



The Most

Excellent Zine



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**DIVIDED
WE FALL**





Pursuit of Extraterrestrial Knowledge

kibasniper

Standing at the edge of a stream, the tall, thin trees, with their plumes of deep green leaves and gnarled branches, tried to obscure what a pair of aliens sought.

Scratching through his hair, Bobby asked, "So, you want me to get that?"

"Affirmative," Chloe replied, unfolding a slightly crumpled paper. She gestured for Bobby to come closer, and he squatted by her side, examining a list identical to the one he received this summer, last summer, and the one before that.

"This is quite possibly the most important item in the scavenger hunt. Clearly, the counselors don't understand its true importance. It's critical we retrieve it for imminent inspection."

Bobby cracked his neck as he stood, giving their surroundings a quick check. They were a little ways from the reception area with craggy, imposing hills and open tunnels. The ominous growl of a bear lingered in the muggy air, combining with the familiar stench of fragrant wildflowers. As flowing water crashed into the burbling brook, and grasshoppers galloped between tall blades of grass, Bobby pulled his attention back to a tree cleanly chopped in the middle. There, resting in a sturdy, thick nest, was the condor egg, which he never bothered inspecting for himself.

"Y'know, I've never actually seen a condor," Bobby admitted, and he raised a foot, feeling the familiar, bubblegum pink shimmer of his levitation ball ghosting up to his ankle. He hopped on it and rocked, his eyes on the prize, a smirk curving on his lips. "I bet they all flew the coop like real chickens once they heard Bobby Z was in town."

Chloe slipped the folded list back into her pocket. "Should we try a higher vantage point? If you float down, it should be easier to obtain."

His grin fell. He glimpsed at the looming, weathered, rocky formation covered in saturated moss and damp grass. A large, hollow log was angled atop it like a sloping slide. It was aimed perfectly at the nest, proving Chloe's idea as reasonable.

But that wasn't good enough. Her suggestion was safe and sound. It was a beginner's challenge to leap off a conveniently placed log, pluck the egg, and rebound to the curb. There was no glory present in gliding and grabbing. With Chloe awaiting a response, her eyes turned up to him, he cracked his knuckles, swallowing the irksome lump in his throat.

"I could, sure, but I got a better idea."

He motioned for Chloe to stand back, and she obliged with a particularly wide berth. She stood with her arms crossed near the rickety fence by the path. The cool shadows within her helmet prevented him from discerning her expression, but it didn't matter. Her observations were astute enough. In the short time he knew her, it seemed she had a query or remark for everything; he wondered what she would say about him next.

His levitation ball trembled underfoot. Doubting himself now wouldn't provide a good performance. He walked back until he felt the light thump of his ball against a peg in the fence. Taking it as a signal, like a flare gun popping at the start of a race, Bobby shot forward, sprinting like his life was on the line. It may as well have been.

He kicked off as soon as he reached the water's edge and careened across the stream. Briefly, he was weightless, a feather in the wind, before slamming down hard on the closest curved branch. He squatted low, then lunged off again, repeating the pattern until he reached the rounded trunk of the nest's tree. Balancing with both arms out, he sighed, looked up, and jumped, scaling the trunk faster than even he expected.

As soon as he was eye level with the egg, discovering surrounding broken shells, he seized it with a bark of laughter, and floated higher on the thrilling vibes of pure victory.

Bobby twisted around and presented it to Chloe. Her head raised, a subtle shift on account of her large helmet. He landed and strolled across the water, hoisting it on his shoulder like a trophy.

As Bobby's ball fizzled out on the solid ground. Chloe brought her hands together or a single, crisp clap. "I haven't had much use of it, but you make levitation easy to utilize. Your species must be able to wield it naturally."

He handed her their prize, his grin pulling into gaunt cheeks. "Yeah, it's child's play," he jeered, and as she turned the egg over, drawing a circle around a darker patch, he grasped an opportunity to change the underlying subject. "So, um, why'd you want that?"

"Humans call this a condor egg. Well, did you know condors are actually from outer space?"

His jaw dropped. "What?"

"Incredible, right?" Chloe grinned, her scratchy tone light. "Condors are notoriously similar to avians on my planet. They're nocturnal and abandon their young. It's up to the elements whether they survive."

"Sure explains why there ain't any condors in camp. Do they lay their eggs, and fly away for good? When I went up there, the other eggs were broken. So, uh, could that be it?"

"It's similar to the earthling phrase 'flew the coop' in a literal sense." She paused, pressing her palms against the egg's sides. "What's peculiar is this egg is warm. I wonder-!"

A shrill, strident shriek sliced through her budding hypothesis. Both flinched, whipping their heads toward the sky. Amid the golden tinted clouds, a dark blot sullied the scenery. It hovered, circling over its prey, and Chloe gasped. As if that, too, was a flare gun popping, in the blink of an eye, the invader dive-bombed.

Wind assaulted Bobby's ringing ears. Deep brown feathers flapped fiercely in front of him. He sputtered, slapping nothing, and Chloe screeched. Repelled by the condor's wing, he couldn't reach her in time, not when the condor's talons snatched the egg and Chloe with it.

Hot blood drained from his frigid face. All he could do was shriek a dismayed cry of, "Chloe!"

The condor soared, wings angled to cut a clean line through the sun. Chloe's legs uselessly kicked the air. She gripped the egg for dear life as the distance between her and Bobby grew too vast for levitation alone. Even if he raced along the rocky ridges, bouncing higher and higher, he couldn't grab her. He raked through his matted hair, cursing himself for stewing in slack-jawed shock, and his heart burned as it plunged into the acrid acid of his sickened stomach.

Chloe's head swiveled. Sunlight glazed a pure white hue over her visor. But Bobby didn't need to read her expression to know her terror.

He clenched his fists. He boiled, lava rushing through his veins. Heat scorched his complexion in blotchy, violet patches. Throughout his entire life, he never felt such immense, broiling fury.

"Let her go," he snarled, sheer anger gathering in the pulsing veins of his brow, "you mangy mole rat with stupid wings!"

He fired and recoiled. A spiraling PSI blast speared into the air aiming for a bullseye. The condor couldn't evade, bearing the brunt of the blow to its torso with squawking terror. It screeched, wings flinching and feathers scorching, all while Bobby brayed with laughter.

But while the condor's talons cradled the egg, what dropped like an anchor into the sea was Chloe.

Bobby gasped. Every ounce of rage dispersed in that breath. His concentration faltered as her hazy colors grew solid to form her shirt and shoes. Throwing out his arms, Bobby stumbled forward, placing himself where he hoped he needed to be, and feverishly stammered her name.

But a stardust shimmer of soft plum swirled in the air. In the nick of time, Chloe grasped her thought bubble. She landed in front of him, safe and sound.

Glancing at his shaking arms, Bobby couldn't get enough air. He panted like he ran a marathon, wheezing, "Uh, um, a-are you okay?"

Relinquishing her grasp, Chloe adjusted her lopsided helmet. Her smile was bright enough to shine through its darkened interior. "Quick thinking! Once my space plane is finished, you'll make an excellent second-in-command!"

Instantly, her excitement soothed his zealous worries, his hackles lowering. He heaved a sigh so deep that he coughed. Her genuine praise warmed him to the bone, returning natural color to his otherwise pale, freckled face. He wanted to reply, but glared at the outlier making itself comfortable on the nest with their prize.

"Wait!" Chloe exclaimed as he brought two fingers to his temple. Pausing when he winced, she gestured at the condor preening itself. "She's the mother. She attacked us to protect her child. I thought the egg was abandoned, but obviously, it's no longer the case. We can't hurt her when she's only doing what's within her natural maternal instinct."

Bobby stuffed his hands into his pockets, his legs tense. He shook his head, snapping at himself to stop shivering. How she could be so understanding was beyond him. There were kinder aspects of Chloe that thoroughly mystified him, as he would have blasted the bird with every vestige of his imploding malice.

When she sat down, he joined her. Together, they watched the condor, and gradually, his agitation softened. The mother bird enveloped the egg in her thick plumage, settling down for a nap. Her chirping rumbled in her sleep, soon accompanied by the harmony of the wilderness. All was calm.

"Nature can be really beautiful," Chloe quietly stated. "Ordeal aside, what do you think, Bobby?"

"If you say so," he said, and he met her gaze, tilting his head. "Sorta nice, I guess."

Her smile remained, a slight curve, which he returned as best as he could.

"So, hey, what else d'you know about condors?"

While Chloe spoke, dazzling him with intricate details, Bobby felt like he could have listened to her for hours. Imagining the kind of planet and friends awaiting them beyond Earth was better when it came from her. And as he learned more, cementing his comprehension on her every fact, he realized he hadn't stopped grinning. Neither had Chloe.





True Psychic Tales #520

alleycatforthelulz

It was an oddly overcast day at Camp Whispering Rock. Not that it was always sunny but that cloudy days usually meant torrential downpours that would flood the nearby lake. Admiral Cruller never slept with an open door after Bobby and Benny floated his bed out onto the lake after the last one.

Not that Elka was complaining. It made for moodier lighting for the romantic boat ride she had planned with James. (If you squinted with your eyes closed, a canoe could almost be mistaken for a gondola.)

"J.T. my man, I thought we were supposed to be partners for canoeing today."

Now, if only she could get rid of the thorn in her side.

"Well, shucks pardner, I'd love to but—"

"Unfortunately, James, my boyfriend, already promised a romantic boat ride date with me," Elka cooed. Spotting Elton by the docks, she pointed over to the sailor boy. "Elton's free, why don't you partner up with him? You've got a lot in common: being obsessed with someone who is so not interested in you. Right honey?"

James' face became pinched, from having to stare at such a blatant display of clinginess no doubt, but before he could reply, Elton must have wandered over after hearing his name and butted in, "Hey guys, are you going out on the lake today? I wouldn't, cause the fish are all kinda freaked—"

"See, perfect for each other." Elka wrapped her arm around James and tugged him towards the boathouse to pick up their canoe. Sweetwind regrettably followed them.

Splash.

None noticed the sailor hat that bobbed up and down on the lake's surface.

The boathouse was a bit crowded for Elka's liking. Quentin and Phoebe were tolerable, but Dogen's presence ruined the whole mood. She couldn't help overhearing the trio's conversation as they walked in.

"-so I'm so glad we could help you get your Oarsman Badge Dogen, but I already promised Quentin here that I'd be his canoe buddy." Phoebe had an uncharacteristically nervous tone to her voice. That was to be expected when having to deal with Dogen though; he was more ticking time bomb than boy. Good thing that Elka was good with bombs, her visions could get her and Ni-JAMES out of harm's way before anything could happen.

A wonderful idea occurred to her. Without missing a beat, Elka inserted herself into their conversation. "Oh Dogen, do you need a canoe buddy? Well luckily, Sweetwind over here is looking for a new partner!"

Elka pushed Sweetwind towards the trio, grabbed James' arm, and spun off to collect their canoe at the end of the boathouse dock.

"But Phoebe, we didn't promise-ow!"

"Shush it, Hedgemouse.")

Of course, the Admiral had to store all the canoes at the very edge of the dock. All the extra cardio was good for James, he really needed to work out more with how small he was, but Elka herself could do with less.

Midway through, they passed Bobby and Benny performing their favorite pastime: bullying Maloof. At least they were a bit creative this time by adding a fish into the usual underwear action. James, bless his noble heart, looked like he wanted to speak up, but pursuits of justice are not conducive to dates starting on time. So with a snap of her fingers, she wrangled him back into place behind her.

Splash.

Elka didn't care to glance back to see if Maloof had been pushed into the water. J.T. did, but all he saw was a floating pair of underwear and three missing kids. unnerved, he hurried after Elka.

Their canoe awaited at the end of the dock. Elka waited, foot tapping, as James struggled to maneuver it closer to the dock. It was cute how he was such a fish out of water when it came to water, except in all the ways that it was annoying. He finally managed to park it next to the dock and they boarded.

"Wait!" Milka appeared out of nowhere, almost sending them jumping into the water. "I saw everything! The lake, it's—!"

Splash.

Drawn by the sound, they looked over at the blue fish that leaped out of the lake water. It seemed oddly agitated. They turned back to Milka, only for her to have vanished. Typical.

"Elka, you don't reckon—" James started but Elka quickly waved him off.

"It was just a cry for attention. Poor Milka, it must be rough not having a handsome, quiet, boat-rowing boyfriend."

Taking the hint, James started to row. They passed the docks and out onto a flat stretch of water. In the distance, they could spot the island that sat in the middle of the lake. In the not-so-distance, two canoes with their own canoe buddies.

"Hiya Elka! Hiya J.T.!" Crystal cheered. Clem followed suit, "Are you having a nice date?"

"Yes, before we rowed into you two," Elka muttered under her breath. They were sweethearts and she admired their relationship's slow and steady and loud pace, but from a distance.

A slight twitter from their right showed that Kitty agreed. The air between the two was frosty and they didn't acknowledge each other. Sometimes, that was for the best. The world wasn't ready for the clashing of such queens yet.

Splash.

Oh dear, the C&C duo must have heard her after all and jumped ship. Elka sighed in frustration; another girl's night was in order to cheer Crystal up later. She tried to catch Franke's eye, the more tolerable one of two, but blinked in astonishment that they had jumped ship too.

Two friendship bracelets, a scrunchie, and a headband floated on the water. Ignoring the pit in her stomach, Elka smiled at James. "Well, look at that! Weren't they so considerate to give us some alone time?"

"Er, I don't think that was iiiiiTTTTTTT!" From the heavens, a claw suspiciously shaped like an arcade machine claw dropped down and snatched up James. Elka could only gawk as her boyfriend was carried up into the sky, his hat dropping down into the water with a faint splash.

Just as his screaming started to fade into the clouds, Chops leaped into the air with a strong PSI-right hook. The claw released the cowboy and Chops was quick to catch his partner in his arms. They landed in a rough thud in his canoe, jostling Dogen who sat at the other end.

"You... you came back for me?" J.T. asked in a tearful voice.

Chops grinned. "Always."

"I'm here too," Dogen said.

ANYWAYS, this heartfelt reunion was cut short as two claws descended and plucked up Sweetwind by his obnoxiously big hair and James by his unfortunately cowboy-hatless-head. It was so shocking that Elka didn't even have time to grieve, left all by her lonesome out on the cold lake waters.

"I'm here too," Dogen said.

Elka watched the sky with fearful eyes, waiting for the claw to claim her next. She despaired over the fact that her date could go so wrong; when she had peeked into the future, the only doom she saw was with her and Nils being dragged under the lake by a horrendous brain-eating fish.

"I'm here too," Dogen said. We get it.

A courageous heart-throbbing voice called to Elka over the water.

"Elka, my sweet thang!"

Nils zoomed into view on his own canoe, leaving water spraying in his wake. With a mighty leap, he cleared the gap between their two canoes and grasped Elka tightly.

"I was so scared!" Elka sobbed. She buried her face into Nils' manly chest. He gripped her tighter to soothe her trembling body. Peering up at him through her eyelashes, her breath caught in her chest. She was a taken woman but at the end of the world, surely it was okay?

Chloe was there too, to deliver some sorta exposition about the sky-monster. Actually, it was aliens from the planet Peezah-blah, blah, back to the passionate makeout session between Nils and me. I mean, Elka.

"I was there too," Dogen said. Okay, Dogen, shut up. Oh no, look the claws took them away. Oh Dogen's hat fell off? It's okay, the aliens block psychic attacks. Plot hole? No it's not, shut up.

"Sky bear?" Mikhail, it's an alien not a-okay whatever, it's a sky bear and you valiantly defeated it. Wooooooo. Anyways, so Nils grew bold and nipped-

But that wasn't the only danger lurking on the lake. Maloof had barely escaped the clutches of the true lake beast earlier; who knew that underwear fish were a delicacy of lake monsters? He gestured to the canoe where he and Mikhail stood. "Come with us if you want to live."

-But before he could do anything, the lake monster smashed his canoe in two and they were dragged off by the aliens or something. Left alone as the only two campers left in the world, Nils and Elka locked eyes and-

Lili and Raz arrived in the nick of time to save everyone's brains from being eaten. Is that what this story is supposed to be about? Well anyways: sky alien attack. There goes Lili. Like I would go down that easily. Shut up, I'm telling the story here.

Oh, fine, your boyfriend Raz jumps heroically out of the canoe to save you, only to get dragged down by the lake monster where he drowns and dies forever.

"Am I still here?" Dogen asked. Yeah, sure. So-

Ca-caw!

In the talons of an eagle, Antonio "Ant" Aquato soared onto the scene to avenge his baby brother Raz. The eagle, who had spirited him away in the first place as a young child, had secretly been training-

"Wait, that's not how this story goes," Raz says, looking to Mr. Pokeylope to see if he's also hearing this insanity.

The story had started to grow as Raz helped rebrain the other campers. He thought at first that the others had been talking about Linda and had paid it no mind. It was when he was showing Mr. Pokeylope to everyone when he caught wind of the final twist of the story.

Elka rolls her eyes. "Well, duh. It's a campfire story. Didn't you have those at the circus?"

"I know what a campfire story is," Raz bites back. "But Antonio? Ant? Who even came up with that?"

Vernon perks up, gazing into the sky as he begins to wistfully recount. "Oh, that was me. See, this reminded me of a—"

Splash.

Vernon blinks in confusion at the now empty campsite. "Hey, where did everyone go?"

None noticed the sailor hat that bobbed up and down on the lake's surface...

Huh...?

Oh.

"Wait!" Milka appeared out of nowhere, almost sending them jumping into the water...

"You... you came back for me?" J.T. asked in a tearful voice...

"I'm here too," Dogen said...

But that wasn't the only danger lurking on the lake. Maloof had barely escaped the clutches of the true lake beast earlier...

In the talons of an eagle, Antonio "Ant" Aquato-

-soared onto the scene to avenge his baby brother Raz.

Wait, that's not how this story goes!



PROPOSED PSYCHIC DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY

Sasha Nein

Proposal:

While studying the developmental psychology of the general population of children with specific cognitive differences has become relatively commonplace, there has not yet been a study done on the developmental psychology of psychic children.

This is in part due to the continued stigma against psychics, but also due to the difficulty of gathering a large enough sample size such that meaningful conclusions can be drawn. However, Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp attracts a large number of campers every year, and the majority return at least once.

This provides a unique opportunity for holding a longitudinal developmental study, should parents and children both consent to participation. In addition to both naturalistic and structured observation, as well as interviews, however, the development of psychic abilities would also be tested. While it is unlikely that any correlations would be drawn between psychic ability and style thereof and developmental stage or personality immediately, it is important to begin testing psychic abilities from the outset, so as to lay the groundwork for future studies that able to draw such conclusions.

Cost:

The main cost of this study comes from the equipment necessary.

As uncontrolled psychic abilities can be dangerous and not all Whispering Rock campers always have full control over their budding powers, a safe, controlled environment will be needed to perform tests of psychic abilities. Thus, in order to minimize environmental damage to the camp and futureproof the study's methods in the event of those with unforeseen types of psychic power, a Brain Tumbler will be required, to create a mental construct that can be affected at will with no danger involved to participants or onlookers. As the Psychonauts have received decreased funding in recent years, I have taken the liberty of locating a cheap Brain Tumbler, and if given approval for the study, will purchase it, transport it to Whispering Rock, and refurbish it on-site.



It may also be necessary to compensate young psychics or their parents for their participation in the study. Should this be the case, compensation may be given in the form of tuition credit to Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp, to encourage further learning and to reduce the amount of funding we use on this study while still providing compensation.

Risks:

The large amount of Psitanium at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer camp may cause particularly strong thoughts, aspirations, fears, etc. to be amplified and turned into psychic interference. Said interference not only could interfere with data collection, but also cause campers to see related visions while in mental worlds or the Collective Unconscious. This risk will be mitigated by placing the Brain Tumbler in an underground lab beneath the Geodesic Psychoisolation Chambers, as the area is far enough removed from the Psitanium meteor at Whispering Rock such that if psychic interference were to cause visions at this distance, they would already be occurring elsewhere—for example, in dreams—where they could be noticed in advance.

On the data analysis side, the influence of psychic interference will be handled by analyzing the data from the Brain Tumbler and mitigating noise in said data through common statistical methods. In order to obtain a baseline for interference, attention will be paid to campers mentioning any out-of-place elements in dreams, particularly if more than one child mentions the same element.

Furthermore, there is the risk that a young psychic may see something disturbing in the Collective Unconscious or their own mental world, should they visit it. This risk will be mitigated by having a fully-fledged Psychonaut, likely myself or C. Vodello, overseeing the experiments testing psychic ability at all times, ready to pull the young psychic in question out of the Brain Tumbler safely should this occur. Constant communication with any young psychics undergoing this study will be necessary, both for their own well-being, and to determine when psychic interference may be occurring, should it not have been noticed in an outside context.



The third and final risk is that of data privacy. As we would be collecting sensitive developmental and personal information about children, to mitigate the privacy risk, all data must be stored on a computer with no access to the internet, as well as anonymized long before a study is published.

Should mental worlds be observed, they will only be discussed in terms of broad themes, rather than specifics, in data collection. Encryption may be necessary, with the decryption key given only to agents authorized to work on this study and randomized every three months.

Benefits:

The benefits of holding this study are a better understanding of developmental psychology in budding psychics, as well as laying the groundwork for comparative studies between child development in psychics and non-psychics, which may help researchers understand why some experience psychic breakthroughs and others do not.

Furthermore, facts about psychic child development may serve to lessen the stigma against psychics, as qualitative and quantitative observation of psychic powers in published scientific papers would cause them to appear as less of a mysterious unknown in public consciousness.





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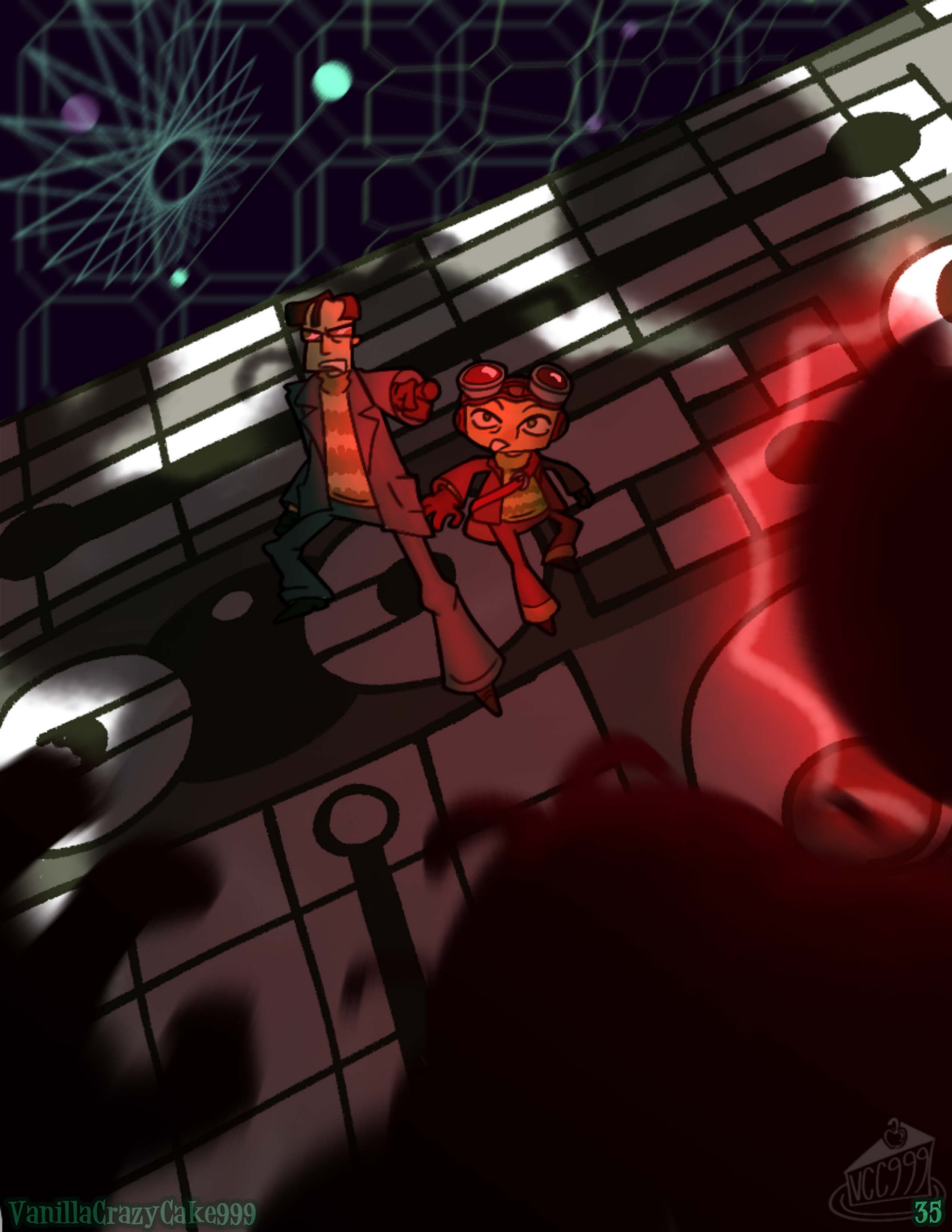
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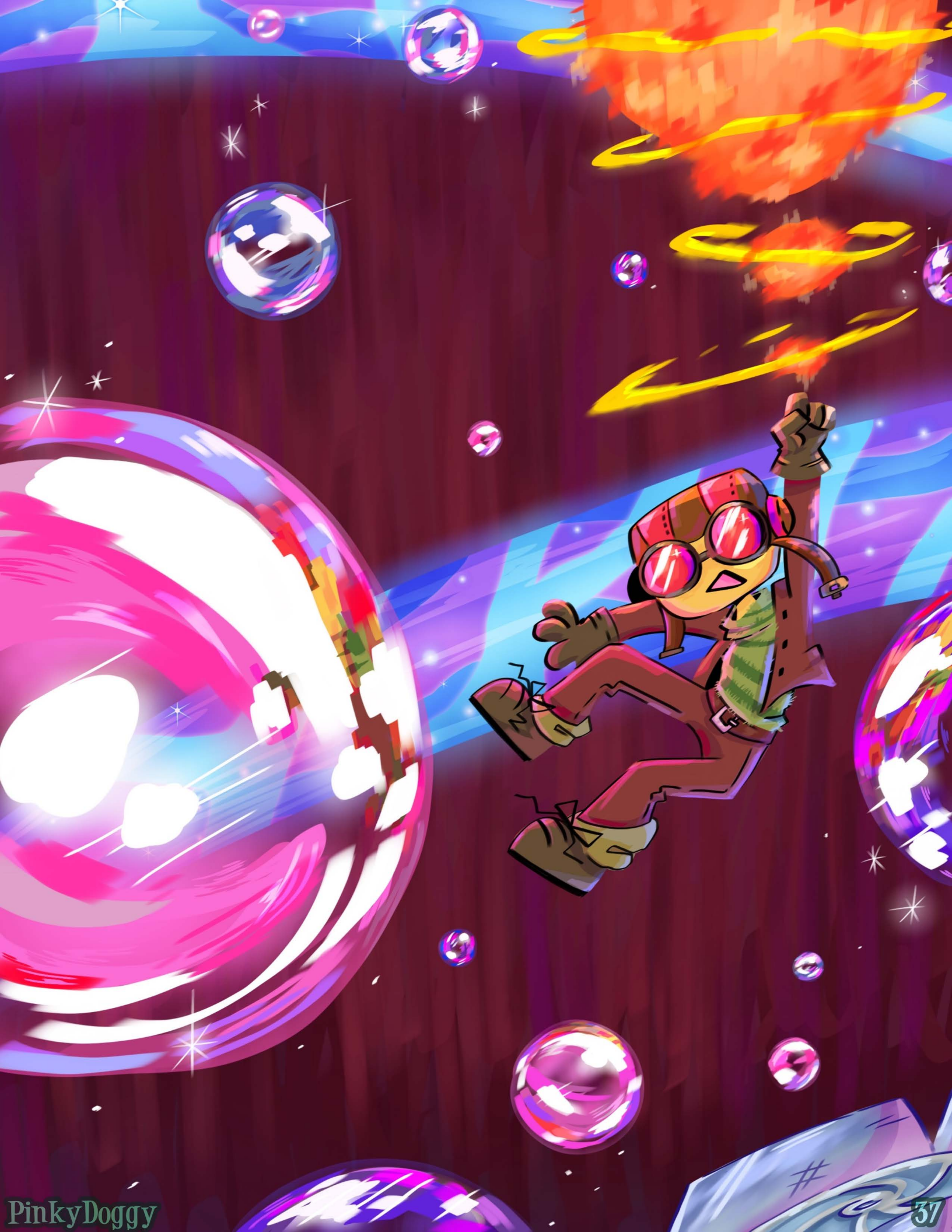
sasha nein's shooting gallery



a Mind of Bauhaus Principles.









Hot Air Balloons

alleycatforthelulz

The groovy beat and psychedelic lighting of Milla's dance party makes it one of the premiere mindscapes at camp. There are hardly any dangers or risks of being forcibly ejected either. Even if one didn't finish the final part of the course, it would still be a fun time to simply dance with friends in the dance lounge.

All of those things still didn't lessen Phoebe's frustration though. Once again, she readies herself on her levitation ball and leaps. She tries to switch the ball into a parachute at the peak of her jump. It flickers briefly and she jerkily floats for a second... before it disappears entirely and she plummets back down to the dance lounge.

She lands with a thud loud enough to make Quentin wince. Thankfully, Phoebe barely feels a thing as the fuzzy green carpet absorbs most of the impact. She lays there, facedown in the carpet, and Quentin warily approaches.

"It's okay Phoebe, you'll get it next time!" he encourages. Phoebe doesn't reply but the sudden spike in temperature says enough. Still, with a quick calming breath, she pushes herself determinedly and resummons her levitation ball.

"How do you switch so easily?" she asks as she precariously balances on top of the ball. Quentin scratches his cheek contritely.

"I dunno," he admits. "It's like, I think 'I don't want to fall!' and suddenly I'm floating."

At her disappointed sigh, he bites his lip and thinks. An idea hits him. "Maybe we're approaching this from the wrong angle."

"Oh?"

"Instead of trying what works for me, why don't we try what works for you? You're really good with fire, right?"

"Yeah, but..." Phoebe rocks uneasily back and forth on her levitation ball.
"I, uh, don't know if that's a great idea."

Quentin waves her off. "It's not like you'll be thinking of other people. You'll be focusing on yourself."

"That... might just work!"

"Right?" Quentin grins, glad to finally have been of help to his friend.
"So, why don't you think of it like a hot air balloon? You increase the fire, you go higher."

"Let's try it!"

Phoebe rolls over to the side of the lounge and leaps up the various platforms. She stops at the top one again to take a breath. Then she leaps, thinking about hot air balloons rising into the sky.

"Phoebe, you did it!"

Her eyes fly open in surprise, unsure when she closed them. Quentin beams up at her from the lounge as Phoebe floats in place. She whoops but quickly comes to a realization: she didn't consider how she's supposed to steer. She drifts forward, barely catching the airstream but too far down to make it to the platform across from it. She lands one of the balconies on the wall instead.

"Where are you going?" Quentin calls, with an undercurrent of amusement as he realizes what happened.

Phoebe huffs, "I didn't think about steering! Ugh, back to the drawing board."

"Hey, but you got farther this time!"

Before she can reply, a whisper catches at the edge of her consciousness.

"...ot... bur...ng..."

Quentin says something else but Phoebe pays it little mind as she tracks the whisper down. The entryway is partially blocked but there's still enough space for her to enter, barely having to duck her head. In the center of the room sit some old and dusty toys. She gives them a cursory glance but her gaze is drawn to the back right corner of the room.

The floor is slightly discolored. Bending down to touch it, her fingers come away tinged with soot. The whispers have gone silent and she studies the floor for a moment. After nothing happens, she shrugs and turns away. With no warning except for a sharp crack, the wood gives out beneath her.

The scenery spins around her and belatedly she manages to call on her levitation ball. It only materializes for a second but it's enough to ensure she doesn't fall on her face. The bright orange of the walls sears her eyes as she blinks furiously to figure out where she is.

The sweltering temperature hits her first. Molten bars surround her and she doesn't need to get any closer to feel the heat radiating off them. There's no smoke but the air feels suffocating anyway. Bright yellow eyes glare at her and her breath catches.

Nightmares line the outside of the cage. Or, she realizes, they're on the inside of the cage she's stumbled across. She swallows and locks eyes with one of them. She can taste her own salty sweat as it drips down her brow. ...

Her eyes burn as she struggles not to blink and tunes out the cries surrounding her. Because if she focuses too long on their words, on the heat and the burning and the fire, then she

"Phoebe!"

Quentin's voice snaps her out of her fugue. Unconsciously, her eyes dart up to him. He leans down at the edge of the hole and holds out his hand.

"Jump!"

She shakily summons her levitation ball. Her knees tremble too much to attempt more than a little hop. As if sensing their prey is fleeing, the nightmares bang on the bars of the cage and the cries turn into desperate screams.

"Just focus on me!" Quentin calls down. Phoebe focuses only on him and his strained smile. "Hot air balloon, remember?"

She closes her eyes, bites down on her lip, hard, and breathes harshly through her nose. Leaving no room for second thoughts, her eyes fly open and she leaps. Imagining that the heat around her is the fire lifting up a hot air balloon, she flies through the air. Her fingers barely brush against Quentin's, grasp slipping, when another set of hands grabs both of them and yanks.

They tumble onto the ground, nearly falling into the dusty toys. Milla's face is panicked and relieved all at once as she checks over them.

"Darlings, what were you doing?" she asks incredulously. Phoebe opens her mouth but no sound comes out as tears bead in her eyes instead. Expression quickly shifting to concern, Milla gathers the two in her arms. "Never mind that. I'm just glad you're safe."

Phoebe's shaking dies down after a while but she still feels the heat from that room. Quentin, face pale and drawn but not as shaken, yelps as his scarf end catches on fire. Phoebe's heart stops.

Milla places a hand on Phoebe's forehead and the fire flickers out.

"You... you stopped it," Phoebe breathes disbelievingly. Milla gives her a tired smile and a wink.

"You learn a few things over the years." She says it conspiratorially, like it's a secret only shared between them. "Mental blocks come in handy for cases like this."

"Can..." Phoebe remembers the pain and fear and the burning in the echoes below. "Can you block it permanently?"

"Absolutely not."

Phoebe flinches back at the unexpected sternness. Milla's expression is severe as she lightly grasps Phoebe's shoulders. "Darling, there is nothing wrong with your psychic power."

"But, it can hurt people! It hurt you!" Phoebe argues. Quentin reaches over and takes her hand. But she doesn't look away from Milla, who holds steady.

"Yes, and so could anything else. A flood could kill just as easily." Milla's tone is soft but firm. "I'm sorry that you saw something as scary and hurtful as that. But darling, I'm better now." Milla raises her hand to cup Phoebe's cheek and brushes away a stray tear. "I have support and want to support young minds like you in turn." She winks again and finishes with a joke, "Besides, I've been in my own fair share of explosions since then."

Milla pulls back and affixes them with a stern look. "Now darlings, you two know better to poke around in places you shouldn't be. Minds are very unpredictable, even ones that have regular upkeep."

"Yes Milla," they chorus. The sternness melts away right after. They had learned their lesson through experience already.

"What were you two doing to end up here?" Milla asks. Phoebe shuffles her feet.

"I drifted off course," she admits. Quentin squeezes her hand.

With a shake of her head, Milla mutters to herself, "I'll need to move this behind the fan then, make sure no other accidents like this happen." Louder, she addresses the two, "I'm sure you are both exhausted so let's get you out of-"

"Wait!" Phoebe interrupts. "I still want to finish the course!"

"Darling, are you sure?"

"Yes." Phoebe nods decisively. Quentin shoots her a thumbs up.

"Alright, if you're certain," Milla checks. At the vigorous nods, she sighs and shakes her head. "I'll allow it but you'll be under my supervision for the rest of the course, okay?"

"Yes Milla!" they chorus again but with significantly more cheer. Cracking a smile, she herds them out of the room and to the dance lounge. Phoebe prepares to start her leap when Milla waves her over.

"Darling, before I forget, the mental block I put on you will only work for Quentin. You'll need to practice with dampening down the urge for everything else."

"Why can't you block it for everything else?" Phoebe is more curious than anything as she asks the question.

"Oh, I can." Milla holds up a hand to stop Phoebe before she can interrupt.

"But that won't solve anything. You've seen Dogen, sweet boy that he is, and how difficult it is for him to control his powers without his hat. But if he never practices without his hat, there may come a day when he loses it and may unintentionally harm the people around him.

I want him to be able to walk around one day without worrying if he'll need that silly hat. And I want you to be able to not worry when sitting next to the campfire, or when your band brings in waves of people and they all hold up their lighters. That's my mission as a psychonaut."

"It's like a hot air balloon!" Quentin pipes up. He makes a motion as if raising something. "You want to lift people up!"

Milla chuckles. "That's suddenly one way of putting it, darling."

Phoebe can't help but be a bit starstruck. While she knows that the counselor is a psychonaut, this feels like the first time she truly felt it. The power to lift people up...

With that thought, Phoebe rolls her levitation ball to the edge of the lounge and leaps onto the platforms. Jumping up to the top, she doesn't spare a second before leaping into the airstream and gliding her way across. Milla and Quentin let out victorious cheers and Phoebe grins from ear to ear.

Maybe Phoebe could be the fire in that hot air balloon. She can burn, but not hurt, as she lifts the people around her up and up and up. She could start with the other campers, give them a shoulder to lean on and an ear that will listen. And maybe one day, after her highly successful band career, she'll be a psychonaut like Milla.



























Goopi 3/19





Lubia







THE MEAT CIRCUS





RAZPUTIN
AQUATO
IN:



THE

CHOPPING BLOCK



