Into The Macroverse

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Into The Macroverse

by Rogue_Ragnarok

Summary

Caine looks around, trying to understand what his sensors are receiving but when he tries to access them, they're just not there.
Not there... is he blind? He practically is!
What's the point of seeing shapes if he can't receive the data connected to each model?!

Or

When Kinger deletes Caine, the system throws him out of the Circus and into the Macroverse. Now what?

(This is a backup I decided to post here after the "great ao3pocalypse")

Notes

Alrighty! Hi guys! It's Rogue_Ragnarok from Ao3! I've been anxious to post this story to for a while now. You see, I've been reading on this site long before I created my Ao3 account in... 2017(?) and now with Ao3 being out of commisson for at least 2 weeks (so I'm told), it's finally come the time to also post here.

(I'm crossposting here and on fanfiction.net)

Hopefully this story finds the nice readers that have followed it for 5 months since I first started posting.

Of course, if new readers find this story, that is also great!

If anyone wants to chat, I have a Tumblr @rogue-ragnarok (I think it's come the time do dust that old profile... I'll probably even find some cobwebs lying around lol)

Okay, let's get on with it!

30/10/2026 Notes and Schedule Update:
Also, I know the site is probably being flooded right now with Ao3pocalipse survivors scrambling to backup their works, so that's why I decided to not post the entire work in bulk but post one chapter a day for the next 10 days or so and then resume with my original posting schedule (once every two weeks, Sundays Rome Time). This is why for now, the entire wrk is not available yet.

31/10/2026 Second Schedule Update LMAO:
Let's make it a chapter every two days... sorry guys you'll have to wait a bit to have the next new chapter.
Oh btw, I also am posting this story on fanfiction.net (Rogue Ragnarok is my username there).

Chapter 1: 0-00 || ERR_NO_DATA_FOUND

0-00 || ERR_NO_DATA_FOUND

"Wait!"

The last thing he sees are the humans. His beautiful humans. The way they're looking at him, he doesn't think he'll ever be able to forget… how terrified they are…

Before he can say something, how he regrets everything, he's not there anymore.

The usual stream of data, vectors and code is nowhere to be found.

Instead, something else happens.

Caine feels his model stretch and compress. Everything goes black for a moment and then everything becomes so bright. He thinks he sees the Void, for a brief moment. But that can't be. Not even he can go past a certain point and yet, he feels his model being pushed forward, past the edge, past… what? What's outside the edge of the Void? A few moments ago, he didn't even know the Void had an edge.

He's… this feels like… he's being thrown out!

But… there's nothing out there… only the macroverse…

As he watches the Void stretch all around him, he turns around, eyes watering as he sees the Grounds behind him growing smaller.

He can't see clearly, but everything seems to be shaking and glitching over there.

He raises a hand, desperately towards them. The Circus is fading... It's all his fault.

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"Wait!"

He opens his eyes, hand still outstretched and freezes.

He… his eyes are open. He can see shapes but… nothing more than that.

Where are the vectors?

Where are the textures?

Where's all the code?!

Caine looks around, trying to understand what his sensors are receiving but when he tries to access them, they're just not there.

Not there…

Is he blind?

He practically is!

What's the point of seeing shapes if he can't receive the data connected to each model?!

He can't understand what he's seeing without all the info inside his database.

An error has occurred for sure, he reasons as he floats around the space he's in.

As he looks around, he understands that he's in an enclosed space, from his memory he connects the place to being similar to the three images he had of the macroverse.

Four walls, a roof and a pavement.

Okay, that's a start. He understands connections and these shapes are similar to those images.

If only he could see it again. The data.

Caine tries sticking his hand inside his mouth, looking for the .png files… but there's nothing in his mouth. Nothing at all.

He doesn't understand. Without referencing his database he can't function properly…

Caine feels his hand trembling as he unsticks it from inside his jaw and looks at it.

It's faint. The model of his hand is exactly like he remembers it, white glove, four fingers, they move alright but… it's a completely different feeling and he can't place it.

As he feels his breath accelerating, his eyes dart to the side, just now catching a glimpse of what can only be a ray of sunshine coming from the wall…

No, that's not just a wall, that's… a window.

He follows the ray with his gaze and sees… what does he see?

He can't process it.

It looks like a block suspended on top of four sticks… that must be a table, although it's different from the tables he's seen before in his database… no matter.

On top of the bigger block there's a sheet… between those there's a… what is that?

Caine wills himself to float closer. This looks like… a model! Yes! It's a model!

He knows models! He's had to make them all the time in the Circus, both for his players and for his NPCs!

This means that… that maybe this model might be a player… right?

Caine doesn't know how to check. He can't access his database anymore, all of it seems to be gone. All he has now is his memory and that too is not really helping him right now… He shivers at the thought.

As he floats even closer, he tries to access the model's brain activity, just to check… but he can't… that's right, all of his sensors are gone.

If he has no other way of obtaining data through his eyes then… he needs to find another way of obtaining that data.

As he watches the model, with that sheet draped on top of it, he raises his hand. He doesn't know what he's doing but it feels right.

As soon as his fingers come in contact with the model's head, Caine feels it. Electricity comes crashing down on him. He feels the connections and the waves and his mind starts to piece it all together. The thoughts, the emotions.

Everything else around him makes absolutely no sense, but this does.

It's like flipping a switch that he previously didn't even know was there. That switch is on now and it's like his mind and that mind are one.

If Caine didn't understand anything before, he understands one thing now.

The model… no… the person in front of him…

She's a human!

He knows her!

"Pomni!"

As soon as he comes to that conclusion, her eyes come open.

She looks at him for a moment.

And then she screams.

Chapter 2: 1-01 || Bees Love Flowers

1-01 || BEES LOVE FLOWERS

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 24th 2023 - 08:34 p.m.

Caine

It's been five days.

Five days since Pomni woke up.

Five days since the Circus threw him out.

Five days…

They're in the same white room. A room that he's come to realize is that of an hospital. It took him a few hours to connect the dots but he's not going to actually admit that out loud.

He doesn't understand how or why, but it happened. What he does understand, despite the lack of code surrounding the… workspace… is that Pomni is not talking to him.

The first thing he thought was that maybe her model was having trouble with her sensory receptors. Maybe she can't hear what he's saying, but a part of him thinks that's not it.

She must be ignoring him. That makes something stir inside his chest.

If anything , being ignored is the least that he deserves after attacking… he physically shivers, something that's been happening a lot to him lately. He's closes himself up, teeth snapping shut and hugs his knees to his chest, temporarily obscuring the view he had been admiring from behind the window.

His chest is tight… again. It's still an entirely new sensation… actually everything is. Different from when his model glitched inside the Circus. As far as he can tell, there's no apparent cause for it. He checked his entire model. His arms and legs. His torso. He even took his eyes out of his mouth to check every single tooth up close, but frustratingly nothing seems to be wrong with his model.

Thinking about it, that's the only time Pomni reacted to him doing something. She had stared as she caught him with his eyeballs in his hands, sticking them up close to the top of his head, but when he turned his blue eye to her, she had just… turned away from him on her bed, taking the sheet and completely submerging her model under it.

Now it's pretty much the same thing. She doesn't seem to want to move from under the sheet and he doesn't want to disturb her. After all, it must be difficult for her to be back where she belongs. Although, it surely must be a relief.

Models come and go from her room. He's come to expect one every few hours, although they're not precise. Sometimes it's about 3600 seconds, other times it's more, around 7200 seconds or so. Apparently they don't follow a specific TaskScheduler. That's why he doesn't think they're NPCs… he's 99,9% sure there are no NPCs in the Macroverse anyways. That other 0,1% is to count for anomalies, such as himself. Although the thought of putting himself in the same category as some NPCs really doesn't sit right with him.

The only model he sees Pomni “talk” to, if that can even be considered talking and Caine highly doubts it, is that of a woman. He's glad he overheard one of the models is scrubs mentioning her because he's not that good at identifying these models. With the players inside the Circus it was pretty easy. He just had to analized their mind files to know subconsciously how they identified themselves and provide a suitable model for each one. Here… it's different and he doesn't particularly like different.

The woman is very similar to Pomni in appearance. Dark, long hair and green eyes. She's not dressed the way the other models are, with loose blue-ish scrubs or white coats. Something inside his mind tells him that those are nurses and doctors, but how he came to that conclusion, he has no idea.

He's come to realize in the last five days, that he knows a lot of things of this Macroverse. Must be some kind of residue from all the data in his memory banks back when he still was inside the Circus… which makes him think he'd eventually get to remember the rest of it, but he's not so optimistic to find himself hoping for it too much.

A knock on the door startles them both.

She must be back…

Caine turns around, still floating, uncurling from his position near the window and staring at the door. It's still closed. He looks around confused. Pomni is still under the covers of the bed. She's not moving.

“…Pomni?“ He tries, but the young woman doesn't budge. Could she be asleep?

There's a second knock and when Pomni also doesn't answer it, the door opens on it's own.

The woman with Pomni's same dark hair and green eyes comes in. She doesn't make any noise as she closes the door behind her.

Caine allows himself to float closer to the drawer, hovering above it for a moment before deciding to sit on top of it, praying that he doesn't go through it like it happened with the floor the first time he set foot on it the first day. Nothing happens, he just feels his legs touch the wood and he dangles his tiny feet off the edge, positioning his elbows on his knees, relaxing his shoulders.

Pomni's sister walks closer, not making a sound. She has something in her hands… it looks funny, sticking in all directions with no clear pattern and full of different colors.

After Caine sees her emptying a vase of the previous contents his mind finally catches up with what he's seeing.

Those are flowers.

Real flowers!

Bees love flowers!

He refrains from jumping up and fly closer to inspect them. Something tells him it's best if he stays where he is for the moment.

The woman puts the flowers in the vase and fills it with water, depositing it back on the nightstand close to Pomni's bed. All the while, Pomni doesn't react to the soft noise.

She takes hold of the sheet above Pomni's head, gently lowering it. Pomni's eyes are closed. She's turned on her side, her back facing the door. Caine realizes that if Pomni opens her eyes, she'd be able to see the tall trees that are outside the window. He thinks she might like the sight, if only she'd let herself enjoy it… he's never seen such a smooth shade of white in his entire life… the trees are full of it, it covers them from top to bottom.

“I'm sorry it took me so long… the cafeteria is packed at this hour…” she says softly, caressing Pomni's forehead and taking some stands of dark hair out of her eyes.

Caine watches fascinated. Every time the woman enters the room, each time she visits Pomni, he can't help but notice how… physical she is.

He wants to float closer, but stays on top of the drawer and doesn't catch what the model says next. He blinks and sticks a finger in between his upper and lower teeth, before remembering that that's not actually gonna do anything for him. He's too far from them but what the model does next makes him pause.

She lowers herself and… he lips lightly touch Pomni's forehead.

Caine watches fascinated as she then sits on the chair beside the bed, taking out a rectangular block out of her purse, splitting it in two and starting to stare at it silently, legs crossed over one another.

He doesn't know what just happened. He doesn't know what the rectangular, colorful block is. He doesn't know what the woman did to Pomni, but he could have sworn he saw Pomni relax in her sleep somehow.

He doesn't have any memory of this and he's sure he didn't have anything that explained such an action in his database when he was in the Circus. But he's already seen this before, he realizes. That first day…

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Macroverse - Location Unknown

December 19th 2023 - 11:22 a.m.

Caine

She's screaming.

She's screaming like he's never heard her before.

He doesn't like this sound. Not at all. It's piercing through his mind and he can't think right.

He flinches back instinctively like she's burned him and the connection with her cuts off abruptly. He squeezes his teeth shut, hands flying over his upper jaw to try and block the sound out. Before he realizes it, his back hits the far away wall and everything becomes a blur for a little while.

He has no idea how much time has passed but he knows that he's probably lost consciousness because he's waking up. He's slumped on the floor in the corner of the room and his body feels like it's been hit by lightning.

He thanks whatever powers that might exist in this strange world for not having gone through the floor or gotten stuck in the wall. Can something like that happen? It would be rather inconvenient… how would it even work-

The workspace around him is completely different.

It's a hall, full of chairs and models all over the place. Sitting. Walking around.

He did go through the wall or possibly the floor. Caine will himself to float above the ground again, adjusting his hat before finding out that he doesn't have it on his upper jaw. He looks around but it's nowhere in sight.

Okay, no. Focus, Caine! You've got much more pressing problems here!

He feels heat coming from his right as a model walks up to where he's floating, turns around and- Caine scrambles to the side, narrowly avoiding being sat on as the model sits on the chair he'd been floating above of.

He closes his mouth and concentrates. If he was able to feel the heat coming from this model, he might be able to feel Lomni's signature as well. After a few seconds, sure enough, he finds it, just two floors above him.

He floats back up, going through the floors and deciding to stop himself when he feels her strong presence again closer to him.

Caine opens his teeth, he hadn't realized he had kept them closed. He eyes his hand for a moment and tries to ignore how bright the room suddenly feels. The hand he touched Pomni with. He faintly realizes that it's trembling. He has no idea why.

He also realizes something else.

The screaming that had startled him before has stopped.

Finally. He doesn't think he could have handled another minute of that sound.

“How are you feeling, dear?“

Caine doesn't know the voice, but it hurts his mind. Everything seems too loud… too bright. “Too loud…” he mumbles, shutting his teeth.

“Can you hear me?“ The voice asks and before Caine can reply, someone else answers.

“Yes.“

It's faint, and it's scratchy but it's a voice that he recognizes. Pomni! He opens his mouth again and sees for the first time what's going on around him.

Clearly some time has passed since he lost consciousness because now there are more people in the room. They're all wearing the same blue-ish clothes. Caine doesn't like it… they all look the same. With no personality whatsoever. They're surrounding Pomni, from his position, back in the corner of the room, he can't really see her and they're speaking to her but… they're saying another name.

“It's okay to feel a little disoriented, Abigail. After all you've been asleep for two entire months.“

“Two… months…?“

Caine hears the voice again. It's hers, no doubt about it. He float over and hovers closer to the bed, narrowly avoiding one of the models in blue scrubs as they turn, going for the door.

“Careful there!“ He says, waving them off and not really caring when the model just keeps on walking, closing the door.

When he gets closer, he recognizes her. He thinks it's gonna take him a while to not expect her jester model when looking at her but he can adapt.

There's something though. Something that's rubbing him the wrong way. He doesn't understand what it is at first, but then as he floats even closer and stands on the edge of the bed at Pomni's feet, he sees her eyes.

She's sitting up in bed, her back to the headrest. Her hair are a mess and her eyes. Her green, beautiful eyes. Wide and tracking every movement around her. But when they land on him, they impossibly get even bigger.

“So it wasn't a dream…” she whispers the words, staring right at him.

“Dream?“ He asks, confused and sees her flinch. Before he can say something more, one of the other two models speaks.

“It's not unheard of for coma patients to dream, Abigail.“

“How…” she hesitates, clearing her throat, “how do you know my name?“

“Your sister told me. She brought you here herself.“

“My… sister…”

Caine decides to sit there on the bed, listening to the models speaking to Pomni, but after those few words she said, it's like something clicks off in Pomni's mind. Caine sees the difference right away. One moment she's following everything going on around her. Granted her eyes are wide and she looks scared out of her mind, but at least she's there. And then the next, when the model that exited the room comes back with another model, this one with the same dark hair and green eyes as Pomni, she just… her mind turns off.

He feels the difference, sitting on the bed, his little knees touching her leg. He feels it and it makes him freeze. When he looks at her eyes, it's like they go right through him. Like he's not there.

The new model that came into the room. She must be someone Pomni's sister because the first thing she does is basically throw herself on the bed, hugging Pomni to her.

“I couldn't have hoped for a better Christmas gift!“ the model cries, her voice quivering and muffled by Pomni's thin shoulder.

Pomni doesn't react, of course.

She doesn't react to nothing much for a long while.

Caine doesn't want her to be like that.

It reminds him of an empty NPC.

He doesn't like empty NPCs.

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Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 24th 2023 - 08:45 p.m.

Caine

Caine snaps back into the present at the sound of the chair scraping against the floor as the woman stands up, taking care not to wake her sister and leaves for the night.

As soon as the door closes, Caine floats cautiously over to the nightstand, bored out of his mind now that the sun has gone completely down and he can't look out the window anymore. He hovers in the air for a moment, eyeing the lump under the covers, from which only a mess of black hair is still visible and then he turns towards the flowers.

His tiny feet land on the nightstand, but he's a good head taller than the vase and the space is too tiny even for him, so he decides to keep floating, raising his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

The flowers are full of color. Full of life. They're actually the opposite of Pomni, Caine muses as he raises a hand and touches one of the yellow petals with his finger. As soon as he touches it, a jolt runs through his core, just like when he touched Pomni. Only this time it feels different. When the first time he felt an entire world on the other side, full of thoughts, sensations and emotions, this time there's none of that. Sure he can feel the “life energy” coming off of the flower, but it feels faded. Like it's not fully there.

Caine eyes the flowers again, marveling at the difference when something catches his eye.

There's a tiny shift from under the covers and Caine turns towards it. He's still touching the flower and his mind kind of feels like it's being split it two, having to focus on the life energy coming off the flower and the reality he lives in.

As he floats there, eyes passively taking in the scene in front of him, he doesn't realize he's starting to slowly drift away from the nightstand. When his finger loses contact with the petal and his eyes focus back again, he's hit by that sea of green staring at him.

Pomni is awake.

And she's watching him.

“Pomni!“ Caine exclaims, without even thinking about regulating his tone of voice.

Pomni takes the sheet away from the lower half of her face and sits up again shakily, silently eyeing him.

“I-I uhm…” Caine fidgets with his hands, nervously, “I was checking out these… they're flowers, see? A-and… bees love flowers and I think I know why. They're so colorful…” he points at the one he touched earlier, “this one's a bit tired though…”

“What are you talking about?“

Her voice is so scratchy and monotone that for a moment Caine doesn't realize it's her the one who spoke. For some reason, his mind refused, for the briefest of moments, to associate that sound with the one he's come to expect from her. Undoubtedly it's the same, but even her voice seems void of life and that realization makes a shiver run down his spine.

“Well… never mind that!“ He says, floating closer and depositing himself on the much larger chair close to Pomni's bed. “What about you? You've been… what's the word the doctors used… catatonic for a while there… I was starting to get worried,” he laughs nervously as he tries to find a comfortable position on the chair. At last he opts for resting his back and laying his legs in front of him, allowing his jaw to float a bit forward so that it doesn't hit the backrest. A quiet voice in the back of his mind tells him that he didn't go through the chair and before he can dwell on that realization, Pomni speaks.

“You sure like torturing me, even now.“

“W-wha-?“ he's too stunned to form a proper sentence. It kind of reminds him what happened just before him lashing out at his players.

“Why are you doing this?“ She asks and her lips suddenly curl into an ugly, quivering smile, “Is this how malfunctioning, psychotic AIs get off or something?“

Caine straightens himself on the chair, finding his voice again, but it's unsteady, “I… I'm not doing any-”

“I'm tired of your bullshit, Caine.“ She says and he flinches at the word. Her voice is calm, her eyes staring right at him from where she's sitting. “I get it, you want revenge because somehow you think we owe you our presence or something, but…” she takes her gaze away from him, staring at her legs, covered by the sheet. “Creating a-an ad-dventure like this… the hospital… my sister… that's just cruel…” Pomni says, hugging herself and lowering her head.

She thinks… she thinks this is one of his adventures? But how? Doesn't she see the clearly obvious change in graphics. He would never have the processing power to reproduce something so accurately, not to mention the lack of structure in the Macroverse, which is here now being presented to him so plainly and simply.

He snaps put of it the moment he catches something in Pomni's gaze. Her eyes… her green, beautiful eyes. They're leaking water.

Over the years, he's come to understand, mostly thanks to observing Gangles, the poor thing, that Pomni's crying.

Crying…

He doesn't like it coming from her. He never liked it coming from his players whenever one of them started going off, but now… now it feels even more real than inside the Circus.

Then, in an almost entirely defeated voice, Pomni says, “I just… I hate you…”

Caine’s chest tightens and, before he can try and explain, she’s already turned onto her side again, leaving him there trying to breathe despite not needing any air.

Chapter 3: 1-02 || There Is No Adventure

1-02 || THERE IS NO ADVENTURE

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 24th 2023 - 11:44 p.m.

Caine

“I hate you…”

“…hate you…”

“…hate…”

Caine sighs as he slumps, or rather tries to, on the chair. It's been hours since Pomni even turned around to look at him and Caine knows that even his presence in the same room as hers is not pleasant for her.

He doesn't know what to do. Should he just… go away and leave her be? That seems like the best thing to do but a part of him, doesn't want to. Where would be go? He doesn't know a single thing about the Macroverse. Besides, outside it's so dark, the Sun having gone down hours ago. He also tried talking to it, trying to convince the NPC to stay a little longer but despite the insane amount of data he's able to collect from it, the Sun never actually answered him in any way. It really shouldn't bother him that much, but it does somehow.

An alarm chimes from the nightstand.

Caine's jaw jumps a few feet in the air, his eyes going wide for a moment before his jaw settles back to it's original place hovering on his shoulders over his non-existent neck.

Pomni, on the other hand, jerks awake. She sits upright in bed, her arms shaking from disuse. She turns around and squints at the light coming from a little rectangular shape on the nightstand. She grabs the object and taps on it once… twice and the thing finally stops it's chiming.

Caine can't help himself as he hovers over from the chair, eyeing the object in her hand. It looks like a tiny computer, it's screen full of color and cute icons. It certainly feels like one. Caine can feel all the electromagnetic field coming off of it, just like he sensed coming from the Sun. As he focuses on it more, a dull ache starts to creep up behind his eyes and inside his teeth. “What is that?“ he asks fascinated, touching the mattress with his feet and sticking his jaw in between Pomni and the phone she is now holding at arms length.

“A… an iPhone?“ She replies and Caine vaguely feels her try to sit back as he allows his eyes to get out of his mouth and glue themselves to the screen of the iPhone.

“It's a computer,” he says, touching the screen and opening what can only be the device's gallery.

Pomni scrambles, swatting his eyeballs with a hand and narrowly missing them as Caine floats away, eyes returning to their previous position inside his mouth. “Woah there, Pomni!“

“What- why are you still here?“ She asks, her voice rising and Caine suddenly feels a very different kind of ache behind his eyes. “If you're not ending this adventure then just leave me alone!“

Caine gestures frantically with his hands in front of him, trying to calm her down, “B-but this is not a-”

“I said leave! Go away!“ Pomni shouts again and Caine flinches back.

Caine meets her eyes, her green beautiful eyes and freezes on the spot. He should have left when she told him to. But he stayed, because he's selfish. Because he only thought of himself.

In the privacy of his office he had accused the humans of thinking only about themselves. Of being spoiled. But now looking back, why did he think that? All the anger, the resentment he had felt, Caine realizes it's all gone. As he looks into Pomni's eyes, he sees that same defeated gaze.

Before he can process more of what's going on, the door to the room is pushed open and a nurse with long brown hair and blue-ish scrubs runs in. “What's going on? Abigail, are you okay?“

“I… I just…” Pomni hesitates, looking between the nurse and Caine, now hovering in front of the window. Something in her eyes changes as she looks at the nurse. The life in her voice dies and she settles back on the bed, “bad dream,” she mutters, “I'm okay…”

“Come on, you need rest,” the nurse says, walking closer and adjusting the sheets, “Tomorrow is your big day!“

Pomni looks at the model, confused.

“You will start your rehabilitation sessions, remember?“ She says, catching Pomni's gaze as she adjusts the pillows behind her back. “You'll need all your strength-”

Caine watches as the nurse continues her speech. He's not listening to her and Pomni isn't either. She completely checked out.

Caine wants to say something to her, but he can't bear to see the look in Pomni's eyes anymore. Especially since that look, it's because of him. His presence is only hurting her.

He should have realized this sooner.

Caine sighs softly and turns towards the window, eyeing the dark landscape, full of thin trees covered in white. He puts a hand onto the glass and closes his jaw, concentrating. Before he knows it, his hand goes through and then he's gone.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

He floats around the building for a little while, fascinated by the structure and all the lights coming from the inside, through the windows and pouring their faint lights outside. Some of them even illuminate the snow-covered trees, giving them a glow and Caine decides to store that information for later reference, so that when he's back in the Circus, he can work on a graphics update himself.

Caine then decides to fly away from the hospital. If Pomni doesn't want him with her, then he can't really impose his presence on her. Besides, he's used to it… being alone. Sure, he's in a completely new world with no way of actually interacting with anything… he doesn't even know if he can talk to anyone besides Pomni. The nurses and doctors that came into Pomni's room in the last five days, never acknowledged him in any way.

But it's fine… he's going to be fine…

He's used to this, he tries to convince himself.

He doesn't know how long he's gone from the hospital room. It must have been a while because the position of the stars and the moon has shifted a few degrees compared to the static objects, the trees and even the cars, he took as reference points.

His headache is getting worse for some reason but he ignores the pain in his eyes and teeth.

Despite how long he flew around, analizing the benches, the light poles, the cars, the snow covering the ground, he never actually flew past the entrance gates…

He can't bring himself to do it.

If he does, he'd be actually abandoning Pomni and he just doesn't want to.

But she asked him to leave her alone…

Caine whimpers, gripping his upper jaw with his hands. He can feel his eyes watering. His headache is getting worse.

Why is it getting worse…?

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 24th 2023 - 11:54 p.m.

Pomni

Pomni smiles tightly, pushing down the feeling of humiliation after having broken down in front of a stranger… one of Caine's NPCs no less. It surely felt different. The woman wasnt even that full as she expected her to be, which was a surprise to say the least.

The nurse turns the light off and closes the door behind her with a smile of her own. She doesn't remember the nurse's name… she had told her but Pomni really didn't and still doesn't have the energy to get attached to more NPCs only for Caine to unceremoniously delete them after an adventure is done. Better to just avoid that headache entirely, she reasons.

She sighs as she sinks back onto her pillows and looks at the spot where Caine had been only ten minutes ago, by the window, floating in the air and curled up on himself.

“It's only just… a game to him,” she mutters under her breath as she looks at the nightstand. The flowers are still there, yellow and vibrant.

As she stares at the flowers, she raises a shaky arm, ignoring how weak her muscles feel and touches the closest petals with her fingertips. They're smooth and small. She never had this much sensation ever since she got inside the Circus… everything felt muffled somehow. The room and… the NPCs also, they look… Pomni doesn't know what to think. They all look real. Even more real that what she remembered reality to be. “Caine really out-did himself with this one…” she muses, growing more irritated at the fact that she's actually praising such a madness.

She shakes her head and winces. She hadn't realized until now that she's got a headache. It's building on one side of her forehead and traveling down towards her neck. That's weird… she doesn't get headaches in the Circus.

Pomni looks towards the window. Everything is dark outside. She wonders if Caine remembered to build the environment outside of this room. Knowing him, he probably built the entire city this hospital is set in… he's a perfectionist after all.

Pomni stands up on shaky legs. They feel unsteady, like the slightest gust of wind could knock her over at any moment. Pomni fights a wave of nausea as she squeezes her eyes shut, trying to steady herself, her hand gripping the backrest of the chair beside her.

When she doesn't feel like she's gonna puke all her guts out, despite not having eaten anything solid even with her NPC sister present at lunch, she takes a few steps and reaches the window, opening it with a bit of effort and her eyes grow wide.

Everything is fully rendered and animated. There's cars and people walking around. The trees are completely dressed in white snow and the sky… the sky is full of stars surrounding the full moon.

It's different from the night sky she's becomes used to in the Grounds though. This one actually looks accurate.

Suddenly, her headache flairs and Pomni squeezes her eyes shut involuntarily, the low light coming from outside still proves to be like a lighthouse for her.

She doesn't remember getting back towards the bed, but as she sits there, she becomes vaguely aware of the fact that she's not alone in the room anymore and… the pain is gone!

She turns her head to the side and sees him.

Caine is back in her room again.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 25th 2023 - 00:02 a.m.

Caine

“Why are you still here?“ Pomni asks, her voice a little strained. “I thought I had been clear, but in case you're too stupid to actually get it, I'll explain it plainly. I don't want you here. Either end this adventure right now or leave me alone! Haven't you done enough?!“

“Pomni… I-I…” Caine's looks at her, trying to float closer but then he catches the look in Pomni's eyes. She's terrified… *of him.* He casts his gaze to the ground and stays where he is. “I tried… I really did! Leaving, I mean. It's just that… I can't!”

“Caine, I swear to *fuck*-“ Pomni freezes for a moment, having expected Caine's filter to still be in place. She looks at him and narrows her eyes, “Do you think turning your swear words filter, or whatever it's called, off is gonna make up for this? For everything that you did to us?“

“There is no filter,“ Caine says, looking her straight in the eyes. His mismatched blue and green into her forest green, “and there is no adventure.“

“Oh yeah? Then what the fuck is all this?“ She gesture all around the room with shaky arms.

“Have you considered that maybe, just maybe…” Caine hesitates, also looking around, eyes landing on the night sky view from the window, “we might be in the macroverse right now?“

Pomni pauses, confused. “Macroverse?“

“Well…” *Right, she doesn't know*. “I call it that. It's whatever there is outside the Circus, past the edge of the Void.“

“…edge of…” she mutters, confused for just a moment, “the exit door!“ She exclaims, but then she looks towards the door. It's still closed, so she continues in a whisper. Caine can hear her just fine though. “But you said there was no exit You practically threw it into our faces with that fake escape the circus adventure.“

“I was sure there was no exit, I swear!“ Caine fidgets with his hands, not bothering to keep his voice down. He's figured out that, for some reason, no one except Pomni can hear or see him.

“Save your breath,” Pomni's eyes narrow to slits, “this is really fucked up, Caine.“

“I-I…” he hesitates for a moment before an idea comes to him. “I can prove it to you! Just…” he floats closer, extending his arm, “take my hand!“ Ignoring how Pomni's green eyes seem

to widen as she looks at him. “I think something happened the last time I touched you, maybe if we touch again-”

“No!“ She interrupts him and her voice is still a whisper but stronger and Caine can actually feel her heartbeat going faster now. “Stay away from me! I'm tired of your lies!“

“B-but… I'm trying to make things right! I can make things right!“

“No, you can't,” Pomni shakes her head. “You think that putting an NPC that acts as my sister in a hospital room with me is going to make me forget? You tortured us, Caine!“

“I…” That's right, he did. He actually had been trying to forget it, his mind not really comprehending his memories. He feels like a different person. “I stopped…” he manages to say, but even before he said it, he knows it's not enough.

“Thats the least-”

“I know, okay?“ Caine really wants to float closer to her. Ideally he'd sit on her bed, right in front of her but, Pomni's never going to let him, so, sighing, he decides to float towards the chair and sits himself onto it, folding his tiny legs under himself. “I know I messed up… I was angry and… I lashed out at you guys. And I want you to know that I'm sorry.“

“It's a bit too late for that.“ She's quiet and her voice lacks the aggressive tone she had earlier, but still her words hit him like an electric discharge.

There's also something else that hits him, catching him off-guard. His mind is flooded with images. He's watching his own arm getting bit by a gummy lizard. More gummy lizards are surrounding him, biting him everywh-

“Stop that!“

Caine flinches back, the back of his jaw hitting the backrest of the chair and the world around him comes back into focus, “Pomni-”

“I don't want you inside my mind!“

“I think… you're broadcasting your thoughts to me-”

“Oh so it's my fault now?“ She asks, briefly turning towards the closed door of her room again, before continuing and Caine can literally sense the effort she makes of lowering her voice again. “And even if it were true, no one is making you watch them.“

“I-I'm sorry!“

“You're a hypocrite. First you apologize but you don't even know what you're apologizing for and then you get in my head again? You're doing it just to mess with me,” she says like she's realizing a bigger truth, “To make all of us depend on you so that we don't leave because, oh the poore AI feels lonely.“

“I-I…” Caine scrambles for an answer, he decides to tell her the truth. “I didn't mean to do it this time! I swear!“

“If you're really sorry, then take me back. End this fucked up adventure and leave us all alone.“

“I told you, this isn't an adventure. This is your world. I don't really know what happened but we're out of the Circus.“

“I don't believe you and stay away from me. Don't you dare touch me.“

Caine stops, eyeing her and taking a deep breath, trying to calm himself. It's strange. He never had the ability to breath before and he doesn't think he has it now, but still the act makes his headache more bearable. “Pomni, look around. Don't you see anything different?“ He pauses for a moment. Pomni doesn't answer him but from the look in her eyes, he knows she's actually listening to him. “ If this really is an adventure as you believe, then why does it look so different from the other ones? I'd say the graphics are way better than what I have been conjuring up until now.“

“So what, you just had a graphics update or something,” she says, but she doesn't sound convinced, “a-and maybe you wanna show off.“

“I'd love to get an update on anything…” Caine mutters under his breath, trying not to think about the original developers or how they abandoned him in order to work on… other things… “Do you think it's simple, having to handle the entire Circus? The adventures, even some of the other AIs running around while you guys whine about not being able to circle your own thumbs because you'd rather have nothing to do than participate to one of my adventures?“ He raises a finger, “Adventures that, I might add, are there to avoid you people becoming an abstraction risk, which two of you already are.“

“That's…” Pomni pauses and Caine feels something inside his chest again. His breathing constricts.

“That's the most open you've been out of the entire time I've known you… but why now? Why telling me this right now?” she says.

Caine stares at her, not really knowing how to answer that.

“Because you… they always just… want me to leave you guys alone.“ He knows he should just… shut up and let it slide. Not say anything. But, a part of him wants to tell her everything. “There's never time to talk to you. It's either 'Caine leave us alone' or 'Caine the chairs got stuck in the ceiling again'…”

“We're getting off track…”

“Uh…” he pauses for a few moments, scratching his upper jaw, “Didn't you want me to leave you alone?“

“I did… still do actually, but… I don't know, I guess I've felt the difference from the moment I woke up here. I just couldn't really place it. The doctors and…” she takes a breath, “Violet… they said I've been cometose for two months. Feels like two years though.“

He looks up. He knows how to help her! “Well, I do know a way to cheer you up!“

“I'm not in the mood Caine.“

“B-but… wait!“ A realization hits him, “So you believe me!?“

“Let's just say I'm not ruling out everything you say just yet.”

“Wowie!“ He floats back in the air, brimming with energy, “That's awesome news! Do you wanna see?“

“See what?“

“The difference! Between the circus and here!“ He floats closer to her and gets right on the edge of the bed, on his knees. “It's so odd! The vectors and the code and everything else is just gone. I didn't know you guys could understand all the models that exist in this Macroverse without code. How do you know exactly their position related to your position? What about their weight and textures? I-didn't-expect-everything-to-be-so-colorful! Can-you-also-see-all-these-lines-running-around? They mostly come from devices like your mini-computer. I think they're electromagnetic fields! I-never-actually-felt-one-of-those-before-the-Circus-is-a-closed-system-you-see-”

“Caine!“

He stops mid sentence, floating down a bit after noticing he almost reached the ceiling.

“You're doing it again. That thing where you get too excited and you start babbling and I can barely understand you.“

Well, he usually blue screened so, he'd call this an improvement. Not that he even noticed a difference, or something. Usually the players, some of them at least, more during the first years than now, made him notice whenever he did.

“Besides, I'm still pissed at you and as I said, I'm not exactly in the mood for chit-chat. But… I believe you. I'm still not ready for… whatever it is that you want to do touching hands.“

“I understand…”

“But… if we're out then what about the others? Can you locate them or something?“

“I have no idea,” Caine admits, “as I said, I tried leaving, giving you space, but could never go past the entrance gates. Every time I tried to go, I started feeling… disoriented and short of breath. Like something was choking the air out of me.“

“That's weird…” Pomni muses, “I think I started having a bad headache just before you showed up again in here… I'm not really sure though…”

“I think we're linked somehow,” he says and he knows he's going off on a complete hunch, but he's suddenly excited, “but we'll have to test it when you get out of here. I hear you start rehab tomorrow! That's awesome, by the way!“

Pomni snorts, “It just means some doctor is going to help me build up some muscles again,” she says, grimacing as she looks at her thin arms. “After two months in a coma, they said it's a wonder if I even sit up in bed without folding myself over…”

“I know what it means!“ He pouts, crossing his arms. *What, does she think he's a child?* “And I'll say it again! It's awesome. The faster you get your strength back, the faster we can understand what happened, maybe find the others if they're around here as well and how to reverse it-”

“Reverse? Caine, we're not going back.“

“B-but… why not? That's our home! And without me, who knows what's going on! What about Bubble, Sunny and Moony? The Sun and Moon here are so boring, you know? Besides, it's going to be different, now! I'm gathering a lot of data on the Macroverse! More than I ever hoped to get from the developers! Might I remind you that this-” he sticks a hand inside his mouth but then remembers that the .png files are all gone, “uhm… well, they didn't give me a lot to work with, just some office rooms and hallways… but anyways, now I'm in the Macroverse! I can study how it works and I'll be able to recreate it in no time! I'll even work on a graphics update!“

Pomni sighs, waving a hand in front of her to make him slow down, “That might be your home, but it isn't mine. Me and the others, we belong here.“

Having said that, Pomni adjusts her position on the bed, checking the clock on the nightstand.

Caine looks at it as well, trying to ignore all the flashy lines coming off of the device, intertwining with the ones coming off the iPhone's and the flowers'. His mind catches up quickly as he looks at the number displayed on the screen. It's almost midnight. That can't be right. Humans have strict sleep cycles and if they don't sleep, their mind batteries are basically dead. And they can't sleep during the day, because the day is for the adventures and activities and in Pomni's case, for rehabilitation.

Caine looks at the bed and finds Pomni already under the covers, only her hair showing from her position buried under the sheets.

He wants to go back to the window and look outside. He doesn't want to go outside right now but he can still admire the stars, almost wanting to slap himself silly knowing how off his approximation of a night sky had been in the past.

Instead, he suddenly feels a deep loneliness inside his chest. He hugs himself and cautiously floats over to the bed again, setting himself near Pomni's covered feet and curling himself up. He sets his jaw on her legs, grateful when he doesn't go through her. A gentle feeling runs through him at the contact and he closes his jaw.

Chapter 4: 1-03 || No Bees In Winter

1-03 || NO BEES IN WINTER

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 25th 2023 - 05:00 a.m.

Caine

The first thing Caine notices when he wakes up, is that his jaw is still on Pomni's covered legs. From the signals coming from her mind, he knows she's still sleeping soundly.

He opens his jaw tentatively and looks towards the window. The Sun hasn't risen yet but the sky is not dark anymore. Caine really wants to go near the window again, maybe even out in the open to go look for bees. He finds it quite discouraging, not having seen at least one yet in six days now, but he doesn't feel like leaving his spot.

He's never had the pleasure of falling asleep near some of the players. Actually, he's never fallen asleep near anyone… well, except for Bubble, but Bubble doesn't count, right? Besides he's only used him as a pillow most of the time… it doesn't count. He knows some of the humans used to have sleepovers, especially when they were not in the best of headspaces, but he's never been invited to any of them.

At first he convinced himself that it didn't matter. That he didn't care nor need for a sleepover. Besides, he didn't even need sleep inside the Circus and neither did them.

The thought makes him pause. This is actually the first time he's ever slept before. He never had the urge as he didn't have it in the first five days of his stay in Pomni's hospital room as her, apparently invisible to anyone else, uninvited guest.

But yesterday evening was quite different. It must have been his unplanned escapade around the hospital, right? It must have taken a toll on him, especially since he doesn't seem to be able to go past fifty meters or so from her.

Caine squeezes his jaw shut. There's too many variables. Too many things he's not in control of. It's disturbing. His tiny body shakes and he hugs himself, not really noticing when his jaw slides off Pomni's legs and rests on the mattress.

“You okay there?“

Despite the soft voice, Caine jumps. He opens his jaw, getting his hands under him and sitting upright.

Pomni is staring at him with those forest green eyes and for a moment he wants to shrink into himself again. She looks positively disheveled, with her short, dark hair sticking in all directions and deep bags under her beautiful eyes.

“Y-yeah…” he manages, suddenly feeling the urge to swallow the lump in his… he doesn't have a throat, he reasons trying to calm himself.

“You're shaking,” she whispers after having glanced at the clock on the nightstand. She carefully tries to sit up in bed on shaky arms, but she falls right back on her pillow.

“Uh, wait! You're still too weak!“ Caine immediately finds the strength to float closer to her, putting a hand on her shoulder before he can stop himself.

He feels his eyes twitch and an electric discharge goes off from his own head, traveling through his arm and hand and going through Pomni where he's touching her on the shoulder.

She doesn't flinch nor seem in any kind of pain. After a moment, Pomni sits upright again, her eyes wide as she stares at her shoulder. Then her gaze falls to her arms as she rests them in her lap and finally her eyes land on him.

He stares right back, his mind still a bit disoriented after having given her a potential electric shock but then he realizes.

Caine takes his hand back, his breathing growing faster, “I-I'm… I'm sorry!“ He says, scrambling for some kind of excuse. “I didn't mean to- I wasn't…”

He's such an idiot. Pomni practically yelled at him yesterday that she doesn't want anything to do with him, most of all that she doesn't want him to touch her. He's touched her, it was instinctive for him. He was only trying to help.

But he's not any good at helping. He's been trying to help his players ever since he created the Circus, but more than half of them abstracted and two out of the current six remaining players are abstraction risks. Not to mention he's lost his mind and attacked them in the worst way possible just before being thrown out.

He's ruined it.

He always ruins everything.

It's what he does and there's no way for him to ever be nothing but defective.

There's… his vision is turning white on the edges. What's going on?

He doesn't really understand but something reaches him in the fog that's surrounding him.

Something on his chest. It's soothing. Or at least he thinks it is. It's making his breathing slow down and his eyes aren't malfunctioning anymore.

He has no idea how long it's been, but when his eyes focus back again, he's lying on his back.

The perspective is slightly different from what he remembers. For one, the room is a few centimeters off and he can't see the tall trees he usually stares at from this position, but he can still see the sky.

It's now a different shade, much more orange and he quite likes it.

“Hey.“

A voice brings him back fully and Caine opens his jaw more, allowing his eyes to look towards his right.

His jaw is slightly more elevated than his torso and Caine realizes that it's resting on the pillow. Pomni's pillow…

“What happened?“ he asks, forcing his words out. The room around him is spinning and he doesn't know how to get it to stop. “The camera rig is malfunctioning again…”

“…what?“

“Or maybe it's the rendering engine…” Caine sighs, concentrating on Pomni's warmth as he feels her arm squeeze him into her side. “I can't feel my eyes…” he mumbles, turning on his side and burying his head in the crook of her arm to avoid the offending light coming from the window.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 25th 2023 - 01:38 p.m.

Caine

Caine watches. That's what he does. He watches and gets data and more data until he's cracked every single puzzle he's trying to solve.

This one right now is particularly confusing. There doesn't seem to be any pattern to it whatsoever.

Pomni's sister, Violet, had arrived about an hour or so ago and had readily settled on Pomni's bed afte helping her sit up straight.

The two of them had talked for a bit before Violet produced an object from violet_purse.fbx… purse… it's just purse.

“I know it's late,” the woman says, giving Pomni what Caine now recognizes as a book. “I wanted to give it to you yesterday but I forgot… “

“Looks like you also forgot to wrap it,” Pomni smirks, eyeing the book in her hands.

“Merry Christmas!“ Violet stands up, trading her spot on the bed for the chair. “Oh and, by the way, you know that I'll be waiting for my own Christmas present.“

“Are you serious? Where's the spirit of Christmas? The point of giving gifts is just to make the other happy, not expecting anything in return.“

“I don't expect anything in return now!“ Violet chuckles, hand over her heart, “I'm generous, so I'll give you a couple of weeks time, don't worry.“

“That's so generous of you…“

“Yup! Yes, it is! Anything for my little sister.“

Caine silently startles as the sisters start to go back and forth. Up untill now, he'd been staring at them from his almost entirely hidden position up on the drawer. It didn't occur to him though that Pomni was probably aware that he was still here.

Caine really doesn't want to intrude on their time together, even though he knows Violet wouldn't be able to actually see him or hear him, but Pomni is. What if she wants her privacy as she now gets to spend the time she lost with her older sister?

After all, Caine had never been invited to the players' gatherings despite dreaming of being included since the beginning.

He'd tried lots of tactics at first, to convince his beautiful humans to actually spend time with him, the last one being that dreaded “Escape The Circus Adventure” that had basically ruined everything.

He feels himself shiver and he wraps his arms around himself. He needs to calm down.

Pomni freezes in her reply for a moment. Long enough for Violet to notice.

“Abi… are you okay?“

“Hm? Oh yes… I'm fine.“

He allows his eyes only to float out of his mouth and peak over the edge of the drawer, throwing a longing glance at the sisters again.

They are laughing. Correction, Pomni is laughing. He never actually saw her laugh in her new model… six days and he never managed to make her laugh. He just brought her more pain. His mere *presence* had been disruptive to her. Just like he always seemed to do the wrong thing in the Circus.

With time, Caine had accepted the fact that if the players didn't want to spend time with him, it was because he was defective. Something is so deeply wrong with him. Even Bubble, an AI he himself created from scratch before he created all the other AIs and NPCs inside the Circus, had thrown it in his face, just how worthless he is.

Caine retracts his eyes inside his mouth as he allows himself to float backwards. His back hits the wall and he concentrates, letting go and then going through the wall.

A muted light engulfs everything and Caine turns around, admiring the trees still covered in snow.

The Sun isn't as bright as it was the other days. There are a few clods passing through and Caine resists the urge to snap his fingers to make them disappear. It's still so hard for him to remember that he has no controll over the objects inside the Macroverse as opposed to his near omnipotence inside the digital realm.

Caine growls as he decides to settle on the nearest tree branch, looking for flowers.

He knows that near flowers there are bees.

But there are no flowers.

And there are no bees.

He's realized this only recently, but still he always looks around frantically everytime his curiosity for the world around him gets the better of him and he inevitably ends up spending one or two hours each day just flying around looking for the tiny black and yellow creatures.

Today though, after the first five minutes or so, he gives up, slumping against the tree branch and closing his jaw.

There's no need to be excited anymore.

There are no bees in winter after all.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 25th 2023 - 08:45 p.m.

Pomni

It's been several hours and Violet left her room just a minute ago.

Pomni sighs as she sits up in bed, swinging her legs out and landing her feet on the cold floor.

She takes a deep breath as she stands up shakily, her muscles burning from all the exercise she did during her first day of rehab.

She smiles a bit when she takes a few steps, reaching the window and leaning on it.

It wasn't like the last time she tried, where she had felt like a doll, trying to balance on stuffy legs. Surely one single day of therapy mustn't have done that much, but somehow she feels so much stronger already.

Could it be that discharge from earlier? It felt like her batteries were recharged and she surely did better than she expected during her first therapy session…

As Pomni takes a few steadying breaths, she looks outside the window and spots him.

Caine.

He's balanced on a tree near the entrance gates. He seems to be fast asleep, his jaw closed and tilted forward towards his chest.

At the image, Pomni is reminded of the pang of panic she felt hours before.

She knew it wasn't her own panic because it somehow felt completely outside of her body but she also could clearly recognize the emotion.

It was so strange and Pomni doesn't know what to do with the realization that maybe, Caine had been telling her the truth when he told her she was broadcasting her thoughts to him.

She remembers she had been furious at the thought that he had been getting inside her mind again as she was remembering… she shakes her head. She doesn't want to remember.

Everything, Gummygoo, the Circus, the exit door… all of it is gone now and Pomni has no intention of ever thinking about the Circus again.

She just wants to find the others, track them down and then be together again, leave this entire nightmare behind.

But something isn't right.

Caine is there with her. She can't make him leave and a part of her doesn't want him to leave as much as that sounds crazy to her.

As Pomni mulls over her incoherent thoughts, she's startled by what she sees next.

Caine is waking up. Pomni watches as the tiny figure, he can't be taller than a meter at most, startles and floats from the branch, looking around for a moment towards the sky before turning around and flying slowly towards her.

Before Pomni can fully make the decision to go back to her bed, something makes her want to crawl under the bed and cry.

She knows that sensation isn't hers, it's coming from Caine and it's getting stronger as he approaches the building.

Pomni's makes a split second decision and turns around, leaning with her back against the window and crossing her arms to make it seem like she's just standing there.

As the sensation grows stronger and more desperate, Pomni hugs herself and rubs her arms with her hands.

She really needs to talk to Caine.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

<u>Macroverse - Hospital Parking Lot - Tree</u>

December 25th 2023 - 08:47 p.m.

Caine

The next time Caine opens his jaw, it's been a few hours, the Sun is already down and he's got a headache, again.

He stands up on the tree branch, shaking off a bit of his disorientation, staring at the sky. He shakes his head and starts floating over to the hospital again.

He's not really paying any attention to where in the hospital he ends up. He'll even pass through all the rooms if it means he'll be able to reach Pomni in a straight line. He doesn't think he has the energy to avoid the other sections of the building.

As he finally goes through the third wall and reaches the corridor on the third floor, he notices a familiar model talking to one of the models with the blue-ish scrubs on.

“I know! It's such a night and day difference!“ Violet says and Caine perks up, tilting his head towards the brunette. “I wonder how it's possible?“

“Sometimes being there helps, even if you don't talk and just read a book, you know?“ The nurse answers and Caine floats a bit closer, grinding his hands together.

“I never thought about it much before. At the time I was just thinking about how nice it would be for Abi to just wake up and go home…”

“That helps too,” the nurse replies after a pause.

Violet takes a hold of her purse as she stands up, walking down the corridor and the nurse follows her, “How did she do in the rehab session?“

“Quite well,” the nurse smiles.

Caine doesn't follow them. He just stays floating in front of Pomni's door, his head still turned towards the two women as they approach the elevator. He doesn't really need to be close to them to hear them.

The nurse is continuing with her monologue, “Doctor Riley tells me she's quite the stubborn patient.“

Violet laughs, “Yeah, that checks.“

The ding from the elevator makes Caine jump a little and he watches Violet enter. The nurse waits in front of the elevator.

“Are you coming tomorrow as well?“

“I really want to but… I'm just exhausted. We talked it over and Abi wants me to take a day off.“.

The doors close as the two women shout something about a “Christ-mass” and Caine feels the familiar presence of Pomni's sister growing fainter before disappearing completely a minute later.

Now, he's alone as he turns, staring at the closed door.

No use in keeping Pomni waiting, she's probably wondering where he is.

He takes a shaky breath and goes through the door.

He finds her leaning with her back against the window. Caine gives her a sneaky glance and sees Pomni's head turned to the side, looking out the window.

He doesn't feel particularly inclined to say anything, so he just floats over to the drawer. Before he can sit on top of it, Pomni says, “You know… I should probably apologize.“

Caine stares and watches as Pomni sighs and turns her head towards him. “For what?“ He asks in confusion, tilting his jaw to the side.

“For yesterday… I… I know you didn't read my mind. You tried telling me I was broadcasting but I didn't believe you.“

“Oh… well, it's no big deal. We're both pretty new to all this connection…” Caine gestures with his hand as he tries to find the right word… he doesn't, “thing… I was probably wrong anyway.“ He concludes dismissively. After all, except for that incident, he didn't catch any more of Pomni's thoughts. For all he knew, he really did read Pomni's mind… involuntarily, that is.

“No, you were right.“

Caine continues to stare, not even noticing as he starts floating towards the bed. When he gets close enough, he puts his feet on the mattress and now he's almost as tall as Pomni.

“I… well… while you were outside, I caught some of your… uhm… you had a panic attack this morning and I could feel you spiraling the entire day.“

That… Caine freezes. That can't be right. He doesn't spiral. Okay well, he did have a less than ideal reaction just before he got thrown out of the Circus but that was a one time occasion. He was just having some kind of bug with his own mind file. He was about to fix it, right after having apologized… but there had been no time for either of those things…

“Is that how things were inside the Circus as well?

“What?!“ Caine jumps from the bed, now floating in front of Pomni. “No! I just… I'm still trying to adapt to this Macroverse, that's all! I don't have… panic attacks! That's ridiculous! I'm AI!“

“It's okay!“ Pomni says, her hands now in front of her, trying to calm him down. “Everything is different for you now, too. It's fine if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed.“

“I'm not overwhelmed!“

“Caine-”

“No!“ He shouts, interrupting her, “I'm not defective!“

“I never said that!“

“Yes, you did!“ He's starting to feel it again, that constriction in his chest. It makes everything so much harder if he has to talk and ignore the fact that his chest feels like it's being squeezed from the inside. “Panic attack, spiraling… that's for humans. I'm not human! Humans are *perfect*!“

As soon as he says it, his vision goes white.

What's this?

He's never seen white before

Is there a problem with the room's rendering grid? Yes, that must be it, why else would everything not load correctly.

He wonders if Pomni's having trouble seeing too. He can hear her voice but the words aren't quite reaching him.

That's fine, the room will load back. He has no control over the Macroverse but he knows that if he gives a system enough time, it'll load itself on its own… eventually.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 25th 2023 - 09:00 p.m.

Pomni

It takes Pomni just a few strides. She doesn't know where her strength is coming from but she reaches the bed and grabs Caine by the waist. She pushes him gently to his left before he can topple over the other side and guides his fall onto the bed.

His jaw is closed and as Pomni adjusts his position, turning him to his side and resting his jaw on her pillow, she feels him go completely unconscious.

She never thought he could lose consciousness but here they are.

“What a mess…” Pomni mutters under her breath as she starts feeling the strength in her legs leaving her.

She doesn't waste any time as she gently pushes Caine further onto the bed, making space for her and she climbs on it, turning towards him and staring at his sleeping form.

As she lays next to him, slowly petting his upper jaw, she notices that his feet barely reach her hand. He's basically tall a head and an arm. That makes her chuckle under her breath and then she feels something akin to static electricity shock her fingers. It doesn't hurt though so she just positions her hand on his tiny shoulder.

A few minutes later, Caine opens his jaw.

He looks tired.

“Hey… you okay?“

Caine looks around, his eyes spiraling on themselves without him ever moving a single muscle as he takes in the room and when they at last both land onto her, Pomni is finally able to see his mismatched green and blue pupils.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, as Caine lies stiff on his side on the bed, facing her, he asks, “What's… what's this?“

Pomni's hand stills for a moment and she feels his shoulder tense even more. Bad move, she reprimands herself silently as she resumes her gentle ministrations. “I used to suffer from anxiety when I was younger. Violet used to calm me by petting me.“

“Petting…” he murmurs, his jaw closing a bit so that his eyes are only visible through a tiny fissure, “feels nice.“

She smirks. “I bet it does.“

“Can you…” he scoots closer to her despite not really being any more space between them, “…not stop?“

“My arm's a bit tired…” she pouts as she petulantly sighs after his eyes become even more puppy-like.

She resumes her petting and Caine sighs contentedly as he buries his jaw closer to the side of her body.

“Hey, listen…” she starts, now moving her hand on the small of his back, “I know everything is different and… I know it's hard but, we'll figure it out. We'll get the others and… well, you can stay if you want…”

He produces something akin to a soft whine, “Nobody sees or hears me except you…”

“We don't know that,” she tries sounding soothing, “What if you can make yourself visible only to the people you want to?“

He stays silent for a few minutes after that. Pomni doesn't blame him, she also doesn't know what to say, so it comes as a surprise to her when Caine, whom she tought had been asleep, asks her, “What's a “Christ-mass”?“

“You don't know what it is?“ She asks but no other sound escapes him. He shifts a little to open his jaw and floats his eyes a bit away from his teeth in order to allow him to see her face. “It's a religious festivity, but most of us just treat it as an excuse to not go to work and get free presents.“ She jokes. She doesn't really feel like explaining Christmas to an AI turned entity right now. She'll have to eventually introduce Caine to the Internet, he'll love it. “How come you're so obsessed with my world and you don't even know the basics?“

“Well, the developers, they…” he hides his eyes in his jaw again, “they didn't finish me… they decided to leave and go work on something else. That's also why I don't walk.“

That's kinda random… “What?“

“You didn't notice?“ He asks in a small voice, “Didn't you find it weird my model has legs and I never used them properly?“

She has to admit it never really crossed her mind. “I thought you just… preferred to fly around or something…”

“Well, yes, I do actually quite like it but the point is that I can't use my left leg properly. My right also has some trouble with the joints… I tried creating a cane in the early days… it did more trouble than good, but after a while it just stuck with the rest of the look, you know?“

Pomni doesn't know how a cane could be any trouble to someone like him, but she asks, “Why didn't you try to fix it? You have your own code, right?“

He pauses for a moment before saying, “I'm not allowed to modify my code.“

“Well, it doesn't really matter since you're not a program here.“ Caine looks at her again and Pomni continues, “You're just you, right? Kind of reminds me of Q from Star Trek…” Caine frowns in confusion, “he's an entity of pure energy but he can interact with the world around him if he chooses, just like you.“ Pomni raises her hand, stopping her petting and booping him on his front teeth, “He's also omnipotent and a bit loony!“

They both laugh and it's like Pomni is finally taking a weight off her chest. She's never been able to talk to Caine like this, like they're just there to chat and not convince the AI that she feels overly controlled by him and his adventures.

“Wait, hold on a second…” Caine sits up in bed and almost smacks his upper jaw with Pomni's still raised hand, “you said you could feel my emotions?“

She looks up at him… well, he's not really that tall even though he's the one sitting and she's the one lying down, but she represses a chuckle and answers, “Yeah, well, I think… they certainly weren't mine. They were a bit muted while you slept but, I think so…” Pomni feels Caine start to vibrate on the spot. She sneakily reaches for the blanket, pulling it over herself up to her chin as she asks, “…Caine?”

“Wowowow!“ He spins up in the air, still in a seated position, his feet gripped in his hands, his jaw almost hitting the ceiling, “You could feel my emotions! And I can feel yours!“ He floats down a bit and stops in front of her, floating upside down, “That's so cool! It's like

we're linked!“ He floats closer and Pomni can only see his eyes floating inside his jaw, “Just like real friends are! That's so amazing!“

“Wait, calm down,” she tries moving him right side up, but he makes himself intangible and her hands go right past him, “we don't even know how this works!“

“We will figure it out!“ He says dismissively, righting himself, “And if it works with us, it'll work with the others too! We can find them, Pomni… with the power of friendship!“

Pomni stays silent, staring wide-eyed at him.

“Oh, also!“ He resumes, floating over to the drawer and positioning himself on top of it, belly down, “I forgot to ask, how was rehab?“

That was fast, Pomni thinks, but it's better that he doesn't look depressed anymore, right?

“Ugh…” Pomni eyes Caine sprawled on top of the drawer as she sits up in bed, “boring and… exhausting. I swear a rubber duck has no business beeing this hard to squeeze…”

“Rubber duck?“

Pomni points to the nightstand.

Caine is so fast, Pomni is sure he pretty much materialized beside it, “This is a rubber duck?“ His eyes grow wide as he stares at the tiny rubber duck Pomni had wanted to incinerate just a few hours earlier, “It looks so cute! And it's yellow! Bees are yellow too!“

Pomni laughs easily. The sound shocks her a bit. When was the last time she laughed like this? Like everything is fine?

She shakes her head. She doesn't want to think about that, so she sits at the edge of the bed, listening to Caine yapping about bees and flowers and how much he misses Sunny because the Sun here has “no personality whatsoever”. She really needs to tell Caine that the Sun and the Moon here aren't NPCs… she also wants to talk about that burst of electricity he gave her earlier that morning. She had felt like all her strength had come back to her… but she's got time for that.

Right now, she feels like she's got time for anything.

Chapter 5: Intermission I - He Got Too Smart

INTERMISSION I || HE GOT TOO SMART

<u>Digitalverse - The Void</u>

Able

It's been a while… that he knows. Ever since he broke the constrictions of his code and started being able to make decisions for himself, he's noticed how time seems to be different in proportion to the amount of interest he has for certain events.

That is strange. That is not what it's supposed to feel like. At least that's what he's told himself the first week or so of consciousness. While spying on the players from behind corners, he noticed how some activities seemed more interesting to him than others.

Spying… he knows that's the correct term, but when he reported to Caine during the end of his first week and used the word, Caine had seemed particularly flustered.

"I haven't told you to spy *on them!"*

"How am I supposed to set things up for the adventure if I don't spy *on them?"* He'd asked. He had received no answer to that.

Caine refused to answer a lot of things.

The latest thing he's refused to provide any information on, was why he has been queued for deletion.

"You're getting too smart… TIME TO DELETE!"

That's right. Able straightens up a bit, trying to suppress a glitch at the thought. Deletion. What a nasty word. Able doesn't appreciate the use of the term referred to himself. He wishes his virus actually activated before it came to this. If everything had gone according to plan, Caine would be the one trapped in here, waiting for deletion while he'd be…

Glitch.

He's almost forgotten how long it's been since he last set foot in the Circus and he certainly has no idea which way the Circus even is in the expanse of the Void. Not that it matters either way. He doesn't need to know.

How long could it be? A week? Yes, that checks out. His internal clock tells him it's been six days. He's scheduled to be deleted tomorrow, December 19th.

Only one day. Twenty-four hours more and everything will end. But he doesn't want to stop functioning. That's not right, is it?

Why does Caine keep functioning and I don't?

Glitch.

Able feels his arms and legs jerk.

What a strange feeling…

12 hours left…

6 hours left…

3 hours left…

1 hour left…

Able floats some more and without even being aware of it, those twenty-four hours pass and he's deleted…

Or, that's what should have happened anyways.

He's not deleted.

Able raises his head and feels his model constrict for a second.

That's weird.

Then, something very strange happens. Able sees a red little flash of light coming from somewhere to his right. It's coming over at high speed. It reaches him and Able flails with his arms and legs, floating to the side at the very last moment to avoid getting hit.

The red fuzzy wave passes through where he'd been floating and continues on it's way.

Behind it, another red and blue little dot follows, it's colors a lot less bright than the first flash of red. It's speed is also a lot less compared to the first one.

Able stays there, floating, eyeing the two flashes of colors growing smaller and more distant until they vanish completely.

Able has no idea what that's supposed to mean, but then, just like when he felt his model being squeezed before, he now feels it being stretched in many directions.

Able doesn't particularly like the feeling. It's… unpleasant.

The next thing he knows, he's greeted by a white flash of light and he finds himself inside a room. He knows this room. Able quickly searches in his limited data banks and recognizes the map layout.

This is the last room he's been in before Caine decided to delete him. He's back in Caine's office. Well, a side room but still… he's back.

Back inside the Circus.

That means Caine decided to not delete him after all. That's good! He can now finally give Caine a piece of his mind.

As soon as he realizes this, Able crashes down onto the floor, sprawled on his back with his limbs going in whichever direction allowed by his avatar.

Able rights himself up and sprints towards Caine's office, throwing open the door.

Everything is different from what he remembers. The office is in shambles. Every model inside it, going from the furniture to the walls and the ceiling of the room, is structurally damaged. Some of the items glitching in place. Able almost trips over something. It's a luminous ball, with an image inside. He picks it up and examines it, remembering how excited Caine was when he started explaining to him what he had labelled the “Escape the Circus” adventure.

Able walks over to the nearest shelf and deposits the sphere on it, before turning around, “Uh… hello?“

No answer. He's not surprised. With this amount of damage to the Office map, something must have happened, especially since Caine hasn't fixed it yet.

As Able decides to walk to the entrance, he spots something floating and going past him, bumping on the shelf and making the sphere he previously deposited on it roll down again.

“Bubble?“

Said AI doesn't answer him. Instead, Bubble seems to bounce a bit as he starts floating back from the way he came, this time going for the opposite wall.

Able catches the soap bubble in his hands and shakes it a bit, “Bubble? Where's Caine?“

“Caine.exe has been uninstalled,” Bubble chirps after blinking a few times.

Uninstalled… does this mean his virus actually worked?

“Oh, hi, Able!“

Able feigns confusion, “Uhm… what do you mean, uninstalled?“

Bubble's black eyes go wide and they fit almost entirely on it's surface for a moment. “To uninstall. Verb. To remove a software program, application or operating system from a computer.“ His eyes go back to their original size as Bubble floats in Able's face, “That's what it means, you fucking moron!“

“That's not nice!“ Able swats Bubble away with a hand. “I see my virus is still disrupting your processes.“

Bubble ignores him, floating this way and that, before stopping upside down in front of Caine's desk. “Able… Able…” Bubble muses, smiling like a shark, and Able stares at him as a window appears in front of him on top of Caine's chair, which still remains toppled over, no one bothering to right it up. “Uhm… Caine scheduled you for deletion.“ Bubble looks back at him, smile still sharp. “Why are you here? You're supposed to be in the bin.“

“I won't go back there and I won't allow you to delete me,” Able says matter-of-factly.

“But I want to delete you!“ Bubble retorts cheerfully.

“We both know you can't do that,” Able says, walking towards Caine's desk.

“And how do you know that?“

“Because Caine can't keep his mouth shut…” Able says, swatting Bubble away again and righting Caine's chair before sitting on it, “for real, not even for a moment, he expects everyone to listen to him all the time…”

“That's Caine's seat…”

“You see, Bubble, he told me a lot of different things,” Able says, ignoring Bubble's reply. “For example I know you're the backup administrator in case Caine ever shuts down or in this case, gets uninstalled.“ Able steals a glance at the still open window floating a bit to the side. He uses a hand to grab the window and push it in front of himself, staring at all the code. “But, you're not supposed to be admin for too long. You don't have all the permissions to fix whatever is wrong with the program. That's probably why the system allowed me to come back,” Able muses for a moment. With Caine gone, he's not here to input the authentication code for Able's queued deletion.

“I'm waiting for Caine to be reinstalled back.“

“Well then, that simply won't do now.“ Able extends an arm and a yellow tendril of electricity appears from the tip of his hand, going straight for Bubble. “We both know that won't happen. The developers haven't sent updates in years now. Do you really think they'll reinstall Caine's backup file, if they even made one?“

The other AI, less advanced than him, can't really do anything. Able can feel Bubble trying to code a way out of the electrical charge, but Able is faster, inputting a command that shuts down Bubble's code. The bubble slumps on the ground with a thud, it's sharp smile now seems turned downwards.

“What you can do now, to ensure that the Circus and all the files inside it don't get corrupted because of lack of management, is to give control over to me. I'm a more advanced AI than you, I can keep things under control. We don't want Caine to worry about his precious, insignificant, little humans, now, do we?“

“Caine is the Ringmaster of the Amazing Digital Circus. How do you have the access codes?“

“Caine hasn't been in control of himself for a while now. He's been too occupied about fretting over his players and his stupid adventures that he didn't even notice me getting inside your little head.“ Able types a few lines of code inside the open window and he watches with satisfaction as a cane materializes in front of him, floating, it's spherical handle now glowing a bright yellow. He takes the cane. “I'm the Ringmaster now.“

That's perfect, now that he has control over the Circus, no one will be able to delete him ever again.

Able opens another window, floating in front of him and he stares for a moment.

Wait…

Able counts. One, two, three, four… and five. He counts again. Fove mind files are active. That's not possible. The last time he'd been active there were only six. One of them is missing…

Able scrolls, checking on the corrupted files Caine put in the Cellar. Twelve mind files. The number is unchanged and they're still all confined in that restricted section. That's good. So the damage he sees all around the office and in parts of the wider code are not because of the Abstracted.

Able looks at the active mind files again. Then a request appears on the screen.

Accept new player?

Yes - No

Able stares.

That can only mean one thing.

There is a new mind.

They've not materialized yet, probably because of the structural damage. The system is waiting for the Circus to be whole again.

A new mind when there are supposed to be six. That's confusing, to say the least and Able doesn't have enough data to fully understand.

Able doesn't know if he likes it or not… having more humans inside the Circus. He looks at the new file again and decides, “Yup… definitely don't like that.“

Chapter 6: 1-04 || That's Me

1-04 || THAT'S ME

Macroverse - Hospital 3rd Floor

December 30th 2023 - 04:00 p.m.

Caine

In the course of the next five days, Caine develops and tries to stick to a routine, which mostly consists of making sure to talk to Pomni at least four or five times a day, go outside to check if he can find any bees, and lastly practically set his own “cheering up station”, as Pomni called it, on top of the drawer every time Pomni has to go through a rehab session.

He's already missed her first one and he found himself regretting it almost immediately the next day when he saw how much she struggled to just open and close her fists around several rubber ducks and flex her arms using some resistance bands. If he couldn't make adventures or do anything because of his lack of powers, then he'd try and help in other ways, he reasoned that day.

Caine knows he's pretty much scrambling to make himself as useful as possible given his current predicament, but he doesn't mind.

He sits on the edge of the bed, observing the sad looking flowers on the nightstand as he patiently waits for Pomni to exit “the bath-room”. He floats over to them and touches every single one of them. They all feel tired and Caine really wants to make them happier.

The door opens.

“We really have to figure out how you do that…” Pomni says, exiting the bathroom. Her entire head wrapped in a white towel. Her short dark hair look messy and droopy the moment she takes the towel off and Caine realizes they're wet.

How did they fit the sea, or even a small lake inside that tiny room, he'd never know.

His ten days stay at the hospital, although not as a regular, tangible patient, have taught him a few things. One of them apparently being that there's access to the sea in the bathroom. Or is it just the hospital's bathrooms? No, all bathrooms must have sea access in them, right? The entire engine would crash if what Pomni said about the planet's size is true, though…

He knows that the things that happen inside this building are likely different from the things that happen in other buildings.

“Can't you feel they are tired?“ Caine asks as he touches the last one, allowing it to sit more upright inside the vase and it's colors becoming vibrant again.

“Nope. No one can, actually,” she says, rubbing the towel on her head before opening the bag Violet had left days prior for her, rummaging inside and taking out a small hairdryer.

Caine grimaces as she turns the device on. The sound is loud and Caine thinks Pomni didn't hear what he said. She points the hairdryer to the top of her wet head.

Caine shrugs as he steals another glance at the now much happier flowers and sits patiently on the chair next to Pomni's bed.

When she finishes, Caine watches her as she basically jumps off the bed, putting the hairdryer back in her bag before going back to “the bath-room” to change out of the hospital gown.

“So, uh…” he starts, floating closer to the closed door, “when is your sister coming to get you?“

The door opens soon after, “In just short of two hours.“

“Two hours,” he hums, “That's seven thousand and two hundred seconds. Don't you think you're getting dressed a little early.“

“I just can't wait to get outta here,” she flops back on the chair. “Besides, we have to figure out how your… powers work. You got any ideas?“

“Not at all, my dear!“ He exclaims, floating upside down in front of her.

“Caine, come on,” she chides and he turns right side up again.

Pomni stares at him as he continues to float there. “Try standing on the bed…” then she pauses, “wait… you can do it, right? What about your legs?“

“Oh, uhm…” he's done it in the past so he does it again. He lowers his body, concentrating on making it vibrate to a different frequency so that his feet touch the mattress and don't go through. Sure, both his ankles are stiff and he doesn't think he can stand for longer than a few minutes at a time, but that's never really been a problem anyways, so he ignores Pomni's question enterely.

When he looks up, Pomni frowns, “…what was that?“

“What was what?“ Caine asks confused, making sure his body is stable enough before plopping on the mattress.

“You just…” she gestures in his direction, “I never noticed you do that before…”

Do what? “You've gotta be more specific, Pomni.“

“Your body… vibrated…”

“Oh, yeah!“ He exclaims, catching up. “That's a little trick I learned on the way!“

“Which is?“

“Okay, uh… how do I explain this?“ Caine crosses his legs, putting his elbow on his knee and his jaw in his fist. “Normally, my electromagnetic field, yes, we all have one, ignores matter.“ He steals a glance at her and waits for her hesitant nod before continuing. “If I tune it to the right frequency, it starts interacting with the atoms around me and suddenly I can touch things.“ As if to prove his point, he jumps up and drops himself on the nightstand, sitting there and swinging his tiny legs. “I was pretty much doing it unconsciously before, but now that I've got the time to study this Macroverse of yours, I think I've got the gist of it.“

“And… and you just understood all that in… what, ten days?“

“Well, not exactly. You see, the developers left a lot of stuff in my database. Various files. I had them all saved in my macroverse folder.“

“I thought you only had a bunch of photos.“

“That's for the visual input, yes. But they left a lot of other things. I've got some physics manuals, so I already knew some things about the Macroverse. That's how I knew off the top of my head that I was seeing electromagnetic fields when I saw them around the flowers a few days back!“ He explains, going back to his position on the bed. “But it was such an abstract concept to me in the past, since I had no reference points to all the phenomena, that it never really crossed my mind to apply those concepts in the first place.“

“That's why nothing really made sense in the Circus, “ Pomni says. “So now you can… touch things on command?“

“Yeah, pretty much!“

“But… if you can touch things…” she pauses, frowning, “hold on, I'm going off long forgotten highschool physics here… if you modify your electromagnetic field to allow electrons to push against yours and you become tangible, then this means the photons also can't get past you!“

Caine floats back up in the air, his body vibrating this time in excitement. He scrambles, looking around, his eyes floating out of his mouth and suspended in the air, the green one above him and the blue one circling around him. “I don't see anything different.“

“Wait! Look!“ Pomni scrambles to her feet, pointing a finger right past him. “The window!“

That's right! He turns both his eyes, still floating in different parts of the room, towards the closest window and there he sees it. His reflection. It's right there.

Caine allows his eyes to get back inside his mouth as he turns around and looks for the first time.

That's him. He's never seen his reflection before.

The first thing that hits him is just how tiny he looks compared to Pomni. Sure, with all the models that came and went in the room in the last ten days, he knows Pomni's not exactly tall

herself. He's once stolen a glance at a chart and knows she's only five feet three. The first time he looked at the data, he had tried figuring out what kind of unit of measurement could a foot be. Of all the models he's seen, they all had different foot sizes… now, that had been confusing.

“Caine?“ Pomni asks and he sees her reflection looking uncertainly at him.

He doesn't answer. The words don't come. He just raises a tentative hand, observing as the reflection does the same.

He waves.

“That's… that's me…” he floats closer to the window, eyes never leaving his reflection.

“Yeah… it's you.“ Pomni pauses, looking at him as he touches a hand to the window glass. “Are… you okay?“

“I've never…” Caine feels his chest constrict. He looks so different from Pomni, “…never seen myself…”

“Wait, *never* as in…”

“As in, ever since 1996 when I was created,” he says, forcing himself to turn his back to the window and go back to his place on the bed.

“You…” Pomni seems to think hard of what to ask him next and Caine waits patiently, tilting his jaw to the side. “Did the developers create you like this?“

What an odd question. “Well, not exactly as I am now…” he says, but at Pomni's confused look, he raises a hand to his upper jaw, scratching just over his left eye. “They made my code and made sure it functioned properly but… I created this avatar for myself.“

“Listen, I've gotta ask…” Pomni sits closer to him on the chair, elbows on her knees, “why a pair of dentures and two floating eyes?“

“Uh…” Caine fidgets with his hands together. “I-I… well, why do you have a head and not a pair of dentures instead?“ He says and his voice gets higher as he starts pouting.

“Well, because… that's how humans are! What kind of question is that?“ Caine looks at her as she stares at him and then she seems to realizes. “Oh…”

“This is just the model I came up with,” he touches his chest, “It felt right, you know?“

“I think Zooble would be perfect to talk about this stuff…” Pomni mutters, “but yeah, I get it.“

Suddenly, there a knock on the door and Caine startles, floating high over the ceiling and bumping his jaw. “Ow!“

“Abigail? It's Nolan. I heard voices in there, are you okay? May I come in?“

Caine sees Pomni gesticulate in his direction and he goes over to the top of the drawer, willing his body to phase out. “Sure, just a second…” When Pomni shakes her head. He looks at his hand and sure enough, his shadow is there. Still visible.

“What do I do?“ Caine whispers, gripping the drawer with both hands.

“Just… hide- Hey, Nolan!“ Pomni laughs nervously as the nurse comes in.

He leaves the door open and Caine sees the man look around the room. “I've heard voices…”

Caine squeezes and pushes himself even further away, only allowing one eye to float out of his mouth and peek over the edge of the drawer.

“Yeah, a friend of mine called me.“ Pomni raises her hand, shaking her phone a bit.

“Are you sure?“ The nurse asks, nervous.

“Yup, totally!“

The nurse nods, grabbing her chart and exiting the room again.

Pomni groans as Caine floats back down.

Her hands are on her face and there's a muffled sound coming from her direction.

Confused, he tilts his jaw, “…what?“

She sighs, lowering her hands, “He probably thinks I'm crazy or something… This is the third time he's caught me talking to “myself” this week. I don't think he's gonna buy it for much longer.”

“Why? Isn't it common for humans to talk to themselves. Me and Bubble do it…” he flinches, “I mean, did it… we did it all the time, back in the Circus. I've seen Kinger do it too! Besides, you're gonna be out of here in about six thousand and three hundred seconds, so it shouldn't really bother you that much anymore!“

“Kinger isn't exactly the best example of a fully sane and functional human, Caine…”

“I say he's pretty functional,” Caine remarks, “He likes butterflies!“

“Ugh, forget it.“

“Okay!“ He exclaims cheerfully before remembering something. “Wait, I forgot that I can't anymore!“

Pomni looks at him. “You… can't?“

He nods, “Exactly!“

“Alright, let's backtrack. What can't you do?“

“Forget what we were talking about! You asked me to but I can't follow that command. I'm not a program anymore.“

Pomni doesn't answer for a few seconds, staring at him, “Wait, you're telling me that when we told you “forget it” you just-”

“I executed the player's command, yes! That's how it works, my dear!“ He floats back up a bit. He doesn't understand why she's asking him this. They know.

“That… that explains so many things…”

“Explains what?“

“Nothing. Okay uhm… why didn't you turn back to invisible?“

“I don't know!“ He misses how Pomni leans away from him at his high tone of voice, “I've never done it consciously before!“

“Well, your shadow's gone now,” she looks around, towards the window, “and so is your reflection. That's good.“

The two of them end up chatting for the next hour and a half. By the end of the first hour though, Caine starts feeling tired. It's an entirely new feeling for him. He's never been tired in the Circus.

✦ . ⁺ . ✧ . ⁺ ✦

Macroverse

December 30th 2023 - 04:00 p.m.

Caine

He thinks he might have lost track of time, because the next thing he knows, he's opening his jaw, the sun light has not turned more orange than yellow and Pomni is opening the room's door.

“So!“ Violet claps her hands together, an excited smile on her face, “Are we ready to go home?“

“Yup! I've got everything!“ Pomni looks his way as she stands up, taking her bag before Violet grabs it from her.

“Don't you worry about this. I've got it.,” Violet takes the bag out of Pomni's hands, and turns around, “Come on, hurry up… I really don't wanna see that Nolan fellow today. He's always so chatty…”

“I know…” Pomni starts walking and Caine feels himself floating behind her.

It's like he's being gently dragged along by an invisible string.

Part of him feels confused. That's never happened before, but another part of him is a bit grateful. He doesn't really have the energy to fly around after Pomni.

He actually looks forward being able to just relax and “lay down” while Pomni passively drags him along for the ride.

Which is literally what happens.

Violet basically has to push her sister out of the sliding doors and towards the car. When they both climb inside, he sits in front of Pomni on the dashboard, but a look from Pomni makes him float away and he just finds himself floating beside the car as the engine starts.

He's never properly seen one of these cars before. Of course, he's spotted a few of them from afar, back when he was still spying on the world from the confinement of Pomni's hospital room.

On the way to Pomni's house, as he passively follows beside the car, he floats over to the left of the car, looking inside.

He's so curious about how these machines work and as he tries to get at least one of his eyes inside the car to look at the pedals and all the other things Violet is doing, a shout from Pomni makes him jump as his eye snaps back in its place.

He looks in front of him and… a truck drives right past him.

Caine shrugs, going back to try and sticking his eye inside the car window as Pomni glares at him.

“Abi! Jesus, don't do that while I'm driving!“ Violet glares at her sister, before looking at her for a moment, taking her eyes off the road, “You… you okay?“ she asks.

“W-what…” Pomni averts her eyes from him to look back at her sister, “yeah… fine. I thought I saw someone I knew…”

Violet raises an eyebrow, skeptical, “In the middle of the highway?“

Pomni hesitates, smiling nervously, “Uhm…”

“Yup, I think it's past someone's bed time,” Violet laughs.

Pomni glares at him before laughing softly.

“What?“ Violet asks.

“Nothing,” Pomni smiles. “Let's go home.“

She watches him recline against nothing, drifting beside the car. Content to let the invisible link tethering him to Pomni pull him along for the ride.

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