



Author's Note:

Happy Holidays everyone! We're really excited to bring you this chapter this week, showing off the new PDF format for the stories. From here on out you can listen to the stories with the Southgate Media Group, read them at jameswylder.com, or download them from there to! We're also on Wattpad now, so the options are pretty wide!

Made sure you come by on Christmas Day (Tomorrow, December 25th) because there will be an extra special bonus for you. No spoilers, but it should be lovely.

Also, lets give some props to Annie Zhu, who has worked tirelessly to create fantastic visuals for all our stories. Go over to cardinalcapaldi.tumblr.com and show her some love, tell her 10kd sent you. Personally, I think the art for this chapter is the best she's done yet!

Without further adieu, here is Chapter 19, which is a doozy. Its the longest chapter so far, so go get some cocoa or something.

From all of us at 10k, we wish you love! -James Wylder

Imagine for a moment, that you are Graelyn Scythes. You are a girl. No, you're a woman. No, you can't make your mind up which label suits you better. Your skin should be more sunbaked than it is, but its not. You've been trying to figure that out in the back of your head this whole time: there must be something different about light, or the way it interacts with things in the world you were just in. But that's been pushed out of your brain by whats in front of you. There is a figure at a desk in strange robes, writing. The desk is broad and dark, formed of a deep and sullen wood. The figure rises slightly at your presence. Your foot touches down-- and there is a note! You recognize the note. It is an "A" on the treble clef, the one you get to first from the bottom of the staff. The slab of faintly glowing crystal filled with sand beneath your foot made that note, like a piano key. You learned piano as as child. You want nothing more than to be an adult. You want nothing more than to be a child. You played that note with Lizette, her tiny fingers learning the notes you did so long ago. You worry you poisoned her. But this whole road you're on is crystal, and you will be walking it. Behind you steps Arch, your friend. You barely knew him before this journey, and now he's just always there. Strange. You look up. Your jaw drops. You feel the cool air in your mouth, giving a taste to go with the awe you feel inside you. Good God, look at the stars! They aren't even stars though. You try to take in the magnitude of it all. You try. You've seen this before, but it was different then. You were with an army, with Kinan, your mind was elsewhere. Now you can really see it, *really* see it. Its glorious. Your thin fingers want to reach out for each star, each world, each dimension.

The stars spin around you. Your crystal road lights up, lights a path to the world of the gods in mythology. Bifrost is right, it is apt, you see it now. You're behind the curtain, behind the world. It clicks. The majesty descends on you, and you feel small, but not in the way you usually do.

"Shit" says the man behind the desk.

The magic is suddenly and utterly broken for you. You stop being you. You're just the reader again,

sorry. You return in front of the words, where you are, where you were. But you were Graelyn for a moment, I hope you briefly enjoyed the guided tour.

“Hello.” Graelyn says, as you externally observe her again.

“How did you get back here?” The figure at the desk says, rising to its full height.

“I stepped through the looking glass.” Graelyn says, and the present tense starts to fade. You were part of this, but less and less now. You're just reading a book again, which is in itself a pretty good thing.

“I'm warning you,” he says, “you need to leave immediately. All of you.” It knows we're here, shh, stay quiet.

“All of you is odd to say for two visitors.” The figure is silent for a moment, it leans down and scrawls something down.

“By order of the Firmament, I'm ending this.”

“We're trying to get home.” Arch cuts in. “I don't know who the Firmament is-”

“Pathetic. But the fact that you got in here is astonishing. Are you of sound mind?” It asks. They look at each other, and shrug. The stars are plenty.

“I assume so.”

“Puzzling. Regardless, your adventure has gone on long enough.” It sits back down. It scrawls. Its ink is the color of blue when you dream. Graelyn walks down the path, the notes echoing in eternities, Arch clomps behind her. It finishes defining the firmament above our sky on paper. Graelyn opens her mouth to speak.

Graelyn opened her mouth to speak.

The universes go black, and the Crystal road carries you no more, your eyes scarred only by a blue scrawl that floats off into the blackness of a void.

Perhaps it could be something like a dream, but you felt your foot make an “A” on the treble clef.

The sheets were warm, and she didn't want to leave them, but the voice at the edge of her consciousness kept calling. Then the cat walked over her.

“Graelyn! Breakfast is ready.”

“Coming mom!” She said, suddenly jerking to attention. Mister Sprinkles took that time to sit down on her head. She carefully lifted him off, and set him down as he meowed at her.

“Shh, I've got to get dressed before mom gets impatient.” She hurriedly got herself ready, removing her PJ's and slipping on her underclothes and skirt, buttoning her shirt so fast she missed one at first, loosely putting her tie around her neck, and searching for her cat pin... Where was it? It was nowhere on her vanity, and she lightly cursed as she gave up and grabbed another pin, which she didn't remember having, of a giraffe. Sure, why not. Graelyn hurried out of her room, slipping her shoes on and grabbing her bag in case she needed to make a quick exit. As she made her way down the stairs she nearly knocked over Treanna, who was carrying a cup of tea.

“Graelyn, what's the rush?” She looked down at her. “You know we're not leaving for the Zoo for a few hours yet right?” Graelyn was speechless, she just stared at her. “You alright, lil sis?” She nodded dumbly. “Okay great, well, Dad made waffles again so try to pretend like you're excited.” Dad? Made waffles? She held onto the railing as she made her way down to the dining room where her mother, older sister Xandra, and older brother Alexy were seated, with her dad rushing back and forth from the kitchen dropping different items like glasses of milk, cups of tea, and waffles on the table. They were all smiling, well except Alexy who was busy looking at something on his tablet. Xandra waved at her as she stared, looking at her quizzically.

“Good morning!”

“Morning.” She managed to respond.

“Is something wrong? You look pale.” What was this? She... It occurred to her that this was wrong. Her father had moved to Annapolis Maryland after he'd divorced her mother, along with Alexy and Treanna. Xandra had run away from home. Graelyn and her mother had lived alone together after that. Then she'd gone to Atlantis. Then she'd ended up in Songbird's world... And... Had that all been a dream? Some kind of nightmare? She set her bag down, and sat the table, still dumbfounded.

“Graelyn?” She snapped back to reality, or whatever this was.

“I'm, I'm fine, just... Had a bad dream.” Her mother reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, and Graelyn flinched, pulling her body in tight to avoid the blow.

No blow came.

“Graelyn are you sure you're okay? We can put off the trip to the zoo you know. You're more important to us than a little trip.” Her dad said. Graelyn was about to respond, when another voice came in.

“Dad I don't want to miss the zoo today!” Her little brother Petyr said. Graelyn heard the voice, and turned, and he was there. His light red hair was shiny in the early light. He had a big blotch of freckles right over his nose and cheeks that didn't travel over the rest of his face. He was rubbing his left eye and yawning. He was perfect, and Graelyn knocked over her chair as she scampered over to him, wrapping her arms around him tightly.

“Petyr... Petyr you're here, you're really here. I can't believe it.” She held back the tears she wanted to cry, not wanting to look weak in front of her mother, but still hugged him tighter. “Oh Petyr. I can't believe this. You're really here!” She repeated.

“Uhhh, yes?” He rasped through her hug. She kissed him on the cheek, and let him go, keeping him at arm's length as he stared at her in confusion. She stared at him in wonder, and ruffled his soft red hair.

“Hey.” She said lovingly.

“Hey?” He replied. Overwhelmed with emotion, she took him in her arms again.

“Graelyn, are you sure you're okay?”

“You're also blocking my way down the stairs.” Treanna noted.

“Sorry.” Graelyn said, getting up, and trying to look non-concerned. “Sorry, it was just a really weird bad dream.”

“Jesus, how bad could it be.” Xandra said.

“Language Xandra!” Her mother said. Graelyn expected to hear an undertone of malice there, but instead Xandra just rolled her eyes, “We're all adults here mom.” Xandra hadn't dyed her hair. It was still red, like her mother's.

“Graelyn and Petyr aren't.” Xandra waved her off, and Graelyn awkwardly took her seat back at the table, letting her father put a waffle on her plate. He finally sat down, and her mother held out a hand to her. Not entirely sure what to do, Graelyn gave her a low-five. Then, as her mother became quizzical, she noticed everyone else was joining hands. Oh. Blushing, she took her mother's hand, and tried to hold back the shivers running through her body as she did so. On her left though, Petyr took her hand, and she felt euphoric. The two feelings clashed inside her.

“Let us pray.” Her dad said. Pray? Graelyn tried to remember the last time she had prayed.

Then she remembered the last time she had prayed, and it took all her focus to not bolt up from the table.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” the table began in unison. Graelyn couldn't make herself form the words, she tried, she really tried, but she couldn't make them come. She waited it out, till her mother and Petyr squeezed her hands and let go, and the table said an “Amen.”

“Dig in, I don't want to buy any of you expensive Zoo food.” Her dad joked. It wasn't actually funny, but Graelyn found herself joining in the chuckle.

“Morning, Archimedes. I hope you slept well.” The computer said.

“Thanks, WeN-D.” Arch replied, groggy for only a moment before the mechanical parts of his body pumped the organic parts of him full of the chemicals he needed to wake up. Fully conscious, he got off of the form fitted slab that was his bed, and began to go about his day on the station. Outside his door, his sister Artemis was sucking up a packet of nutrient paste, while his mom was busy getting ready to go tend to the hydroponic gardens. “Good morning Archimedes.” His father Apollo said, his carapace lighting up with friendly symbols in his general direction.

“Hey Arch” said Artemis, throwing up a caricature of Arch bumbling about a room on hers.

“Artemis, really?” Aphrodite, his mother, cut in.

“Sorry mom.”

“Get a packet of paste from the dispenser, today is going to be a visiting day so we all need to be at our best strength. You might want to polish your carapace.” They all of course had identical carapaces, that was one of the whole points of their society. After Earth died in the nuclear Apocalypse due to divisions in humanity, removing barriers between people like specific cultures was the next logical step to prevent it happening again. And visiting day was important, it was when the ambassador from the survivors of Earth came to visit with new supplies he'd scavenged. It was always a good day when Manuel Salazar was around.

Manuel Salazar.

Thinking the name stopped him cold. He looked down at his mechanical hand, and flexed the fingers in and out. He looked at his sister, sitting there, sipping her paste.

He saw her lifeless body floating out in space, along with his mother and father's. He saw the hull rupturing, those two women who had come on board and ruined his life that day... But he had been so young and naive those months ago. He saw Manuel Salazar in his mind's eye, and he knew who was at the heart of all of this. His sister, outside of his eye, angled the paste packet trying to get the last morsel out.

“I've never been so excited.” Archimedes said. He wasn't even lying. Both of his parent's carapace's lit up in fireworks.

“It is an exciting day Arch, he's been gone a long time this time. I wonder what he brought back this time?” Arch didn't know, he didn't care, as long as Manuel Salazar was aboard that ship. Arch filled up a packet of paste from the dispenser, and drank it down. He then got into the hygienics machine, and allowed it to clean and repair his carapace to the best of its ability. He stayed focused. Then it occurred to him, obviously, while he was in the cyborg equivalent of a shower of all things, that this didn't make a lick of sense. The machine removed his plating, unscrewing it, and cleaning his skin down to the pores, and cleaning, replacing, fixing, polishing, and oiling his mechanical parts. The machine got to work fixing some internal damage left over from where Chrometeeth had reached inside him and gripped.

That was the hole here, wasn't it? He's seen his family die. He'd met Manuel before. He'd been to other realities, and this was not his own reality. This couldn't be a dream, he checked his internal status and that clearly told him if he was dreaming or awake, which was probably annoying for people trying to write stories about trying to tell if you were sleeping or dreaming, but which was very convenient for him. His memory was video, and he could see it all. He could literally pull up the files of the past. He saw his family die. He saw Ares push him into the ocean from that vtol. He saw Graelyn's face as she woke him up. Saw her look of shock as he grabbed onto a rocket and flew out the side of a building. Saw Alice's face as they had talked. Saw himself as an owl, of all things. No, There was something that wasn't right here, and it wasn't his memory.

Graelyn watched the giraffe eat some leaves off of a tree, its jaw working back and forth to grind the

greenery up before swallowing it. Petyr was watching it enthusiastically, and she smiled down at him. He wouldn't be shorter than her for long, she realized. How odd that was. He had, in so many ways, stayed the same height for so long for her...

"Hey you creep stop looking at my sister!" Petyr was no longer looking at the animals, but looking at a man standing nearby, his eyes fixed on Graelyn, a camera lens lowering. Graelyn turned to look at him, and felt her own hands on this railing, but not her hands. She saw he had a black bag, so professional camera equipment. No one bothered carrying that stuff around unless they were very serious anymore. She met his gaze, and he turned and fled.

"What was that all about?" Petyr said. Graelyn realized, and ran after him. "Graelyn wait!" But she was already gone. The man wasn't particularly skilled at getting away or hiding, so she quickly caught him, grabbing him by the upper arm as he tried to run. Realizing he was caught, he stopped. The chase had been brief, and Graelyn realized how much more athletic she felt after all her adventures. She had, in all honesty, never exercised in her life of her own choice. She did well in gym in school, but only because she wanted an A+. Now she could run down a grown man. Maybe it was just because he wasn't athletic, but... She'd been away from home for some time now. Sure, most of that time had actually been spent in jail, but she wasn't going to count that against herself.

"Why are you taking pictures of me?" She didn't let go of his arm. Where was this coming from inside her?

"Look, I don't want any trouble."

"You're the one taking pictures of a teenage girl and running away." She felt strange, wrong, why wasn't she running?

"I'm Igor Andropov, I'm a photographer for Centro Media Moscow."

"And?"

"I thought you looked like someone I took pictures of yesterday." Graelyn tightened her hand. She felt stronger than she should. She scowled.

"Well clearly you're mistaken."

"I should just go..."

"Show me the pictures."

"You don't want to see them."

"Why?"

"They're of a girl who died on the metro last night. A maglev train derailed, seventeen people died. Among them was a girl. The body was nowhere to be found an hour later." Graelyn's grip loosened. Her scowl faded. It sunk in.

"Was her name Graelyn Scythes?"

"They are literally replaceable. As in, we've replaced people before." Johnathan had said.

"Yes." Graelyn let go, and tried to keep her footing on the pavement. A smiling concrete elephant for children to climb on made eyes at her. She stumbled.

She was dead.

That hadn't been a nightmare.

She was her own stand in.

She felt her hands on the railing by the giraffe, and saw herself looking down at a younger Petyr.

"We'll come back here again when you're feeling better."

"Promise?"

"Promise." She saw him weakly smile from his wheelchair. The photographer was saying something but she couldn't hear him. She could feel herself, this self, she was cold. She felt herself lurch over, and the pancakes come up her throat. Falling to her knees she retched on the ground. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" She spat out the vomit from her mouth, and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"I want to see the pictures." She said weakly.

"I don't think that's-"

"Show me the damn pictures!" She yelled, grabbing his wrist. He slowly nodded, and she let go, breathing hard. He pulled out a tablet, opened something up on it, and handed it to her.

"Its pretty gruesome." She didn't care. She looked at the first picture: It was a young woman, 17, a piece of rebar going through her neck and up through the base of her skull. Her glasses were askew, as if she was just about to fix them, but they somehow hadn't fallen off her head. One of her legs had been crushed by falling debris. Blood had soaked through her white shirt from an unseen injury in her abdomen.

She'd been sitting on the train. She could feel herself there, right now, the rumbling beneath her, the passing city scape through the window. Then there was a snapping sound, and she dropped what she was holding (a tablet) as the floor of the train become a 45 degree slope. She felt herself fly through the air and-- well, you can guess the rest. Graelyn held her neck, and handed the tablet back to the man.

"Was she your sister?" He whispered.

"Graelyn where are you?" Petyr yelled. She looked the man in the eyes, and finally, she felt like herself, and the instinct she'd been longing for took over. She ran.

The whole of Ahnerabe Station had come out for Manuel's visit. After all, they always did. There were a few who were manning essential systems, of course, but there were no volunteers for those jobs today. They stood together in the greeting room, and waited for the shuttle to dock, watching it on the viewscreen together. For the first time in a long time, Arch felt at home. Here were the people he'd grown up with, people who kept their skin covered, who removed their excess body parts. He felt no embarrassment here with them, no awkwardness at looking at someone else's skin. The temple to the Olympian Gods was still here, he'd checked on the way over. Oracle Hermia and Priestess Nike had been busy arguing over what sort of offering to make for Manuel's arrival, as usual. Their bickering had annoyed him so much as a child, but now he stood outside the temple door and listened to their petty argument. The evidence was overwhelming that this was not his home, he knew this had to be an alternate reality he'd been placed into, probably by that figure at the desk, somehow. No one could tell him it was a dream, because his records were too precise. No one would fool him, he'd already been fooled his whole life. But still, it felt like home.

* * * *

When Arch had been a child, he had been there for the first visit of Manuel Salazar to their station. He'd shown up, out of the blue, broadcasting on an emergency communications channel for help. Oh how surprised they'd been. They'd gone their whole lives thinking that they were all that was left of humanity, and then he'd shown up in his ratty spacesuit, tears streaming from his eyes, saying he'd been searching for any other survivors. They all knew the story of the war, how humanity had failed, had turned the Earth into a nuclear wasteland. How they had been the only ones who saw it coming and had fled to Ahnerabe station. The Earth, and its colonies had all been nuked, and the signals had died off. Manuel came as the ambassador of the last survivors of that great planet, who had survived the blast in a giant bunker. There were very few of them, but he promised to bring them things they needed and to come and visit. He brought holograms from the other survivors, sickly looking people who waved cheerfully at the camera, and the people of Ahnerabe knew they were the chosen ones. Earth was unsafe to traverse, and they needed to stay onboard. And so they did. They waited.

But in hindsight, there were so many incongruities. They couldn't have all the spare parts to keep building replacement parts for every new person born aboard the station, and according to the elders, the station had been built hundreds of years ago, but the quality of the parts kept improving, and the station seemed fairly new itself. Not state of the art, but clearly from within a half century. He had spent the time before Manuel's arrival today rooting through things he wasn't allowed to. He opened panels, and pulled open circuit boxes to find parts labeled "Centro Systems, Manufactured 2449". He checked the communications receiving devices, and found there was a block in his mind telling him to not do that. *Just ignore it, Arch.* So he ignored it, deleted that code, and went back. After looking

through the device's code, he found it was programmed to only accept and receive encrypted transmissions from vessels with the proper transponder codes. He knew very well what that meant. His body tried to regulate his rage, and pump in chemicals while associating those chemicals with good memories of Manuel Salazar. He stopped thinking about anger, and calmed himself, then went into his own code and deleted that to.

His mind wasn't even his own. His body plotted against him at every turn. When he tried to question it, a voice in his head told him not to. The white walls of the station were crushing in on him, his body was a husking shell. He hated it. He hated his stupid body, filling him with poison. He was weak, trapped in it. Arch reached for his arm and began tugging on it. Get it off! He wanted it gone. He didn't want to have it anymore.

Get a hold of yourself, that isn't doing anyone any good!

He exhaled. His breath was reprocessed. He knew what he had to do. He went back into his own code, and sifted through it. He had work to do before the ship docked.

And that is how he ended up that day in the greeting room (they had a room just for greeting visitors, when they were the last of humanity, and no one was biologically allowed to think that was odd). Arch allowed his body to move into the pre-programmed greeting posture as the shuttle docked, and a handsome man from Guatemala stepped through the airlock, grinning as he grabbed a modesty mask from the wall.

"My friends!" He said, throwing his arms wide, "It is good to be back here on Ahnerabe station." Applause. He took a short bow. "I come back with more gifts, and news from Earth. It looks like we are ready to take a few more of you back for the Terraforming project."

Ah yes, the Terraforming project. Every so often, Manuel would take a select group of people from the station back in his spacecraft. It was usually only one or two. The stated goal was that they would be helping to create a radiation free area on Earth they could all move into eventually. They always felt very happy for whoever was chosen, and they were never seen again. But no one ever missed them. Applause followed.

"This time I will be taking..." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a tablet, "uh, Tethys and Oberon." There was applause, and the two lucky people got many pats on the back, the clunky sound of the pats echoing throughout the chamber.

"Mister Salazar." Arch spoke. He raised an eyebrow, and lowered the tablet. No one ever spoke over him. "I think you should take me as well." Several people's carapaces lit up in awkward swirls, as if to say, "He is NOT with me..."

"Arch what are you doing?" his sister said, through text that appeared on the bottom of his vision.

"Trust me." He replied.

"Oh?" Manuel laughed, "You know I follow strict guidelines, and it seems like you might need to be serviced." Mandatory laughter.

"Ariadne Moore." Arch said. "Centro Systems. Nojpeten, Inc. Graelyn Scythes. John Aril. Project Atlantis. Maria Salazar." He paused, trying to think of one more thing to say, "Lizette." Manuel's jaw dropped.

"Possum, Sinestro, Victor, Betafish." Manuel said, and the room stopped being at attention, instead the drooped as if they had been turned off. Arch stood tall.

"The auditory deactivation code doesn't work on you anymore. Impressive."

"Neither will the non-auditory ones." Arch said. Manuel rubbed his chin.

"Well, this is interesting. I never expected this. Though I'm not sure exactly what this is."

"Revenge." Arch said, and burst forward, faster than Manuel could realize. In the time it took the edges of Manuel's eyes to widen, Arch had cleared the room, unsheathed a sword from his arm, and put it to Manuel's throat. Manuel looked down at it, terrified.

"Wait." He rasped.

"Why."

"If you kill me, this station will explode. There's a subdermal implant, in case there was some sort of revolution, inside me. You kill me, boom. Everyone here goes up in smoke. Well not literal smoke, we're in space."

"Naturally." Arch said, unamused. He scanned for devices that were accepting signals on Manuel's body... And got a ping back. It wouldn't identify itself, it could be something else, but Arch couldn't take that chance. Not with these people's lives. Still, he had the upper hand.

"I have a lot of questions for you, Manuel. We're going back to Earth."

"But... Its a wasteland."

"Yes, I'm sure its horrific, drinking beers on the roof of your private pyramid with your loving extended family." Manuel looked afraid. Good.

"Well, uh, we're all friends here."

"Are we."

"How about you take that knife from my throat and we can have a nice civil chat, just you and me, ey?" Arch nodded, and lowered the blade. Manuel rubbed his throat. "Jesus kid, I have to say, I really am impressed."

"You lied to us. You lied to us for our whole lives." He laughed.

"Of course I did, there was no other way to keep the project going. You can't just make your own private army of super soldiers by telling everyone that's what you're doing. You get everyone too riled up, they'll start fighting before you're ready for them to, and then what good is everything?" Arch looked over at the silent room of his country folk. Their eyes blinked in unison, like a big device indicating it was on low power mode.

"Soldiers? We were going to be soldiers?" Manuel rolled his eyes, and started walking away. Arch raised his sword again.

"Oh don't get jumpy. I'm just going to show you something." Arch followed silently, and they went to the station's theatre. There was a big projector, that could make either 2D or 3D images, and rows of seating. "While the station's population is asleep sometimes I watch films in here, after all nobody leaves me alone on the surface for 10 seconds, business business, not that you'd know that... Or perhaps you do. I'm so curious how you do know."

"You can learn a lot when you stop being a slave."

"Slave? You're being very melodramatic." Arch's carapace went red. Manuel seemed to be picking out something to show him.

"Am I? You controlled my thoughts. You kept me from thinking. You told us a story, and made our whole lives a lie. We were your slaves, to do with as you wanted. Don't sugar coat it." Manuel pulled up a video.

"I'm your parent. Parents tell all sorts of lies. You have to tell them to your children from time to time."

"You're not my father!" Arch yelled. "My father's name is Apollo. My mother's name is Aphrodite! We were happy here, and you ruined everything!"

"My dear... What was your name again?"

"Archimedes." Arch spat.

"Archimedes, right, you really know so very little." The video began playing, and Manuel had been right about at least that last thing.

Graelyn had spent the rest of the day at the Zoo with her family, and had come home with them for dinner. They'd laughed together, and everything had been going great until Graelyn dropped a glass of cider. She'd been laughing at something Treanna had said, something about bears' eating habits or something. She quickly forgot what it was when the glass slipped out of her hand. It smashed on the floor, the dark liquid splashing everywhere, and Graelyn panicked. She ran for the towels and began to wipe it up.

"Damn damn damn." Graelyn said.

"Its just a glass Graelyn, we'll print a new one." Graelyn looked up at her like she was crazy.

"But mom..." She said, and as if on cue, she came around the corner.

"I heard a crash, is everyone alright." Graelyn covered her face and waited for the yelling to start. But it didn't come. Instead she felt an arm gently stroke her back.

"Its okay sweetheart, its just a glass." It was her mother's voice. She peeked out, and saw her face, smiling like she cared. It was a trick. She wanted something from her.

"I'll clean it up, you don't have to worry." Graelyn said, and got right back to work, picking up the shards of glass with her hands."

"Graelyn, the cleaning droid will get those."

"No, its no trouble."

"Sweetheart you cut yourself."

"Its no problem, I'll be okay." Her mom looked really worried.

"Graelyn, is there something wrong? You've been acting weird all day." She stopped picking up the shards, and tried to meet her mom's gaze but couldn't. She couldn't really actually be concerned could she? It struck Graelyn then, that she didn't know the difference between love and manipulation. They went together, you played games with people, you tried to get things out of them. You tried to hurt them without implicating yourself. You lied to them to make them think they were guilty of things they hadn't done. That was love. That had been love ever since...

"Is there something going on at school you haven't told us? Is someone hurting you?" She had to be lying. No one actually cared. Arch stayed with her because he needed to get home. Kinan needed her for her plan. Manuel thought he could use her for a strategic advantage. Alice felt she owed her for stopping her from killing Manuel. They all had a game they were playing (not Lizette, a voice said) and she played along. She just wanted to be alone, where no one would love or hurt her (same thing, really), where no one would...

Her mother hugged her. Graelyn shuddered. But her mother didn't say anything. She just held her, and rocked her gently. And there was a horrifying realization in the back of Graelyn's head, one she tried very hard to not admit, but the possibility of it was too horrific, she couldn't avoid looking at it:

Maybe there were people who were not just using you for things, but actually cared about you.

That was impossible. She tried to fathom it, and failed. The droid came by and cleaned up the mess, and Graelyn waited for her Mother to use her failure in dropping her glass against her. But it never came. She went to bed in her room, and her mother called out goodnight to her. She replied, and then curled up under her sheets, grabbing her cat and holding him close.

"You were the only one who was there for me, Mister Sprinkles, even though you're not, you know, my

Mister Sprinkles, you're a Mister Sprinkles at least. So, let me pose a question for you. Hypothetically, do you think there is a universe out there where my family loves me?" The cat was a cat, and did not respond. "Yeah, I think its unlikely to." She said, gently stroking it. "But... If that's possible. Do you think I can live a lie, replacing someone who died? Living her life for her?" The cat vainly struggled to go somewhere else, and then accepted the petting. She didn't need the cat to give its advice for her to know the answer to that question. It was plain as day. She didn't need to think about it.

She was 100% fine with living a lie.

When she woke up in the morning, trembling, she went up and kissed her mother on the cheek. Her mother smiled back.

"Are you feeling better today, Graelyn?"

"I am, mom." She wasn't sure she believed this could be true, but it didn't even matter.

She wanted to believe.

Video Transcript: Centro Systems Military Commissions Fund Proposal

Image: We see Manuel Salazar, he is sitting in front of the camera at a desk made of an artisanal genetically modified wood. He looks more prim than usual, wearing a dark blue blazer with red stenciling across the breasts, and a light blue shirt. We can't see his legs, so he could be wearing boxers and bunny slippers for all we know. Let's just assume he is.

Manuel: Good evening, members of the board. The question ahead of us at Centro Systems is one of the future of humanity. After all, as our disastrous campaign to attempt to retake the Rim showed, the threats and challenges Centro faces are ones that throw our previous assumptions about what constitutes adequate preparation under a train, and then under another train.

Image: We see several grisly images of the failed war on the rim. People in Centro uniforms and armor who suffered death on the Rim colonies. Even though we've never been there ourselves, the backgrounds look different enough that the bodies look out of place. After all, if you make concrete out of naturally occurring materials on Europa, it will probably be different than concrete on Earth. The sense of loneliness this dichotomy brings permeates the screen.

Manuel: Even though we ended up taking Titania, the moon of Uranus, and annihilating the warlords who ran it, the credibility of Centro's military is in question. Mars has already been seeking increased home rule, and the underground resistance here on Earth is increasing as well, whether or not you'd like to believe it.

Image: We see a pair of women, Commodore Cornelia Carthage and her ground commander Colonel Zhang Han, standing in front of a Centro flag during the Centro victory ceremony on Titania.

Manuel sighs, from offscreen, not the version of him onscreen.

“Problem?” Arch says. The video pauses.

“Well, we all know what happened with Zhang Han, don’t we.” Arch threw a question mark up on his face.

“Uh, no?”

“Ah, so your knowledge of basic facts about the outside world isn’t infinite. Zhang Han ended up taking an Honorable Discharge, and then dishonorably led and won the unlawful revolution on Mars. She ended up fighting her former commanding officer, Cornelia Carthage, during the conflict.” It seemed strange to Arch they could have served together so closely when they would be so far apart so soon afterwards. Had Zhang kept her aspirations from Carthage? Or did she know? Arch knew nothing about the two women. For all he knew they hated each other. The lack of knowledge unnerved him. The video resumes.

Image: We see B-Roll of scientists and engineers hard at work. It looks less like a lab and more like what a lab looks like on TV. A scientist holds up a vial of transparent red liquid, and examines it, swirling it gently for the camera.

Manuel: The solution? A new step in the art of war. Too long have we relied on developing loyalty, instead we should simply create it. Right now my scientists at Centro System’s subsidiary corporation Nojpeten Inc. are hard at work on an idea that will put Centro back on top in terms of military might. We call it... Project Ahnerabe.

Arch leaned in, he didn’t even realize he did.

Image: We see A room full of people who look sort of like Archimedes, only their outer carapaces have been removed. They all face away from us. Their limbs are all cybernetic, machine parts and metal structure around which the exterior screens fit, complete with rows of holes where screws and bolts fit in. Their bare skin is free of pigment, and you can see veins and processes clearly through their engineered albinism. People in lab coats or overalls walk around them, taking notes, testing mechanisms, or doing repairs.

Manuel: What you see before you is the army of the future. An entire culture that will follow our orders through trust alone, secluded and paranoid of the outside world. We re-purposed an old storage hub spacestation and transformed it into their home, Ahnerabe Station. A place where they think themselves totally alone in the Universe. When insurrection occurs, be it on Mars, Venus, the Rim, or Earth itself we will be able to deploy these units against them. No chance of insurrection, no chance of

disobedience.

Image: We see the units going through training drills in unison. They are superbly skilled. The image changes. We see vats of torsos with heads growing in tanks.

Manuel: The first generation was speed grown, built from a potpourri of the best genes we could find on Earth for our purposes, and a few specially made ones. Implanted with similar but not identical sets of memories. As you can see the arms and legs were stopped from growing using genetic blockers in order to save material, as the units will receive cybernetic limbs as well as organs as soon as they leave the tanks. Since the units will be completely covered, skin pigmentation is superfluous and was removed as well. Soon afterwards, they all woke up on their new home. Initial tests with this first generation were less than perfect however.

Image: We see Manuel standing next to some sort of Centro army officer, yelling commands. The soldiers follow the orders too well, if given a list of orders that contradict themselves, or have an order that makes another order impossible, the group simply attempts to follow it, getting confused and injured in the process.

Manuel: Memory implantation doesn't necessary mean cognitive reasoning development. In skipping the group's development, we created a group of adults who had less problem solving skills than children. While this works in a pinch, it wasn't optimal for a realistic combat scenario. So we allowed the Ahnerabe Units to procreate.

Image: We see several masked and carapaced units, one of them is lovingly holding a baby. Its not subtle, as there are big red cartoon hearts on their carapace. They suddenly turn off, the baby starts crying, and several people in lab coats pry the baby out of its mother's arms.

Manuel: Naturally this presented challenges, the offspring had to have their legs and many organs removed very quickly after birth to make sure their bodies accepted the new parts and incorporated them correctly.

Image: The young children are being issued orders by the military officer again. They question when the orders are impossible to follow, and come up with creative solutions to hard problems. The officer and Manuel look pleased.

Manuel: The new children are proving to excel beyond our ever expectation. Capable of creative and independent thought, yet also totally under the control of their programming, creating a continual army of these units will allow Centro military supremacy for decades to come.

Image: We see Manuel again. He is smiling at us, his arms wide out.

Arch felt a hand on his back.

Manuel: Your funding for this projec-

The hand tried to reach for a panel on his back. Arch reached back, wrapping his hand around the wrist, and flinging the person over him to land with a smack on the floor. Manuel moaned on the ground as the large recorded version of him kept asking for money. It looked like his arm was broken, maybe more. Arch didn't let that hold himself back: he grabbed Manuel by the underarm and dragged him along the aisle of the theatre as he screamed and yelled.

"Please, listen! You don't understand the situation."

"I understand what you did to us. How you lied to us." Manuel tried to grab onto Arch's leg, but he just kicked him in the face, breaking his nose. Blood gushed out onto the floor, leaving a red trail as he kept dragging him, Manuel trying to grab door frames, chairs, any handhold he could get. But Arch was just too strong. "Are you proud of what you did, Manuel Salazer?" Arch lifted him up, holding him a foot off the ground, Manuel struggled in vain.

"I did what was necessary to save humanity. You've never been off this station. There are revolutionaries, people who want to take everything from me, people like you-

"I have nothing in common with you."

"You are an independent man!" He smiled a forced and bloody smile. "Out of all of the Units-

"PEOPLE."

"-People, sure. Out of all the people here you're the only one who is awake. You're special. There is something different about you. People like us, we're better than other people. It doesn't sound nice, but its true." He hacked on his own blood for a moment. "We make possible what other people just wish for."

"Do you know what I wish for?"

"Anything you want."

"Good. I want to see you suffocate." Manuel's eyes went wide.

"A-Archimedes, please!"

"This station is shielded from outside signals, aside from your ship. You'll have 30 seconds to live before your little bomb trigger becomes as important as your frozen corpse."

"I have people, a wife, grandchildren-

"You're not even my Manuel. But you're close enough. I'd be happy to kill every last one of you in these 10,000 Dawns." Manuel looked at Arch like he'd gone crazy. For that, Arch flung him into a wall.

"You enslaved me! You enslaved my family. You took our freedom, you took our bodies. You cut us up and secluded us to be your private army, but even though you tried you couldn't take my thoughts. I'm right here, Manuel Salazar. Archimedes VonAhnerabe. Say my name." Manuel stared up at him, trying to get up off the floor, but he'd clearly broken many more bones from the throw. "SAY IT."

"Archimedes."

“Say the whole thing.”

“Archimedes VonAhnerabe.” Arch looked down at him.

“You're gods damn right. Thanks for announcing your executioner.” Arch picked him up, and carried him to the Airlock. He was barely fighting anymore. Opening one hatch, he got in, and closed it behind him.

“I'm magnetizing my feet to the floor, Manuel, so when I open that hatch you'll blow out that hatch just like my family did.”

“They... Didn't...”

“Shut up.” Arch reached for the button to open the door. He didn't touch it. “...Any last words.”

Manuel's brow furrowed, as much as it could.

“NojPeten, k-in-k'äm-ik-ech.”

“Fitting.” Arch reached back for the button. He breathed in. *Come on.* Manuel's eyes shifted to his hand.

“Have you ever killed anyone before, Archimedes?” Arch's body turned on extra absorption as he began to sweat.

“This would be the first time.” Manuel laughed.

“So Archimedes, lets see how good of a soldier I made you. Finish your job.”

This program is dumb. It wasn't actually funny, you wouldn't laugh along if there wasn't a laugh track. Graelyn didn't mind though, feeling her mother stroke her hair as her head lay on her lap was good enough. She had never felt his safe. The days had been flying by for her. Was this what she had missed? It was so hard to imagine that this could be real, that she could stay here. That the hell she'd grown up in was just that-- a hell-- and not the norm. She tensed for a moment, and sat up, curling up in her blanket suddenly spooked by her mother's touch. *What if she hits me?* She thought. She knew she wouldn't, but she still looked like the woman who did. Her body would be out of her control, her skin turning to pins and needles, and she'd grow distant.

“Are you okay.”

“I'm fine.” She said. The program finished, and with everyone else in bed, her mother decided to make them cocoa.

“Mom.” Graelyn said with her voice catching in her throat.

“Yes?”

“Do you think people can change?” Her mother stopped stirring the cup.

“Well, of course. I'm sure they can.”

“I mean, do you think there are things about yourself that you can't change?”

“Graelyn, you're a good person. You do well in school, you get along at home and church.” She gulped back the knowledge she still went to church here. She'd awkwardly attended with her family since she'd arrived, but she felt like she was lying the whole time she was there. But it made these people happy. Attending was part of the bargain of keeping them happy, she'd concluded.

“But what if I'm not? What if its all an act?” Her Mom laughed, then caught herself.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be laughing, but being a good person is a choice. Lets say, oh, deep down you had the urge to be a serial killer."

"MOM. I'm not a serial killer."

"Hypothetically! What would the right thing to do be?" Graelyn mulled it over.

"Turn yourself in for help. Get people to watch you. Or take yourself out of the equation. Put yourself in a cabin in the woods or a secret city in the mountains or something."

"Exactly. It may be hard, but you still have a choice." Her mother sat a mug in front of her, and Graelyn sipped it.

"Are you sure that's right though?"

"No, I mean, I'm not a philosopher, I'm just mom." Graelyn looked up at her, her glasses glinting off the kitchen lights.

"I don't want to leave."

"And you don't have to. This is your home." Graelyn smiled, and sipped her cocoa. There was a knock on the door.

"Who on God's green Earth could that be at this hour?" The knock happened a second time.

"I'll get it." Graelyn said softly, and slid off the kitchen stool. She made her way to the door, her bare feet cold against the tiles, then warmer against the carpet that led to the door. She reached for the knob and turned it. Opening the door, she saw Archimedes, his carapace dirty and scratched.

"Arch, what are you doing here?" She whispered.

"Who is it dear?"

"Just a friend! I'm sending them off!"

"Graelyn, we need to go." Arch put his foot in the door. "This isn't real."

"Of course it isn't real! Now go away. How did you get here anyways?"

"Its a long story."

"Graelyn, they're trying to give you what you want."

"And they succeeded. So shoo."

"No, I'm not going to let you do this." He shoved the door open, and grabbed her by the arm.

"Arch let me go!" He began to pull her out the door, and she stumbled down the path. She winced against his firm grip.

"No! I know what they want you to do here. I'm not going to let you kill your mother."

Graelyn's eyes went wide.

"Arch." She whispered. "Arch, what did you do?"

Archimedes VonAhnerabe was born in the inky sea of starlight, kept in by a thin wall of metal. He had lived under one set of presumptions his whole life, only for those ideas to be lies, and for those lies to be promises he made to himself. This moment, holding Manuel in an airlock, was a moment he'd dreamed of for years. His heart beat with rage, its metal, plastic, and ceramic parts working in tandem to increase his temper against the man who'd built him, who'd shut him up in this menagerie. Arch's feelings were his guide, then he asked himself the question he'd asked ever since he was a child, staring

out at the twinkling stars.

Why am I here?

It was a tired question, but today the question had a different meaning, a different purpose. He wanted to kill Manuel Salazar, to free his people... But it was too perfect. The programming in him shouldn't have been that easy to overcome-- it had to have been modified to remove some of the internal blocks, but not all of them, before he came here. Just enough he could do it himself. Manuel squirmed in his grip. This was a trap. A trap of his wildest dreams. He pressed the button to open the door back into the station, de-magged his feet, and stepped back inside, gently carrying Manuel with him, and setting him down coughing on the floor.

"Activate one of us who is a doctor. Only one. Give any other order than to have them heal you and I'll snap your neck." Manuel nodded, and called out a series of random words and a one of the denizens of Ahnerabe's names. They carried him to a med center, and the doctor, Galenus, got to work.

"Here is how its going to work. You're going to take all of us back to Earth, and set my people up with a place to live. You're going to remove the programming from them as well."

"That's impossible."

"Its possible. The alternative is you lose your life." Manuel slowly nodded.

"Then we're going to go to Project Atlantis. Does that exist here?" Manuel nodded quicker.

"Yes," he rasped, "But it was a failure. Whole thing was closed off."

"Good. Then the city will be empty."

"I'll just put the units--"

"-my people."

"Your people, there. Save time"

"Fine with me." Arch leaned back in his chair, "You're getting a very good deal here."

"You activated Project Atlantis in another universe to come get me?"

"Of course. It wasn't entirely that simple, but basically."

"Well you wasted your time. Go home Arch.

"No. If we don't go home, we can't save my people who are there, don't you get it? They're slaves Graelyn! Manuel Salazar thinks he owns them."

"You can do that without me, that's your business. This is mine."

"They want you to stay here Graelyn, the people who tried to stop us traveling in the first place, the figure on the bifrost, they're trying to trick you."

"Great it worked, go away." Arch reached for her.

"Don't you touch me!"

"Graelyn, they want to make you their pawn!"

"I want to disappear! We both lost our families Arch, I can get mine back."

"I could have stayed with mine to."

"Well its not my fault you don't love them enough."

"How dare you?"

"Yeah, I said it. Stop hoisting your problems on me! I'm just fine."

"Graelyn.... Don't you remember what Kinan said? The mission we're on is important. Its not just us at stake here. If we fail, universes could turn to nothingness. There are trillions of lives at stake here. More than we can even understand. Versions of everyone we've ever loved-"

"I don't love anyone you nitwit. Love is just something people tell you so you stop fighting back."

"No one?" She narrowed her eyes.

"No one." She thought of Mister Sprinkles, Lizette, Alice... Arch.

"That can't be true."

"You need to get away from me, Archimedes." She could almost hear the gears turning literally inside him.

"I can't do this on my own. I'm not as smart as you, I'm not as clever. I don't even understand the science of what's going on remotely. I'd be trapped with out you."

"And I'm not your brawny waste of space."

"I can't even really operate the portal equipment, I just turned it on and just threw slips of metal I'd carved with where I was into it till Kinan came and did it for me. She threw up when she came through, it was making her sick just being where we are. I can't get help again. I need you."

"Your mental failings aren't my responsibility."

"We're the only ones who can go into the Prime Universe, we have a moral obligation-"

"Oh screw you! This is everything I've ever wanted, right here."

"This will die with the rest of it. You'll die."

"Good!"

"Why are you acting like this? I thought we were friends."

"I don't have friends."

"I guess so. But I need you." He grabbed her by the arm, and began pulling her down the sidewalk.

"I'll scream!"

"Fine. You know I'm built to be a killing machine." She gritted her teeth.

"You can't take me away from here Arch. You can't." Her voice started cracking. "You don't know what it was like. How my mother was. I've only ever wanted this. Only this. Don't take this from me, please. Please Arch. They haven't hit me, or yelled at me, or told me how worthless I am, not once. Can you understand that? I need this. You can't take this from me." He didn't stop. She struggled against him. She tried to dig her bare feet into the pavement, but it didn't work.

"I'm not going to let trillions of people die so you can be with your mother."

"Please."

"No."

"Please!"

"NO."

"Possum, Sinestro, Victor, Betafish!" Graelyn yelled. Arch stopped. She looked at him, moving her head back and forth, and slipped her hand out of his grip.

"Unit Archimedes, delete all references to person: Graelyn Scythes, then continue with your mission

into the prime universe.”

There was silence, she rubbed her wrist, Arch was completely still.

“Well come on then, it shouldn't take you that long to delete me, get on with it?”

“...How did you know that code?” He whispered. She looked at him, searching his faceplate for an emotion she couldn't find. She clasped her hands, taking a step back.

“I... Saw it when I accidentally looked in your brain when I found you.”

“And you kept that from me.”

“I needed insurance you wouldn't hurt me.”

“You lied to me.”

“Its what I do.”

“Who the hell are you? I don't even know you do I?”

She straightened her spine, and looked him right in the eye.

“No, you don't.”

“I never thought you could be so cruel.”

“You thought my whole seclusion thing was an act? Arch, I scare myself. I only know how to treat people how I was treated.”

“No you don't. You helped those people in the cages. You saved me from Ares with that gravity manipulator. You saved Alice and Manuel on the roof in Nojpeten.” She didn't meet his gaze anymore, and found a nice plant to look at.

“...Statistical anomalies in my overall behavior.”

“You were so good to Lizette, you taught her Piano nearly every day.”

“Stop it.” She closed her eyes.

“Stop telling you you're not the monster you've convinced yourself you are?”

“Its a cycle Arch. I can't be better than it. I can't fight it. I just have to run from it. I don't deserve people, and people deserve better than me.” A dog barked in someone's yard. Graelyn crossed her arms, it was chilly outside and she was after all just in her PJ's.

“I'm sorry I grabbed you.” Arch said.

“I'm sorry I took information from your head without asking, called you horrible things, and insulted you.” He nodded.

“I won't make you leave...” She nodded, and looked up at the moon.

“You see that Arch?”

“Earth's moon?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid we took a school trip up there one day. I spent the whole time doing homework, for the most part. When I got back, my mom was still angry I hadn't worked enough during the time I'd spent on it.” She sighed. “Sometimes I say something, or I do something, and I just... Feel like I'm going to be her, you know?” He didn't know, but nodded anyway. “When I got to this place... How could I let it go? I felt like, maybe if I stayed here I could wipe away the poison inside myself.”

“You're not poison.”

“I don't deserve anyone.”

“Yes you do.”

“This family will lose me when I leave Arch, I'm dead in this universe.”

“I'm sorry.”

“If... If I go. We need to find another one of me, one without a family, and put them here. You have to promise me that.”

“I promise.” She tried to hold in her tears.

“You're right. Trillions of lives. Trillions and trillions of lives... I'm not going to be that selfish.”

“I'm glad.”

“But we both know I almost was.”

“Wanting a family isn't selfish.” She kept staring up at the moon, and thought of the Crystal orb over the Beach world.

“Have you thought of the kind of cruelty this takes? To give us our wildest dreams, and to have to give them up to save others? What kind of psycho does that? What kind of monster.”

“You couldn't do that.” She wanted to argue, but she knew he was right.

“Thanks.”

“You're allowed to be selfish, you're allowed to want a better life than you had. But that time is passed.” She nodded.

“If I want to be a good person, the kind of person I should be, I can't cross certain lines. This is one of them I guess. If I want to be even a fraction as good as the real me... Haven't you wondered what we'll be like in the real universe? I bet I'm a great scientist, saving tons of lives.”

“I don't know who I'd be.” She walked up to him, and put her hand on his arm.

“You're the man who didn't kill anyone, even the person you swore to kill.”

“And you're the woman who let go of a perfect family to save a universe.”

“Then come on Arch, lets go save people. I'll pack my bags.”

“And you said you didn't care.”

“I'm a bad liar, okay?” She smiled as she said it, walking back to the house as the moon glowed brightly.

Kinan Jans was sweating hard. This place was too close to the prime universe, and she was feeling it. Where were they? Arch shouldn't be taking that long. At least all the Ahnerabe citizens Arch had had transplanted here were staying out of her way. A moment later, the portal began swirling faster, and Graelyn and Arch popped out of it, Graelyn dressed to the nines in a nice skirt suit.

“Nice clothes. No troubles?”

“No.” Graelyn said. Arch looked down at her. “Okay, yes.”

“Figured.” Kinan spat, and began typing in new controls. Her eyes were sunken, her skin pale and sickly.

“Kinan? Are you okay?”

“Can't stay here long. I've set the machine to pop you back on the beach world.”

“No, put us on the crystal moon thingy.” Graelyn said, “I need to know what it is.” Kinan's eyes went

wide.

“Did you say crystal moon?”

“...Yes?”

“That's a factory of Crystal. That's a powerful piece of technology. They make the bifrost and the labyrinth. Without them we'd go insane trying to traverse the gap between universes. Many have.”

Graelyn tried to take that sentence all in. There were a lot of “how?” questions on her brain, but Kinan looked like she could barely stand.

“So... We shouldn't go to it?”

“No. You absolutely should.” Kinan began to work the controls again. She took off her coat, and rolled up her sleeves, revealing a series of circles on her arms, each like a bullseye had been banded over and over in a line on her fore arms. “This machine is awful, its like using a bulldozer to turn a doorknob...” She muttered.

“Will the moon help?”

“If you can get control of it, your mission will be easy.” She finished, and wiped her brow. “Now go, I can't stay here much longer, but I have something for you. Info the Vice family dug up for you.”

Kinan reached into a pocket, and handed Graelyn a thumbdrive. “This should help you when you reach Triton.” Graelyn nodded, and slid it into her pocket. Whatever was on it, hopefully it helped.

She looked at Arch, “Right, lets.” He nodded. She held out her hand. Hesitantly at first, he took it, and she squeezed his hand.

“I lied. Friends.”

“Friends.”

“Go!” Kinan shouted, and they jumped through.

Graelyn's feet touched down on a plain of glowing crystal, blue and lined with thin fractures, and she heard Arch clomp down next to her. As far as they could see was crystal: it rolled flat, and up into hills, and down into valleys. Large titans of the same material lumbered the landscape, 30 feet tall and hunched over, their arms nearly dragging on the ground as they lumbered, their headless torsos glowing with an internal light. A few hundred meters away was a towering spire, twisting up to the heavens. Below their feet, light seeped up from the moon's center. It glowed gently, lighting up the bottoms of their faces. All of this had been built, she realized. None of it was organic. A civilization existed that could make a whole moon out of crystal. A civilization existed that could make many of them, and leave one here, for... Some reason. As she stepped forward again, the portal closing behind them, it looked like the bottom of her foot was glowing from the light coming up at it. She smiled at Arch, and then being unable to see his face hid her own behind her hands.

“I'm sorry.” She said. He carefully stepped toward her.

“Can I hug you?” She nodded, her face still hidden. He wrapped his arms around her.

“We were both assholes today.”

“I was worse.”

“You always blame yourself Graelyn. People make mistakes. I forgive you.”

“You shouldn't have to.”

“That's stupid. No one's perfect. Do you forgive me?” She nodded into his chest. “Cause if you don't, that's okay.”

“No, I do.” She took her hands off her face, and wrapped her arms around him to. “I just mess everything up.”

“Liar.”

“Tinman.”

“Graelyn.”

“That's not an insult.”

“I'm bad at this game.” She laughed.

“Lets go, the tower awaits.” She held out her hand again, and he took it. Together, they walked towards the tower, the world alight around them.

The tower had a door, like many towers do, but this one had no knob or handle. Arch had to drag it open, carefully rolling it into the wall (it was apparently secretly a circle), and they entered in. On the base floor of the tower was a pool of what was almost water, but was not water. It was thicker, but still clear. Without touching it Graelyn guessed it had the consistency of spit. In the center of the pool was a chair, no, a throne. But not a throne for a king. The chair was wide and tall, and on it were all sorts of tubes and wires and rods coming out of it all over, which all led into a person. That person was wearing a skintight bodysuit, that left the head, hands, and feet exposed. That person was a she, and she was a Graelyn. This Graelyn had a helmet on, covering her eyes, ears, and nose. In her throat was a feeding tube. The Graelyn and Arch who had just entered could only gawk.

“What the hell is this?” Graelyn Said. Arch looked behind them, as if this was a trap about to be sprung on them.

“Its like she's feeding into the tower.”

“Or the moon.” Graelyn picked up a piece of stray crystal on the ground, and threw it into the pool. It plopped in harmlessly. Throwing caution to the wind, she took off her shoes, and dipped her foot into the liquid. She was right: it had the consistency of spit. Looking back, Arch took it as the signal to follow her, and they sloshed through the pool to the woman at the center. Graelyn and Arch called to her, yelled at her, but she sat silently.

“What should we do? We don't know what these cords all do.” Arch asked.

“Then lets get the ones around her head first. Maybe she will.” Good idea. They carefully began to lift off the helmet, pulling out tubes, and pulling off sensors that hung down from it as they did. They gently set the helmet on the back of the chair, and waited. Slowly, ever so slowly, her eyes opened.

“Hello?” The chair Graelyn whispered.

“Hi, we're here to rescue you.” She said to herself. She tried to focus on them.

“I'm still dreaming?” She said.

“No, you're awake. What are you doing in that chair do you know?”

Chair Graelyn looked back at her like it was an odd question, “I'm the moon.”

“You mean you control the moon?” Arch asked.

“I suppose?” She replied meekly.

“Is it safe to take these tubes out of you?” Chair Graelyn nodded.

“The moon can keep running for a while with me out of it, but I’ll need to come back or it will fall from the sky.” Okay, well, that wasn’t good. Carefully they removed the rest of the tubes and wires (our Graelyn taking care of some of the more personal ones as Arch left the room) and then they lifted her out of the chair, carrying her to the crystal plain outside the tower. Looking at each other, the Graelyns didn’t speak, but silently held hands, as the one in the chair first looked out at the world with her own eyes, and then began to sob. She leaned in and held herself, a confusing moment to be sure, stroking her own head gently. In time, the Graelyn from the chair was ready to talk.

“How on Earth did you get here?”

“We had a machine that opened up a portal to other realities.” She nodded.

“I knew you were coming, they told me.”

“I thought you’d be more surprised to see yourself.” Arch added. She shrugged.

“I was a moon. It changes your perspective.” Chair Graelyn began to roll up the sleeves of her body suit, and our Graelyn saw a row of circles like bullseyes on her skin where the tubes had gone in. Just like the ones Kinan had.

“Why did they choose you to run a moon? That seems like something they’d want someone they could trust for.”

“I’m not so much in control as like... A processor. They give me orders through my mind.”

“Could you control it though?” Chair Graelyn squinted. Our Graelyn realized she didn’t have her glasses, so she pulled out the pair of prescription sunglasses she’d gotten for the beach, and handed them to her. It was probably really bright anyways. She put them on, and reacted to the sudden clarity.

“Oh, I forgot that’s what seeing looked like. Its darker than I remember.”

“They’re sunglasses.”

“Oh, right.” She rubbed her head. “My head is so empty without their voices in there...”

“You’re free, you don’t have to go back.”

“No, the moon will fall into the ocean if I don’t.”

Our Graelyn thought. This was *her*. This was Graelyn. This was a Graelyn who had been through things she couldn’t even imagine. But Arch could. She gestured at him by tilting her head, he tilted his head back in confusion, so she tilted her head back at chair Graelyn and he got it.

“Hey, do you know who I am?” She shook her head.

“Big cyborg guy.”

“Well, yes, but I’m a friend of yours from another dimension.”

“Not mine.”

“True, but I care. We’re here to help. I know what its like having people be able to make you do things without your control. Change your thoughts. Its horrible, isn’t it?” She nodded, pulling at her hair. “But we have a way to free you.”

“No one can stand up to them. You don’t understand their wonder and atrocity. They can create moons.

They can pull you out of your own history.”

“Dawn can.” Our Graelyn cut in. “Do you see the marks on your arms? We work for a group of people led by a woman with those same marks. She owns a whole plane of reality. She has an army. And she's sent us here to help save you.” Arch gave her a look like, “You are stretching the truth” but she didn't stop. “Dawn is all about saving people. Saving as many people as we can, and we're going to save you.”

“You can't stop them. They're infinite, they're...”

“Scared enough that they left a moon here to guard their backdoor. What was the moon here doing?”

Chair Graelyn thought hard.

“I was... We were... Sealing the exit.”

“But we found a meteor on the ground, an orb, that let us through. Was that you?”

“They didn't notice.”

“So you can resist them.”

“Only barely. When they are... Looking away?”

“But you know how the machine you're hooked up to works?” She nodded.

“I am the moon.”

“Then do you know which cords feed you their commands.”

Her eyes grew wide behind the sunglasses. Its amazing how simple things don't occur to you when people go out of their way to make sure they don't. Weaning your mind away from them. Turning you to the ideas they want. Chair Graelyn's mind had opened up.

“I could be the moon. Like, just me, as the moon, that is me.”

“Uh, yes.” Our Graelyn responded. Chair Graelyn tried to rise, but stumbled, she'd been in the chair so long her muscled had atrophied quite a bit. One of her arms around each of her shoulders, they carefully helped her back to the chair.

“Which cords are necessary?” Arch asked, picking up a handful.

“Not as many as you'd think. Most of them are for maintaining my body, and feeding information back and forth from the Council.” She directed them which cords to hook back into her, and then she leaned back in the chair, her eyes doing the same in her head. She kept the sunglasses on.

“Where do you need to go?” Chair Graelyn said.

“The Prime Universe, the so called real one. Its on the other side of the Labyrinth behind the fascade here.”

“I think I know how to make an entrance.” She said, a smile creeping onto her face, “Hold on.”

The figure at the desk was old. Older than its easy to comprehend. In fact, it was so old that trying to put a label on how old it was for our own pathetic minds is fairly pointless. You know those turtles that live for centuries? Chump change. Trees that are thousands of years old? Wimps. This was a being so old it didn't keep tack of age anymore, it had simply gotten over that. The funny thing about getting that old though, is that while you certainly get more and more knowledge, you still have the same physical capabilities of your species. Abet, you can live really long, but that doesn't mean you can make your

will into existence with a snap. Perhaps a pen stroke, but not a snap.

So imagine the figure at the desk. It is filling in something in its book. The things it writes look three dimensional on the page, when it finishes a character, the character starts moving, sometimes adjusts its place on the page. This is normal for the figure. As is having a desk at the end of a crystal road called the bifrost in a place called the labyrinth. This is nothing special. However, the day got quite a bit more unique several seconds later. As the being was beginning another line on the page, there was a rumbling, and then the black wall of the sky tore open, and a great shining object rammed through the barrier between a reality and the labyrinth, ripping through illusion and substance, sending them flying down through the unending void. The being covers its hooded visage. Its so bright! What is it, some kind of battlestation. No, that's not it. Its...

"That's no battlestation." The figure says. "That's a moon!"

Jutting out from the unending shadow is a bright glowing blue ball, fairly cheerful, bits of darkness collapsing around it.

"Hello there, my name is Graelyn Scythes. Put down your pen and surrender, or by God we will use the full capabilities of this moon on you." It was fairly certain they didn't know what the full capabilities were, but even so, it dropped its pen.

"Hands up!" It followed orders. The moon flew into the Labyrinth, and began maneuvering down so that the bulk of it was below the bifrost, then it steered towards the road so that the top of a tall tower was lined up with the being's desk. Thirty seconds passed, and three figures popped out of a hole in the top, clearly propelled by an internal gravity manipulator, two of the three looking rather surprised at the travel device (Arch's lack of a face didn't deter the being) and then landed gently on the tower roof.

"Surprised to see us back I bet!" One of the two Graelyns said, the one who was wearing a skirt.

"Yes." The being said back. It said yes back in every language, and yet none. Maybe it hadn't spoken at all.

"You're taking us into the prime universe. Or showing us how to get there." The being lowered its arms.

"Look, I understand you don't live very long, but this is a very hasty idea."

"Explain why."

"We've sealed off the Prime Reality for a reason. Our people have a truce with the council now. The Prime reality has already fallen in the future." There was silence.

"What."

"I mean, there's no point going in there. Your leader doesn't understand what's going on. You are with Dawn, right?"

The woman, clearly tired of people from other dimensions trying to explain things to her, sighed.

"Sorta, I mean, yes. But look, that's why we're going in."

"Kinan is letting her vendetta against the council get the better of her. They have already won, and their story will spread into every one of the 10,000 Dawns." The woman looked aghast.

"So you're just surrendering? Who are you guys anyways?" The figure scratched its head.

"We're the last Fixture of Reality. The Firmament that holds 10,000 Dawns in place. The final bastion of Sanity against the Void, the chaos, the darkness, the Shadrach. We are the Firmament in the sky you

never see.” The two Graelyns looked at each other, rolling their eyes.

“That means nothing.” The figure made a broad sweeping gesture with its arms.

“It doesn't matter that the council has won, because we are eternal.”

“Oh my God, shut up and explain yourself.”

“It might be too much for your tiny minds-” Both of the Graelyns stormed off the tower, and getting right up in the figure's personal space, crossed their arms, staring the being down till it flinched.

“Okay okay! Look, so we are tasked as a society with keeping the universes, space, time, causality, all of that together. We had already evolved and built time travel while you were protozoa. We keep track of everything.”

“So you're an empire?” Arch added from the back.

“No! Not at all. More like the city services. You don't think that everything in the universe would just keep running without someone nudging it in the right direction every now and then do you?” The Graelyns looked at each other.

“Yes.”

“Well, yes technically, but there are always people messing it up.”

“Like the Council!” Arch shouted from the back, again.

“Well, again yes, but we're tired of trying to deal with them. They want to rule 10,000 Universes? Have at it. They'll be the real ones suffering with all the paperwork they'll have.”

“They're murdering people.” One Graelyn said.

“Kidnapping people.” The other said,

“You can always get more people?” The two Graelyns, angry, pounced on the figure, and pulled its hood back. At first, it was like seeing static. Then a woman's face appeared. They looked surprised.

“No?” She said. Static. A man's face.

“Better?” They were dumbfounded. The being sighed. *Humans.*

“People matter. And our stories matter. So you're taking us into the Prime universe. Now.” It rubbed its new head awkwardly.

“Its sealed.”

“I got there before- and wait Kinan said there was a rule you couldn't go to a reality you hadn't been to before, but I--”

“Ah, wording.” The being said. “These portals are built between realities that way, so you need a shepherd to take you across the labyrinth as a safeguard to prevent anyone who wasn't us using it willy nilly. We didn't expect someone like Kinan to be able to take advantage of that system, and let tiny people like you through with her so the Labyrinth accepts you... But that's not the only way to travel. If you tear through, cut through, you can go anywhere... its just dangerous. And hard to aim. And damages the fabric of the universes. The Council keeps doing it, frankly its an environmental catastrophe. That's how we started exploring when we were primitives, built the Labrynth in the first place.”

“Wait, so Project Atlantis does that? Tears open realities?”

“Hence why both us and your 'Dawn' are trying to stop those from opening. For different reasons, and

generally they hate us, but we overlap on that point. Though apparently Kinan is willing to break that rule today, the fool.”

“You're taking us to a Project Atlantis, and you're going to help us tear a big gaping hole into the prime reality.” Chair Graelyn said.

“Honestly it just has to fit through Arch and I.”

“You're going to help us tear a small and reasonably sized hole into the prime reality.”

“I really can't, this goes against, well, everything I stand for.”

“You think you're better than us, don't you?” Our Graelyn spat. “You're a big fish and we're just plankton.”

“That hardly gives me enough credit.” It muttered. “But sure.” She grabbed him by the collar.

“You played with me today. Do you know what you did? My life may be tiny, but you gave me the one thing that ever mattered, and I had to take it away from myself. Do you know how that felt? How that hurt? Can you imagine how I feel? What kind of person could be so cruel so casually?”

“You didn't have to leave.” She let him go.

“Of course I did. I'm not a monster.” She took a step back. “Open the portal. I'll go first.” The figure gulped, and gestured to a star, which accelerated towards them, and then stopped as a circular pool of white light.

“Oh, I can't leave my moon here...” Chair Graelyn said anxiously. “Its my moon.”

“You can just collapse the matter you know?” The figure said, as though this was obvious. Chair Graelyn cocked her head to the side, then touched it and focused. Suddenly the moon shrunk into a tennis ball sized crystal orb. Our Graelyn yelled.

“That's impossible! You can't just compress matter like that! Even if you could it would still weigh as much as a moon.” She pointed and gestured wildly.

“The moon's internal gravitic compensators are now taking most of the weight off, and much of the mass has been flushed into a temporary pocket universe made just for this purpose.”

Our Graelyn threw her hands up in the air, and walked towards the Portal, cursing. As she did, the figure touched one character on his book, and then Arch began to nudge him towards the portal.

One by one, the four of them made their way into Project Atlantis, a different one then they'd been in earlier that day, arriving just outside the building inside the structure that housed John Aril's machine. Ushering the being along with them, they entered in, to find the machine dusty and out of use. Together they worked to hook it back up, and soon enough they had a spiraling gyroscope of light.

“So, do we just step through.” The being was silent.

“We don't step through do we?”

“You'll need to cut a hole through this reality into the edge of the labyrinth, and then, well, ram it.”

“Ram it?” Arch said, “With what?”

Chair Graelyn looked around them, “Why not this place?”

“Let me get me if I'm saying this right to myself, you're saying we fly this underwater city, somehow, through a tear we cut in reality, into another reality?”

“Yeah, I mean, I flew a moon. I think you can manage a city.”

“Would that work?” Arch asked the figure, who promptly changed into a woman and started to try to look inconspicuous. When this didn’t work, it began to look like a lizard person, then a fish person.

“It’ll work.” Our Graelyn said, and went over to a few consoles, pulling levers, and checking dials. “I mean, it shouldn’t work, but she’s right, it will work”. She looked around the room, “Which just leaves what we do with you, I guess.” Chair Graelyn pointed at herself. “Yes, you, me.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.” She tried to give a dismissive gesture.

“Yes we do. What were you doing before they installed you in the moon?”

“I was an orphan, living on the streets.”

“So you have no home to go back to?” She shook her head. Graelyn’s hand shivered, and she walked over to the figure, stepping over old cords and machinery, the hum of the gyroscope ever present.

“Can you make a portal to the house you put me in?”

“I’m not.”

“You are. She has no home. Give her one. That family lost a daughter. Now, technically, twice. You can heal a lot of hearts.”

“That home was meant for you.”

“And now its for her.” Chair Graelyn took off her sunglasses. Her jaw trembled.

“You mean... I’ll have a family?” Our Graelyn nodded. Chair rushed to her, and wrapped her arms around her again, kissing herself on the cheek. “I won’t forget this.” She squeezed her back, glad she couldn’t see the pain on her own face.

“You deserve it.” The figure made a portal for her, and giving Arch a hug, them both a wave, and the figure a middle finger, she jumped through the portal. As the light faded, a slow applause came from the doorway to the building.

“Touching, touching.” There entered the same figure Graelyn remembered from the day her first portal opened dressed in the same sort of robes the figure was, followed by Ares, the Ahnerabe unit like Arch who kept his carapace totally dark. He opened his arms wide. Ares had a sword out.

“I see you managed to get this far down the Crystal road. But this is the end of it I’m afraid. I’m impressed, you even managed to intimidate one of us. Tsk tsk, I thought better of you you know.” The fish person gave an awkward shrug from the back of the room, and turned into a woman who was also part cat. “But this is about us. You’re not going into the Prime Universe. They’ve won, get over it.”

Arch’s feet clanged on the floor as he walked towards them. His coat billowed in the recirculated air.

“I’ve learned a lot of stuff recently. Most of it, honestly, I don’t really understand. But I know enough about you now to know one thing.”

The man crossed his arms. Ares raised his sword.

“What?”

“You won’t see this coming.”

The five figures faced off against each other. Arch and Ares narrowed their visual apertures. Graelyn crossed her arms like the man. The cat-woman, who was now also a man again, tried to look inconspicuous. They stood. They stared. Glares were exchanged. Time passed.

Nothing at all whatsoever happened.

Eventually, the man uncrossed his arms and threw his hands up.

“What exactly was suppose to happen.”

“Oh, nothing.” Arch said. “We just needed you to wait for the systems to finish coming online.”

Graelyn laughed as with a huge lurch the main mushroom of Project Atlantis detached itself from the ocean floor and began to rise up through the waters of the ocean. Ares, and the two men, no wait the one who came in with Ares was now a woman and the other wasn't either gender, scampered as the whole thing rose up, rocketing higher and higher from the ocean floor.

This might seem impossible. And technically, it was. But Graelyn had seen that the energy that created the portals could be used to move an object, ie, a moon. Putting this principle into practice, she directed the machine to not create a portal, but to instead provide upwards thrust to the bottom of the mushroom. As the mushroom climbed into the sky, Graelyn would have to work quickly to put the second part of her plan into motion.

“What the hell are you doing?” One of the figures said, they'd lost track of which was which now.

Ares ran at Arch, who unsheathed his sword, and the two crossed blades while Graelyn scampered along the controls. One of the figures began to get close to her, so she grabbed a crow bar off the ground and hurled it in their general direction, badly. It didn't get close to hitting, but they ducked. That gave her all the time she needed. Arch had gotten better since his last encounter with Ares, and Ares seemed caught off guard by it. He swept the legs out from under Ares as he blocked one of the man's blows, and then dropped on his chest, elbow first, the impact making a cracking sound. Graelyn ran, pulling levers, adjusting dials. She had one shot at this. As the mushroom reached the height of its ascent, and began to fall, she reached the last lever she needed, and pulled it.

From the Gyroscope, down out of the bottom of the base, shot a swirling blue portal, a huge one. No one inside the Mushroom actually saw this, so until they hit it, Graelyn was just hoping and praying.

“What I did, sir or madam, is win. I'm Graelyn Scythes!” She yelled across the rim, “And don't you forget it!” The mushroom impacted the portal violently. It tore itself apart, its superstructure crumbling in on itself, support beams and offices being whisked away by the forces of the tear's swirling chaos. But it went through it.

“You might want to get out of here!” She continued to yell, but they already were, scampering for the doors, running at top speed, Ares clutching his chest. One of them hastily made a portal, and the three disappeared. Graelyn smiled at Arch, as they rocked and tumbled around the room. They couldn't see it, but they tore through the Labyrinth, ripping reality asunder, the mushroom a multimilliondollar battering ram against the sealed portal. There was a breaking sound, a smashing snap that echoed and pounded as the nature of the universe was ripped open, and the Mushroom fell in, loosing bits of itself with every second.

“You enjoyed that a bit too much!”

“They had it coming!”

“True!” The station seemed to flip, and Graelyn clutched a bolted down console as Arch magnetized his feet.

“Graelyn, I just thought of something!”

“What?”

“We're coming out in space right?”

“Yeah?”

“What if the station isn't air tight?” She would have made a shocked expression if she wasn't being thrown around like a ragdoll.

“I can't move!” Arch nodded, and clomped out of the building, stumbling as the station spun, finding the suits and bringing her one. She messily put it on, thanking him profusely and biting her tongue a few times as the station shook.

“This is going to be a messy landing.” She said through the suit's comm, as she sealed the helmet. They broke through.

Most of the mushroom was gone. In fact, nearly all of it. As the last bits tore off, a single building, complete with the surrounding flat expanse of concrete around it, floated down gently through space, until it crashed inelegantly on Triton, the moon of Neptune. Finally, it was all over. They were here, in the prime universe. The station was dark, the station was silent. Nothing moved on the moon. But they were there.

Imagine you took your first look at truth. Lets use the most tired example in philosophy by Plato: imagine you were in a cave, shackled so you could only look at a wall. Shadows of objects moving behind you appear on the wall, projected by a fire behind you. You give names to those objects turned shadows, and that is your world. One day, you are let out of the cave, your shackles broken. You see the world outside of it, no longer shadows but whole. Plato is probably there yelling at the narrator about misusing his story. Ignoring Plato, you take in the world, and the world you saw before was a pale imitation, a mere shadow of what it really could be. The shapes are more real, more formed. Now imagine you look down at your hands, and you see you yourself are made of shadows.

You are just as much a lie as the scatterings on the wall. You were them all along.

Imagine you are Graelyn Scythes, staring out at an empty waste on Triton, your breath catching in the re-filtered air of your suit. There is nothing, and it what there is means somehow more than the most meaningful moments of your life. A piece of sand holds more weight than the shadow of a mountain. Now imagine you look down at your hand, and you are that shadow on the wall.

I imagine you'd scream.

Not that it matters, for there is only silence amidst the shadows.

* * * *

Chair Graelyn, no longer in a chair, sat on the roof of her new home. It had taken some odd lying to get through the whole situation, but now she had a room, and a cat, and a family. Sitting on the roof of her house, finally in real warm clothes, she stared up at the moon. Technically, she still had one in her pocket. She smiled at the shining white disk.

“Hey you,” she called up to it, “I guess we have a lot in common.”

Next week: Our heroes are in the Prime Universe... but who else is there?