

As the city bus hissed to a stop, and wearily allowed its doors to be opened, the four exited with roughly the opposite expression as they had for their previous ride.

**"I think I'll stick to the Party Wagon."**

**"That's because Seth's awesome, and knows how to ride in style."**

**"Some of us can't afford the Party Wagon, thank you."**

**"Well, some of us are related to the driver, and can insist."** Cora waggled her eyebrows at no one in particular.

Westbourne Holdings certainly looked like a giant obelisk from the outside. Perhaps all skyscrapers did, when they reached a certain size. The building gave off a general feeling that you should probably be on with your business, and if you had to ask what your business was, it probably wasn't with Westbourne.

The sidewalks became two shades cleaner when entering the personal space of the tower, and those who walked aside it seemed to find a spring in their step, a slight urgency that never quite connected in their brains. A pigeon landed calmly, stepped across the divide, and hastily realized it had some other piece of sidewalk to haunt.

**"It's more elegant than the Downtown one, at least. Look, they've got little baby obelisks at the corners of the lot."**

**"What, holding it down?"**

**"Mmm..."** Cora was never really a metaphor, but she would try for Basti's sake. **"Like a construction fence. The little poles, that the nets wrap around to keep people out."**

**"Ahhh. Yeah, I see it."**

**"Well if you're done gawking, let's head on in?"**

They walked up the steps, shoes clicking on marble and noses breathing air that was slightly off from the rest of the town. Marion was reminded of airports, though perhaps not quite as filtered. Pressurized, certainly.

A moderately sized plaque, wide but not tall, sat on a raised plateau around the front door. Dark marble, in contrast to the usual grey glistening that declared "We're part of the business district!" to anyone who couldn't afford marble walkways.

**"Arthur and Wendy... this is the thing Monty was reading in the elevator."**

**"From underground?"**

Bastian shrugged. **"Maybe it's in both places?"**

**"More importantly, how are we getting in? I'd rather not try and explain this to security."**

Cora shrugged. **"Not our fault school was canceled."**

**"It kinda was."**

**"You know what I mean."**

Bastian's backpack vibrated and jiggled, but he refused to acknowledge this. **"Still, Marion's right, that would be awkward."**

**"Just stay close to me."**

**"Travis?"**

**"Close. I'll get us through."**

They gave each other looks, but this sounded at least 50% more of a plan than any of the others had. Towards the door they walked, Marion almost reaching out to open it. But the space

melted away, the boundaries between hither and thither picked up and ducked under, until they were walking in the back of a very ornate elevator lobby.

**“Wh... what?”**

**“Just keep walking. It’s the one in the back, he said.”**

One elevator did seem suspiciously... alone in back, as they walked through three rows of doors to reach it. None of them were in the mood to look back, lest the guards of hades notice their disregard.

Door open, file in, door close. A massive exhale for the lot.

**“What was that?”**

**“We went through security.”**

**“We definitely did not.”**

**“Ah, but we did. We went to the entrance of security, came out the other side, and maybe kinda sorta neglected to stay in the parts in the middle.”**

**“And that works?”**

Travis slumped against the wall, marveling at how every surface was mirrored. He could see infinite Travises, and the view concerned him greatly. **“We’re here, aren’t we? I figured if the place was magical enough, we could do it.”**

**“You’ve been practicing.”**

He gleamed, for once. **“I’ve been practicing!”**

Bastian’s backpack bounced and shook, and this time he had little choice but to let Monty out, lest the zipper on this one break too. **“Gwaaaahhh! Stuff in there.”**

**“Yes, well, I think you’re going Back in there soon enough, Monty.”**

**“What?! Why.”**

Marion pushed the top button, Floor number 20, before rounding on the bunny. **“Because we were having a very good interrogation until you started shouting.”**

**“That! I... he was skewing things. Obfuscating!”**

**“And we could have just kept talking to him, and gotten to the bottom of it. You’re always in a rush.”**

**“Speed is useful!”**

**“Not... not when talking.”** Marion frowned, pondering. **“How long has it been since you’ve talked to people, Monty?”**

**“Today.”**

**“Besides Today, and besides your friends. Just like... another person, talked to them.”**

The bunny’s head cocked a little, eyes staring off into space, and then staring far, far beyond. Seeing things they could not, seeing far into the past, and still not finding an answer.

**“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”**

**“Guarding the treehouse portal is important!”**

**“Doesn’t mean your social skills aren’t. When we get back, I’m teaching you how to be polite.”**

**“I-!”** Monty’s ears flapped up and down, but found no actual response that would save her.

**“Mrgrgr.”**

**“Good. It’s settled.”**

**"I think that's the first time Monty's lost an argument."**

**"It's the first time she's not been allowed to shout people down. Being loud isn't winning an argument. It just makes people not want to talk to you."**

Monty grumbled, and slid back down in the backpack. Yes. Thank you, we get it.

The elevator went ding, loudly and proudly. Outside was a circular room, dark marble like the rest, but with a 4 foot tall pedestal in the middle, facing a large metal blast door. Air flowed through the room, despite no obvious vents, or dust of any kind.

**"Someone spends way too much time cleaning."**

**"What's this...?"** Marion looked down at the pedestal, a flat facing at 45 degrees to them all. The letters **CREATI** were emblazoned around a circular relief, atop a wide nameplate that merely read **1+**. **"It doesn't look electronic."**

**"It's not!"** Monty peeked over Bastian's shoulder. **"That's a magic lock."**

**"Oh yeah, Fox said the place was locked."**

**"Also said it wouldn't be a problem for us."**

**"Again, it's not. This just tells you what sort of magic you're good for. Various types, personalities, outlooks on life."**

Cora flicked out Isaac's business card. **"So when it says Arbiter of Chains..."**

**"That's an R! Requiem type, focused on knowledge and memories. Arbiter means he's good at comparing memories, ideas, judging value."**

**"And we'd qualify?"**

**"Sure. Have a handprint."**

Marion reached out, placing her hand on the pedestal, watching as the C lit up with blazing gold light. The 1+ down below lit up green, and a small green ENTER shone on the right of the nameplate.

**"Like so. 1+ Just means you'd need to have any one of the types, or more."**

**"So anyone past this door..."**

**"Is magical, yes. Or was let in by someone who was."**

**"What's a C?"**

**"Catalysts! Creators. You're good at making things happen, inspiring change."**

Cora gave the noogie, which Marion struggled to escape. **"Troublemaker."**

**"No, that's me!"** Monty wiggled Bastian over, and poked the pedestal. T lit up, as well as the outside circle entirely. **"A trickster, someone good at causing trouble and doing the unexpected."**

**"The circle lit up too."**

**"I'm a good Observer! I seeeee things."**

Travis sighed. **"Yes yes, you're very good at your whatever, Monty."** He poked it, curiosity getting the better of him, as E lit up.

**"Esper! Spirit. You're all about the experience, about doing things. It's not about you, it's about what you can be a part of."**

**"...sounds about right."**

Cora scored an I and an E, while Bastian popped up an A. **"Inspiration, imagination, you make things!"**

**"I do."**

**"And Bastian is an Aspirant. Aspires to do great things, be the best he can be."**

**"You should too."**

**"Sometimes you're a little too driven, Bastian."**

He frowned, mumbling and grumbling **"...no such thing."**

**"Anyway, as you can see, we're all qualified to go in."**

**"Great, Monty! Now, back in the bag."**

**"What? Nooooo!"**

**"Back."      "In"      "The"      "Bag."**

Monty wailed and protested, but in the end was zipped up tight. **"This is someone we really, really want to be nice to."**

A muffled cry of **"Are you saying I'm not nice?!"**

**"We're saying you're loud. No manners."**

**"None."**

**"Less than me, dude."** Cora patted the backpack gently. **"You get a gold star for that."**

**"...yay."**

**"So quiet, and just listen for once. It's a good learning experience."**

Marion half expected Monty to complain, but it seemed that the rabbit did, in fact, become quiet as commanded. Peculiar, but not without gratitude. Pleased, she placed her hand on the pedestal once more, and booped the ENTER button when it appeared.

The far door hissed, splitting open in the middle, and parting to reveal a long circular hallway. A raised metal gantry walked over the rounded space, and the whole of it was gently lit up from behind.

**"Neat."**

**"Let's just go. Before someone else comes in."**

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The far door opened automatically, without such pomp and circumstance. The inside was slightly less ornate, though still immaculately clean. The secretary's desk was allowed to be a solid color instead of speckled sparkles, and a bulletin board showed various times and dates for people to remember.

She started, curled hair wobbling as the middle aged woman shot up from her seat. **"W- you can't be here!"**

A dim piano key played from overhead, followed by a bored, smooth voice coming over the intercom. **"It's alright Moira, they're here to see me."**

**"I, um... right, sir."** She sat back down, mumbling about No Soliciting and No Appointments Without Authorization. Clicking the little button, large oak double doors parted on the far side of the room, one of them sliding open a crack. **"He'll see you. I guess."**

**"Thank you."** Marion nodded, though this did little to assure the secretary that random children wandering into the CEO's office was allowed.

The office in question was, to put it mildly, spacious. A massive square room, easily the size of half the floor, it stretched over twenty feet to the ceiling, and bore unblemished window views on both left and right. Something was... wrong about the corners of the room, though Marion couldn't quite figure out what. It was certainly larger on the inside than it should have been, and she found herself hoping that this was still 20 stories above the town, and not somehow taken them deep into Downtown when they weren't looking.

Few features actually took up space. A bookshelf on the back wall, and another two over in the right. A sitting area in the corner, larger than Travis' entire living room, low plastic table filled with binders and files. The far back had a wide mahogany desk, atop which two computer screens sat at odds with each other. Behind the desk was a tall, blond man, turning only slightly to face them out of the corner of his eye. If anything, he seemed less ornate than the room around him; coat of fleece and t-shirt with a tie printed on it, as if this really counted. Yet he held himself with utter, precise control, and there was nothing on his desk that would ever be allowed the heinous crime of being out of place.

**"Welcome. I am Isaac, though you knew that."**

**"And... you know who we are, apparently."**

**"Impersonally."** He placed a hand on his desk, drawing a mug of coffee from it, though they were reasonably sure the mug hadn't actually *been* there until he wanted it. **"Marion Walters, Travis Burmason, Cora Dyscango, and Bastian Fen."** Eyes closed, then opened again.

**"Trivia aside, you are here to be angry at me, yes?"**

Bastian crossed his arms, coming slightly into the room, though at a loss for where exactly to stand. Or sit, really. **"We'd like an explanation, if that's alright."**

**"It is."** Isaac turned to face them for the first time, though he didn't seem to be looking at any one of them in particular. **"Dr. Larres worked in our employ until 8 months ago, when a lab accident caused unfortunate magical damage to his person. Our attempts at rehabilitation appear to have ended in failure."** He sighed. **"Unfortunate, though I would have different people yelling at me if we didn't try."**

**"He barely survived."**

**"He barely survived the first time. When someone is in hospice, you do not fear that they will die. You fear that they will not be able to live."** The coffee went back onto the desk, but it remained visible. **"Dr. Larres gained eight extra months of life in our reality. Less than he wanted, but more than we hoped."**

**"You let him go."**

**"I did, yes."** Eyes closed, and he tapped a few buttons at his computer, but nothing seemed to come of it. **"Sad, but necessary."**

Travis made a noise, tapping his foot. It echoed, but the echo died far earlier than it should have. **"You caused him to fall in the first place."**

**"Perhaps."** Eyes opened, staring straight into Travis', as if to burn a hole in them. **"In that manner, people can be said to be responsible for countless deaths. Unintended, or perhaps the better option of many undesirable ones."**

**"There is a giant \*\*\*\*ing drill stabbing into the Dreamlands. That's *perhaps*?"**

**“Ah. I see the misunderstanding.”**

**“Misunderstanding?”** Bastian’s backpack rumbled, and Isaac’s eyes darted towards it. Bastian watched, and stood perfectly, starkly still, at least until Isaac lost interest. **“This’ll be good.”**

**“No, it won’t, but you should hear it anyway. Tell me, Marion. What does it mean for someone to fall?”**

Oh no, pop quiz. We just LEFT school. Punched a hole in it and everything, thanks. **“To slip through cracks in reality. Too conceptual, or missing important concepts entirely, that the whole person sinks down to a level where they make sense. Like a stone that is too dense to float.”**

**“Or in this case, a boat with a hole in it, yes.”** Isaac tapped at his computer again, and this time the room darkened. The left window became black, and then the dismal grey of an undecided computer screen. **“And you are worried about the hole, yes?”**

**“It is rather impressive.”**

**“And yet... were I to have never been here. For Westborne to not operate, for no magical connection to be forged between the Sovereign City of Reality, and the Downtown of the Dreamlands... people would still fall.”**

**“What.”**

**“It has happened before I came here, and will continue happening after I am gone. More importantly...”** He clicked, and a huge graphic flared on the windows. A 2-d city, black and grey, resting at the top of a multi-layered cone. Down a layer, another city, mirrored, flipped upside down. Down another, various circles and nodes, lines charted beneath them, a map of the dreamlands. **“These holes do not happen in isolation. When someone falls out of reality, they leave a hole behind. That person used to exist, and reality tries hard to fill in the crack. But every fall, every slip, the border grows thinner and thinner. As you poke holes in a board, eventually it stops being a board with holes, and simply becomes sawdust to fall apart.”**

They stared, watching as numbers flashed on the side, increasingly red and stark.

#### **DECAY ESTIMATES**

Daily Fall - **42 Years**

Relational Fall - **63 Years**

Total Collapse - **81.9 Years**

Decay Spread - **0.2%** per mile<sup>2</sup> per year

Minimum Safe Distance - **N/A**

**“This... is...”** Marion had a hand over her mouth, while Bastian’s fist clenched. Cora cocked her head sideways, but the expression didn’t change.

**“A rather worst-case analysis, but yes. In case you’re wondering, without the “drill”, as you so call it, the total collapse time would be closer to 85.2 years. Did we contribute? Certainly. Would stopping make things better? Absolutely not.”**

**“Then why?”**

Isaac stepped forward, walking around the front of his desk. **“Because I do not believe in doing nothing? Every operation, every work of our researchers, all of it is made so that we might Understand the Dreamlands. I will not give the world off to later people that it might fall into catastrophe when I can Do Something About It.”** He frowned, but not at



them. **“Will we prevent all of Sovereign, and eventually Earth, from falling into the Dreamlands? Perhaps. But even if we do not, we will be Ready. Humanity will learn from magic, understand it, and have solutions to deal with even the worst case scenario.”**

**“And... to that end. You would let it continue.”**

**“I have no choice. If they do not fall today, they will fall eventually. I would rather we lose people building a net, wings to fly that we might never fall again, than to fear that loss and hide in shame.”**

Marion took a step, standing more firmly. **“And... what does that mean about us?”**

**“You?”** Isaac sipped more coffee, placing it back down after a time. **“You have missed enough school for now, haven’t you?”**

**“That...!”**

**“Rest assured, I am pleased with your... exploits. Talent, willingness to improve. I will not interfere if you insist on continuing to *play hero*.”** He almost spat the last bit, but that would be a waste of good coffee. **“When you have graduated, we can speak more about proper employment. I dare say there will be no trouble at all.”**

**“You’re just letting us go.”**

**“You are young. Live your lives in this reality first.”** Isaac sighed. **“I think we’ve seen too much of what happens to those who don’t.”**

The air became awkward, feet crossed gingerly. Well then! **“And if we don’t?”**

**“Why don’t you ask *Montgomery* how that turns out. I’m sure he could tell you *all about it*.”** This time he *did* spit, coffee splattering and dripping off the edge of the desk.

Bastian’s backpack wiggled, a crack in the zipper, enough to slip a tiny stuffed finger. Freedom!

**“Now wait just a minute, buster! If you wanna talk trash about me, say it to my FACE.”**

If the air was awkward before, it was deeply embarrassed now. Marion and Travis wanted to be anywhere but here, Bastian tried in vain to catch the rabbit that now stood astride his shoulder like a pirate captain, and Cora merely raised an eyebrow. **“Well? Nothing to say?”**

Isaac’s lips quivered, his expression one of mild shock. **“So... that’s what you did.”** Fingers found the edge of the desk, one hand gently sliding off it, while the other grasped it with firm vicious might. The wood began to creak, straining feebly as golden brown hairs rippled and covered the edges of his fingers, short nails thickening and curving into increasingly enraged claws. A finger slid up, and the wood was scratched, scarred deep with a grating screech.

**“I think you should leave.”**

**“Oh no you don’t! You don’t get to run away from this.”**

**“Run... away...?”** The claws bit deep, punching holes in the mahogany until sawdust fell down.

**“You... do *not* get to say those words. Not now, not EVER. You-”**

A mechanical door hissed, and the kids’ eyes turned to see a glass double door in the corner open up, a concrete stairwell behind it. That one *definitely* hadn’t been there before, or at least when they came in.

Out strode a tall, brown-skinned man, mid-20s perhaps. He was nowhere near as dressed up as Isaac, green jacket and warm smile clashing with the blindfold wrapped over his face in a way that didn’t quite hide the fact that there was nothing underneath. He walked with purpose,

clearly unburdened by his lack of eyes. **“Hey there. I was thinking about lunch. You wanna get tacos?”**

**“Tacos?!”** Monty’s fist swirled in a circle. **“We aren’t-”**

**“Aht. You... you don’t get it.”** Sighing, the man put his hands in his pockets, leaning forward.

**“Isaac asked you to leave. And I’m really, *really* not good at holding back. So, uh... why don’t we just go get some tacos? Talk it out, somewhere else. It’d be a lot less painful.”**

Marion turned in front of Bastian’s shoulder, staring with pained, pleading eyes. **“Monty, let’s just go.”**

**“...ugg. Fine! But this isn’t over!”**

Isaac growled, his right hand still clawed and furred. **“You have *no* idea of the sacrifices made so that you can play Hero with your little pet humans. Next time you head off to die, make sure to do it properly.”**

They walked out, Bastian forcibly restraining Monty and her flailing arms. The blind man followed, letting the door close with a loud clack.

**“...good riddance.”**