is a little weird we haven't been attacked yet . . . almost too weird."

Tara shrugged.

"Since when have you been quiet? Usually, you do not miss a chance to complain about your misfortunes."

Tara looked off into the distance.

"E.L.U," Teen Demon coughed out.

Tara raised her eyebrow inquisitively.

“I was thinking, when we get home, you should give Arthur a call. Things have been going really well for you guys, you would not want to forget your twenty-six-month anniversary.”

Tara gave a thumbs up.

“Alright, sounds go--HU-RAH!” Teen Demon whipped out his blade and swung it into Tara’s chest. The spikes on the side of his sword sunk into her skin. A purple light glowed where her skin was cut.

“Aw, Heaven,” Teen Demon said.

Tara’s face remolded. Skin folded in on itself as her eyes sunk into her face and a gaping hole appeared in the center. It formed into a jaw. Two red slits formed above the mouth. Her body grew to be unevenly proportioned with her right arm longer than her left. It dragged against the ground.

Two of the fingers on each of her arms sunk into her body and the remaining three grew longer and sharp. Her legs grew in a similar fashion. As her body morphed, Teen Demon struggled to pull out his sword. He finally ripped it out once the monster stooped over him.

The monster scraped its claw forward and its nails dug into Mindmeld’s face. He recoiled. Markie followed up behind and blasted the monster in the chest. She flew through the hole in its stomach and reappeared behind it. She rapidly fired energy bursts from her arms into its back. The monster reeled in pain.

“Should I copy its memories?” Mindmeld asked.

“That would be risky. We don’t know what’s in there,” Markie said.

“We need to know what we’re up against,” Mindmeld said.

“Don’t do it, Mindmeld!” Markie said as a cord spewed out from her hands. She grabbed one end and began spinning it around the monster.

“Teen Demon and Tara are in danger and your best idea is a string. I have to!” he said as he ran forward. He took off his glove and pushed his arm forward. He closed his eyes as his hand made contact with the monster’s skin. It felt like sandpaper.

He awaited a rush of memories and emotions, but nothing happened. He put his hand back on the monster’s body as it was distracted by Markie hovering in circles around it.

“I got nothing! Either we are way out of our league, or this thing isn’t living,” Mindmeld said.

A yellow light projected out from Markie’s faceplate. It scanned the monster.

“I detect no heartbeat,” Markie said.

“What is this?”

Markie finished circling the monster and pulled the cord tight. Her hands lit up bright as electricity crackled across the monster’s body. It roared in agony. When she let go of the wire it loosened and the monster collapsed to the ground. Smoke hissed off its body.

The monster started bubbling as its flesh grew soft. The muscle and skin turned into a pinkish gray fluid that sunk into the ground.

“I guess your string worked. My apologies.”

“Apology accepted.”

The abomination’s jaws dug into Teen Demon’s arm and ripped it off. The monster chewed on it briefly before swallowing the piece of flesh.

“This here is all you can eat,” Teen Demon shouted as he swung his sword with his non-dominant hand. With each swing of his sword a thin line was cut into the monster's skin. Dashes of purple were etched across its body from Teen Demon’s efforts.

A nub pushed out of Teen Demon’s shoulder and molded itself into a new arm. The monster tilted its head to the side.

“Yeah, that is right. I possess tricks too!” Teen Demon shouted. He was not afraid as he believed he could win this battle. Instead, he was amused by this monster that was immune to his sword strikes. Usually, he only got to swing it once against an opponent before they fell.

Meanwhile, deep in the forest Tara regained consciousness. She was tied up against a tree. Across from her, a woman in a long cloak muttered quietly to herself as she read from a book. She wore a deer skull on her head and her clothes were muddy.

“Who . . . are you?” Tara muttered. Her head was sore, and the back of her skull burned with sensations of pain.

“Wendigo Woman.”



Wendigo Woman

“Why are you doing this?”

“Everyone always asks questions. I think it would be smart to mind your own business.”

“Funny you say that, because I remember you attacking me first,” Tara said.

“If you stayed out of my forest, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Well, then stop messing with this forest.”

“You see this conversation. Chicken or egg? Chicken or egg? Which came first. I say you came here first. You say I caused you to come here first,” Wendigo Woman said as she spun her fingers. As her fingers moved through the air, they drew purple lines that fell like sparkles.

Tara’s arms molded into knives, and she cut loose from her wrappings.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you stop me,” Wendigo Woman said.

Teen Demon pushed his arms against the jaws of the monster as it attempted to swallow the bottom half of his body.

“I know I said all you can eat, but that does not apply if you eat the chef!”

The monster’s saliva spit out from its mouth and slowly covered more and more of Teen Demon’s body making him slippery. He lost his grip on the monster’s mouth and fell into its stomach.

“SOMEONE! HELP!” he screamed out as he fell into darkness.

Teen Demon attempted to climb up the monster's innards, but he slipped off anything he tried to grab. He slashed his claws against the monster's flesh to no avail. He anxiously attempted to escape for over twenty minutes.

His mind began to wonder, and he questioned if he had been forgotten. Perhaps they had thought he died? Maybe they never even liked him so they would take this opportunity to leave him? He knew his personality could be grating, but he was trying to get better. He hoped this wasn't what had happened.

"Markie, that one ate something! Hold its mouth open!" a muffled voice shouted.

The monster roared as moonlight shined down on Teen Demon. He looked up to see Mindmeld peering in through the monster's mouth.

"You owe me big time for this," Mindmeld said as he extended his hand down. Teen Demon reached up, but his hands slipped off Mindmeld's leather gloves.

"I cannot get a grip!" Teen Demon shouted.

"Try harder!" Mindmeld shouted.

"I CAN'T HOLD THE MOUTH AGAPE MUCH LONGER!" Markie said.

"Are you really going to make me do this?" Mindmeld said as the monster attempted to roar.

"Do not do it. You do not want these memories. I will find another way out," Teen Demon said.

"I'm not leaving you here. I couldn't do that to my brother," Mindmeld said. He slipped off his glove and threw it to the ground. Mindmeld extended his bare arm down and held out his fingers for Teen Demon to grab.

Mindmeld stretched his hand and intertwined his fingers with Teen Demon's green claws. He shouted out as he ripped his arm up in one motion. Teen Demon flew out of the monster's stomach and toppled to the ground. Mindmeld lost control of his body and began to convulse. He loosened his grip on the monster and fell to the ground where his body began to shake violently. Markie began spinning a cord around the monster.

Teen Demon ran over to Mindmeld and slid to a stop next to him. He watched Mindmeld's body rock against the ground. His head struck against the dirt as his legs shook wildly in the air.

“No. No. No. Relax, Andy,” Teen Demon said. He grabbed onto Mindmeld’s body and held him tight, keeping him from smashing his body against the ground. Spit bubbles formed in Mindmeld’s mouth as saliva foamed. Teen Demon held him even tighter as the yellow electricity from Markie illuminated the woods.

“Do not lose yourself. I know you can do it,” Teen Demon whispered. Tears gathered in his eyes as he embraced Mindmeld. He let out a whimper as he listened to Mindmeld’s quiet groans while his body shook.

Markie hovered over and scanned Mindmeld’s body.

“He needs to be sedated, now!” Markie said.

“Then do it!” Teen Demon said as he gripped tighter to Mindmeld’s body.

A syringe extended out of a cavity in Markie’s chest. The tip pierced Mindmeld’s skin. The fluid was pushed into his body, and he grew silent. Teen Demon slowly let go of him.

Tara dove to the side as a blast of purple energy flew past her.

“I’m not going to let you take my friend away from me,” Wendigo Woman said as she readied another blast.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s why I needed this forest. If I sacrifice enough life, I can bring her back.”

“Wait, so you’re going to kill everything within this forest?”

“All of it. It’s all about balance. Takes a lot more to bring back than to take away.”

“But you’re in the radius too,” Tara said. Her blades molded back into her hands. The suit slinked back into her anklet.

“I’m aware of that.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. You can’t bring someone back to life,” Tara said.

“You can. Just no one has the will to do it. I can’t continue on knowing she died, but I got to live,” she said.

“I--I can’t let you do this,” Tara said.

“Are you really going to stand in my way?” Wendigo Woman asked. Her voice wavered. It was apparent to Tara that Wendigo Woman had not slept for days.

Tara paused. She opened her mouth but didn’t know what to say.

Zwip! A syringe pierced Wendigo Women's leg and serum pushed into her body. She looked confused before collapsing to the ground.

As the fog began to clear, Teen Demon ran out of the foliage and stopped himself in front of Tara.

"Thank the devil you are alright."

Tara stood still.

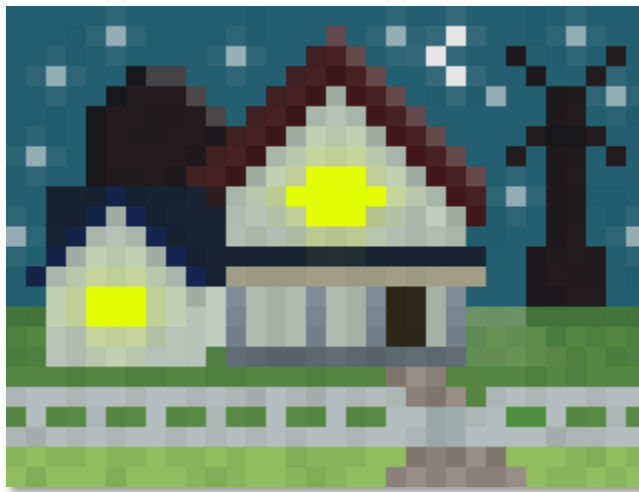
"Has any harm come upon you?" Markie asked.

"She just wanted to save her friend . . ." Tara said.

"I am sorry for her, but I will not let her take down my friends to get it done," Teen Demon said.

". . ."

"Come on, let's go home," Teen Demon said.



That night, Tara sat quietly in her room. She listened to "Pink in the Night" by Mitski as she scrolled aimlessly on her phone. ***Knock. Knock. Knock.***

"Come in!" Tara shouted.

Mindmeld hobbled into her room.

"How are you doing?" Tara asked.

"I'm doing pretty well, all things considered. Please do stop me if I start praising the devil or something," Mindmeld joked.

“That’s what I’m here for. What are the first ten words from the list Tinkerer gives you?” she asked.

“Are you testing me?”

“Just making sure you aren’t too demon-like.”

He rolled his eyes before rapidly saying, “Pink. Dog. Bottle. Card. Ladder. Grass. Phone. Can. Apples. Hair.”

“I actually have no way of knowing if you’re right,” Tara said as she shrugged.

“I am. There is something I could use your help with. I have a spot I like to go to think, but I’m a little worse for wear. You think you could give me a lift? As a plus, a place to contemplate may be healthy for you,” Mindmeld said.



Tara flew to the ground and landed in the middle of the Dilaberentur Cemetery. She set Mindmeld down and her armor folded back into her anklet.

“I like to sit here and talk with all these people I sort of know from other lives,” Mindmeld said as he pointed at a few of the tombstones.

“Since it’s a small town, most of the people whose mind I have copied have some connection here. They may be buried here, or a loved on of theirs are. I sorta find myself caring for their family once I copy their memories. It’s a funny by-product.”

He took a deep breath. The musty air filled his lungs.

Mindmeld said, “Although I’m going to be honest with you. I didn’t bring you here just so you could figure things out or because I needed a ride. I wanted to figure some stuff out myself that I needed your help with.”

“Why me?”

“Because I’ve seen that you open up to other people. Knowing so much about you makes me comfortable to ask you this. Probably better to talk to someone that isn’t six feet under on the rare occasion.”

“What do you need help with?” Tara asked.

“What is love like?” Mindmeld asked.

Tara’s eyes widened as she said, “That’s a big question. I’m not sure if I could do it justice.”

“I just want to know what you think it is. I have all these other people’s thoughts in my head. Each of them views love in a different way and I just want to hear what one mind thinks.”

“Well, to me, it’s comfort. It’s knowing that there is one person out there that will always have your back. It’s the person you can come to with anything ever and they will be there without judgment. They’re the person you always work to mimic because you look so far up to them you can’t ever hope of achieving such peaks. But for some reason, someone so incredible picks you.”

“Wow,” he said.

Mindmeld paused before saying, “Do you think about Arthur that way still?”

“I . . . guess not.”

“Why do you still miss him then?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” he said.

“ . . . ”

“It’s okay. You can tell me,” Mindmeld said.

“I suppose what I truly fear is the between. I know we could be happy together some day. But I just can’t deal with what’s around him right now. The problem is I don’t know if I could reconcile with what he’d do in the between if we weren’t dating.

I guess that’s toxic. But I’ve really just been holding on so I could guarantee he’s the person I still like. That’s what’s really stopping me.”

“You can’t keep living like that,” Mindmeld said.

“Why can’t I? He’s so close to the perfect person. I just have to adjust a few things about him.”

Mindmeld frowned.

“Wait, did one of the people in your head do that?” Tara asked.

“You’d be surprised how often something like that happens.”

“So, what are you trying to tell me?” she asked.

“That you made the right decision when you broke up with him.”

“But . . . But I don’t want it to be the right decision,” she said.

Tara broke eye contact with Mindmeld and looked up at the trees. Their spiked, green leaves rustled quietly in the wind.

Tara’s voice wavered as she said, “I’m afraid to let him go.”

“He’s never really gone. You’ll always carry a small part of him in the corner of your heart.”

“I . . . I just wanted someone like me. Why’d he become more like his friends and less like me? Is there something wrong with me? Am I unlovable?” Tara asked. She didn’t mean that last question. The answer was obvious, but sometimes hard to find.

“Shh. Don’t think like that. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Mindmeld said. He embraced Tara.

“How’d I end up broken? I didn’t ask for much. I don’t get why he didn’t try and help me get through it. All he said was, ‘I didn’t change.’ Or he’d act like I was expected to just accept this. It was always me trying to fix things. He was fine letting go.”

Tara rested her head on Mindmeld’s shoulder as he patted her on the back similar to how you would burp a baby.

“He just wanted to go elsewhere, not that he is wrong for that, but Arthur wasn’t the right person for you at the moment.”

“I feel . . . I feel like I should have been stronger,” Tara said in between sniffles.

“Right now, it feels wrong. Know someday you will go to bed and awake to pink skies in the morning. Birds will fly across the horizon and leaves will rustle in the wind. You’ll go to sleep without worrying and rise excited for the next day.

Things will be okay someday. You'll still have all of us and you will have even more people that care about you because you are lovable. Everyone is."

"I'm so sorry I have been burdening you all by talking about this all the time."

"You never burdened us. We care about you and it's okay if you still aren't through this. We will be here for you every single day you need it," Mindmeld said.

Mindmeld let go of Tara and began to move meticulously through the graveyard cleaning off a select number of gravestones.

As he finished cleaning the first stone, Tara said, "I think his parents probably hate me."

"I know a thing or two about that. I don't just think my parents hated me; I know they did. Can you imagine what it is like to have their memories and see the exact moment they determined I was worthless?" he asked.

"Erm. No, I can't quite imagine it."

"It's the worst feeling in the world. There are two people that are supposed to support you no matter what. I didn't even do anything. They just decided I wasn't worthwhile on their own for some reason," he said.

"I don't know what to say to that," Tara said.

"Sorry, don't mean to be brooding. What I guess I meant to say is, who cares? His parents mean nothing to you. They are two random forty-year-olds on this big rock who you have no real connection to. They aren't your family, and they will not be your family. You have nothing to prove to them. Are your parents proud of who you are?" Mindmeld asked.

"I think so."

"That's what matters. Don't let all these other superfluous people get you down," Mindmeld said as he ripped vines off another tombstone.

"Thanks for the advice tonight," Tara said.

"Thank you for your advice. We all come into each other's lives with different pieces missing. It's only through sharing what we know that one another can become full."

Chapter 9

Dreaming of Peace

Tara sat on the back patio of Arthur's house with his family. It was a warm summer evening. The sun was setting, and the hum of cicadas rose into earshot. The bright sunlight cracking through the clouds was blocked out by the wooden gazebo they had recently installed. They talked as water droplets dripped down the glasses of tea on the table.

"So, tonight we will be having smoked ribs. I'm pretty proud of this recipe," Arthur's dad said. He had recently received a new smoker and was anxious to put it to work.

"Then, maybe in a few nights I am going to try smoking salmon."

"The possibilities are truly endless, dad," Arthur said.

"Obviously. I could smoke anything in this thing," he said while proudly pointing at the stainless-steel smoker.

"I'm sure it'll be great," Arthur's mom said as his father sat back down.

His father picked up a ball and threw it into the yard. Their lean dog chased after it. Externally, he was covered in a thick coat of black and white fur. Internally, he was undeniably unique. Vacuums bothered him, like other dogs, but he was also disturbed by the opening of a can or other seemingly innocent actions. He was the kind of dog that was so full of quirks that the act of him laying down on his own bed was considered praiseworthy. His most amusing trait to Tara was how he would anxiously lick the floor grout in between the tiles when they would eat dinner. He would meticulously work his way down one side of the tile, then turn ninety degrees to lick the next side.

The dog smiled widely as it returned the ball and Arthur's father threw it back out.

"You think you're going to go to that superhero home next year?" his father asked.

"I think so. My dad thinks they are the only ones that can help with my anklet," she said.

"Is it safe to go to a place like that?" his mother asked.

"Tara can handle herself," Arthur said.

"I'll be around good people. Supposedly, one of the mentors used to be a pretty big deal back in the day," Tara said.

"Well, we got to work on that name of yours. 'Emerald Earwig' isn't exactly going to strike fear into villains," his father said with a slight smile.

"I like it. I think it's a cute name. Feels very *you*," Arthur said.

"I'm not the one with the space anklet, so I trust you know what to name yourself," his mother said as she got up.

“She makes a strong argument,” his father said before chuckling.

“I’m going to prep some veggies. I’ll be back out,” his mother said.

“Oh, I’ll help!” his father said as he followed her in.

Since they were now alone, Tara took her chance to say what she really wanted to.

“I’m sorry about everything. I don’t know why I did all of that to us.”

Arthur reached over from his chair to grab her hand. Although the chair was new, it squeaked as he swiveled to face her.

“It’s okay. I forgive you. I know you were going through a lot,” he said while rubbing his thumb in a circle over her palm.

“I just--I just feel like such an idiot about it all.”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re the smartest, most capable person I know,” he said.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Of course, I do. I love you, Tara!” Arthur said as he kissed her hand.

The ground shook beneath them and instantly the world faded away. Tara was shaken awake by her bed rattling.



“BREACH DETECTED. BREACH DETECTED,” a voice shouted across the speakers hidden in the house.

Mechanical arms pushed out from under the head of Tara’s bed and pushed it up into the air, so Tara slid out of it. She landed on her feet and rubbed her eyes. Outside of her window the

sun was starting to rise in the distance. The light from it illuminated several figures approaching in the distance. Tinkerer stood outside in front of the house fully suited up.

Before long, Teen Demon, Mindmeld, Markie, and Tara stood next to her. The figures grew more defined as they marched forward. Once closer, they were able to distinguish between people and over fifty different figures became apparent.

“What do you think it is?” Mindmeld asked.

“Not sure,” Tinkered said as she molded a ball of metal and some pieces of glass into a pair of binoculars.

“Shall we start shooting at them now?” Teen Demon asked as he hopped up and down excitedly.

“We don’t know what they want yet,” Tinkerer said. Through her lenses she could see that each of the figures donned blue ninja armor. Their suits were entirely monotone except for a number on each of their chests. At the center of the group was a man in similar garb except he did not wear a mask.

He had silver plates covering his shoulders, knees, and tips of his boots. Each of the ninja carried nothing but a blade.

“Ninjas,” Tinkerer muttered.

“Ninjas? I thought they were supposed to be sneaky,” Teen Demon said. His mouth began to salivate as he thought of getting the opportunity to fight ninjas.

At this point, the army of warriors covered in blue had reached earshot of Tinkerer. The man in the center stepped in front of the rest. He rubbed his stubble before speaking.

“I have come to exact vengeance for the murder of my wife and son during the battle against Atomsplitter,” he shouted.

“What are you talking about? None of us were there!” Tinkerer shouted.

“That’s precisely the problem. New information has arisen to inform me that Stupendous Man did not feel inclined to help!”

“Listen, I’m sure if he was not there, he had a good reason!” Mindmeld shouted over.

“The reason matters not. The results were that my family died in the crossfire. The city was supposed to be cleared before Micro Man made his final stand. Yet, they missed two people. She was the love of my life, and he was only four years old!”

“That is unfortunate, but I have had enough vendettas for at least six months. Someone else just tried this a few weeks ago. Besides, the old man is not even here. He is saving the Earth from a meteor or something!” Teen Demon shouted.

“An eye for an eye shall do for now. I think you underestimate my determination. The plates on my armor are made from pieces of Micro Man’s shattered armor scattered across the remains of my home. It is all that was left when I returned.

This wasn’t a discussion. It was a declaration of your impending death.”

“Not going to let that happen. HOUSE! DEFENSE PROTOCOL 17!” Tinkerer shouted.

The ground rumbled as numerous metal balls popped out from the ground. The morning sun shone off them as they rested spread across the field. They lined the entire area between the two factions.

“Metal balls will do nothing to stop your slaughter by the hands of the Eighty-four Sword Guild. ATTACK!” the man shouted as he pointed both his swords forward. Eighty-four swords unsheathed and the wave of blue crashed forward.

“Remember, no killing strikes. That goes double for you, Teen Demon. Markie, on me. We’re going to get creative!” Tinkerer said. She ran forward and jumped over one of the metal balls. She raised her arm and the ball molded into a pedestal under her feet. She continued to hop forward molding the metal into pillars to run on. Markie hovered after.

“You have retained my sword fighting knowledge from when you took my memories, right?” Teen Demon asked Mindmeld.

“I think so.”

“Good. Because you are going to need it.”

Teen Demon ran forward and leapt at one of the pillars left by Tinkerer. He grabbed on to it and spun around. He let go and flew over to the next pillar where he repeated the process.

A jetpack formed on Tara’s back.

“I can give you a lift in,” Tara said.

“That’d be nice.”

He grabbed her hand, and they took off. Within moments, Tara reached the epicenter of the battlefield where Tinkerer hopped above the ninjas. The vacuum on her backpack was turned on and the swords floated out of their hands and up into her storage container. Metal fluid filled

her tank. As she did this, she grabbed the liquid metal and molded it into armor paneling which she threw over to Markie who attached them to herself.

Teen Demon swung off a pillar next to two of the ninjas and drew his sword in midair. He cut them both to the ground. Tara landed on the ground next to the fallen warriors and Mindmeld picked up one of their swords.

“Let’s see if I retained anything!” he said as he moved the sword around through the air assessing its weight.

“DUCK!” Tara shouted.

Mindmeld bent down and a blast of energy flew from Tara and into a ninja sneaking up on him. Tara nodded before boosting herself into a group of four more ninjas. She molded her hands into swords and spun through the air cutting them down.

Mindmeld ran at another ninja and swung his blade forward. *CLANG!* Their swords clashed and Mindmeld pressed it forward. In the distance, Teen Demon spun through seven more ninjas, cutting them down.

Mindmeld continued to push his blade against the other.

As they fought, flashes of a barren wasteland crossed Mindmeld’s eyes. Instead of fighting a ninja, he looked in front of himself and a purple beast was pushing against his blade with its bare arm. Red drool dripped from the monster’s lips as its tongue hung out from its mouth. Large horns protruded from its head and black ink was stained into its body forming countless pictures. Around him, shadowed figures snarled as they struck one another. As he pressed against the beast’s attack, the smell of smoke stung his nose. In the background, he noticed the peaks of the mountains were lined with flames.

“Pink . . . Dog . . . Bottle . . .”

He closed his eyes and reopened them to see his original adversary still pushing their blade forward. Realizing he was gaining no ground, he let go of his blade and ducked down. The ninja slashed forward and Mindmeld dodged it while swiping his opponent’s feet out. The ninja fell to the ground.

Mindmeld lifted his sword in the air and roared. He prepared to swing the sword down and through the blue cloth on the ninja’s back.

“Card . . . Ladder . . . Grass . . .”

Mindmeld turned his sword around, so his hilt faced the ninja. ***Ka-thunk***. He bashed the ninja on the back of the head. As he did this, Tara blasted rays of energy forward at a group of ninjas. Four of them deflected it, but the other five flew backwards from the blast.

KA-THUNK! A ten-foot-tall silver robot landed on the ground. Its feet crushed the ground with each step. The robot ripped one of the pillars left behind by Tinkerer out of the ground and threw it at a group of ninjas. It knocked ten of them down.

Tinkerer looked down proud from another pillar. Suddenly, it fell beneath her. At the ground, the unmasked man cut the metal at its base. Tinkerer attempted to retrieve metal from her backpack to save herself with, but the man dashed through the air cutting the container on her back open. As she fell to the ground, the metal spilled out around her. ***Thud!*** Her body crashed into the ground. She laid unconscious.

While this occurred, Markie crashed her arms against the ground knocking back another thirteen ninjas. Tara molded a shield on her hands to block a slash before boosting forward. She pushed four ninjas into a pillar. Teen Demon bounced between ninjas, slicing them down one by one. He smiled as the air rustled through his air. He cut down eight before landing on the ground.

Mindmeld dueled one ninja. Their blades continued to clang off each other as they swung. Each time Mindmeld swung thinking he could get the best of his opponent, but he was proven wrong. He pulled his arm back and--***CRACK!*** Markie knocked the ninja over by accident as she stepped forward to aim a blast of electricity at another group. Her arms hummed and lit up before a blast of yellow energy crackled forward into six more ninjas. ***Shink! Shink! Shink!*** The arms to Markie's large suit fell to the ground, then the legs fell off, and finally the centerpiece fell as two pieces. Markie was revealed floating in the air. ***Shink!*** Markie fizzled slightly before her headpiece was halved. Her body fell to the ground.

Teen Demon finished disposing of another five ninjas. He looked up to see Markie fall from the sky.

"Something is cutting us down and it is not the runts!" Teen Demon shouted as he threw his blade forward, cutting another three ninjas to the ground.

"I just took down another six. We need to group up! We will convene on your location, TD!" Tara said over their intercoms.

"I just managed to get another two. It was pretty impressive. I had to fight both of them at once," Mindmeld said over the headpiece as adrenaline rushed through his body.

“Yeah . . .” Teen Demon said.

“But I’m on my way.”

As Tara flew towards Teen Demon’s coordinates, she fired blasts at the ground taking out another three ninjas. She landed next to Teen Demon who had just finished fighting two ninjas.

Mindmeld paused his approach as one ninja stood in his way. Mindmeld ran at the ninja and feigned a swing. He slid to the ground and cut the ninja’s legs as he slid under. His adversary collapsed to the ground.

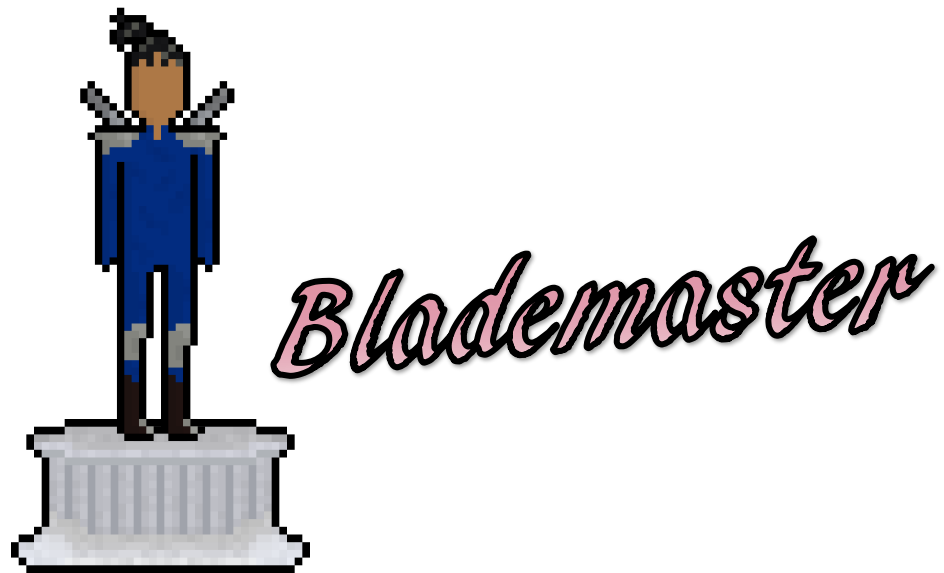
“That was pretty awesome. Guy’s I’m--UGH”

The transmission cut out. Tara tapped at her earpiece.

“Mindmeld? Are you en route?” she questioned.

“The strong one must have taken out Mindmeld too. It is just us,” Teen Demon said.

“You would be correct with your assumptions,” the man said as he stepped out from behind a silver pillar.



“You may call me Blademaster. After the death of my family, I came to America where I studied the blade. I knew American heroes were flawed. They have always been so caught up in themselves. I never knew if I was training to lead them to a better age or if it was to cut them down to where they belong. I suppose I know now.”

“You’re not taking us down!” Tara shouted.

“Four strikes are all it takes for me to cut down anyone. Although most are just one,” Blademaster said as he clenched his blades.

“Take thi--***SCHINK!***” Tara stopped talking as Blademaster appeared behind Teen Demon and her. A chunk was missing from both of their chests. Tara collapsed to the ground as her suit rescinded into her anklet. A patch of green metal formed over the gap in her stomach as she fell unconscious.

Teen Demon felt the gap in his body. His fingers rubbed against his ribcage. The bone felt surprisingly porous and uneven. Teen Demon knelt on the ground.

“Excellent work making it past one.”

SCHINK!

The man reappeared in front of Teen Demon. Teen Demon’s arm flew off into the distance. He remained kneeling.

SCHINK!

Teen Demon’s other arm flew off. Blood seeped out of his gaping wounds. Blademaster stood behind him. He kicked Teen Demon to the ground.

“You are lucky to experience four strikes from me.”

SCHINK! Blademaster plunged his blades into Teen Demon’s back, pinning him to the ground. Teen Demon let out a groan of pain as Blademaster walked away.

“Revenge has been dealt.”

Smoke rose from the ground as the battleground settled. Blood from countless origins sunk into the grass as the sun continued to cross the sky.

“If I counted properly, that was four strikes.”

Blademaster turned around to see Teen Demon standing with the two swords protruding from his chest. He stood shocked as Teen Demon’s fresh hands pulled the metal out from his back. Teen Demon grunted as the long swords slowly cut back out of his body.

“You said you wanted revenge. Come and get it!” Teen Demon said as he threw one of the swords forward.

Blademaster looked at the blade on the ground and assessed how he would attack. They ran toward each other shouting. Teen Demon swung his blade forward and Blademaster dove to the ground to grab the sword. Teen Demon missed his first swing but attempted to capitalize on his opponent’s positioning. Before he could, he was knocked back by a kick.

“How do you still stand?” Blademaster shouted as they circled each other with their blades drawn.

“Something about friendship . . . or family . . . I do not quite remember.”

“Do not jest with me, demon.”

“I will do what I want because as far as I see it you cannot kill me.”

Blademaster swung forward and Teen Demon deflected the attack. They continued to slash back and forth as the sun moved across the sky. Metal crashed against metal as the sun crossed the midpoint of the sky.



Blademaster took a deep breath then said, “Why . . . won’t . . . you fall.”

“Could . . . say . . . the same . . . to you.”

“I’m compelled to get revenge for my family.”

“I am compelled to not let bad guys win,” Teen Demon said as he wiped sweat from under his mask.

Blademaster plunged his blade into the ground and leaned against his hilt. Teen Demon did the same.

“I’m not a villain,” Blademaster said.

“As far as I see it you came into my home and started trying to kill us.”

“You couldn’t understand. The loss. It pollutes my body. Every day all I can think about is them from sunrise to sunset. I want nothing more than to bring them back.”

“I express my condolences. But they aren’t coming back.”

“I can at least honor their lives,” Blademaster said as his breaths grew less deep.

“By killing us? Is that really what your family would want?” Teen Demon asked.

“How else am I supposed to honor them?”

“That escapes me. Not this though. It is not too late. You can still go the other path. You can rise up to be a new standard for heroes,” Teen Demon pleaded.

A cool breeze blew past them. The wind was refreshing.

“Do not let the loss get to you. I have seen what it does to people, and I know others like to pretend it just goes away after time, but that is not guaranteed. You are not a bad person for carrying their loss as your burden, but it is up to you to determine how to shoulder it.”

“How . . . How would I start changing my path?” Blademaster asked.

“Why not stay for dinner. Although, I think you knocked the cook unconscious.”

“My people will cook. At least five of them are proficient in the culinary arts. It is only fair considering what we brought today. Will the rest of your family accept us for dinner?”

“If you all allow your swords to be confiscated, I see no reason why you couldn’t stay.”

“You are too kind, Demon.”

“You would be surprised how often something like this happens,” Teen Demon said.

All ninety of them were outside ready to eat. They sat at a long metal table molded by Tinkerer from the blades used in battle. The medics in the Eighty-four Sword Guild had helped to make sure everyone was patched up with help from the tools Markie carried on her. While many were in slings or had stitches across their body, everyone sat together at the table looking at the countless plates in front of them.

“To new beginnings!” Tinkerer shouted. Blademaster nodded in agreement as everyone began to eat.

“Thank you for letting us stay for dinner,” Blademaster told Tinkerer in between bites of lasagna.

“Thanks for not killing me after knocking me unconscious!” Tinkerer responded.

“Really? I just left you lying on the ground? Happy coincidences,” Blademaster said as he continued to eat.

Mindmeld took a bite out of his hamburger. As he ate, he turned to the ninja next to him and asked, “So, I was pretty great out there. Right?”

The ninja remained quiet as she lifted her mask to eat a chicken tender.

“Strong and silent type. I respect that,” Mindmeld said.

Markie sat in a chair next to Tara with her solar panel propped out.

“Want me to describe what the food tastes like?” Tara asked.

“I do not require such a stimulus. But the offer is appreciated,” Markie chirped.

“Suit yourself.”

“So . . . there I was . . . four strikes in . . . and I got back up!” Teen Demon shouted out to a group of ninjas in between bites of food. Bits of spaghetti flew out of his mouth as he spoke. The ninjas leaned in as they listened attentively.

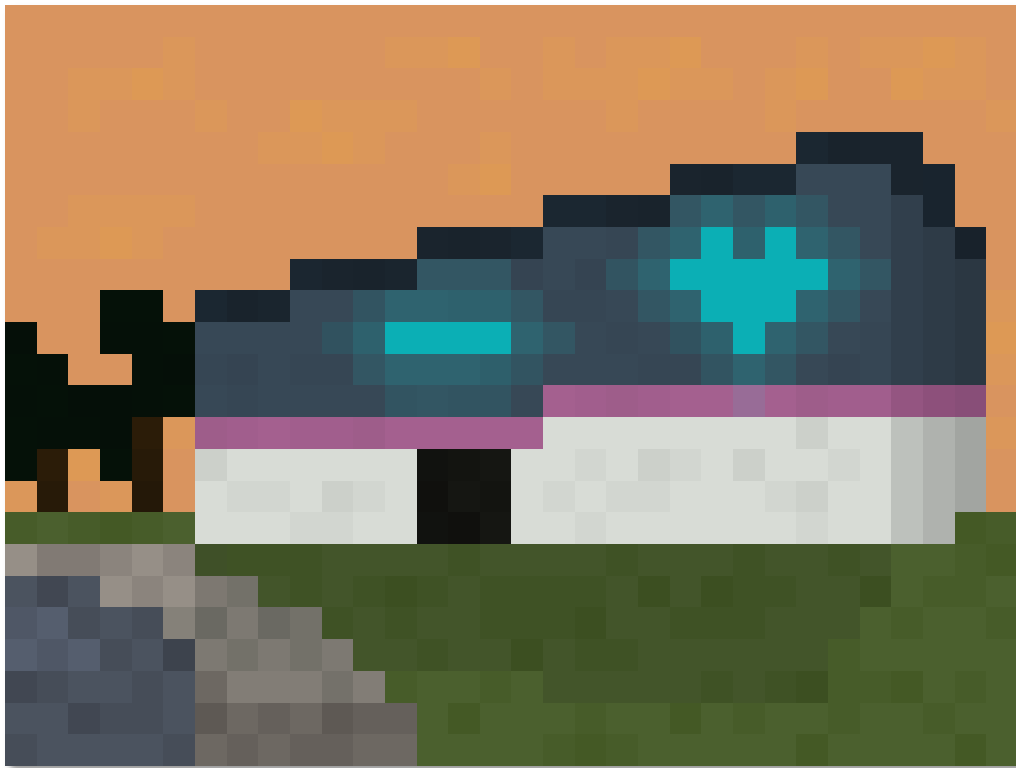
They all happily ate as the sun began to set in the distance.



*I've been growing a beard.
I know my mom finds it weird.
But the last thing she said
before I started fighting this dread
"You should keep it. It looks nice."
So, I grow out my scraggly hair.
Into the empty mirror I stare.
I stroke it with a bristle comb.
Is this the time for my heart to roam?
Is a new period in life about to start?
Or am I just trying to be who she wants?*

Chapter 10

Nothing Really Ends



Tara attempted to skate in circles as countless people rolled past her in the roller rink. Mindmeld effortlessly learned to roller skate and began lapping her. He did jumps in the air and spun in circles before landing perfectly all while keeping his hands in his jacket pockets. Teen Demon used his tail as a third leg to help balance. Markie just hovered in circles.

Bright lights flashed across the roller rink as “Friday I’m In Love” by The Cure played in the background. Stupendous Man and Tinkerer giggled as they held hands skating together. They paused next to Tara who had just almost fallen to the ground.

“You okay, honey?” Tinkerer asked.

“Yep. Just takes me a bit to get used to. I don’t do this often,” Tara said with a faint smile.

“How has your healing process been going?” she asked.

“Good!” Tara said as she wobbled. She struggled to skate and talk simultaneously.

“Excellent! Have you had any problems with the suit?”

“Not recently!” Tara said. She began to lose her footing, but Stupendous Man caught her then reappeared next to Tinkerer in the blink of an eye.

“Superb! Don’t be afraid to take a seat if you feel like it. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone here!” Tinkerer said before taking off with Stupendous Man.

Tara attempted to tilt one leg horizontally to push off the ground with. She made a little progress, but still refused to let go of the rail on the wall. Mindmeld and Teen Demon slowed down next to her.

“Your skating skills are abysmal!” Teen Demon shouted over the music.

“Well, at least I won’t live long enough to see the sun implode and all life on Earth extinguish,” Tara said. Her heels burned from scraping against the interior of the cheap roller skates.

“Zinger!” Mindmeld shouted.

“Very funny. But I stopped here because I wanted to ask you something. Do you think we should tell the old man about what happened while he was gone?” Teen Demon asked.

“I thought Tinkerer had brought it up to him,” Tara said.

“No, not as far as I know,” Teen Demon said.

“We can talk to him about it. But let’s just enjoy the night! I’m sure everything is fine. Stupendous Man wouldn’t do something without having a good reason,” Mindmeld said.

“Consider the fact we have been attacked twice already! Something is not right here,” Teen Demon said.

“Do you question him?” Mindmeld asked as his brow furrowed.

“No! That is not what I am saying. It is just, is this not all a bit weird? How long until someone gets hurt?” Teen Demon asked.

“TD makes a good point. A lot of this is a little weird. We should ask him about this,” Tara said.

“Can we wait until the end of the night? Look how happy they are,” Mindmeld said.

Tara looked over to see Tinkerer kiss Stupendous Man on the cheek as they linked elbows while gliding across the wooden floor. The wind blew in their hair as they cruised past everyone else.

“Fine. We wait until after tonight,” Tara said.

CRASH! The wall to the roller rink crumpled and a figure stood in the dust.

“Where is Stupendous Man!”

“Yeah, I think we are going to have to delay asking them,” Teen Demon said.

His eyes were the first thing visible through the dust. Bright red lights pierced the veil and began scanning each person in the roller rink. A large metallic leg stepped out followed by a seven-foot-tall body.



He was a robot, but in the form of a man. It looked like he was never finished being built. Instead of a smooth surface, his body resembled that of a metallic skeleton. Jagged edges formed the ends of the metal that comprised his body.

“I’ve had enough fun sending people after you. Time for me to get my own revenge,” his voice boomed.

“Don’t worry, honey. I’ll handle this,” Stupendous Man whispered into Tinkerer’s ear. He kissed her on the forehead.

“I love you.”

“Wai--” Tinkerer was cut short as he blinked away and reappeared donning his suit. He floated in front of the villain.

“He’s actually going to fight this himself?” Mindmeld asked.

“I’ve had enough of people terrorizing my family because of me. I will let no harm come to Rosewood nor to those that I love.”

“I don’t think you know who I am,” the robot said as he sharpened his glaive against his leg plate.

“Someone liked nineties comics,” Tara said.

“You ever stop to wonder why a crazed woman and an army of ninjas found your home all in the span of a month? Did you stop to wonder what they all had in common?”

“They were villains that needed stopping. That’s all they had in common, just like you,” Stupendous Man said.

“Either he is a good liar, or you selectively transferred his memory,” the robot said as he looked over at Tinkerer.

KA-BOOM! Stupendous Man slammed into the robot, and they tumbled into the street. Tinkerer attempted to run out and stop them but was knocked back by the shockwave from their punches. No one could approach them. ***CRACK! BAM! POW!*** Stupendous Man slammed his fists against the robot. He did not make a dent.

“You ever wonder why people keep telling you things you can’t remember?”

Stupendous Man threw a punch forward and the robot evaded it.

“I will not let you talk me down from this fight!” Stupendous Man shouted.

“Oh, this wasn’t a fight. This was an execution. You can call me Mark One . . .”

Mark One jammed his glaive forward. It impaled Stupendous Man in the stomach. He froze at this unknown feeling. Never had something pierced his flesh. His fists unclenched and he looked down at his stomach to see a dark fluid dripping out of it. Mark One lifted the glaive into the air with Stupendous Man on the end of it.

“ . . . and let me introduce Rosewood to Mark Two!” Mark One said as Stupendous Man slid down the glaive. Mark One grabbed him by the head and legs. Stupendous Man’s skin stretched out as he screamed in agony.

Crunch!

His body tore in half. Sparks flew from his chest as wires hung out of his stomach. Mark One flung the two halves of his body forward. They slid to a stop in front of Tinkerer and the students.

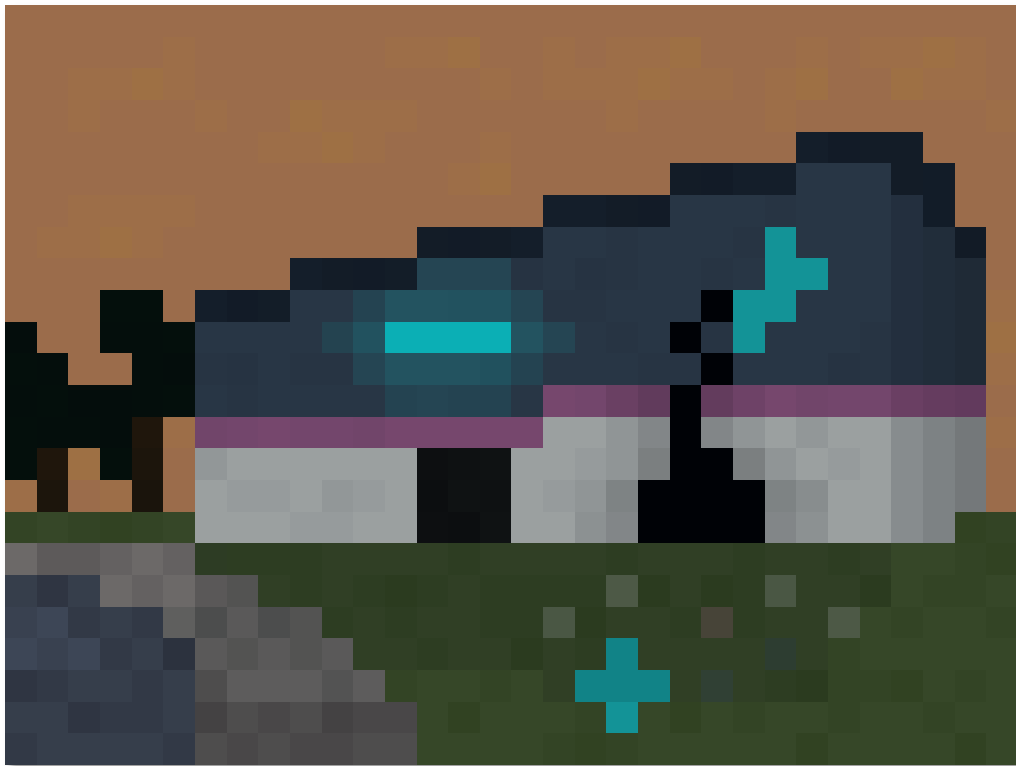
“ . . . dad?” Mindmeld said quietly.

Stupendous Man’s jaw opened and closed randomly as oil dripped from his ear. His peach coloring had been scraped off against the cement revealing a silver beneath his skin.

“I’ll . . . miss . . . you . . . all,” a voice box within the husk said. Stupendous Man’s eyes looked up at Tinkerer before the light in them flickered off.

Chapter 11

Why don't you get better?



“In the Best Case Scenario We’d Die at the Same Time” by My Name Is Ian played in a bar across the street from the roller rink. ***Crash!***

One man looked out the window to see the back of a robot. People gathered around and watched quietly as the robot remained still. ***Ka-Boom!***

The robot was pushed back by Stupendous Man, and they began fighting on the street.

“Hey, look! It’s Stupendous Man! He’s going to destroy this thing!” the man said.

“Go get him!” another man with a handlebar mustache said.

“Ten bucks the robot wins!” a woman in the back said.

“Pfft. No one is going to take you up on that,” the first man said.

“I was just messing! Of course, it’s a done deal,” the woman said.

“Oh, this wasn’t a fight. This was an execution. You can call me Mark One . . .”

“Holy shit! Did he just stab Stupendous Man!”

“Wait, no, that isn’t possible. Let me see!”

People gathered to the front of the bar to watch as Stupendous Man was frozen helpless. Mark One lifted him into the air.

“ . . . and let me introduce Rosewood to Mark Two!” *Crunch!*

“No . . .”

“That can’t be right. He can’t be fake. My dad knew him.”

“What is that thing?”

On the street, Mark One soaked in his glory.

“Past has a way of catching up to you. All it took was one clever robot with access to the internet and a few emails before people came knocking on your door.”

“What is he talking about?” Mindmeld asked Tinkerer.

You created him but married him. Did that make you closer to his mom or wife? A little bit of a gray area if you ask me,” Mark One said as he cleaned the oil from the tip of his blade.

Tinkerer remained quiet.

“How come I was the only one left out of the family? Hardly seems fair. Should have at least decommissioned me if you planned on leaving me in the doghouse,” Mark One shouted. He pointed the blade toward Tinkerer who knelt on the ground.

“How . . . could . . . you kill him?” Tinkerer said. Tears slowly rolled down her face as she embraced the husk of Stupendous Man’s chest.

“He’s been dead for years. About time you caught up.”

“Tinkerer . . . what do we do?” Mindmeld asked.

Tinkerer didn’t answer him as she stroked Stupendous Man’s synthetic hair.

“How are we supposed to beat this guy? He eviscerated Stupendous Man,” Teen Demon said.

“Same as anyone else. We do it together. Gather on me, team! Let’s tear this guy limb from limb!” Tara shouted. Her suit formed around her body and two blasters molded over her hands.

“The thought of this makes me giddy,” Mark One said as he readied his glaive.

“TD, get his glaive. I’ll go for the head. Mindmeld, see if you can disconnect any wires. Markie, hit him with everything you got. GO!” Tara shouted.

They ran forward as Mark One waited patiently. Teen Demon ran on all fours and leapt at him. Mark One swatted him to the side. Teen Demon rolled on the ground and came to a rapid stop against a chunk of concrete.

Tara fired at his head as Markie circled around him showering sparks of energy down. Mark One extended his glaive upward and knocked Markie to the ground. The glaive ripped a hole in her chest.

He kicked the ground and rubble pelted Tara. As she molded her blasters into a shield, Mark One ran forward and uppercut her. She flew into the air and fell back down. Her body toppled to a stop.

Mark One’s head slowly twisted ninety degrees. The metal scraped against itself until he locked eyes with Mindmeld attempting to sneak up on him. Mindmeld froze as the red light scanned him. ***Ka-Thunk!*** Mark One extended the butt of his glaive forward and Mindmeld flew backwards. He collided with the siding of the roller rink.

“Are you going to let me keep playing at the kid’s table?”

“No. I am about to remove you from existence,” Tinkerer said.

“How poetic.”

Mark One spun his glaive in the air then struck a pose.

“I’ll be damned if I’m just going to sit here and die. Please forgive me, John.”

Tinkerer turned on her backpack and pointed the absorption tube at Stupendous Man's quiet body. His nylon hair ruffled as the vacuum pulled on the corpse. Slowly, metal droplets floated into the air before his body began to dissipate. His head faded away, followed by his chest, and his lower torso shortly after. His empty uniform and hair remained on the ground. The suit was torn at the center of the S.

Tinker pulled the metal o of the backpack and pressed it against her body forming a suit of armor. **Klang!** She slammed her fists together and the gauntlets rang out.

Her feet moved forward as Tinkerer closed within range of the glaive. Mark One swung out and Tinkerer raised her fist in the air to block it. She grabbed the end of the glaive and ripped it backward out of his hands.

Tinkerer tossed it to the side. She ran forward and slammed her fists against his body.
Klang, Crack, Klang!

As the battle raged on, Mindmeld crawled over to Markie. He rolled her body back and forth, but Markie did not stir.

"Markie . . . get up . . . we need you," he said. His mouth tasted like salt. Mindmeld spit out blood from his mouth as he rolled Markie onto her stomach. He pulled a plate off her back and stared at the wiring. **Klang. Thunk. Pow!** He looked over to see Tinkerer and Mark One battle relentlessly. Never had such rage been apparent in Tinkerer's eyes.

He turned his head back to Markie and faintly said, "Okay . . . physics class had electricity in it . . . How hard could this be?"

Blood dripped out of a gash on the side of his stomach. The brush burn had cut through his jacket and past his skin.

"Pink . . . Dog . . . Bottle."

As he moved wires around his eyes grew heavier.

"Card . . . Ladder . . . Grass."

He dug through the mess of cords to find the one he needed.

"Phone . . . Can . . . Apples . . . Hair."

Mindmeld plugged a cord in and the panel on Markie's face lit up.

"Corruption in files. What has happened?" Markie asked.

"That big guy over there is killing us out here. I think you're our best bet at winning this. His name is Mark One and you're Mark Three," Mindmeld said as he rested his eyes.

Klang! Bam! Crack!

"I do not understand," Markie said.

"You . . . were Tinkerer's be--best creation. She wanted you to be the strongest . . . not Stupendous Man . . . and definitely not that guy. You're superior," Mindmeld said.

"Understood, stay safe here," Markie said as she took off towards Mark One.

Mark One grabbed Tinkerer by the throat and lifted her into the air.

"You are a coward who hid from the truth and a liar to those that held you closest!"

"And . . . I'd . . . do it all again!" she choked out before losing consciousness.

Mark One extended his glaive forward as two yellow wires hooked into the back of his head. He was stopped mid-motion before he could pierce Tinkerer's stomach.

"Superior is defined as higher in rank, status, or quality," Markie said.

The two wires glowed brightly as Mark One groaned and leaned against the ground. He let go of Tinkerer and she fell out of his grasp. Electricity crackled across the wire from Markie into Mark One's head.

Mark One's head creaked as it rotated one degree at a time until he faced Markie behind him. His red eyes locked sight with Markie's cracked visor.

"Hey, sister." Mark One said. ***Twack!*** His arm extended and crunched around Markie's head. Red sparks flew out from his hand as it hissed against her face plate.

Markie's speaker screeched out in agony. High pitches were cut off by deep tones as crimson electricity cast over her circuit boards.

Teen Demon got up and looked over to see Markie shouting out.

"MOM . . . SOMEONE . . . HELP ME!"

Teen Demon ran at Mark One. He swung his sword forward. It clinked off Mark One's metal panels. Without turning around, Mark One grabbed Teen Demon by the head with his free hand. Teen Demon squirmed to no avail. Markie continued screaming as her body shook violently. Crimson electricity bounced across it. Her arms shook violently enough to loosen the screws that held them in, and they popped off her.

"Do not fret, Markie. I will get--" ***POP!*** Mark One crushed Teen Demon's head in his hands. Green blood splattered across Markie's faceplate.

"T . . . D . . . ARGHHHHH--Take me home tonight**brrrr**Kenny's Top Hits . . . There is a house in . . . Seventies on Seven . . . The war is over . . . Coffee Shop Mix . . . But I know we'll meet again some summer day."

"We'll Meet Again" by Vera Lynn played quietly from Markie's speakers. Mark One let go of her. **Thunk.** Her body fell to the ground.

"Stop killing them!" Tara shouted as she stood back up.

"Was fine for the man I was created after to leave people to die, so I think I can choose to be a little more active in the process. I don't see why I shouldn't follow in his legacy," Mark One said as he retrieved his weapon.

He approached her then slammed his glaive down repeatedly. Tara stepped back as her suit formed a shield around her arms.

He shouted as he continued pounding on the shield, **"Oh, have I relished the chance to kill you. THUNK! You're pathetic. THUNK! You ran from your relationship when it got tough! THUNK! That's what people do. They leave when it gets tough. THUNK!"**

Don't let him get in your head. We will not win if I must take over.

"Doing my best," Tara mumbled.

Each hit landed with such force that pieces of Tara's shield chipped off. To reform the shield, material was pulled first from her helmet, but when that wasn't enough, the suit pulled away from her arms and legs.

"I don't have to explain myself to you of all people," Tara said as she held her shield up high. The cement on the ground dug into her bare feet. Her knuckles whitened as they gripped the handles. Sweat mixed with blood trickled down her forehead.

"You think your boyfriend changed at college? He didn't change at all. He only changed once he knew how little you thought of him!"

Tara's thruster activated and she rocketed backward.

"You're just trying to get in my head!" she shouted as she floated in the air above.

"I don't need to do that. You get in your own head if you have even just a minute to yourself."

He paused to let that soak in before saying, **"Were you hoping he would come crawling back to you so you could whip him into whatever shape you desired?"**

“That was never what I meant to do. I--” Mark One yanked his glaive forward and impaled Tara in the leg. He whipped it toward the ground, and she flew off it. **KA-THUNK!** Her body collided with the cement.

“What’s worse? Intentionally manipulating someone or having such little understanding of yourself that you do it anyway!”

“I never, ever did any of it to hurt him. I wasn’t manipulating.”

Tara’s jetpack activated again, and she flew backward before his glaive could strike the ground. The engine sputtered as she tumbled behind a pile of rubble.

“I know what you asked from him. If he really loved you, he would have been there for you,” Mark One shouted out.

Tara looked down at her leg. The suit slowly covered over her wound.

“You constantly lean on others. Did you ever consider they just help you, so they don’t risk you attacking them when the suit takes over? Do they actually care about you? What are you going to do without them here now?”

He wants you to doubt yourself. Don’t let him get to you.

“I am quite aware of that,” Tara muttered.

CRACK! The glaive pierced through the rubble and protruded next to Tara’s head.

“I know how long it took Arthur to move on from you. Care to know?” Mark One prodded.

“I’ve been told we’re all one of a kind, so my best guess is he never got over me. Besides, it probably wouldn’t be good for my healing process anyways!” Tara shouted over the broken cement.

“Three days.”

“Yep, that was not helpful.”

“As much as you tried, he hates you now. You were replaceable, unvalued, and forgettable.”

She knew this was a lie, but her eyes burned anyways, and she didn’t know if it was dust in the air or emotion causing it. She shook her hands nervously, fanning air towards her face. Tara blinked and the world grew quiet. She no longer heard the marching of Mark One. She blinked again and everything turned a hue of white briefly.

Tara, stick with me . . .

Her throat began to close, and her breaths became erratic. Tara held her eyes closed trying to shake the thoughts away, but it was too late, the precariously built dam had broken.

When she opened her eyes, she was looking over a room lit only by fairy lights. The musty smell from the college dorm room carpeting wafted into her nose. Arthur followed a woman into it. This time, Tara was able to get a look at her as she watched from above. Arthur pushed the woman against the wall and began to kiss her neck. He delicately moved his mouth across her covering every inch of her skin. Tara took this moment to get a closer look at the woman who shivered as she tilted her head to the side so Arthur could reach more of it.

Tara didn't know the woman. They shared the same hair color and skin complexion. The woman rubbed her hands through Arthur's hair as he kissed her.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Sammy?" Arthur whispered into her ear.

"I'm sure," she said back.

Arthur grabbed her shirt and pulled it off as he moved his mouth down her body. Tara watched in horror as Sammy lifted off Arthur's shirt. They pushed against each other as they continued to kiss. Their skin rubbed against each other as they vigorously tried to increase their amount of contact.

Tara wondered who this woman was as she moved closer and looked into the woman's eyes. They shared the same eye color. Samantha shared every physical characteristic with herself. But this woman was cooler than her. She did the same things as Arthur, accepted him for who he was, and was physically present for him.

Arthur picked up Samantha and dropped her onto the bed. He laid over top of her and whispered into her ear. He was with someone better than herself, and Tara could never hope to fulfill him in the same ways. She was beyond speechless as she watched quietly. It was as if her eyes were pinned open and she was forced to watch the repercussions of her own actions.

He wasn't mourning her, or thinking about her, or even sad in the slightest. Tara had fallen victim to unutilized synapses disintegrating over time, or maybe . . . she just wasn't worth remembering. Even worse, Arthur was with this woman because Tara had decided to let him go.

In the physical world, Mark One approached the rubble and Tara watched him move forward.

"Like I said. You get in your own head."

Tara listened to the sounds Arthur made as she collapsed in the corner. Mark One's voice echoed in the room, but it did not phase Tara. She didn't care what was happening outside.

"J'avais dessiné

Sur le sable

Son doux visage

Qui me souriait

Puis il a plu

Sur cette plage

Dans cet orage

Elle a disparu"

Music grew louder over the sounds of Arthur.

Mark One stared down at Tara and tilted his head to the side as he attempted to listen. Music played quietly over the suit's speakers.

"Et j'ai crié, crié

Aline!

Pour qu'elle revienne

Et j'ai pleuré, pleuré

Oh! J'avais trop de peine"

"There will be pink skies again . . . There will be pink skies again. Don't lose yourself, Tara. Not now. People are counting on you," she said quietly as the bed rocked next to her. She chose to ignore the sounds around her and listened closer to the music.

Schink! Mark One retrieved his glaive.

"Je me suis assis

Auprès de son âme

Mais la belle dame

S'était enfuie

Et je l'ai cherchée

Sans plus y croire

Et sans un espoir

Pour me guider"

Tara hummed quietly to herself, and light began to shine into the dim room. Mark One raised his glaive into the air. The sounds of their moans grew quiet as the crackle of burning wood reentered her perception.

A spark of courage ignited in her soul. The gears that had been stuck in place for weeks finally moved once more. The late nights spent questioning had finally led to an answer. Countless days filled with endless hours of self-doubt finally aligned to form a conclusion.

“It’s your life. Take control of it!” she shouted as the blade fell down. Her suit activated and she boosted to the side. **CRACK!** The ground where she once stood shattered into pieces.

“Your facade couldn’t even fool your friends and it doesn’t fool me. You deserve those thoughts in your head. People who leave others deserve punishment whether it was Stupendous Man leaving a city to die or you leaving your ex. You’re all the same. Humans only think of themselves.”

“I am tired of your manipulative shit! Life is never that black and white. We both made mistakes. We both did thoughtful things. Some days were good. Some days were bad. Maybe Arthur is going to move on quickly and he’ll date someone that is better than me in some ways, but there’s other things he’ll never find in someone else. I was right when I said I’m irreplaceable.

For as long as someone else dictates your emotions you will never have a fulfilling day. Quite frankly, I can’t tell if you have mommy issues or *mommy* issues. You more mad mom wasn’t present in your life or is it the fact some other guy took what should have been your place?

Maybe Arthur doesn’t like me anymore, but I like me and that’s enough. The Emerald Earwig is going to kick your ass! Rip him apart, suit!”

Upon the existence of the very thought, her suit listened and activated All Out Mode.

It’s about time!

The anklet on Tara’s ankle glowed brightly as it hummed. **Click.** It pierced into her skin and absorbed the iron in her blood. Green metal formed a cocoon around her. **Skree!** The cocoon screeched. Mark One slammed his glaive down in an attempt to break it. His weapon deflected off it. Suddenly, the cocoon cracked open.

Tara burst out of it and flew into the air. Her suit had morphed into the likes of a moth. Large metallic wings flapped up and down keeping her airborne. Her fingers had sharp,

glistening claws at the end of them. The helmet to the suit was streamlined with two silver spots over her eyes. Dozens of glowing circles lined the front of her suit. Each contained energy crackling across the surface waiting to be let loose.

She flew up and let loose a burst of energy. Electrons flowed through the air in a continuous geyser bursting against Mark One. He spun his glaive cutting off the stream before they could crash into his armor. Tara's wings closed in, and she dove forward. She ripped the glaive from his hands and threw it downward. The glaive pierced through the ground and sunk into the earth far beyond reach.

"Of course, I wanted him to be the one! I can't even tell you how many different scenarios I imagined us in together someday!"

Her legs molded into one united mass. She spiraled through the air and hammered it into Mark One's jaw. ***KA-BOOM!*** Mark One staggered backwards.

"I knew what I wanted our living room to look like, I knew what kind of dog we would get, I saw us taking our kid to school together on the first day. I had thought about us being together till the end for over seven hundred days of my life!" Tara shouted.

Her arms molded into pincers. She dove into Mark One and began rapidly stabbing him. He reached his arm forward and attempted to pry her off. Tara grabbed his arm and ripped it off effortlessly.

The pincers reclined and her claws reformed. She slashed at his other arm, and it fell to the ground. Tara pushed off him and flew up in the air. Her wings extended before closing back in and she dove down.

Tara grabbed his legs as she flew past him. A gust of air blew by as she took off with him into the air. She spun around and threw him as hard as she could into the ground. Every angry thought she ever had was channeled into one motion as she hurled him downward. His legs ripped off in her hands as his torso fell to the ground.

Ka-Thunk! Mark One sat helpless on the cement. ***WHOOSH!*** Tara dove down and flew through his chest crashing into the ground. The red lights faded as she stepped backward. The prongs retracted back into the anklet and her armor rescinded from her skin.

Mark One sat quiet on the ground. Electricity had stopped flowing through his wires and bouncing across his circuits.

Tara fell to the ground from exhaustion. Her eyes closed as she looked up at the sky to see the clouds. *pitpatpitpatPitPatPitPat*. Rain began to fall as she rested. The water washed over everyone, cleaning blood from their faces and smothering the fires from the battle.

A ball pushed out from Teen Demon's neck. It slowly molded and reformed itself until it resembled a face. His closed eyes opened, and he leapt back up into the air. He looked around to see everyone on the ground. He ran over to Tara and slid to a stop kicking up a puddle of murky water.

He shook her as he said, "You are not dead, right? Big evil robot is gone, and you can stop playing dead!"

Tara groaned as she opened her eyes again.

"I could go for some peas."

"What? I mean sure, that could be arranged," Teen Demon said as he picked her up. Once she was standing, he ran over to Mindmeld. Tara hobbled over to Tinkerer. She looked down to see Tinkerer laying on the ground.

Tara shook her quietly and Tinkerer slowly opened her eyes.

She reached her arm out and said, "It's time to move on."

Chapter 12

May Flowers



Mindmeld and Tara dug a hole in the graveyard as crickets chirped around them.

He paused and leaned his shovel against the side of the hole then said, "So, my father figure wasn't real?"

"I guess so . . ." Tara said as she continued to dig.

"That's kinda messed up," Mindmeld said with a smile.

"I'd say so. I'm surprised you are taking this all so well. I know you really looked up to him," Tara said as she still focused on removing dirt from the ground.

"One of the benefits to not having a strong sense of self. It's hard to miss someone that meant a lot to you when you can't even know who *you* are," Mindmeld said as he rubbed his nose.

Tara stopped digging and set her shovel to the side. She could feel he was hiding something.

"I'm serious. Are you okay?"

"I . . . I wouldn't know how to mourn this even if I was sure I felt sad. Besides, we won," Mindmeld said.

"God knows you've been here to listen to me so know I will listen to you if you ever need to talk about this. Although, you should be aware that we barely won that," Tara said as she sat on the grass. Her feet rested at the bottom of the hole.

"What do you mean?" Mindmeld asked as he sat down next to her.

"I had an anxiety attack while we were fighting. At least, that's what I think they are."

"Does that happen often?" Mindmeld asked.

"Not often. It's only when I let myself start thinking about him," Tara said. She stared blankly forward. She was too tired from digging to cry.

"If you don't mind me asking. What about him makes you get these attacks?"

"It's just me thinking about what he could be doing right now. I know they aren't realistic. I don't know why I let myself think about that sort of thing. Every time it leads to me shutting down, but I guess I trick myself into thinking about it because I feel confronting these thoughts would help me work through them, but I just get stuck in them."

Mindmeld put his arm around Tara's shoulder and leaned against her making sure to only touch her shirt.

"I'm sorry to hear that. That sounds really difficult," he said.

“And you know, even after all that has happened, I still miss him,” she said.

“It would only make sense. He was a big part of your life and from how it sounds, was a pretty decent person too.”

“Yeah, he was pretty decent. When I was a little girl, I always heard that most relationships from high school don’t last. I always felt I was going to be the one that made it.”

“Don’t we all,” he said.

“I’m not sure why I did. I think it’s because my grandparents met in high school and were married until they died. I always thought I’d be like them. I guess I’m just part of that statistic now.”

“Don’t give those numbers power. The fact your relationship didn’t work is not representative of anyone’s character. You guys were just going different directions.”

There was a brief pause. Tara took a moment to soak in the sound of the cicadas. She listened for the trees brushing across one another and breathed in the cool night air.

“I guess we are just two messed up people,” she said.

“You, my friend, are not messed up,” Mindmeld said.

“Aren’t I? First off, we are sitting in a cemetery talking. Secondly, how come I’m not getting better? I broke up with my boyfriend and here I am months later, and I still can’t stop thinking about him.”

“One, I like the cemetery. Two, getting better from loss isn’t some journey where you get better every day. That’s just what people like to think so they can make it seem more manageable.

One of the people whose memories I copied had a nice way of putting it. Imagine there’s a box with a button on one of its walls. You stick a ball in there that is as big as the box, so the button is always being pushed down. Whenever that button is being pushed down you feel sad.

People would like to think you just get rid of that ball eventually, but what really happens is every single day a little bit of air slips out of the ball. One day it stops hitting the button all the time, but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t roll into the button. As you move on farther and farther the ball will hit the button less and less, but that doesn’t mean it won’t.”

“Was that guy a poet?” Tara asked.

“No, he was an engineer,” Mindmeld said.

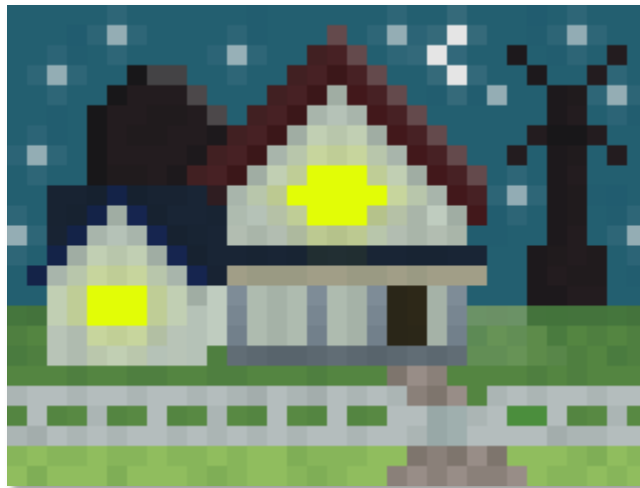
Tara nodded her head slowly as she processed that.

“I guess I just don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. Should I sit around and wait for the chance he changes, or should I try and move on?”

“You can’t just wait around for him, especially because him changing is an if not a when. You need to live your life because there might be someone even better just around the corner. I think it’s time to learn how to love someone else. I know that is easier said than done,” Mindmeld said.

“No kidding,” Tara said as she laughed at the daunting task laid out in front of her.

“Good thing you got a pretty cool family to help you out,” Mindmeld said as he stood back up and grabbed his shovel.



Meanwhile, Teen Demon sat at the kitchen table with Tinkerer. She quietly poured molded metal onto Markie’s back in an attempt to fix her.

To break the silence, Teen Demon said, “So, why do we always try to eat with people after we beat them up?”

“Because it’s rare we actually fight a true villain. Most of these people are just lost and need a shoulder to lean on. John taught me that,” Tinkerer said without looking up.

“What was he like?”

“Well, he ate food. He was so compassionate, almost to a fault. He would sacrifice anything for his town and the people he cared about. That’s why he didn’t help in Tokyo. His friends weren’t there.”

“What did him in?” Teen Demon asked.

“Cancer. It’s why we never got to have kids.”

“I am sorry,” Teen Demon said.

“It’s all done now.”

Teen Demon got up and investigated the fridge. He couldn’t find anything to eat, but he made sure to open each drawer one at a time. As he did this, both the door to the freezer and the cooler section were left open. Once he saw nothing, he went over to the radio that hung beneath the cabinet and turned it on. “Motel 6” by River Whyless played quietly through the old speaker.

“You don’t have to stick around while I do this, TD. You also don’t have to pretend like this is normal. I know I broke all of your trust,” Tinkerer said as she connected a wire in Markie.

“I forgive you. You both gave me a second chance. It is only fair that I do the same. We fought a bee monster the other week and I think I can adjust to this too,” Teen Demon said as he sat back down in the old, wooden chair.

The large clock ticked quietly in the background.

“I . . . just missed him so much,” Tinkerer said as she put her head into her hands.

“I know . . . I know.”

“It’s the little things you miss the most. I miss the way his chest would rise and fall as he slept. I miss the way I could tell it was him walking in the house based on his footsteps. I miss his eyes. They were so beautiful. Those were the kind of things I couldn’t recreate in the robot.

I’m sorry this all got so out of hand. I tried turning him off for a while to see if it took some heat off us, but after Blademaster attacked I realized it was too late.”

“You do not have to explain any of this. You were mourning and you dealt with it the only way you knew how,” Teen Demon said.

Mindmeld read from his diary in the graveyard, “And so, the empty ravine sits. It thinks about what it once was before the trickle of water started. Lush with flora and fauna bouncing about it used to be happy . . . Actually, I should stick to poetry. The more words I use the greater chance I will confuse the message.”

“Makes sense to me,” Tara said.

“Would you like to hear this new poem I’m working on?” Mindmeld asked.

“Sure!”

Mindmeld cleared his throat then began to read from his diary.

*The tall peak spends each night sad
for he looks down at the ravine.
They used to be the same
but the world had different plans.
The peak had thought
that a glacier would take away what he sought.
Something exciting and untold
although most importantly outside of his control.
Yet a stream of water had been his undoing,
so quiet and unassuming.
He watched it trickle by
and couldn't stop it even if he tried.
Sediment was slowly washed away
as the earth cut deeper every day.
The ground next to him had changed
its very being rearranged.
And although he keeps himself busy with rhymes
what he really does is reflect on old times.
Their bond shown through plants
and the distaste for those pesky ants.
So, as the moon makes its nightly round
the peak mourns what it fears can't be refound.
His tears trickle down
down
down
and the stream grows ever larger.
For he knows they are made of the same soil.*

Mindmeld closed his journal and looked to Tara.

“Do you think I rely on rhymes too much?”

“I think they’re cute.”

“See! That’s what I think too!” Mindmeld said excitedly.

They got up and picked up a tombstone that had been lying next to them. Together, they propped it up over the hole.

“The town deserves closure,” Mindmeld said.

“I think we all could use some,” Tara said.

“Want to head back?”

Tara checked her phone to see the time. When she turned it on, she was greeted by her new lock screen. It was her and everyone else together at the roller rink. While she looked nervous in the picture because of her skates, this image still held a place in her heart.

“Probably a good idea to get home. See you back there,” Tara said.

Mindmeld frowned.

“Fine. I guess I will give you a ride,” Tara said facetiously.

They walked out of the graveyard passing Mark Harold, Don Moench, and the bees before taking off in the distance. A new tombstone stood tall in the graveyard. Mindmeld would return to it in the future to tell his stories, but not because of someone else's memories in his head. This would be the first tombstone he would visit for himself.

Here lies Stupendous Man.

Hero to Rosewood.

Husband, Father, and Protector.