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THE BOOK CLUB COLLECTION
THREE TALES BY JAMES WYLDER

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Rachel Survived first release: 2017, Arcbeatle Press
The Gendar Conspiracy first release: 2019, Arcbeatle Press
White Canvas first release: 2018, Arcbeatle Press
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Introduction

(Note: We’re releasing this ebook early, to simplify a frustrating issue. For now, we have rewritten the introduction to reflect this early release. This ebook will be re-issued at a later date, when we actually use this release for what it was intended: a book club style reading of these three stories. At that point, the introduction will be reverted to it’s original intended text to reflect this.)

Back in 2017, when I wrote the first 10,000 Dawns crossover with Faction Paradox for Arcbeatle Press, I had no idea I’d be writing two more, and that they’d go on to crossover with not only Faction Paradox characters, but places and people that originated in Doctor Who! Getting to play around in the edges of the Whoniverse has been an honor, and it’s not been one I’ve taken lightly. Every story required not only that I get the rights and approval to use every story element I borrowed, but that the creators of them get the opportunity to make sure they lined up with their own vision. The fun thing about that was that every little thing I ended up having to change made the stories better: creators, of course, know their characters well!

While these stories have all previously been released for free, we’ve collected them together for a future little bit of fun we’ll be doing: a book club style reading of our three commercially licensed 10,000 Dawns / Universe of Doctor Who crossover stories. By the time we do that, all these stories will also be collected in “10,000 Dawns:

Sidewinders”, which will be available in paperback and in ebook form. For now, you can experience all of these stories in a row. We at Arcbeatle Press hope you enjoy them, and I hope a little extra since I wrote all of them.

Oh, and look at that cover art! Isn’t Anne-Laure Tuduri amazing? She’s just an incredible talent.

Finally, we do have a fun bonus activity for you. It’s optional! But we think you might enjoy it, gentle reader.

One fun thing about these three stories is that they can be read as part of a larger intertwined cycle of stories, mixing together with tales from Obverse Books’ “The Book of the Enemy” and “The Book of the Peace”. If you like these stories, or just like experiencing the fun narrative effect of optional reading orders, consider trying this reading order out. You can grab the Obverse books at their website: <https://obversebooks.co.uk>, and they’re all well worth your time. Heck, “Rachel Survived” only exists because I loved Andrew Hickey’s novel so much, so I hope you’ll love it too. I think you will.

Optional Reading Order:

1. Head of State by Andrew Hickey (Novel from Obverse Books)
2. Rachel Survived by James Wylder (Arcbeatle Press)
3. The Short Briefing Sergeant’s Tale by Simon Bucher-Jones (Part of “The Book of the Enemy” from Obverse Books)
4. The Gendar Conspiracy by James Wylder (Arcbeatle Press)
5. White Canvas by James Wylder (Novella from Arcbeatle Press)
6. Cobwebs and Ivory by Nate Bumbler (Part of “The Book of the Enemy” from Obverse Books)
7. A Bloody (And Public) Domaine by Jacob Black (Part of “The Book of the Enemy” from Obverse Books)
8. What Keeps Their Lines Alive by Niki Haringsma (Part of “The Book of the Enemy” from Obverse Books)
9. Going Once, Going Twice by Jacob Black (Part of “The Book of the Enemy” from Obverse Books)

Alright alright, I’ve bored you enough. I’ll let you get on with the stories! But thank you for reading them, and thank you for letting us make lovely things for you to read. There’s lots coming: make sure you check out Arcbeatle Press’ new 10,000 Dawns serial story Lady Aesculapius Series 1 this fall from Michael Robertson and me! You’ll find it on jameswylder.com, along with lots of other lovely things.

Till then, keep on reading you lovely people.

-James Wylder, 2019

1. Rachel Survived by James Wylder

A 20th Anniversary Crossover.

Featuring characters and ideas created by and used with permission from Andrew Hickey.

Radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 11th

Okay, I know you're all going to be mad at me, so I apologize ahead of time.

I'm in New York City. Yayyy, right? I'm getting to see all the sights, and...yes coming back here was hard. But I couldn't really turn it down. My old boss here offered me a plum boring job covering some rare books that the New York Public Library has acquired. It's easy, boring, and frankly seems to be something of an apology tour for how things ended before. He didn't feel bad then, he's trying not to show it now, but I can tell it's changed. The first oh-so-subtle clue was when he paid for me to go to the top of the Empire State Building after I got here. Still hasn't admitted he missed out on a story, or did anything wrong though. But whatever, I'm essentially on a paid holiday a guy is paying for out of pocket instead of being able to open up about a Feeling (TM). So I'll take it.

But I'll admit, after the events of last year it was hard coming back. I putzed around La Guardia for an hour after I landed before I worked up the nerve to call my Lyft to come get me (still boycotting Uber, the collaborationist bastards). The ride to the hotel was all nerves, even though my driver made all the small talk a human possibly could on the drive over (a random dude asking about where I went to school definitely didn't make me feel safer, honestly). I've settled in now though. My hotel window overlooks a dumpster and a dirty lot between buildings and I love it.

But...I know you're probably worried about me. I would be too. But I'm okay, I promise. I'm just glad to have mates back home in the UK who support me. I'll be back in a few days after talking to some librarians about a book.

That isn't actually why I'm updating today though.

Despite this website being called dreamjournal, I really don't use it to talk much about dreams. But I had one last night that won't get out of my head. It still feels real.

I was waiting in line at the coffee shop, desperate for caffeine (hello jet lag my old friend). I've never been huge on coffee, but when in Rome get a pumpkin spice latte, right? So that was when the pair started harassing me. One was a young woman, wearing a red blazer and matching skirt with a white blouse and black tie, the other was a tall cosplayer (probably? It's a dream so maybe he was just in some sci-fi crap I forgot I saw) they came right up to me in line (rude) and started talking to me (rude x2) trying to convince me that I was being followed and they were here to protect me (please seek a therapist x3). I got my coffee, and hurried past them.

They kept talking, but I ignored them, just as I ignored the Buddhist monk who tried to force a medallion into my hand (he'd then try to guilt me into paying for it) and the musician handing out his mixtape (who would do the same). I walked past a poster someone had plastered on the wall of the President, and tried to ignore that too.

That was when I noticed the cat.

It was a grey kitty, wearing a white collar with a rainbow sprinkles pattern on it. It was following me, or at least it looked like it was following me. I said a few extremely cutesy things to the cat, which ignored me in return. After I turned a corner, and had gone down half the block, I knelt down to see if I could make it come up to me. It rubbed its face against my glove, which was cute, but then it backed up. First it meowed loudly, then it hissed.

“What’s got you bothered?”

That was when I felt the hand go over my mouth.

I dropped my coffee in shock, and felt my right foot get hot and wet.

I did my best to look around, and saw the street had basically emptied out. Perfect. Naturally, I was terrified.

"Rachel Edwards?" they said, "Nod or shake your head. Be honest."

I felt compelled to honesty by their tone, and I nodded.

"Good, you're going to take me to the Book of Books," keeping their hands on me, they turned me around to face them. They were wearing a cartoonishly intense black robe, flared gently at the boots like a bell, and every edge rimmed in patterned blue. I couldn't see their face aside from the mouth since they'd pulled the pointed-cowl hood down low. A shining orb floated next to their head, I supposed some sort of drone even though it wasn't buzzing. It looked like it was made of crystal.

They began to speak, but I yelled in their face and kicked them in the shins. As their hand broke free, I grabbed my keychain pepper spray and let it off in their face. Then I ran.

And here's the part where it becomes really obviously dream-y.

Their hand grabbed my shoulder, but I was still running, and they still held on. I looked back, and their arm was stretching out. Like, full on Stretch-Armstrong, Mr. Fantastic.

That was when the woman and the cosplayer came back into my dream.

The cosplayer rammed the stretched arm, legs pumping like pistons, and I heard a crack. The arm reeled back in like one of those retractable ID holders as the cloaked person cried out. They turned their head left, eyes filling with surprise. Mine did too. There was the woman again, holding a crystal disk the size of her palm. She slapped it on the creepy-cloak person, and they let out a loud sigh before they were enveloped in a circular white light and vanished.

"Hi again," the cosplayer said, "You alright?"

I ran again.

I tripped, and everything went black.

“Ugh, this is why you should never meet your favorite characters,” I heard the woman say.

Then I woke up in my bed.

What the hell, right?

You think you love donuts? Check out this crazy criminal! Late last night a hungry ninja seemed to break into a New York coffee shop, and security cams caught it all on video!

(The article continues for several more paragraphs, featuring every single second of the video written out in prose, with large gifs between each chunk showing people making over the top reactions of shock, doing backflips, or stuffing too many donuts in their mouth.)

(The actual video is below all of that, and is very short. A small figure climbs down out of an air vent via a rope, grabs a donut box and fills it with donuts, then sticks another one in her mouth. She throws money down on the counter, more than the donuts are worth, and climbs back up the rope.)

Radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 12th

Today was the “Big day.” The day I got to interview people about these old books. I’ve set this blog post so only the usual suspects can see it, but here’s some of my favorite choice segments from the raw material:

Me: So what does this discovery mean for readers?

Johannes Englesberg III: (laughs) Well, it means some of the most amazing speculative texts in history will finally be available to the public.

Me: Speculative?

Johannes: Yes, the texts are old. They date from the 1700’s, and their discovery site lines up with accounts of a meteor falling in that area during the time they were buried! The books display printing methods that we thought weren’t developed for centuries, and feature predictions about future technology that are breathtaking in their accuracy. I dare say, it might be the first science fiction.

Me: What are the books about?

Johannes: Aside from one book, which appears to feature many texts condensed within it, and is an outlier, they all seem to follow one great narrative of a war of powerful beings and the humans that interact with it. It’s quite fascinating, and I’m excited to study them further.

So, that’s the kind of stuff I’m doing. Asking about books. They sound like pretty cool books, I’m intrigued, but like I said: plum job. I’ll be excited to come back, even if things back home aren’t going much better than here.

Radicalrachel.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 13th

Okay faithful readers...I'm not sure if you're even reading this post. I'm putting it on private for now. I'm not sure if I'll ever make it public. I'm still not sure its real. But I'm sitting here, and looking at the evidence right in front of me. So I'm writing this out. I'm not sure what else I can say.

I was walking to the library from my hotel, hands in my pockets, nose dipped into my scarf. They say that the summers in New York are why people live there and the winters are why everyone doesn't, and I was beginning to understand that. Nice fine holiday, I thought, as the wind ripped through me.

I shouldn't joke. The next part isn't funny. A lot of it isn't funny. Its terrifying, and I want all of you to read it, I want to scream about this and knock things off tables dramatically (I'd go pick all of them up afterwards, sure but...) and I just can't make light of this. Because if you read this, you wouldn't believe it.

So, remember my dream? It wasn't a dream. And my confirmation of that started when I was mugged for the second time this week.

I was walking by an abandoned shopfront, the windows obscured by cardboard lining them on the inside. The door opened, and a hand reached out in front of my face.

It wasn't a normal hand.

It was dripping neon.

Blue ooze seeped from the cuticles as it pawed at me, leaving a slick smear as it fumbled to cover my mouth while I tried to whip my head away and yell. I lost, and it clamped down over my mouth. Other hands reached around me, and I was pulled, alone and terrified, inside the dark building. I thought of last year, and assumed that it was the killer from the campaign. I shouldn't have come back. My heart was tearing up my chest. It happened faster than I could blink and yet I can still distinctly remember the foul taste of the ooze, the way the hands stank like a chemical spill, and the knowledge that this really was the end and I'd never see home again. I'd die in an abandoned shop an ocean away.

"Keep calm dearie," someone said, through a mouthful of goo, "You're in safe hands with the Strid. We're actually from the neighborhood, if you know what I mean."

"She doesn't know what you mean," a different voice said, equally garbled.

I began to struggle, but fell still when I heard the voices in the ceiling. The Strid looked up.

"You're crowding me!" One said.

"I'm large!" The other replied.

"This feels kind of shaky," the first voice continued.

Suddenly, in a stunningly accurate recreation of all the promises made by the prats who came up with Brexit, the ceiling cracked, ("Oh," said the ceiling) then utterly collapsed. Mixed in with the debris fell the two weird strangers who had rescued me in my dream. They landed, without a shred of grace, into a mess of boxes and rubbish. The arm of the woman from the day before popped up, rasing up a single finger.

"In the name of Dawn, I command you to let her go!" she said from under the rubble.

The two goo-faced folks (Strid?) both looked at each other, and began a slow uncertain laugh. That was when the cosplayer from the day before burst from the rubble. He ran like an Olympic sprinter (Not that I support the Olympics but it's a good analogy) and before the pair of Strid could get their bearings, he'd rammed into one with his shoulder (bones cracked, they flew and hit the wall) and grabbed the other one's arm with a firm grip. He tugged, and ripped them away from me, sending them sprawling onto the floor.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I began to nod, but the two Strid rose from the floor. From how they were hit, it seemed like they should have been dead.

Should have.

From the rubble, the woman rose fully, dusting herself off.

“Are you aware that Archimedes here is a cyborg with built in weaponry capable of turning both of your pitiful forms to...well I’d say goo but that would be a bit redundant wouldn’t it?”

One of the Strid, their finger dripping blue ooze as they pointed at her, replied, “You have no right to the Book, outsider.”

“Look,” Arch cut in, “we both legitimately don’t like hurting people. But we will.”

The Strid looked at each other, and then, nodding in unison, backed towards the door.

I was expecting them to say something like, “This isn’t over, earthling!” but instead one of them just flicked Arch off.

I certainly appreciated the assist, but I still had the urge to flee or fight.

“Okay, you’re probably scared, or pissed off, or confused, or all of the above, but we’re here to help. This is my friend Graelyn Scythes, she’s in charge of our team. We work for a group called Dawn, and we’ve been sent to protect you. My name is Archimedes Von Ahnerabe.”

“Are...what the hell was wrong with those people?”

Graelyn walked over, picking her glasses up off the floor (surprisingly uncracked) and took up a prim and composed pose, despite still having plaster dust in her black hair.

“Follow us, we’re going to take you somewhere safe where we can talk and answer your questions. Then we’ll make sure we get back to your hotel tonight.” She started walking, as though the debate was over and we’d all agreed to this.

I stared dumbfounded.

“Well come on then!”

“No, really, what was wrong with them?”

Graelyn exhaled, pushed her glasses up to touch her face with one finger, and put on a smile that I could tell was fake from across a dark room while I was still in shock.

“You’re in danger. People are coming for you, only they aren’t people. Arch and I come from the future, and those blue ooze folk, the Strid, they’re aliens. Surprise! Your government has been lying to you about that and aliens are real. Also yesterday wasn’t a dream, I love your blog, and seriously we should get moving before backup arrives.”

“Okay, yeah, sure.”

I went with it for the moment. Why not, I suppose? The moments were passing like a blur. We hustled down the street, trying to look Incredibly Normal (TM) so probably the exact opposite of that, but no one bothered us on the way over to where they took me.

“I don’t believe any of this,” I said defensively.

“Did the two kidnapping attempts not convince you?” Graelyn said with more than a hint of snark (rudex4).

“I should just get on a plane and go home. The USA is a madhouse—USians are a madhouse.”

“USian? Did people actually say that?” Graelyn asked Arch.

Arch shrugged, “I’m really not the person to ask you know.”

Graelyn held up her index finger, and then moved it down, “You--absolutely have a point.” She looked at me, “Oh, he was raised on a spacestation in the middle of nowhere where they lied to all the inhabitants and told them that the world outside didn’t exist. Also he’s a cyborg.”

Arch rapped a knuckle against his metallic head, “Long story,”

“Right,” I said.

We reached the door of a theatre, announcing it was setting up for some show based on some

corporate property to premiere in the future. We reached a side door, which was of course locked. Arch's finger opened up, and little...thingies came out and slipped into the lock. In a second, it clicked, and he barged in.

"We'll be safe in here, this theatre is in between productions," he said, shutting the door. They ushered me to a seat in the front row, where they'd left some popcorn, a box of donuts, a bottle of water and a latte.

Graelyn hopped up on the stage, and held her hands up.

"We know you have a lot of questions, so we're going to try to clear up everything we can. We actually put together a presentation just for this occasion. So that's exciting right?"

"Okay, how do you know who I am?"

Graelyn thought a moment.

"Wait, just...look at this okay?" Graelyn ran off stage, and came back holding up a book, "See, where I come from, you're a work of fiction. Well, that's not true, you actually did exist in my universe a few hundred years ago, but this story didn't happen to you. You at one point heard there was a book about a journalist with your name but according to historical records you just laughed it off. I read your book over and over growing up!" she flopped the paperback in my face a few times, till she finally stopped and I could read the cover.

"Who the heck is Andrew Hickey?"

Graelyn frowned, "Oh come on. He's really good. He wrote that book about the Monkeys."

"I'm not familiar."

She sighed, "Not appreciated in his own time. Anyways, Arch and I used this novel about you in order to find you."

"We bought it from [Obverse books](#)," Arch added.

"And we did find you! Which is lucky, because you're at the center of a big problem. Those books you're doing the story about? They're not from this universe. And neither are we."

There was a long silence. I calculated the fastest route between me and the door, (dash across the aisle, hop over the queue, make a right) just in case.

"After all that crazy stuff last year, I mean, the Pr-"

"Just look in the book, it's all in there."

I took the book from her, and began reading.

My dreamjournal entries were in there, along with...some other weird stuff. Some of it I saw the connection to (again, rather not think about that), but some was...really egregiously random. At least at first. It seemed like there was some connection between things, but I was only skimming it. I wasn't sure what I believed. The book was probably some elaborate fake. This whole thing was.

But it was my life as a book. Someone had written it.

I sat there reading it for quite a bit of time. Graelyn left at one point and got something for us to eat, and I sat there and read. And read.

If this was a hoax it was...detailed. I closed the book.

"We come from another reality," Graelyn said, spreading her arms out dramatically, "In our reality, the last election you had turned out differently. The former United States of America--"

"Don't say former, it weirds people out," Arch cut in.

"Yes, sorry, the still very present and existing United States of America. And there are lots of other little differences which all lead to us growing up in a very different future from the one your world leads to. Not that, you know, you'd know that."

I shook my head, "The heck?"

Graelyn sighed, "Look, you just saw a goopy guy right? And before that you saw a robed guy whose arm stretched extra long right? So just take my word that this isn't normal please?"

I threw my hands up, okay.

“Great. So anyways, Arch and I put together a hologram to try to explain what’s going on. None of the people are real, mind you, Arch just put the script into a program and popped the likenesses of some actors you like in there, but it should be okay.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I whispered.

“I wrote it, so I hope you like it!” Arch said.

So the performance began. I recorded it on my phone and... Its embedded below.

* * * *

(Transcription inserted)

Why We Need This Book
a new play by Archimedes Von Ahnerabe.

(Stage lights go low. When they go back up, we see a hologram flicker to life. It’s the ARBITER OF ETERNITY. It looks like Lin Manuel-Miranda. Also on Stage are a Cabinet, a Chest, and a pile of black cloth.)

Eternity:

I was old and eternal,
my hooks had me bent
trying to run the
First and final
Firmament
Everything was easy
I was utterly bored
when my girl the Arbiter of Knives
came on board.

(THE ARBITER OF KNIVES enters, she looks like Tracy Thoms. The hologram takes a moment to load, and for a moment she instead looks like Matthew Broderick.)

Knives:

Eternity sucks, we’ve been here forever.

Eternity:

My friend that’s the cost of holding things together.
10,000 Dawns, each of them scrappy,
And now the Great Assimilation is trying to own the mapping
An inter-universal empire? It’s never been done.
But they’re doing their best, those fools have me spun.

Knives:

What if there was a way for us to get happy?

Eternity:

You've got a slice, I'll taste the pie.

Knives:

The Arbiter of Knives is ready to try.
Think about a book.

Eternity:

You're done that's easy.
I've read every single one,
even ones a little sleazy.
10,000 Universes, I've read it all.

Knives:

What if you never ran out?

Eternity:

Okay, I'll hear it all.

Knives:

Outside of our domain
I found another 'verse.
A place with a book that's anything but terse
You turn every page, it just keeps going.
You end one book, another keeps flowing.

Eternity:

You're saying this book lets you read on forever?

Knives:

I'm saying this book is the key for us to weather
A trillion more years of keeping things together.
How much longer can you sit around bored?
Making sure Eternity stays true to your word.
Everyone needs a break, even Eternals.

Eternity:

I am pretty tired...

Knives:

So go get some words!

Eternity:

You know as well as I we can't interfere.
If you try to cross that line,
You're gunna know fear.
We're not the only Firmament
putting glue on the stars
If we interfere with another
And they catch us in the act
We'll be at war with our equals
and Knives:
We cannot have that.

Knives:

I know its a risk,
But you gotta let me try!
I know a way in,
I promise I'll be brisk
A man on the inside
Who'll just want a dip in the fisc

Eternity:

You mean...

Knives:

He'll choose us a person.
We'll follow their path.
And he'll block their Firmament
from kicking our ass

Eternity:

But only one person?
You're cutting it close.

Knives:

We only need one
If we choose the right host
I've done a lot of research
I've narrowed it down
A girl named Rachel Edwards
is ready to take that crown

Eternity:

Edwards? I've read a book about her.

Knives:

Her novel in our our world's
her own truth in hers.

Eternity:

Okay then Knives,
I'll trust you to get it done.
But if you screw this up--

(there is a record scratch)

No help's gunna come.

(dramatic music plays as the Arbiter of Eternity exits, the Arbiter of Knives walks UP STAGE RIGHT, and stops in front of the audience. From behind a cabinet, two figures emerge: It's HYPERION and GALVIN, spies from the COUNCIL of the GREAT ASSIMILATION. They begin to sing in a totally different musical style. They look sort of like Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick.)

Hyperion:

Did you hear it? Did you see it?
Did my eyes deceive me so?
Those goody two-shoes Firmies
Going Blackhat for some prose?

GALVIN

I don't wanna go.
I don't wanna know.
We've done enough here,
Why can't we just go home?

Hyperion:

Galvin you're a coward!
I can't stand your lack of faith
If we follow on her journey
We could make it a disgrace

We could take this precious book
Bring it back home to our world
Make our emperors so happy
Give our Council oh such Joy

Together:

I say we've got a plan.
We follow where we can.
We risk a broken treaty
for the glory of our land!

Galvin:

I guess I know you're right
and all this fuss is just a waste
So let's do our small invasion
hope that no one sees my face

Hyperion:

And when we've sent them packing
And we're heroes there back home!
They'll forgive the slight transgressions
That it took to make us known.

Together:

I say we've got a plan.
We follow where we can.
We risk a broken treaty
for the glory of our land!

(Laughing, the two walk UP STAGE LEFT where they freeze like the Arbiter of Knives. GRAELYN SCYTHES emerges from the chest, who looks like Idina Menzel instead of herself for some reason. ARCHIMEDES VON AHNERABE follows behind her, reminiscent of Kyle Scatlife.)

Graelyn:

Arch I think they're mad.
I can't abide their plan.
They'd risk a whole invasion
just to get that book in hand!

Arch:

Graelyn we will have to go,
follow them and stop this show
if we don't they'll cast the lure
for inter-universal war

Graelyn:

We have to find Rachel!
Where did she go?
What did she do?

Together:

Gotta track her down
But we haven't got a clue.

(They walk down stage, and face away from the audience. From the pile of black cloth, a figure rises, who looks like Andrew Chappelle. It is THE STRID.)

The Strid:

So we see
What could be
Forever on the Strid shall be

These foes invade
Our own plans made
We slink into our solemn shade

(The seven characters all converge in the center, and begin a new song in unison.)

All Together:

When we--

Rachel Edwards:

Jesus, okay, I get it.

* * * *

The hologram disappeared, and the two of them clambered to stage center to address me. Arch slid to a halt in front of a less amused Graelyn, performing jazz hands.

"So, any questions...?" Arch ventured.

"So, why are they after me? Why are you protecting me?"

"They're after you because you're our tie to this universe. See, people come and go from alternate realities all the time. Most of the time you never notice them. They just hop over to the store, buy all the seasons of their favorite TV show that were never made where they lived, and hop back. But this is trickier. Because the powers that be in this verse? They want that book. Or they will as soon as they realize it exists. Because we're not supposed to be here the folks from my 'verse called the Firmament bribed one of the folks who watches to make sure parties from other universes aren't having shenanigans to ignore anything funny going on with you for the next few days. You're reporting on the book, so you're a natural fit. As long as our actions are centered around you, we, anyone, can get to the book."

"Alright and...who the heck are you two in all this? Where are you from?"

"Arch and I grew up in a future where the whole solar system is run by one big corporation called Centro systems, but things were pretty boring and after some misadventures we got recruited by this big interuniversal paramilitary group called 'Dawn'. We run around doing missions, helping people, trying to stop bad stuff, and fighting other interuniversal organizations."

"Like in this case, many of them," Arch said.

"Quite right," Graelyn continued, "Here in New York are representatives of the Great Assimilation and their Council, a weirdo group of aliens called the Strid, and what are probably several different alternate versions of a universal regulatory group called the Firmament--"

"Though they aren't called that here," Arch again cut in.

"Well, no, but I already forgot what their name is here? Cool Tower or something. Good Home? Exemplary Mansion?" Graelyn paused.

"You're not supposed to say their name anyway, you know."

"Ah. Yeah. That would be bad." She sighed, "The point is a lot of people want this book, and we need to stop them."

"Because you want the book?"

"Yes," they replied together.

"Name one reason you'd be a better choice to be given this book than everyone else."

Graelyn was about to speak, but Arch held up a hand, and she demurred, "The Firmament wants the book because they're old and bored. The Great Assimilation wants it because the Firmament wants it. And the Strid... Well honestly we're not entirely sure. They're from around here, but they seem to be off the radar. But they use human bodies as unwilling hosts and tried to kidnap you so I'm pretty sure they're not the greatest. We on the other hand did not try to kidnap you and took you to Broadway."

I took a moment to just let all of this settle in.

I pinched myself. I dug my fingernails into my skin hard. It hurt.

Let me tell you, it's a pretty wild situation to be in like this. You can't deny you just saw something weird, but it's really pretty hard to accept this kind of stuff in practice. It's not like you see on TV where you're either logically debating whether or not things are happening, coming up with tons of reasons why the obviously happening things aren't happening, or where you just go, "Of course this is real! Lets flip all my expectations of the world on their head!"

It's more like you're in a car wreck, and your car is going off the road into a tree, and there's that moment before the impact where you think, "This can't be happening. Not to me. Why is this happening? This can't be real?" and you just feel absolutely helpless and confused, even if they explain it all as a musical.

That's more what it's like.

But then there is the moment after the crash. Where you stumble out of the car, a line of blood going down your face from your forehead, and then you look back and realize the driver is still in the car, and your head clears.

I had to accept this. And whether or not I trusted Graelyn and Arch, they were the only people who hadn't tried to kill me yet. So that had to count for something.

"Okay," I concluded, "They're unveiling the books to the public tomorrow. I'll get you in."

Arch pumped a fist in the air, "Yes!"

"Don't do that," Graelyn said to him.

I'm back in my hotel now. And I'm reading this book Andrew Hickey wrote about me. And I'm writing all this out in fits and bursts. I'm still not sure this is real.

But if I wake up tomorrow and the book they gave me is still here, I guess I'll know.

Update: November 14th 6:38 AM

It is.

Firmament Data File: The Strid

The Strid are unusual in that they have been enemies of some of the most powerful people in their native universe for longer than many civilizations have existed. However, they rarely act on their intentions, and this has fermented their survival. You can see the Strid throughout important documented events and adventures in their native universe, only you'd never recognize them. They're there in the background, watching. Did you see them? They never speak. If they spoke, you'd know. When they take a host, speaking causes their natural form (a blue goop) to seep out from the host they are inhabiting. Indeed, they only ever appear silently in the background. They're there in the crowd, observing. Learning. They learn, and they use intermediaries to disseminate that information. Their goals are unclear, but they have avoided any outright conflict with people from their own universe. More than anyone, they seem aware that the great figures they seek to fight have an inevitable draw towards victory, something scorched into the nature of their world. They've seen it a thousand times. So they watch. And they learn.

But when people come in from outside their bubble, outside their realm of knowledge, they are prone to quick action. If you're acting in their universe as an outsider, you have permission, and they know you're vulnerable. They have successfully taken advantage of several unprepared expeditions. Advise caution when dealing with them.

News Report: ViralNoiseNews, November 14th

The donut bandit has struck again! This time the thief made off with not only donuts, but coffee. According to morning manager Ryan Tockle, the thief left a \$3000 dollar tip in the jar, along with paying in exact change. The queue to the coffee shop has been out the door since the thief began their sweet plunder, so the owners can't complain too much!

(A video is embedded below, it's basically identical to the earlier one.)

Graelyn and Arch greeted me at the hotel with hot coffee (they said they'd kept it in a "stasis crate" overnight) and a box of donuts. I was beginning to suspect Graelyn had stolen them.

We walked to the library, the Lion's greeted us on our way in in their fancy stone way, and after making our way through security, we hit the sign.

The sign that said the reveal of the books to the public had been canceled.

Graelyn stared down at the sign, she trembled slightly, and muttered "shit" under her breath over and over. Graelyn grimaced, "We already have one inter-universal war to deal with, I'll be damned if they start another over a hardback." Without a glance back, she hustled forward, walking as quickly as she could without drawing attention to herself. Arch and I followed behind her, probably not helping the whole "anonymity" thing as we stumbled around tourists taking pictures while we tried to keep up. She flashed some identification at a guard, and we barreled past, going down corners and corridors as the little Russian led us in the slowest panic I'd ever seen.

We finally reached the door to the room the book was being kept in. Graelyn looked at Arch, and he nodded, stepping between us and the door. He widened his stance, ready to take on whatever was inside.

The door slid open, and we were greeted with jovial welcomes and the scent of blood.

Arch had to step through the door before I could see it all, but when he finished it was one of those, "Wow I wish I hadn't looked!" moments. Like when your parents make you cross a rope bridge on a family trip and they tell you not to look down. You instantly look down.

Arch said, "You don't wanna look," and Graelyn and I peered around him instinctively.

Sitting on a desk was a woman in a black robe with stenciled blue lining and a point at the crest of the hood like a wide beak. She was lazily wiping the blood off a knife made of the same werido translucent blue and white crystal everyone and their Labrador retriever seemed to be using these days. Around the desk, standing, were a variety of worried, tired, or grossed out people, some dressed like her, some wearing black clothes styled with what appeared to be millions of dollars of actual gold per person, and then a few who looked like everyday New Yorkers or tourists, only with blue goo dripping from their orifices and cuticles.

Lying on the ground around the desk were bodies. Bodies in a pool of blood.

They'd been cut, some. Or had holes burned through them, some. Or looked like they'd suddenly died of old age, some. Or had globs of still cooling molten gold shining on them, some.

They were dressed in all sorts of clothes. Some in robes. Some wore masks. Some wore silver jumpsuits. There was a wide variety there on the floor.

All of them were dead. All of them had been slaughtered.

I'm sorry. I needed to step away from the keyboard and sob into a pillow for five minutes. Understandable right? That's pretty messed up?

I've done some intense journalism. You're all aware of the awful stuff I've gone through in the last year. I hadn't seen something like this.

In your mind, you always think you'll be resolute during this kind of situation. You'd be able to...say something meaningful. But I didn't. I froze up, and then made a lot of panicked noises and tried to grab something to defend myself with from the floor. Fight or flight I'm a fighter I guess?

Arch and Graelyn held me back, and I think Graelyn slapped something on my neck and doped me. (Real classy, these guys.) I didn't pass out, but I felt the panic drain, the need to run disappear. I

still felt sick to my stomach though, so a little more politely, I threw up in the middle of what the lady started saying.

“Finally,” she polished the knife as she spoke, “We figured Dawn was showing up, we didn’t want to begin without you.”

“Begin what?” Graelyn looked at the bodies, “It looks like you already got started. Jesus.”

She shrugged, “None of us are supposed to be here, you know that Dawn Agent. Unfortunately, our bribe didn’t stop a few parties from finding out about the book and arriving here at the same time. Awkward to say the least. We all came to an agreement that bidding for the book should only be between--”

I threw up.

--those not from this...is she okay?”

“No, why would anyone think anyone would be okay when they come in here and see this? This is heinous,” Arch began.

“She’s peachy keen!” Graelyn cut in, “Just great. Now what the hell do you mean about bidding?”

Arch, despite not having a face, looked furious still. I braced myself against the wall.

“Right, yes. Bidding should only be between those of us not from this reality, well, and the Strid. So we disposed of everyone from this reality who wanted it, honestly they were pretty rude about it. Called me a lot of rude things. Most of them have some way of getting up again or hopping into a new body, so you shouldn’t be so sad about it. I’m not really sure how the Firmament here does that, but I’m 98% sure I’ve inhibited the process till we finish up here. Lattes, by the way? The Great Assimilation grabbed some on the way. They really can be quite a bit more thoughtful than I anticipated, when we’re not trying to kill each other and all.”

The people in black and gold waved like they were a nice couple from down the block, happy to finally introduce themselves.

“No,” Graelyn said, “I meant why are we bidding on it at all? You’re acting like someone has possession of it. Also I don’t want a latte. I brought my own.”

“Your friends...?”

I shook my head, Arch did the same. I tried to get my bearings. Tried to convince myself this was a drug trip, or a dream, but it all seemed too real.

Someone else spoke up, one of the blue goo people Graelyn called The Strid, “We have it. We have contained it within our person, and will release it to the one who provides us with the finest offer. If you attempt to take it from us, we will destroy it.”

Graelyn looked around the room, and then laughed stumbling forward a bit, tripping over a body, which caused her to stop laughing and make uncomfortable noises as she got away from it. “This is amazing. The best infiltrators from 10,000 universes, and we all let someone else throw us into a bidding war. We absolutely suck. Wow.” She threw up her hands in the air, “Astonishing.”

“Since you three arrived last, you will present last. Then we will decide,” goo guy said.

“Then I’ll present first,” the woman said, hopping down from the desk, “I’m the Arbiter of Knives, and I come representing the First and Final Firmament. We’re prepared to offer the honorable Strid their own planet in our universe, and the protection of our Firmament. We know the Strid have been nomadic for eons, living by avoiding trouble. We’re prepared to give you a homeworld where you can live unmolested, unafraid of any repercussion to the fact that you have to kidnap people and take over their minds in order to survive more than a few hours outside your goo pools.”

The Strid looked at each other, impressed, “That’s a...really good offer.”

The Arbiter of Knives pushed her chin up in the air, “It is, isn’t it?”

“Arch,” I whispered, “I don’t understand. If they’re trying to keep a low profile, why would they kill these people? I mean, why kill them in general...Shit.”

He shook his head, “Even backed into a corner it’s something else. But we have to find an out here.”

I didn’t look down at the floor, I looked past it. I focused. I had to think.

“Now, let’s hear from the representatives of the Council of the Great Assimilation,” the Strid continued.

“Thank you, now, we might not be as familiar to you as the Firmament, but while we didn’t inherit power over reality, we built it. Under the rule of our three Emperors, and our Council, the Great Assimilation has spread across universes binding them together under our shared banner. We also offer you a homeworld, but more than that, we offer you a purpose. The Strid would be invaluable as a part of the Empire, and with your skills at information gathering would be on the shortlist to gain a position on our Council. You would have a say and voice over your own destiny.”

One of the Strid stroked its chin, rubbing in some of the goo that had dripped from its mouth, “Another excellent proposal, one we’ll have to discuss and think on...which leaves only Dawn? What do you have to offer us?”

I looked at the pair I’d been thrown in with. I couldn’t read Arch, but Graelyn was racking her brain hard. She frowned, and looked back at us, “You guys got any ideas?”

“We could offer them something of symbolic value?” Arch suggested.

“No,” the Strid cut in, “We’re really more interested in direct power.”

Graelyn sighed, “Honestly? I don’t think there’s anything we could offer you that would be responsible here. I mean, seriously, screw all of you. You guys are cool with murdering people over a book, that’s kind of ridiculous. We offer you nothing, final offer.”

“Wow,” Knives said, “I think we can rule them out.”

“Quite,” the Strid replied, “I will confer with my partner.”

While they talked, the Firmament began shoving all the bodies into a circle, and then sprinkled some crystal dust around them all. The floor lit up in a brilliant white and blue light, and they were....gone.

“It’s a portal,” Arch whispered, “They dropped them off somewhere else.”

I nodded, and walked over to the other books in the exhibit. They all wanted one of them, this Book of Books...but what of the other books? No one paid me much mind. I flipped through them. They were paperbacks, from a handful of different publishers. “Burning with Optimism’s Flame” one was called, well I sure wasn’t. “The Book of the War,” “Head of State,” hey I’m in that one!

Then it struck me. The most obvious thing. To them, I was a character in a book. Graelyn had read about me. She’d said as much. And they didn’t want anyone to know they were here. These books were all dangerous. They were all something people wanted. They had to be dangerous for a reason. I picked up the copy of “Head of State”, and opened it to the last page. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a pen, and wrote in it:

“It was on November 14th of the next year, that when Rachel was in a room filled with strangers from another world, that they all vanished suddenly, the Book of Books dropping to the floor from where the Strid had held it within itself.”

I closed the book and waited.

Nothing happened. Rats.

I thought, okay, if I’m a character to them, maybe the reverse is true. I googled their names, and I found some books about them. I threw money at the ebooks as fast as I could, and skimmed, searched

for keywords, and browsed them with a fury. No luck though. I couldn't find anything useful. I half considered emailing the author and asking him to throw up a quick blog post or something (?) but if writing in the book didn't work, I didn't think that would either. These were people. They weren't just words on a page. I could see Graelyn, crossing her arms, trying to think of something, her feet moving in slight shifts with worry. Arch, struggling more than her to keep it together, had his head in his hands. The Arbiter of Knives was cutting papers into shapes with her blade. The Assimilation folks were playing cards. They were people, and I'd been a fool to think anything less, even with how outlandish this was.

As the Strid's voices got even louder (They were having a fierce ideological debate at this point) it occurred to me, something that I should have thought of before.

"Graelyn," I said, rushing over to her, "you said you read my book before?"

She nodded, "Yeah. I was thirteen."

"Did it matter to you?"

She furrowed her brow, "It did. You were a bisexual woman running around doing cool things. I was a pansexual girl trying to figure my world out. I read the book a lot, and I mainly skipped over the parts you weren't in."

I leaned in, "Tell me more. Tell me why it mattered."

Moscow Russia, 2471, Another Universe

Her mother was yelling again. She did that. Graelyn was used to it. Mr. Sprinkles, her cat, was curled up on her feet. She just hoped things wouldn't escalate to violence again tonight. The door swung open, and she closed her eyes. Of course. Jinx. She curled up in a ball, and made sure she didn't cry. That was a sign of weakness, after all.

"You're broken," her mother whispered in her ear after she'd finished the blows, "I saw your grades, and they're still not good enough.." All A's, yet again, "How could you treat your poor sick mother this way? How could you?" She began to sob, "You keep pushing me to this. I hope you try to be a better daughter."

"Yes, mom. I will," she replied dutifully.

In time, her mother left, and she pulled the book up on her phone. Rachel was being hunted by a mysterious killer, and Graelyn needed to figure out who it was. She knew Rachel didn't die, it's why she picked up the book in the first place. Someone like her to read.

Someone who wouldn't die.

She wanted to feel that way herself.

She kept on reading.

She still had no idea who the killer was.

But Rachel survived.

November 14th, New York, New York, USA

I listened. And...It was a hard story. She'd had a rough upbringing. But I listened. And I knew what the answer to all of this was. The whole time. It was me.

I walked right up to the Strid, and I pulled my pen out again.

I placed the sharp tip against my own jugular.

"Excuse me," I yelled.

They stopped.

The Arbiter of Knives coughed, and gestured at Arch and Graelyn, "Could you two bring your guest under control? Sure shes our cover but--"

"Exactly," I replied, "I'm your cover. So what happens if I'm not here?"

Her face fell, "Well we'd..."

"If you're so afraid of being found out by whoever runs the show here, then you need me. You're far from home aren't you? A foreigner in a land that seems to hate foreigners? Let me tell you, welcome to the USA. And our Universe. You're offering these folks a planet, but you can only do that when you get home. Right now, other people have that kind of power? And you're just a lonely woman with a big knife who thinks she can get away with anything because she can kill. And you two, so enamored with empire and colonization. Really, that's just gross. And of course, my fellow natives, apparently. Selling off our heritage to the highest bidder. Shameful, I'll tell you. So let me tell you what's going to happen. You're all going to go home. The lot of you."

I looked around. There was silence.

"If you don't, I'll cut a major artery, and you'll all be crying about...all that crap you've been info-dumping on me this week. Even you, Strid folk. You'll be found out. The powers at be will know about your private auction, and you'll make the big time. So I'm going to be nice and give you all an out. Go home."

The Arbiter of Knives stood up, "You have no idea what it's like to be immortal. To be so...bored! If I had that book I could read things forever!"

"And you won't know what it's like to be immortal if you don't agree to my terms."

"You're bluffing," the Assimilation group yelled.

I just stared them down, till they looked away.

I was absolutely bluffing, no way I was going to cut my throat but oh you should have seen their faces, because I sold it well.

"So, all this work, all this...everything. We just leave and pretend this didn't happen?" Knives said.

"I didn't say that," I replied "I said you should go home. I very much want you to remember this. Also, the Strid need to give me that book. It's mine now."

The Arbiter grimaced, then shrugged, "Well, time to live another day. I'm out."

"Same," the Assimilations said.

Graelyn and Arch high fived.

The Strid gave me the book though...how they removed it from their form isn't easy to describe, and believe me it was even harder to watch. So I'm just going to skip that, k thx bye. Soooooo anyways, I was left with a gallon sized ziplock bag coated in goop with a book (I took the book out with minimal bag-touching and left the bag in the rubbish bin).

The Arbiter pulled out a crystal orb that began to hover in the air, which was neat, and then met my gaze, "You want us to remember this, but you probably won't. When we're gone, the powers that be will probably try to wipe your memory. They don't like this stuff getting out."

"Psh," Graelyn said from across the room, "Empty threat. The really couldn't care less as long as they get to act all self-righteous and important, I mean, you would know."

The Arbiter frowned, took a step towards the orb, and the vanished into it. It zipped away, disappearing in a flash. The Great Assimilation just walked out the door, as did the Strid. This time they flipped me off though. I gave them the two fingered salute in return.

“Well, our turn to head out then. It’s been real, Rachel Edwards,” Graelyn said, waving, “Have fun with the books.”

I smiled, and gave her a hug, “I’m glad I meant something to you, even if it was just fiction for you.”

She blushed, “You were never ‘just fiction’. And you still aren’t.”

Arch waved goodbye as well, and I gave him a quick hug as the pair threw dust on the wall, and jumped into the light it made.

It was just me and the books now, and this blog.

I don’t know if the Arbiter was bluffing or not. Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow, and this will all be gone from me. I hope not. There’s so much going on I had no idea about. Things that...explain other things. I want to learn them. I’m putting this on flashdrives, printing it out. Hiding it. Even if my memory is gone, maybe they’ll miss one of these and I’ll find it later.

And if they don’t, maybe you’ll find it. You’ll read it, and you’ll know there are other things out there to.

Whatever happens, it’s only the beginning of this journey. Time to do what I do best: find the truth.

November 15th
World Daily Updatez

The unveiling of a collection of rare books purchased by the New York Public Library was put on hold today when it was discovered that the books contained a rare parasite that had caused the deaths of several library employees. The books have been taken to a secure location for quarantine, and it's unclear if they will ever be put back on public display.

(Below is a picture of the books being escorted from the premises in a hazardous waste container. You wouldn't usually notice it, usually you would skip over it, ignore it, but you can't unsee it now. There they are in the crowd. Utterly non-descript. Staring at the box. You'll see them in other pictures now too. They'll wait. They've always waited. They're patient. This is only their beginning too.)

2. The Gendar Conspiracy by James Wylder

**Featuring characters and ideas created by Simon Bucher-Jones and Jacob Black
For Anarchic**

Vo'lach Prime, a long time ago.

It's rocketing down through the atmosphere, the resistance making a bright glow against it's front. It looks like you could make a wish on it, if you were standing down below. Which the Sergeant-Instructor was, though he'd long ago given up on wishes. Ten feet from the ground, the object stops. It cools, the light drizzle hissing off it as it stabilizes, and then there is another wonder. The figure appears tiny, a speck, then grows to the size of a toy, then a full grown woman. She dusts off her dark blue robes, and waves at the Sergeant-Instructor, only her mouth visible from under her beak-pointed hood. He has no time for wonders either.

"Are you the Arbiter of Knives, of the Firmament?" He yells, the wind isn't particularly conducive to chatter, but his orders were to meet the Emissary of the Firmament on neutral ground, and Vo'lach Prime is about as neutral as it gets today.

"I am, Sergeant-Instructor? Of the--" there's a gust of wind, and the end of the sentence is cut off, but he knows what she meant. He gestures for her to follow, and they head for the offending site.

The Vo'lach he met with are already there, huddling around the pit. There are two corpses in it. The Vo'lach make room, their six-foot wide frames bustling aside, lightning reflecting off their shiny colorful fur as they shuffle.

"It's one of yours," he says evenly.

The Firmament slides down into the pit, and examines the bodies, the orb she rode in on shining a light down onto them, "Well one is, anyway, sort of. They're a member of the Knights of Sky, who splintered from--"

"They're from your universes," he spat back, "you know there's not supposed to be any interference in our affairs." He couldn't believe he was having to lecture this backwater representative. The 10,000 Dawns were the most blighted piece of inter-universal real estate he could imagine. And yet, they kept getting in everyone's business.

She looked back up at him, then to the Vo'lach, "There were three more of them I see. I'm assuming they took something?"

"Stole," he corrected.

One of the Vo'lach quivered, "A relic we received from Gendar, supposedly, an ancient urn."

She frowned, and snapped her fingers. The orb seemed to shrink and absorb the body.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"You're duty-bound to come with me to Gendar, and see if we can find the thieves."

She sighed, "If that's my diplomatic duty, then sure. Could you give me a hand--" he walked away towards his ship, and heard the zing as the orb zipped right next to him, and she dropped out again, "I don't know where Gendar is, I'm not from here you know."

"Then follow close behind."

* * *

Gendar was the 17th most interesting archaeological site in it's home universe. This doesn't

sound too impressive, until you remember that 17th out of a couple trillion is actually a pretty good score. At that point, it's all the kids who somehow have higher-than-perfect grade point averages competing for who gets to get in the group photo at the end of the year. And sure, Gendar is in the third row off to the left, but it made the picture.

Why Gendar is so interesting, is that there should be no life on Gendar. Completely inhospitable to life, bombarded constantly with radiation from its three suns, and coated entirely in sand with no water, Gendar has somehow developed life that is completely native to the planet, while being boringly indistinct from life anywhere else in the universe. Fossil records show that this life developed on Gendar, while every moment of those creature's existences should have been impossible. That a sapient species who happened to look exactly like ordinary people who happened to have their hair and eyes dyed purple had also developed there, completely independently, was the final straw that drove many an archaeologist into a seething rage. At least fourteen Universities' archaeology departments had banned discussion on Gendar entirely, and another twenty-eight had declared that they didn't believe it was real.

This didn't stop them from visiting the planet, however. All across Gendar, roving gangs of archaeologists, anthropologists, and other scientists roamed the deserts, trying to find the secrets to the planet's existence. There were three main schools of thought: 1. Gendar had a perfectly reasonable explanation for its seeming nonsense, and through patience and hard work it can be revealed! 2. Gendar is not real, has never been real, and the real question is how is the illusion of it being real so good, and how can it be uncovered and unmasked. And 3., Aliens.

Drezen Hael was part of the second group, and had been searching the planet for the last three months trying to find proof of its non-existence. However, after paying for a few too many over priced bottles of water from the locals to cope with the extreme heat, he was beginning to have suspicions it was real and the whole thing was a tourist trap. He kept these thoughts from the group however, as his funding from the "Gender Is Fake Trust" (nicely acronymed as GIFT) revolved around sticking to the goals of their society, so he rationalized the water as some sort of paid DLC in a massive interactive hologram for the time being. He had just began to work out how the hologram could take the cash he'd brought with him and not just his credit card info, when the man who would kill him approached.

His long blue robes billowed in the wind, it had a beaked hood and the edges were all lined in a fine patterned cloth. One arm was a messy looking gauntlet, cobbled together to hold crystals in varying sizes over its surface. The man didn't say hello.

"Hello!" Drezen said, "You don't look like a local, so I'm guessing you're from another archaeological dig? This site is ours, mind you. We have a permit from the planetary governor--"

Closer, he could see the man was bleeding.

"Do...do you need help? We have a lot of doctors here, but no one who is that kind of doctor, if you catch my drift..." he gave an awkward chuckle. The man stopped, and pulling a hand from where it was supporting the bloody wound on his chest, banged on his gauntlet. "Goddamn thing," he said. Then looked up at Drezen. His face was bloody too. "You, you're from this universe right?"

This wasn't a normal question, even for a space archaeologist. This left Drezen with two possible conclusions to continue from: 1. This man was from another universe. 2. This man was crazy. Upon further thought, he added 3. This man is a bad script in the holographic simulation of Gendar, but he only listed that contractually. "Yes, uh, are you?" the rest of the dig was getting curious, and were beginning to mill slowly towards the visitor.

The man thought for a moment, and then, seemingly coming to resolution, surged forward and grabbed Drezen's chest with his gauntleted hand. One of the crystals on it glowed, and Drezen frantically tried to pull away from the man's grip as he felt his life draining from his body. The wound began closing on the man, and started opening up on his own body. The wear and tear of the desert

faded from the man, his complexion bolstered, his muscled surged, and Drezen's corpse dropped to the ground, drained dry as the rest of his team fled. The man looked ahead, and saw his destination. It was easy to see, it was as tall as the sky.

The statue of the goddess.

Where he'd find everything he'd sacrificed for.

With renewed strength, he continued his walk.

* * *

"Well, it's certainly big," the Arbiter of Knives said.

"It's one of the most remarkable feats of engineering in this universe, built using technology that should have been incapable of it's construction," Littlejohn replied.

"So, you're one of those crazy people who think that humans couldn't have built the pyramids and stuff?" she probed.

"No, they're just racists. Any idiot who has even a mild sense of people who look different than them having skills can tell the pyramids are obviously built by humans. What I mean is that this statue's construction doesn't line up with the archaeological records here at all. Nothing does. There's not way life developed here, but it did."

Knives looked at him, her lips pursed and bunching up at the corners.

"What?"

"So, time travelers?"

"We'd know if it was time travelers?"

She scrunched her eyes up, and held both hand up, "Would you?"

He kept walking.

At this time of day, the statue was filthy with tourists. All mulling about, taking pictures and holograms and molecular scans of themselves and any thing that could or would be interesting. Of course, a lot of them weren't here for the sights to enjoy them, they were trying to glean secrets to prove whether or not the planet was real or some sort of elaborate hoax.

"And over here," a tour guide said, "you can see the elaborate relief drawings of the Goddess, the God, and that other one, who--" a tourist lept forward, molecular scanner in hand, held out like a ray-gun, and a flat triangle of light scrolled over the engraving.

"It's period..." she said dejectedly.

"Yes it is," the tour guide sighed, "now, if you look at the details--"

Littlejohn didn't need to flash any information, the staff seemed to know who he was, and he and Knives were directed through the throng by a woman in a grey poncho and goggles, her purple hair in a long braid.

"Sorry for the tourists," she said as they reached the door, "it's always like this. At least no one tried to deface anything today."

Littlejohn gave a faint smile, Knives shrugged.

"We're here about the urn you gifted to Vo'lach prime."

The woman blinked, "Oh! Oh yes, I'd nearly forgotten, that was ages ago wasn't it?" She winked, "But I suppose not a big deal for you."

It was Littlejohn's turn to shrug, "Do you know if there was any special significance to the urn?"

The woman gave a stuttering laugh, "Uh, let's go to my office! That's a cool place. Do you like offices?"

“No,” Knives said.

“Great! Well, we’re going anyway, uh...”

Once inside, things were a lot nicer. Modern lighting seemed to have been part of the original plan of the building, either that or there had been some odd architectural quirk that had meant all of it could be fitted in without looking out of place. Their guide led them to a cozy office, with wood paneling halfway up the wall, and the upper half and ceiling painted to look like the sky, where she promptly flipped a picture on the desk over as they entered. “Not every day we get visitors from two such noble groups as your own...I know Littlejohn, of course, but I don’t know you I’m afraid?” She pulled up her goggles, revealing her purple eyes, and slid into the desk. Behind her was a portrait of a quartet of musicians playing string instruments. Littlejohn and Knives slid into chairs in front of her.

“I’m the Arbiter of Knives,” she answered.

“I’m Virtuoso, I’m in charge of the Historic Preservation Society.”

“Again? I thought you’d retired?” Littlejohn asked.

She laughed awkwardly, “Whaaaat? Um...” she shuffled some papers on her desk, “Yeah, they brought me back, after the incident where that empire of cyborg thingies tried to conquer us they decided they needed my experience again.”

“...For the Historic Preservation Society,” Knives deadpanned.

“That’s the name of the planetary government here,” Littlejohn clarified.

“So, the urn,” Knives said, impatiently.

“Yeah, uh, so that urn. I gave it to the Vo’lach cause we’re pals!”

“And?” Littlejohn turned his palm up.

“...Uh, turns out it’s actually a secret key to a sealed off area of the temple statue thing!”

Littlejohn stared her down.

“Which I didn’t know.”

Continued eye contact.

“Maybe I knew!”

An eyebrow raised.

“I knew okay! I just wanted it off the planet,” she spun around in her chair, “It’s not as easy running a planet as it looks okay. It was an eyesore, for one, and for two it worried me.”

“So you put the Vo’lach in danger.”

Her smile slowly pulled into an overly wide view of her teeth.

“You’re not going to...investigate me, right?”

Littlejohn pursed his lips.

Virtuoso probably would have said something else unintentionally incriminating, but it was at that point that the man reached the statue of the goddess, and people began dying.

* * *

There was a line. He tried to keep his patience. Certainly, he could wait. He’d waited longer. But the desert had sucked away his patience, and the betrayal he’d suffered had put him on a knife’s edge. They’d gone into this together, and now she and Artillo had thought they could remove the excess members of their conspiracy. And, well, they had, nearly. But he knew where they’d be going next. Gendar was always the next stop. And it was a goddamn tourist trap.

“These shirts are cheaper than the gift shop, get em before it’s too late! Supplies are limited! You want one sir?”

He didn’t. He tried to avoid the man’s gaze. He tried to keep his temper under control. These

idiots. These idiots! His hand shook, the gauntlet rattled. He had to keep control. The vendor held the shirt up to him. On the shirt was a close up of the face of the Statue of the Goddess.

He looked at that face.

He knew that face.

And his temper broke.

He didn't really remember what he did, getting through to the door. Streams of red danced around him as he pulled on life, strung it out and cut life from bodies, carving a path to the door, and then blasting it down with a shot of white light from his gauntlet.

He stepped into the temple, and charged through anyone in his way.

He knew where he was going. And it was probably too late.

* * *

"Ma'am! An attacker has entered the temple!" a guard yelled, throwing the door to the office open. Virtuoso sprung out of her chair, and her guests followed as they ran out, following the guard as he briefed them on the casualties, and Virtuoso yelled orders into a communicator.

"Where are we going?" Littlejohn yelled.

"Where the urn goes!" she replied.

The urn was there when they arrived, placed into an indentation into a relief, which had swung open to reveal a small storage space containing a small pile of papers, and one paper taped to the back of the space that said "Sorry!" with a smiley face drawn under it. Holding one piece of paper was a man in a long cloak, a gauntlet on one hand. He was shaking with anger.

"I know what you're here for," he said, "but I have to ask you read this before you do anything."

Knives gingerly took the paper from his outstretched hand, and she and Littlejohn read:

The Goddess shook her empty glass at one of her thousand servants, and it was promptly refilled, and given a new little umbrella.

"It's going pretty well, isn't it?" The God said, lounging back in his designer shorts. She'd finally gotten him to stop wearing a suit while they were sunbathing after a hundred years, but she could tell he was itching to put one back on when they got inside. He'd becoming such a fop since his last body died, and he became a boy again.

"It really is, I think they really have captured your likeness," Virtuoso replied, and continued sketching the construction.

The statue was the size of a skyscraper, and was being constructed far enough away from the metropolis they'd built here that no one would obscure the view. It was, in fact, the spitting image of The Goddess, who adjusted her sunglasses to gaze at it.

"I was hoping they could get my nose looking a little better, I never really liked this nose," she slid back in her lounge chair with a sigh, and one of her servants carefully steadied her glass so it wouldn't drip.

"Well, I've about seen enough for today. How about we get a nap in?"

"My goddess," their High Priest said with a cough, "will you be skipping tonight's veneration?"

The Goddess let out a long moan, "No, I'll let everyone adore me." Being a goddess was such a slog sometimes.

“Thank you, Goddess of Gendar. May you--”

She stopped paying attention and pulled out a notebook, she was here for a reason after all. The whole goddess thing was just her day job.

“See?” he yelled.

Knives and Littlejohn looked up from the paper, met each other’s gaze, and shrugged.

“It’s even in her handwriting! She wrote that! About herself!”

“Um,” Knives said, “who?”

“THE GODDESS OF GENDAR!”

“She enjoys a nice drink with umbrella personally I find that relateable.”

“She’s a CON ARTIST you absolute imbecile. This whole planet is a billion year con-job!”

Virtuoso coughed, “Clearly, you’re uh, losing your mind and--”

“You’re NAMED IN THE DAMN DOCUMENT!” he said, an accusatory finger pointing at Virtuoso.

Virtuoso waved both hands frantically, “No look, look, if hypothetically a friend built a whole planet up somebody had to stay there and run it or the socioeconomic--”

“SHUT UP! She’s already left. Her and Artillo,” he clenched a fist, and started chuckling to himself, “it’s too late then, I suppose.”

“It is,” Knives replied, “you’ve murdered people, let alone your unlawful interference in this universe’s business. You’re coming back with me. In the name of the First and Final Firmament, I demand you turn yourself in.”

He looked at Littlejohn, “I meant it’s too late for something else. Our larger plan. And for that, well, I’m not actually sorry, but you have my sympathy.”

Littlejohn shook his head, “Enough, are you turning yourself in or not?”

“Do you know what happens to us Firmament when we die, Sergeant-Instructor?”

“You live again, like my people.”

“Not quite. If I die here, this far from home, by the time I make it back my soul, if you would call it that, will lose all memories. I’ll be reborn a blank slate. A white c...well, you get the picture.” He didn’t meet anyone’s gaze, “So I guess this is where it ends for me.”

He swung the gauntlet out, and a blast of white light sent his foes scattering, but as Knives lept out of the way, she clung to the wall with her feet, and ran along it like it was the floor. She drew long crystal knife from her sleeve.

A second white blast came, and turned the wall ahead of Knives to rubble, dropping her back to the proper floor.

Littlejohn walked forward, no fear in his eyes, no agility in his step. Slowly and surely. White blasts came at him, but they seemed to be timed wrong, blazing past his cheeks in perfect near misses. The man screamed, and grabbed him, and sucked the life from him, and his eyes surged with red lines.

He fell to the floor, cold and wet. Skin covered his eyes, it had to be cut away so he could see, at least on the first body...but this was so long ago. So very long ago.

“So this is how you were born, out a simple cloning tank? I heard the 10,000 Dawns were backwaters, but I expected something nicer than this?”

“What the hell is inside you?” he coughed.

“You didn’t guess? Time.”

He let go, and stumbled back, still coughing up fluid from the birthing tank, Virtuoso and Littlejohn staring at him. He got his composure back, straightened his back, and a quick slash went

along his chest. He looked down at the cut, it wasn't fatal, up at the Arbiter of Knives, and snatched at the hand holding the knife, and sucked at her life.

And he fell to the floor, bleeding from everywhere.

"You didn't think about what's inside me, did you? I'm the Arbiter of Knives. Put it together."

He didn't say anything else before he passed on.

Littlejohn checked his pockets, and then looked at the papers, "A lot of historical records...a few notes about some sort of heist but no details...no ideas where they could have gone next from here I'm afraid."

Virtuoso ran a hand over her hair, "I need to go see to the medical needs of the guests, and then the damage he did to the temple wall...will you excuse me?"

Littlejohn gestured, and she scampered off. "Weird, but she does her job well.

Knives nodded. "She's absolutely a Firmament, you know. I can get ready to extradite her immediately."

Littlejohn laughed, loud and hard, "Of course Virtuoso is. She has the worst poker face I've ever seen. I don't really mind her being her, so I've let it slide." He looked at Knives, and nodded, "Looks like we're all done here."

Knives looked down at the body, "I'll bring him back to the Firmament. I'm sorry the trail went cold."

"These things tend to come back around. I'll let you know if anything comes from it all."

Knives didn't expect there'd be much. How serious could this whole plot be anyway? "I'll see you around then, Littlejohn."

"I'll let you know if I need some cutlery."

She smirked, and grabbing the body, vanished into a crystal orb. It zoomed through the temple, out the doors and past the medical crews, up into the sky, and ever so briefly became a star.

* * *

The Firmament, later

He fell to the floor, cold and wet. It was dark.

"You're alright, I just haven't cut your eyes open yet. Don't struggle. I'm the Arbiter of Resurrection, and welcome to life. Now come on, we've got to get you up there's paperwork to fill out."

He wasn't sure, after all he had only just come into the world, but as he was helped off the ground he couldn't help but feel like he'd been here before.

3. White Canvas

by James Wylder

Featuring characters and concepts created by and used with permission from: Jacob Black, Nate Bumber, Niki Haringsma, Simon Bucher-Jones, Lance Parkin, Alan Bednar, Elizabeth Tock, David Koon, and Jo Smiley. Special thanks to Stuart Douglas.

Chapter 1: Art Therapy

The white canvas was taunting her, because after three hours it was still a white canvas. Miss Auteur had left the room to get them lunch, and told Graelyn to put her feelings on the canvas while she was out after two hours of waiting. She'd been gone an hour, and Graelyn still couldn't make it happen. She had to get something done, so she dipped her paint brush in the blue acrylic paint and started coloring in the sky. Not that the sky was blue, but she dreamed it was blue sometimes. Dreams that felt so real it was like they were memories. Still, they were just silly.

She looked down at her toy Mammoth, sitting next to her, wearing its own paint smock Miss Auteur had made herself. "What do you think, Taranis? Is it too fantastical?"

The toy sat silently.

"Yeah, I thought so too. Miss Auteur won't be pleased about it. But I've already started, haven't I?" Miss Auteur would be mad she was still talking to Taranis too, she was ten years old after all. She continued painting the sky in, and was about to paint the sun in, but decided that was probably a step too far, so she painted the silver *Diosca Eitilte* that hung above the city in the sky instead. She decided to keep painting her dream, but didn't get that much farther before Miss Auteur came back in, carrying a bag of sandwiches in one hand, drinks in the other, and two cookies by their plastic wrappers with her teeth.

She dropped it all on her desk and turned back to Graelyn, plastering a big grin on her face, framed by her red hair in a lulu cut. "There, we have lunch. And I see someone made a breakthrough while I was gone!"

Graelyn gave a faint smile back. "I'm sorry it took me so long, Miss Auteur."

Her art therapist put a hand on her shoulder, "You have nothing to apologize for, Graelyn. Now how about you take a break, and you tell me about your painting while we eat? I'm starving honestly." She took off the big metal gauntlet she always wore on one hand, and sat down in her big leather chair while Graelyn pulled up a smaller one to the front of her desk.

"Desolation makes the best club sandwiches in the city, don't you agree?"

Graelyn nodded. "They're very good. Is there another sandwich shop, though? Mister Desolation doesn't have a lot of competition."

Auteur shrugged. "Well, they're still very good. Oh, I got crisps too."

Graelyn took a bag, and popped them open. "You know, it's silly, but I've always called them chips. Like potato chips."

Miss Auteur laughed. "Imagine that, where'd you get that from?"

Graelyn shrugged. "My imagination I guess."

"The same place you got that blue sky?"

Graelyn nodded, and Auteur leaned in.

“That’s from your dream, isn’t it?”

Graelyn nodded.

“Who else is in the picture with you?”

Graelyn blushed. “Oh, that’s...Archimedes from the movies. The cyborg hero. I really like him.”

Auteur raised an eyebrow. “You’re blushing.”

“Not like that!” Graelyn said too loudly. “I just mean...I mean I feel like he’d be a good friend.”

“Better than just a stuffed Mammoth?”

“None of the kids here want to hang out with me. I’ve...” she looked to the side. “I tried, like you asked me to. They just laughed at me.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Graelyn looked at Auteur’s bookshelf. All sorts of classics. *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Head of State*, *Dracula*...

“Graelyn, why do you think that is?”

“Cause I don’t have a mask!” Graelyn spat out.

Auteur’s eyes went wide behind her own mask, and she stuttered, stumbling over her own words in surprise till she came up with, “Maybe your mother and father could get one for you?”

And then she realized her mistake.

“I...don’t have a mother and father,” Graelyn replied.

She tried not to grimace too hard, and shifted it to another question: “Doesn’t it ever bother you you don’t have a mother or father?”

“No, no one I know has a mother or father after all.” She cocked her head to the side, “do you, Miss Auteur?”

Auteur stumbled over her words for moment before getting out, “well, no, I suppose I don’t either.”

“Why do so many books have mothers and fathers? So many don’t seem to be fantasies, but then they pretend the world doesn’t end when you leave the city.”

“Fantasy is a popular genre.”

“I was thinking of writing a poem about the end of the city, where the white starts.”

“You’re no good at poetry, Graelyn. We tried that, remember?”

She nodded hard, her glasses jostling on her face. “I know, Miss Auteur, but I’d still like to try.”

Auteur slumped in her chair dramatically and gave a flourish of her hand. “Oh fine, but I actually have another idea. You’ve had a lot of interesting dreams the last few weeks, haven’t you, Graelyn?”

She nodded. “Yes Miss Auteur. I didn’t used to dream like this.”

“No you didn’t, and I’m worried about it. I’d like you to start keeping a dream journal. Do you think you can do that for me? I want you to write down what you dream, and we’ll review it at our next session. How does that sound?”

“I can do that, sure,” she replied, taking a sip from her tea.

“Great,” Auteur said, “now, I’d say we’re done for the day. You can stop by later to walk F.I.D.O if you want.”

Her eyes lit up. “Thank you, Miss Auteur!”

She gave a dismissive wave. “Just make sure you keep up your journals.”

* * *

Graelyn walked up to the counter and rung the bell. When no one sprung immediately to her service, she dinged it again, and then a few times more in rapid succession.

“Alright, alright. Hold your proverbial horses, I’m coming.” The shopkeep came out of the back, tying his apron around his waist, and smiled under the cut of his mask.

“Graelyn, what can I do for you today?”

Graelyn looked down at her list, and carefully read off the two items on it.

“I need...a notebook, and a mask.”

The shopkeep frowned, “I can get you the notebook, but why do you want a mask? You’ve never wanted one before.”

She leaned in, scrunching her shoulders close. “Mister Shopkeep, everyone has a mask. All the other kids have them. All the grownups too. I’m the only person without one. You have to have some here, you run the store.”

He nodded. “I do run the store, but we don’t have any masks in stock. No one has asked for one before.”

“Then where do people get their masks!?! They don’t just...come with them.”

He bit his lip, pulling the skin back tight over his lower teeth. “Right...well...I can get you the notebook now, but I’ll have to see if I can get you a mask somewhere.”

She smiled back at him. “Thank you, Mister Shopkeep.”

She walked out of the store, notebook in her bag. She passed the playground, where the other kids were playing. There weren’t that many kids in the town, or at least it felt like there weren’t. This was the town, it was the whole world, and it felt like there *should* be more. There were a lot of younger ones, but more people closer to her age had moved in over the years. This was the primary thing that made Graelyn think adults were lying to her, naturally. You didn’t just spin children out of looms, there were organic bodily processes for these things. They couldn’t just spring up here. And she heard them talk, usually behind her back, but often when they thought she wasn’t listening they spoke of places they’d lived before. Places from storybooks. She’d asked about it one day in class.

The Teacher, the only teacher, answered her raised hand.

“Sir, where is London?”

The class didn’t snicker, they looked scared.

“London, uh, well it’s a storybook place.”

“But Sir, your coat says it was made in London.”

All eyes fell on her, and after a deeply uncomfortable pause he replied, “Don’t ask silly questions. Now, we’ll be covering how to make your own summoning circle today.”

Today, as she walked past the playground, the other kids did snicker though. Most of them anyways. She took note of the ones who weren’t there.

Arriving home, Graelyn went straight to her bed, pulled Taranis from her bag, and threw herself down, shutting her eyes and squeezing the plush Mammoth tight. Sometimes it felt like the world was made for her to be alone. She couldn’t stay in bed forever though, she was hungry. She reached for her satchel and pulled out her clutch, sifting through the money inside. She only had twelve abominations and fifty-seven horror left, which meant that if she wanted to still see the new Archimedes movie, she’d need to cook her own dinner tonight. Groaning, she got up, carrying Taranis with her, and set him on the countertop as she sifted through the fridge.

Graelyn sometimes dreamed of a world where nearly no one cooked, where food just came out of machines that built it for you from base parts. But that was a fantasy. She got out her purple whisk, and began to whisk together some eggs. She probably shouldn’t use a whisk, all the recipe books seemed to think it was only good for some things, but Graelyn found she could do most things in the kitchen with it, recipe books be damned. She just liked whisking things, maybe.

She sat across from the stuffed toy and ate her omelette. The *Diosca Eitilte* above gave the daily call of, “Uh, hello citizens. I guess it’s going to get dark in a few hours. Unless you need a little more

light? Or hours? You know, just call me if you need that. Maybe talk for a bit. No pressure or anything.” Graelyn had only met Cinnabar a few times, he wasn’t allowed to leave the *Diosca Eitilte* often, but she felt a kindred spirit with him. Not that she had time to talk to him tonight, F.I.D.O needed walkies.

* * *

F.I.D.O was already bounding up to the gate by the time she got there, metal legs whirring, his tail making a squeaking sound as it battered back and forth.

Graelyn unlatched the gate and slipped inside. “F.I.D.O, your tail needs some oil. Has Miss Auteur not been doing maintenance on you?”

She knelt down and scratched behind the two ear-shaped microphones on his head.

“Mistress Auteur does many things, wondrous things, dark things, and secret things. I am but content to sit at her feet,” the robot dog said.

“You are a good boy!” she said, and rubbed her hands over his smooth head.

“Incorrect. I am a bad boy, Mistress Graelyn.”

“Is that why you wear sunglasses everywhere? Because you’re a bad boy?”

“Correct. Mistress Auteur thought the leather jacket was too much, which I have deemed an unfortunate appraisal.”

Graelyn nodded and went over to the shed, grabbed the oil, and lubricated F.I.D.O’s joints. “Better?”

“You have done me a great service. Long shall it be remembered.”

“Wanna go for a…”

His head turned to the side, one ear perking up.

“WALK?!?”

F.I.D.O leapt ten feet vertically in joy. “WALK. WALK. WALK. MISTRESS IS TAKING F.I.D.O FOR WALKIES. EXCITEMENT TANGIBLE.”

She waited for him to calm down and snapped the leash to his collar. The leash wasn’t made of normal material, it was dark and nearly see-through, its edges cloudy. Still, it let her hold onto Miss Auteur’s dog despite his strength, so she didn’t question it much. He still tugged hard as they left Miss Auteur’s back yard, heading down the street. The residents of the town were going about their usual business: a young couple was on a date doing a blood sacrifice over a storm drain (“Not for dogs!” Graelyn said, pulling F.I.D.O away), the bakers commune was having a debate about working hours in the shop, while one of the members lackadaisically pulled memories from the group to put into tomorrow’s bread (the memories had to chill in the fridge overnight, after all). A group of parents were fussing over their children, the family’s three fathers and two mothers trying to get the ice cream off their kids’ faces, none of whom appeared to be cleanly eaters.

This was her town, and she wondered if it would ever let her go, and if it did, where she could go from here. As Graelyn and F.I.D.O reached the end of main street, she kept going. F.I.D.O wasn’t going to complain about a longer walk, so he might not catch on to what she was thinking. He mostly wanted to talk about Foucault anyway.

“So Foucault wrote that madness, in the 18th Century AD, and I refuse to use CE mind you, we have to have some continuity of tradition in our naming conventions, where was I? Right, madness was often used to stigmatize those who were unwanted by society. Poor, sick, and those whose own thoughts fell outside the social norms.” F.I.D.O ran a laser scanner over a flower, and a screen on his backside displayed a full chemical analysis, which he was very pleased about. “So knowledge in itself

isn't a pure virtue, because knowledge is shaped by the existing powers who control it to gain more p—
Mistress?"

Graelyn was running towards the edge of the town, towards the sea of white. Her high-tops pushed off the pavement, her arms pumped, her eyes kept on the prize. If it was a prize. If it was anything. She grabbed a stone as she passed it and chucked it ahead. It landed on the white.

"MISTRESS! HALT!"

She plunged on, and her foot left the crumbling edge of the pavement and dropped down onto...something soft. She ran on it, leaning down and letting her fingers glide across it. It felt like silk, soft to the touch but firm enough to hold her. She kept running, kept straight. She had to maintain the same direction or she'd get lost. And what did that mean here? She ran. And ran. And there was nothing. She stopped, panting, and looked back. She couldn't see the town. Had there been a slope? She didn't know. She turned around and ran till she tired, then walked. There was only white. Only nothing. She crossed her arms and hunched her shoulders. A mistake, certainly. She should have laid a string behind her, in hindsight. She uncrossed her arms and went to reach into her back, but her hand slipped right through it. She held them up: they were vanishing.

She stumbled, her feet sinking into the white, merging with it.

"F.I.D.O!" she yelled, "F.I.D.O! Help!"

Her feet were now part of the white. No matter how hard she tried to pull up, they kept sinking, her ankles, her calves. She lost her knees next, and decided this experiment was in fact a failure and did not meet her standards for proper experimentation. She thrashed, her glasses falling off onto the white.

Mother would be so disappointed in me, she thought, which was a weird thought for someone without parents.

Her chest began sinking in, and with a breath out, she resigned herself to the end. It wasn't so bad. There were so many worse things than death. A grey blur appeared.

"Mistress!" she heard the blur say, "grab onto me." She flailed her arms out and found F.I.D.O's metal hide, grabbing hold of him. He pulled. His gears ground and his motors revved.

"I'm not moving."

"Hold tight, Mistress."

F.I.D.O's leg's crouched, and she heard his power core charge. Then he sprung. She was yanked out of the white, into the air, the metal dog soaring a hundred feet into the air. She prepared for the rough landing, but from F.I.D.O's back two glider wings sprung, and they coasted to the ground, the real ground at the edge of town. Graelyn collapsed, her heart pounding. She tried to slow her breathing and get her heart rate under control.

"Good...dog...F.I.D.O," she rasped.

"Correct. I have Mistress Graelyn's glasses."

She managed to sit up, and saw that F.I.D.O was holding her glasses in his mouth. She pulled them out, careful to avoid his razor-blade teeth, and put them back on.

"You saved my life, F.I.D.O. Thank you."

"Mistress Graelyn, you knew very well that the empty lands are forbidden."

"I needed to know what was beyond them."

"Now you know," he replied, "nothing exists beyond them, and nothing can exist in them."

She nodded and looked back out at it. "You won't tell Miss Auteur, will you?"

F.I.D.O examined her for a moment. "I shall keep your secret, young one. But I won't save you again if you venture outside the town."

She nodded. "I understand."

"Now," F.I.D.O continued, "what was I saying about Foucault?"

Chapter 2: Dreams

Graelyn presented the dream journal to Auteur, who had never seen Graelyn in this kind of mood before.

“Graelyn, you’re very on edge, excited, nervous, it’s hard to tell.”

She gave Auteur a bad attempt at a smile. “I just had very interesting dreams last night.”

Raising an eyebrow, Auteur adjusted her white robe, the light from the *Diosca Eitilte* making the red and gold edging and designs on them stand out pleasingly, and opened Graelyn’s journal.

Dream Journal Entry 1:

Graelyn stirred the coffee,

Auteur’s Office

“That’s your opening?” Auteur snapped. “That’s barely a first line.”

Graelyn frowned. “I thought you said you wouldn’t be judging my dream journals on their artistic merit.”

Auteur forced a smile. “Yes, of course. But uh, give me a moment.” Auteur took Graelyn’s journal back to her desk, and spent the next hour rewriting it on a notepad while Graelyn sat awkwardly and watched.

“There, now I think that’s ready for us to read together. You didn’t even need the whole opening, setup is overrated. Come sit with me on the couch, Graelyn.”

Graelyn squirmed. “Um, Miss Auteur, if we’re supposed to be analyzing my dreams, does it really help if you rewrote them?”

She scoffed. “Nonsense. I just massively improved the quality of the prose. Well, maybe added a few embellishments. Have you ever read “The Dark Tower”?”

Graelyn shook her head.

“Oh, great. Then you’re going to love this first line.”

Dream Journal, Entry 1

The green-robed man fled across the rooftops, and Archimedes followed. Arch’s mechanical legs, mechanical like most of their body, were making it a certainty they’d overtake the green-robed man given enough time. He leapt off a rooftop, the city rushing beneath him, and as he landed he could hear the pistons of his pursuer. The man looked back, stumbling on a piece of grating, and then panicked as he realized the roof was running out. He’d lost his momentum, and he couldn’t make the next leap. He hesitated, just a moment, but that was enough. Large hands grasped him under the armpits, lifting him up like a child. Then, he really felt fear: the hands threw him up into the air in a corkscrew, and he came down back into those hands, only facing the other direction.

“Hi,” Archimedes said, “did you realize you’re in a lot of trouble or am I the first one to inform you of that?”

The green-robed man looked down into the near-blank mask that Archimedes had for a face, with only one eye on its right-hand side. It was made of some sort of very tough screen that could display images, and the whole rest of their body was coated in it as well, though some of it was covered by a long trench coat and a blue fez that said “Centro Children’s Hospital Fun Gang!” on it.

“I know,” he replied.

Arch sighed and looked at the man's left arm, which was covered up to the elbow in an elaborate, bejeweled golden gauntlet. They'd seen a lot of gauntlets, the Knights of Sky used them all the time after all in order to channel energy from other realities or something like that, but this one was different. Usually the gauntlets had a slapped-together look, with different parts being added on whenever the owner realized it needed one. This was sleek, bespoke, and more than a bit gaudy. Arch sighed a second time.

"Put down the gauntlet, please. I'm not in the mood to deal with this today."

The green-robed man was sweating up a storm. He glanced at the gauntlet.

"I know what it does, and don't you dare. My reaction times are miles beyond yours."

There were three labored breaths, and the gauntlet slid off and clattered to the ground, just as the access door to the roof swung open, revealing Arch's comrade, Graelyn Scythes, who pointed at the captive man, began to speak, then hunched over, hand on her knees, panting.

"You alright, Grae?" Arch asked.

She nodded, and raised one hand to point as she heaved in breaths, "Got...you!"

"You can really take your time, we're not in a-"

"-Dawn...is here...to-" she pulled in several deep breaths.

"Breathe in slow, out fast."

"You guys had to do the whole parkour on rooftops thing? Really?"

"Parkour?" Arch asked.

"It's French for jumping off rooftops like you're in a holoflick," Grae replied, straightening her back and regaining her composure like nothing weird had ever happened to her, ever. "As I was saying, Mr. Knight of Sky, we know you took the...oh, it's on the ground."

"Yeah, I got that," Arch replied.

"Could you please set me down?" the man replied.

Graelyn picked up the gauntlet, and after fiddling with it for a moment, slid it on her own arm as Arch tried to say, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"It fits!"

"It fits everyone," the man replied.

"What's it do?" Graelyn asked.

"No idea," Arch replied, setting the man down, whose face instantly reddened.

"You said you knew what it did!"

Arch shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Artillo Brinzo."

"So what's it do? We know you stole it."

Artillo scoffed, "How could you know that?"

* * *

3 Hours Earlier.

Kinan Jans, leader of Dawn, walked towards where Arch and Graelyn were reading "Fun knitting patterns" and "Clique Mechanics" respectively.

"Hi, this is an Emissary from an alternate reality Firmament, some guy from The Knights of Sky stole their gauntlet."

"We'd like it back," the robed figure with a funny collar said. Then after a pause, "Please."

* * *

"Okay so maybe I stole it, but I didn't steal it by myself, I was hired by-"

There was a flash, and a statue of a painted warrior was there, its stone arm around Artillo's neck, and then both of them disappeared.

Graelyn and Arch stared at the air.

"Agreed that that wasn't good?" she said.

"Yep," they replied.

"Can you trace him?"

A flood of question marks filled the screen of Arch's face. "How...do you think I could do that?"

"You're a cyborg?"

"What does that mean?"

"I mean you're constantly revealing you have new gizmos in your body that do neat things. Like the kitten holder."

"Kittens need to be comfy."

"And the missile launcher."

"To be fair, I didn't know that was there myself."

"So can you track him?"

Arch shook his head. "Afraid not. I've never seen a teleporting painted statue before."

Graelyn flexed her hand, "I do wonder what this does, though." She snapped her fingers. Nothing happened.

"We can figure that out later, after we report back to Kinan. This is..." In front of them on the rooftop was another painted statue of a warrior, its noble jaw pointed in defiance.

"Uh," Graelyn said, "That wasn't there before?"

"Maybe they can only move when we're not looking at them?" Arch posited.

"That's ridiculous!" Graelyn replied, "But then again, teleporting statues are ridiculous..." she squinted, "How do they work?" They stared at them. They didn't move.

"Alright, so, maybe we should test this theory. We close our eyes, er, you turn off your cameras on the count of three and then we open them. Right?"

Arch nodded. "That sounds dangerous and stupid, but I'm in."

She grinned. "I love field research. Three, two, one..."

There was a moment of darkness, and then there was a painted statue, closer, face filled with rage, sword drawn, charging at them.

"Alright cool, so, how about we get out of here then?" Graelyn said.

"Any suggestions on how to do that without death?"

Graelyn nudged him. "Trust fall. Huh, yeah?"

"Stop having fun."

"Sorry."

"But yeah, that works."

They backed up to the edge of the building, keeping their eyes on the statue, and then leaned backward. They tumbled off, Graelyn reaching into her side-bag and pulling out a handful of Crystal dust with her gauntleted hand. The gauntlet hummed with energy upon contact, and Graelyn threw the dust down in a curve, the sparkling crystals forming into a circle of white light, and then a disk, and they fell into it as the disk closed.

Auteur paused, looking down at the ending to the journal's story as though she hadn't read it already and rewritten it personally. "Well, that is a curious dream."

"I liked the part with Archimedes at the Children's hospital you cut out. He was giving the kids candy and toys, it was really kind and cute."

Auteur scoffed. "It was just fluff. You should always trim down your stories to just what you need. Every line should serve the narrative."

Graelyn frowned. "But I always like the details, I like when stories explore things."

"A waste of the reader's time, so I fixed it. But I think this story says a lot about you. You put my gauntlet into it, didn't you, Graelyn?"

She nodded, "I did, I don't know what that means."

"I think it means you're searching for something. You are searching for something, aren't you?"

Graelyn looked at her feet, "Maybe."

"You can tell me, it's okay."

Graelyn turned her head away. "...I...I still don't have any friends. Not one." Her voice choked up, "I've tried, Miss Auteur, but they all hate me. They think I'm stupid, or they yell at me and blame me."

Auteur closed the journal, and pulled a loose strand of red hair behind her ear. "What on Earth could they blame you for?"

"What's Earth?"

"Nevermind, what do they blame you for, Graelyn?"

"Tyraniss said his mom and mom wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me."

Auteur shook her head, "He's being a bully."

"But there's nowhere to go! You can't go beyond the white."

"Of course you can't. He meant his parents don't work on the *Diosca Eitilte* anymore, they used to. Cinnabar wasn't always the voice up there, do you remember that?"

Graelyn's face scrunched up. "Sort of."

"It was a long time ago. Now Graelyn, you're a smart girl with a keen, curious mind. You excel in most of your classes—"

"Not blood magic."

"Yes, well, nobody is perfect. But you can make friends," she gave the girl a smile. "Maybe you're just going about it the wrong way. But I'm afraid we're out of time. I've got another appointment. So we'll pick this up next session. Alright?"

The girl nodded, and grabbed her satchel, "See you next time, Miss Auteur."

"Don't forget to walk F.I.D.O!"

She smiled, a real smile this time. "I won't, promise."

* * *

Holding a silver cane, and dressed in a suit so fine it made the rest of the room look underdressed, Gideon entered. Auteur rose to meet him, and the pair shook hands, then hugged.

"I'm so glad to see you, Gideon, running this whole town for another year has been misery."

They sat down in plush chairs, usually meant for her sessions, and she poured each of them a glass of bourbon. "Misery it may be, but you've been at this a long time. How long is the girl now?"

"Ten," Auteur answered, "just last month. She had a birthday party all alone. I watched it from the nanny cam. Set up her little stuffed Mammoth and blew out the candles with him."

"Terribly sad."

“Oh don’t look at me like that, of course I stopped by and gave her a present. Some science book I kept falling asleep to. She loved it though.” Auteur rolled her eyes hard. “I’ve been letting her walk F.I.D.O as well. I think she’s more of a cat person, but it’s working out.”

Gideon nodded, “And how close are you to making a breakthrough with her?”

Auteur gave a faint smile, “I’ve been making small breakthroughs in our therapy sessions.”

Gideon took a sip of the bourbon. “This is fantastic,” he took a second sip, “faint memories of...did we kill the distiller?”

“Yes, a bit of a mistake. He really made the best bourbon.” She took her mask off so Gideon could see her whole face, the clean white features with artful freckles, her green eyes staring into him. “So I’m taking my time on this one. I’m not going to make that kind of mistake again.”

Chapter 3: Popcorn

Graelyn knew she still had another growth spurt in her, or she'd better have one, because she still felt too short at the movie theatre counter. Not peering-over-on-her-tiptoes anymore at least, but still. This wasn't the way she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

"One ticket for 'Archimedes: Skymetal' please?"

"Would you...like any popcorn, candy, drinks, or the dying...gasps of unloved birds?" the attendant, a hulking thing of machine and clay they called "Hole," asked.

"I'll do the popcorn and drink combo please."

Hole filled the bag, and turned some of its eyeholes back to her, slowly, jerking like stop-motion animation. Tiny flecks of clay fell amidst the popcorn. "Buttery T-Topping?" it asked her.

"No thank you!"

"E-Enjoy the show, Theater 8, to...your left," Hole said, a limb jerking left and right in windshield-wiper-like wave.

Graelyn balanced the bag of popcorn and the drink, which were supposedly 'small' but did not seem small at all, and meandered her way towards Theater 8, when she heard a few things from around the corner. So naturally, she stopped to listen, back flat against the wall and peeking around cautiously.

"Just tell her how you feel," a woman said to her friend. He shook his head.

"You know she won't understand! It's not going to go well." He banged his head against the wall. "I just want one reminder of home, that's all."

"And that's not too much to ask, is it?"

He let out a breath and shook his head.

"So, the next time you see her...you'll..."

"I'll ask her."

She grinned, "Fantastic. Now come on, don't want to miss the previews."

Curious, certainly, but also Graelyn had no context for the conversation. Still, she filed it away. She slipped into the theater, found her seat, and waited for the lights to go down. She was wearing her Archimedes t-shirt, which had the cyborg hero sitting crosslegged, covered in kittens, arms in the air in acceptance of the situation.

Arch was the best.

The previews were mostly movies Graelyn was already planning to see: Songbird 3: The Fall of Kings, Coloth Adventures 4: The Patron of Doom, Aladdin: Kid Hacker!, and a few that didn't really interest her, like a drama about how some fictional space admiral uncovered a secret plot to start a war while sitting in a desk job. She munched on her popcorn and watched the theatre fill up. The other kids from school were here for the premiere, actually, all the kids in her class, filtering in in bursts. She avoided most of the other kids' eyes, but noticed Citizen 176 was sitting alone near the back. At least Graelyn wasn't the only kid here alone.

Finally, the previews ended, and the movie began.

Like all Archimedes movies, it began with the usual intro, where a whole ton of images from the Archimedes cinematic universe flashed, and the camera panned out to reveal the images were being projected on his screen-like chest all along. Then, the adventure began.

Scene: It's supposed to be a science-fiction setting, but we can tell they just shot it on an ordinary space station. They've added things over the ordinary bits, and tried to give the holograms and displays a bit

more of a “Futuristic” look. But really, you can tell that the ocean outside the windows isn’t really there and is just CGI over the vastness of space. Sure, we’ll all be living in underwater cities in the future, but you’d think with how big the budget is they’d do better. We see a man in robes, setting a bomb on a bulkhead. Skidding around the corner comes ARCHIMEDES VON AHNERABE, played under the heavy armor costume and coat by Brad Pitt, and his assistant, his trusted companion for so many years, CELESTE ROTH, played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who has long brown hair to match the character. She’s got a bit of a punk vibe, but nothing that would deter families from going to see this PG-13 rated flick.

ARCHIMEDES

Hi, I noticed you’re trying to blow up this underwater city, would you like some help with that?

The figure turns, he is a member of THE FIRMAMENT, the evil cult! Pulling his hood down, he points at Archimedes and reveals he is played by Brendan Fraser, an amazing piece of miscasting that is instantly obvious because we all kinda like the villain.

FIRMAMENT

Did you really think you could stop us?

CELESTE

We already did, actually.

FLASHBACK: We see the earlier scene where the Firmament shoved Celeste off the bridge (only for her to fix her rocket-boots mid fall and survive). She pulls a bit from the bomb as she drops, we cut back to the present. The bomb has a convenient screen that says: ERROR.

FIRMAMENT

Why did I put that screen there anyways?

CELESTE

We don’t want to hurt you, so go on then, give yourself up and tell us—

“DOWN IN FRONT!” someone yelled.

The Hollow Child had risen into the air, blocking the screen partially, the walls began to whisper secrets not heard since the first being dared to pull itself from the ocean on a weak and daring limb, and Hole came lumbering in with the sound of rusting gears, and hurled the lasso the theater had for these occasions up, nabbing her ankle, and pulling her from the theater like a balloon. Theatergoers hurled popcorn at her as she was escorted out, this wasn’t the first time. Graelyn slid down in her seat, as though they’d notice her too.

“I can’t believe we’re stuck here with these brats,” the same voice said quieter, but not quiet enough.

“Keep it down,” their friend said, then said something too quiet for Graelyn to hear.

SCENE: Archimedes and Celeste have managed to get onto the surf boards, and are sliding down the lava flow, now that the volcano has erupted (natch).

CELESTE

Arch, the kittens!

She's right, the transparent orb with the kittens is bouncing down the side of the volcano above the lava flow...HEADING RIGHT TOWARDS IT! Arch turns his surfboard, an arc of lava splashing up towards the camera (in 3-D), and angles right for the orb.

CLOSE UP: the kittens, they are babies and very cute. They are making little mewling noises, and walking all over each other in the bubble. Arch gets his surfboard parallel with the rolling ball.

ARCHIMEDES

Come on little guys, I got you...

The ball rolls off, it looks like it's going towards Arch's hands—but it hits a bump and the angle changes. and Archimedes catches it!

The audience roars their applause, and Graelyn takes a big sip from her pop. These movies were great. The finale had maybe a bit too much CGI, but that was okay. As she left the theater Graelyn was already daydreaming about the adventures of Arch, and how to build a surfboard that could ride a lava flow (realistically, the lava flow would be too slow for that, but hypothetically anyway). She'd almost reached the exit when Graelyn remembered the most important thing about leaving the movie theater. When she had forgotten before, it had haunted her for days. She wouldn't fail this time. So she turned around, and went to go get a free popcorn refill with her membership card.

On most days, this would have been a completely innocuous action (after how expensive the popcorn was, who wouldn't get the refill?) but today, it put Graelyn in the position of hearing part 2 of the conversation she'd overheard earlier. During the course of it, Graelyn would go from the counter, to the wall, to covering her mouth against the wall with her eyes wide. You can insert these motions into the below dialogue at moments you feel appropriate.

"Mayor Auteur!" the man yelled.

She sighed. "I'm not the mayor. Don't...I'm...don't call me that!"

"But you're in charge?" the woman replied.

She sighed louder. "Fine, what is it?"

"We were wondering if we could have a simple request? You know, with the holidays coming up and all."

Auteur grimaced and crossed her arms.

"...We were wondering if you could show my favorite movie here at the movie theater?"

"Your favorite movie?"

"Yes!"

"You do understand why we're all here, right? Why this town is here?"

The woman coughed. "It has been a bit of time..."

"Fine, what's the movie?"

The man smiled, and his posture loosened. "Oh, it's a perfect movie for the winter: 'Ice Age 2'!"

Auteur stared at him. "You can't be serious."

The woman looked back and forth between them nervously. "It's just a fun fi-"

"It's an artistic travesty! The first 'Ice Age' movie was bad enough, but then they had the nerve to cash in on a sequel?"

“...there are a few sequels actually and—”

“And that god-forsaken squirrel! Who thought that was a good idea!”

“...I love the squirrel.”

“And most of all,” she bared her teeth, “it has Manny the Mammoth. And you know that pisses me off, so how about you show one lick of artistic taste. I mean, it’s commercial tripe but at least something by Pixar! ‘Ice Age 2,’ I mean—” she threw her arm with the gauntlet out, and they looked at something Graelyn couldn’t see. They stared at it, “Oh uh, well. That’s awkward.”

The man and woman backed away from Auteur.

“So uh, I’ll go clean that up, and you go get some artistic taste. Sound good?”

They stuttered out a “Yes, Auteur,” before scrambling away.

When Graelyn returned home she whisked her dinner together, and looked at Tiranis, who watched her from the counter. “Well, we should both be glad I didn’t name you Manny, huh?”

The plush toy didn’t respond, but Graelyn pointed with the whisk like he had anyway. “Yeah, so count your blessings.”

Dream Journal, Entry 2

The pair popped out of a different white disk, tumbling out onto green grass under a blue sky where the clouds were floating bubbles of water. Their home, the home of Dawn: Spiral. They didn’t stop to rest, however. Graelyn and Arch got to their feet and started sprinting toward their leader, Kinan Jans, a lanky person in a long gray coat, the left side of their head shaved so their blond hair fell on the other. They were chatting with the Emissary from the other reality. “What’s wrong?” Kinan said in her slurred monotone.

“Big problems, actually! A painted stone statue showed up and kidnapped our target!” Graelyn ejaculated.

The Emissary looked down at her arm. “You retrieved the gauntlet, however, and that was our main concern. We can chase criminals forever, but if that fell into the wrong hands, there could be horrible consequences.”

“Great, but, really, why is a painted stone statue kidnapping anyone? It’s a statue.”

Kinan cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know of anything from the 10,000 Dawns that does that. Are you sure it was a real statue?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“And it teleports,” Arch said.

All eyes turned the Emissary. “That sounds like it could be a few things from where I’m from. I can’t be sure, though, without traveling all the way back homeward. I can’t be sure without looking.”

Kinan turned to her. “I hate to impose, but if you can assist us.”

The Emissary scratched her face. “Well, I suppose I could...no, no I’m afraid I can’t. My orders were very clear to go straight back when I’d acquired the artifact. Could I have it back, please?”

Graelyn moved to take it off her arm, but didn’t budge. “Uh. Sorry, a bit stuck.” She pulled on it more, and then felt around for a latch. “Arch, it came off the green guy so easily...”

Arch tried to tug it off, but it didn’t move a millimeter.

The Emissary stepped up and examined the gauntlet. “It looks like I don’t have a choice in staying, the artifact has initiated a danger lock. Whatever those statues are, it thinks they’re a big enough threat to your universes that it won’t detach till the situation is resolved.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Alright, let’s go back and investigate.”

Kinan raised an arm and opened a portal up, and the four walked through the swirling white light.

They arrived in Times Square, New York, to absolute silence. The streets were empty, aside from a few automated cars that were going to their predetermined destinations.

“Did you choose a weird year? Maybe there’s a reason for this,” Arch asked.

“No,” Kinan replied, “this is Christmas Eve, 2460. The streets should be packed.”

Graelyn spun around looking for something out of the ordinary, till her eyes landed on a painted statue. “Kinan, Arch, Emissary, look.”

They did, and the Emissary cursed. “That’s a Painted Warrior. I’m not entirely familiar with them, but they’re servants of our enemies.”

Arch took a step towards it. “Hi there, Painted Warrior, I’m Archimedes. I don’t know why you’re here, but we’d love to talk about this.”

“Arch, I love your peace-mongering, but you’re literally talking to a statue,” Grae replied.

“She’s right,” The Emissary said.

“Where are the Firmament? They’re supposed to be handling something like this,” Kinan said.

From beneath a pile of trash, a voice answered her, “The Firmament has fallen.” A woman popped up from the pile, pulling a hamburger wrapper out of her hair. Arch kept his eyes on the statue. “I’ve been trying to find anyone else who made it, who escaped.” She held up a whisk. “Thanks to the Quantum Whisk I was able to find you, though, at least I think it helped me find you. Honestly, it might just be a whisk.”

“Lady Aesculapius,” Graelyn said, “you’re serious?”

“You know her?” the Emissary asked.

“Traveled with her for a bit,” Arch answered, staring at the statue.

“Lady Aesc for short, and for easy spelling,” she pulled a blue slouch cap over her curly hair and scrambled out of the trash heap, dusting her blue pea coat off as she ran to the group. “I’ve been trying to track down information on them, but they’ve already done quite a lot to get rid of it. Before they nicked my ride, I did notice they’d nicked something—”

“There’s another,” Kinan noted, and indeed, there was. Her eyes focused on it.

“-every copy of one specific book, it got marked stolen by the computers-”

“Another one,” Graelyn said, and stared.

“-It’s called ‘The Book of the Enemy’.”

“If they scrubbed this reality, we can find it in mine! The Plume Coteries would have it!” The Emissary yelled.

“We’re leaving, now,” Kinan said, and threw her arm out, the light swirling into a new portal. But there were more Painted Warriors appearing, whenever a gap in their sight came up. The Emissary ran through first, then Graelyn, then Lady Aesc.

“Go,” Arch said.

“No,” Kinan replied, and Arch ran through. And then, there were too few eyes, and Kinan Jans felt a hand on her shoulder of cold painted Marble.

Auteur shut the book and looked at Graelyn, “That was quite the writing you did this week.”

Graelyn smiled, faintly. “Thank you, Miss Auteur.”

Auteur scooted her chair closer to Graelyn. “Now, Graelyn...I think it’s time we talk about some of the underlying things you keep putting into your writing. In this story, you’re friends with fictional characters. It’s a fanfic, isn’t it?”

Graelyn blushed. "Oh, I mean, it's a dream, just..."

Auteur gave a calming smile. "You misunderstand me. I wrote lots of fanfiction at your age, and between us," she winked, "I still might."

The girl perked up a little. "Really, Miss Auteur?"

"Oh absolutely. But here's the thing, Graelyn, fanfic is wonderful to write, but this is you writing down your dreams. Now, dreams can just be dreams, they don't need to be anything, but if there are patterns they can mean something. Do you follow me?"

Graelyn nodded.

"You've told me a lot of your dreams, from before we started this dream journal project, and do you know what they have in common?"

"...They're fanfic?"

"Quite right. There's no friends or family in them. No one except you and the characters you latch onto."

Graelyn bowed her head.

"And I think we both know why that is?"

"Because I don't have any friends."

"Now, these characters like Archimedes, you feel like they are friends you could have had, don't you? You feel like Archimedes and his assistant Celeste are your friends right now?"

Graelyn shook her head. "I don't feel that way about Celeste, she's...I don't feel like I've met her?"

"You've never met Archimedes, though."

Graelyn shrugged. "I suppose not..."

"But you want to be friends with him, you would if you could?"

The girl nodded. "He's everything I'd want in a friend. Kind, nice even, but brave and not afraid to stand up to people doing things he doesn't think are right. And he bring joy into other people's lives."

"Do you want to see those things in yourself?"

There was a long pause, Auteur felt she was calculating the answer, before she replied, "Perhaps."

"Now Grae...there's another troubling element in these stories. One of these friends of yours, Kinan, she just vanished and was pulled out of the story by these," Auteur checked the journal theatrically, "Painted Warriors. Do you not like her?"

"No, I think Kinan is wonderful."

"Then why do you think she vanished, why do you think you're putting all your characters in danger of vanishing too?"

"I don't know, Miss Auteur."

"It's because you're being pushed towards a choice, Graelyn, a choice that's been coming a long time: are you going to stay with them, or not?"

Graelyn paused. "I can't let go of my characters, I don't have anyone—"

Auteur tsked. "Of course you don't have anyone. You only have your fictions, no one to laugh with. I know you talk to your stuffed animal when I'm not looking."

Graelyn hid her face.

"You plot everything you do. You act like other people are a game you can play, and then you take your ball and go home like that makes you better than them. But it doesn't make you better, do you know what that makes you?"

She shook her head, collapsing in on herself.

“It just makes you disgustingly alone!” Auteur stood up and towered over her. “Where can you even go from here, you’ve tried it all, haven’t you?”

Graelyn began to cry.

“I bet you feel like you don’t belong here, like you’re a burden on everyone else around you, don’t you?”

Nodding, Graelyn began to sob.

“Then make it final, write down in your journal what you want. That you want to be with your characters. Make it real with ink. Go on then. Who else do you have?”

She shoved the journal in Graelyn’s face, and the girl uncurled, her face sloppy with tears, and she took the journal. Auteur rammed a pen in between her shaking hands.

“It’s what you want. Write it down. You’re so alone. But you don’t have to be. It can all be okay. Just admit what you want. Who do you have that cares about you, who do you have that looks after you, Graelyn? Write it down! Who do you have?”

Graelyn started to write, started to pen the words, her lips trembling. Then she stopped. She looked up at Auteur, in sudden understanding.

“I have you, miss Auteur.”

Auteur nearly tripped backwards in horror, “I, n...I—”

“You...” Graelyn started crying again, but it was different this time, “You’ve always been there on my birthday, and on Christmas, even when no one else was there, when I was so alone. And-and you let me walk F.I.D.O, and feed him. And sometimes you bring me nice lunches, and we just...” she rushed forward and grabbed hold of her around the legs, sobbing into her robes, “Oh Miss Auteur, I thought I was alone and no one loved me! But I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Auteur patted her on the head, trying to figure out what to say. Her face went through a dozen panicked expressions. “...Y...Yes. That. Yes of course, of, of course, Graelyn.” Why did she say that. Shit. No, that was not what she was supposed to say, but she was being so damn earnest!

“Can...can I spend Christmas with you this year?”

“Of course,” she replied, biting her cheek till she tasted blood.

Graelyn pulled away from her, wiping tears from her face, and looked at the clock. “Oh! I need to go, I’m so late but...” she looked up at Auteur, who tried to smile politely. “I...I thought you were being mean, but...you’re right, I can make friends. I’ll see you when I get F.I.D.O later.” She scrambled towards the door, and then stopped halfway through, turned back, and smiled at her. “Thank you!”

Auteur waved goodbye, and as the door closed she stood in the center of the room in silence, listening for Graelyn’s footsteps to grow silent. Then she stood a while longer, staring at the wall, before she screamed, knocking over the chair and kicking the side of her table. She pulled books off the shelves and threw them on the floor, and curled up in the pile of rubble she’d made holding her head. How had she lost control of that? How had that moment she’d prepared for gone so wrong?

She let out a moan, and then a curse word not suited for family audiences, and thought about what the hell she was going to tell Gideon.

Chapter 4: The Plan

“Nietzsche is massively overrated, it’s not just that his ideals were co-opted by edgelords, but really his ideas were never particularly interesting to me in the first place. Is that because I am a dog? Perhaps but—Miss Graelyn, you look deep in thought, but distant. I presume it’s not a rebuttal?”

“No F.I.D.O, I’m just trying to figure something out.”

“I am a good listener, or can be.”

Graelyn stepped over the dead chickens and beer cans from someone’s late night blood ritual. “I don’t know...I just don’t have any friends, you know? You’re great, but dogs always love people.”

F.I.D.O looked off into the distance, his ears wagging a little in a sudden breeze. “Not this dog, sweetheart.” He looked back up at her. “But I understand your point. Perhaps you’re just trying to be friends with the wrong people?”

Graelyn thought about it, the dog might have a point.

* * *

Graelyn knocked at the door, her heart beating hard in her chest. Citizen 176 opened the door and, seeing Graelyn, moved to close it, but Graelyn shoved the cookies she’d baked into the gap.

“I made these for you. ’Cause I want to be friends.”

Citizen 176 looked down at the cookies. “Material goods aren’t the key to endearing camaraderie.”

Without a hint of emotion, Graelyn replied, “I made them with love.”

“Well that’s okay then. Um,” Citizen 176 leaned in, “do you want to have a sleepover tonight? I used to have them. But...I haven’t in a while.” She looked down at the simple dress she wore, and adjusted the old hat on her head.

That was a thing friends did, so Graelyn saw this as a positive improvement. “I would love to have a sleepover. Should we invite anyone else?”

Citizen 176 thought a moment. “I don’t really want that creepy creepy-eyed boy here. Plus, no boys allowed. Girls and enbies only. Um...we could invite the Hollow Childe?”

Graelyn kept her face blank. “The one who says she has demons in her blood?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know. You knocked here because I’m a weirdo too, right?”

Graelyn looked at her feet. “Yeah. I guess. So we should all stick together then. I get that. Um, should I invite her then?”

Citizen 176 shrugged. “It’s your idea.”

* * *

Graelyn knocked on the Hollow Childe’s door, which was a four-story Gothic mansion.

“Hello? It’s Graelyn from school?”

The door creaked open, revealing a living room filled with dust and cobwebs, much darker than it should be for this time of the day. Graelyn stepped inside and pulled Taranis from her bag. She felt silly for clutching at the stuffed Mammoth (“It’s an emotional crutch you need to get over,” she could hear Miss Auteur saying) but the place seemed engineered to be creepy. A ceiling tile broke, and three bats flew out—swooping down, missing Graelyn’s head as she ducked them, and flying out the door.

Holding the mammoth in front of her like a holy talisman, she made her way across the room, and opened the door into the next one.

A piano with no player tapped out a tuneless melody. Dark stains lined the walls and the checkerboard floor. In the corner, a girl stood, swaying from side to side, her long hair moving with her like a pendulum. She made small noises of laughter in bursts that didn't align with anything.

"Hi, the Hollow Childe?"

"You shouldn't have come here," a little girl's voice said, overlaid with a thick and low voice that sounded hungry.

"Oh, well, I can go then," Graelyn replied.

"Go?" The Hollow Child turned, her eyes leaking black fluid from under her mask, her mouth wet with blood. "We're just getting started."

"Well, Citizen 176 and I are throwing a sleepover, and we thought we'd invite you? It'll just be over at her house tonight. Oh, and I brought cookies." Graelyn pulled out another box of cookies and held them out.

The Hollow Childe stopped laughing and stared at Graelyn. "You're having a sleepover?"

"Yep!"

"And I'm invited?"

"Still yep."

"And you brought me cookies?"

Graelyn pushed her arm out further. The Hollow Childe took them. She pulled one out and took a bite of it.

"These are pretty good...I didn't know you baked."

"I'm still learning."

The Hollow Childe turned around again and pulled up her mask, rubbing her eyes.

"Are...you okay?"

"I'm...fine. I'll see you at the sleepover, Graelyn..."

She was clearly starting to sob, so Graelyn thought about what the correct reaction to that would be, and asked if she needed to talk about things.

The Hollow Child then just cried harder and threw herself on Graelyn, crying onto her nice sweater. The tears weren't as much of a big deal as the blood and black stuff all over her face. But Graelyn patted her on the back, and told her it would be okay. The Hollow Childe pulled away.

"I'll uh, see you tonight. And don't um, don't tell anyone I did that or I'll rip your intestines out."

Graelyn forced a smile. "It'll be our secret."

The Hollow Childe's mouth dropped, and she scampered up the stairs to her bedroom.

Well, at least Miss Auteur couldn't say she wasn't trying to make friends anymore.

* * *

Citizen 176 had a very nice place, which she said was modeled after the Palace at Versailles, which Graelyn had read a few stories about. The Hollow Childe and Graelyn had both showed up slightly early, and stood on the doorstep awkwardly, till Citizen 176 cracked the door open and told them to "come in already it's getting weird." Which they did. 176 had gathered together some snacks: popcorn, candy, pop, fully roasted Cornish hens, pizza, and something called "Pain au Chocolat" which she told them repeatedly to not call "Chocolatine" despite neither of them ever having heard of the chocolatey bread before. Graelyn brought more cookies, and the Hollow Childe brought milk and a bunch of cocoa. With far too much food, the three of them got into their pajamas, put on a movie, and

started snarfing it down together as they lounged on the floor in front of the TV with plenty of blankets and pillows.

Scene: A burned-out ancient city. We're seeing it from a birds-eye view, the charred ruins still smoking; something terrible happened here. Into frame come dragonflies, giant ones. On their backs ride ALICE THE SONGBIRD and her freedom fighters against the Kingdom of Centro. They swoop down, and we cut to them landing, dismounting from their dragonflies. Her intrepid squire JACK leans down and rubs some of the ash between his fingers.

JACK

This can't be real. I thought the legends were false.

ALICE

Can you think of any other explanation?

JACK

I...I can't.

Awkwardly falling from his dragonfly saddle, we meet ALADDIN, who somehow drops five books to the ground, shoving his glasses back up his nose.

ALADDIN

But those were just leg—

ALICE

We're looking at something awful, boys.

We can visibly perceive the actress steady herself to say the next few lines. She's been practicing them in the mirror, hoping they sound at least decent.

ALICE

We're looking at the rise of something new, or something old. We're looking at—

Smash cut to our title card:

SONGBIRD KNIGHT 2: DRAGONS RISING

"Boooooorriing," Citizen 176 said, "of course they did dragons in the sequel." She stretched herself out, and looked over at Grae and Hollow. "How about we tell stories? Like spooky ones? Or...personal ones! Get to know each other!"

The Hollow Childe tilted her head to the side at an odd angle. "Most of my personal stories are spooky, I think.

"Well, then you're a shoe-in!" Graelyn said, "start us off."

The Hollow Childe looked nervous, but Graelyn and 176 waited patiently for her to start. "Right, well, it was a dark and stormy night..."

The Hollow Childe's story

Gideon walked over the finely dressed corpses, trying hard to keep his Italian leather shoes free from the puddles of bodily fluids mingling on the floor of the mansion. He passed the (childish) arcane symbols, and tut-tutted the (painfully) sloppy Latin written over the gold-leaf stenciling on the walls. He was tempted to correct it, but it wasn't worth his time. He was on the clock, so to speak. Pushing a married couple who'd gouged each other's eyes out away from the final door with his silver cane, Gideon shoved it open and stepped into the building's great hall. It was a spacious room, with chandeliers and a high ceiling, but it was difficult to make out the details because the center of the room was dominated by a pyramid of corpses. Atop that, hovering in the air six inches above the massacre, was a little girl. Her head hung down, black hair veiling her face, a shoulder or leg violently twitching every so often.

"YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE COME HERE."

He held his arm up and dropped his wrist. "Oh psh." He began a circle of the pyramid, seeing the edges of a magic circle under the bodies at some points. Of course.

"YOU THINK YOU WILL FIND POWER HERE, BUT THERE IS ONLY THE ENDLESS SHADOW AT THE END OF ALL THINGS. A WHISPER IN THE DARK."

Popping his cane over his shoulder, Gideon gave the child his full attention. "You're the one from the prophecy, right? That's what this whole mess was about, you're half demon, or what these people think of as demons at least, half human. A husk with an insatiable appetite for death. The Hollow Childe. How does that prophecy go? The Hollow—"

They spoke it in unison.

"The Hollow Childe Will Stand at the End of the Universe, Laughing Amidst the Tears."

Gideon nodded. "Yes, that's right. You have a promising memory."

"AND THAT IS ALL YOU SHALL BE." The Hollow Childe's limbs snapped forward towards Gideon, a rush of darkness sweeping over him. A void of pure loneliness, a crushing darkness, enough to tear anyone's mind to pieces. Gideon let it wash over him, twirled his cane, and checked his pocket watch.

"Well, that's quite impressive, actually. I've met a few potential Antichrists in my life, but I've got to say, you're really an early bloomer. I'm guessing these people all sacrificed themselves to unlock your power?"

There was an awkward silence. "...NO."

"Oh, come on, you've clearly only just learned to fly. You're on top of that pyramid of corpses because you can only fly six inches off the ground. Am I wrong?"

There was a second, longer more awkward silence. "...MAYBE."

Gideon sighed, "You haven't even killed anyone yet, I'm guessing. Now get down from there, my name is Gideon, and I work for some people who can unlock your full potential."

There was a third, longest silence, and she floated down (6 inches off the closest corpse the whole way) and came to land next to Gideon on the tiled floor. She pulled her hair away from her eyes, and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "I didn't want them to do it, Mr. Gideon."

"Oh hush, that's no way for a herald of the endtimes to talk. Now come, take my hand— no. wait." Gideon stopped and put a pair of silk gloves on. "Okay, now take my hand. We're going somewhere I think you'll like quite a bit."

* * *

“And then he took me here. Said it was a place I could prepare for when I would destroy the universe, he hasn’t really...visited, though. Just left some training books, ‘the Apocalypse for Dummies’ and ‘So, you’re destined to bring on the apocalypse: A Beginners guide with pictures,’ but neither of them has been super helpful...”

“You said he brought you here,” Graelyn ventured, “from where?”

176’s face blanched, and Hollow laughed, “Oh, come on, 176, like Graelyn hasn’t already had suspicions? There’s another place, outside here. It’s where everyone came from, including you, Graelyn.”

Graelyn shook her head. “I don’t remember anything but this town.”

176 frowned. “You must have been very young when you were brought here. Maybe even when Auteur founded the town!”

Graelyn furrowed her brow. “She founded it?”

Hollow nodded, her body lurching rhythmically with it. “We’re all here for her project, whatever it is. The grownups know, but they won’t tell us anything. Think we can’t keep a secret.”

Citizen 176 shrugged. “Well, I hope you get to destroy the universe, I guess?”

Hollow shrugged. “I guess.”

Graelyn paused. “The only good story I have is a weird dream I had the other night, but you’ll probably think I’m making part of it up.”

176 shrugged. “Well, go at it then.”

Graelyn’s Story

The planet they arrived on seemed too barren to support life, but there were several major cities, and one metropolis. Graelyn complained the whole way towards their destination, as Lady Aesculapius had parked far enough away from their destination that they had to walk through blowing sands to get there. At least Aesc provided her with goggles. Archimedes was blissfully unbothered, the only effect of the wind to billow his coat and make him look heroic. Their destination was a temple, a towering building that had been carved into the shape of a goddess, her arm stretched out in the act of creation. Millennia of winds had erased the details from the stone, and there were birds’ nests in its open mouth, but the gates in the feet were well cared for, and when Aesc slammed her fist on them a few times they slid open quickly.

Shaking the sand off, they were greeted by a few people in long layered garments, goggles on their own foreheads, and a man in imposing black robes. The place was well-lit, with modern lights running along the walls, which seemed decidedly off brand for a spooky temple, but made more sense when they noticed all the signs to direct tourists around the place.

“Lady Aesculapius, I presume?” the man asked in a surly voice.

“Yes, Sergeant-Instructor I take it? Here with my pals, if that isn’t a bother.”

“Only if they’re better at puns than me. Follow. It’s down this way.”

They descended a long set of stairs, until they reached a neat pile of bricks and a hole in the wall.

“There was a break-in not too long ago, and the thieves damaged this wall. During the repairs, the Gendar here discovered the secret room behind it.”

Lady Aesc peered her head inside, and then pulled out the Quantum Whisk and poked it inside.

“I don’t think that whisk does anything,” Graelyn whispered to Arch, who displayed a nodding face on his hand in reply. Aesculapius stepped in and the rest followed. The walls were scrawled over completely in writing, messy scrawls in dozens of languages, but only a few hands.

“These are previously unknown prophecies of the rogue oracles, who came here in ancient times.”

Aesculapius ran her hands along one of them. “A few have been carved up, almost looks like tusk marks.”

“Yes, presumably by beings who didn’t want those prophecies read. But that’s not why we’re here. My people can read all of the existing scripts, all but one.” He gestured to the far wall, where there was an intricate carving of the same goddess the statue had been made in veneration of. But what really drew the eye was a circular inlay of crystal that glittered with a white-blue light. “That crystal isn’t from our universe. It’s Firmament technology, and it’s old.”

Graelyn frowned. “I take it you’re not happy that’s there.”

He looked at her, face blank. “Furious, but we’d rather know what it says.”

Lady Aesc reached out to the crystal and gently pressed her hand against it. The room was illuminated, the crystal brilliant, and Aesc’s eyes gained the same glow. From her mouth came a different voice, from a different time:

“From the White Canvas, she will never escape. Only from flickers will angelic skin return. The Hollow Child Will Stand at the End of the Universe, Laughing Amidst the Tears.”

The light faded, and Aesc stumbled back, breathing hard.

“What does that mean?” the Sergeant-Instructor asked.

Aesc, Arch, and Graelyn shrugged in near-unison. “Heck if I know,” Aesc said.

* * *

“Oh that’s not too unbelievable, I’ve heard that prophecy about Hollow dozens of times, it’s common knowledge around here. You probably just heard it and forgot you did. Pretty creative, the other parts. I like that you put Lady Aesculapius in there, her TV show is pretty good.”

“I like all the monsters in it!” Hollow added.

“You’re a big fan of monsters, Hollow?” Graelyn asked.

There was a beat of silence. “Well...I’m one.”

176 and Grae both launched into a chorus of “Noooo!”s, “You’re wonderful!”s, “Would a monster have hair that nice?”s and “I will absolutely fight and kill the next person who says that about you!”s which made her smile.

“I get what you’re saying though,” Graelyn added, “I feel like a monster too sometime. Like I’m a cold person destined to hurt other people or something.”

The other two launched into the same thing about Graelyn, which also made her smile, and then Graelyn and Hollow turned the praise onto 176 just to make sure she wasn’t left out.

“Well, my story isn’t as good as either of yours,” protestations followed this statement, “but I’ll tell it anyways!”

Citizen 176’s Story

The guillotine slid down again, and Louise finally felt comfortable using Monsieur LeFoy’s notebook and pencil. He couldn’t scold her for using it now anyway. She began sketching the chopping machine and the operator. She could give him the drawing before it was her turn, that would be nice.

“That’s quite good, surprisingly good,” a voice said from behind her.

She looked back to see a red-haired woman peering over her shoulder. Blushing, Louise tried to hide the drawings, but the woman stopped her with a firm hand.

“You’re a little young for the guillotine. Not that you wouldn’t be the first. Your crime?”

"I helped the Marquis and his wife escape, ma'am. They didn't make it very far, though."

The woman grabbed the notebook from her hands. "Your understanding of light sources and perspective is extraordinary for your age. It's an absolute waste to kill you. What'd you do for the Marquis?"

"I was a chambermaid, Mademoiselle. I mostly took care of the chamberpots."

"Gross. Well, come on then," she snapped. "You're coming with me."

She shook her head. "It's too late for me, I..." then she noticed the silence, the birds hanging in the air. The frozen crowd, mouths open in mid-holler. The woman looked impatient.

"Yes, I froze time, everyone can do that, it's not that impressive."

"Are you...an angel, Mademoiselle?"

She laughed, "My name is Auteur, and I'm better than an angel, I'm an artist. Now, are you coming or not?"

Louise clambered over the bench and followed Auteur into the crowd. She looked down to see she looked different, and looked back to see herself sitting in the bench as the crowd snapped back into motion. "It's magic!"

Auteur winked. "It's art."

* * *

"See, that was still a good story," Graelyn affirmed.

176 shrugged, "I think Auteur thinks I'm going to become some sort of artistic spirit of vengeance. She gives me painting classes, and tells me how to kill people."

Graelyn furrowed her brow. "So...we're all here because we're being trained for something?"

"Must be," 176 concluded.

"I don't know what I'd be being trained for though? Miss Auteur just has me write my dreams down, or paint them."

Hollow and 176 looked at each other with a knowing grin.

"What? What is it?"

"Isn't it obvious? Your dreams are special! You're an oracle or something!" Hollow said.

Graelyn slumped a little. "I want to be a scientist though."

"Well, lucky for you, dreaming is pretty easy, as long as you're not an insomniac or whatever," 176 said, grabbing another slice of pizza.

"Can..." the Hollow Child took a deep breath, then several breaths, her face turning red.

Graelyn and 176 each reached out for one of her hands. "You're okay," Graelyn said.

"You can tell us, we won't judge you," 176 said.

"Can we all be friends?"

The pair blinked at Hollow, then broke into grins.

"You know what Hollow, I think we already are," Graelyn said.

* * *

"Lady Auteur, you have to know at this point that people back in the Empire aren't happy with how things are going here." Gideon was swirling his glass of whiskey dramatically, letting the light from the window glint off of it just right.

Auteur gave him a polite smile. "I admit it's taken longer than I expected..."

"It's been ten years, Auteur."

“Oh don’t act like years matter to you. You’ve probably checked in on me every year during the same day back home. You haven’t even changed your shirt.”

He swirled the glass slower. “It doesn’t matter to me, but you’ve still used ten years of resources. Dedicated hundreds of our people to making this town function so you could finish one ritual.

Auteur snapped forward, finger waving in the air. “You know how important this ritual is. We’ve almost done it, and when we do we’ll win the war. The whole war. Not the major players. Us.”

Gideon downed his entire glass of whiskey, and set it down on her desk. “How?”

“The sheer narrative weight of it all!”

He nodded. “Then why not just cut your losses and run, you have enough as it is.”

She stood up and walked over to her bookshelf, letting Gideon watch her. She flitted along the spines. She didn’t actually need to — she knew exactly where the book was — and stopped pointedly at one as though she’d finally found it, letting out an “Aha!” Pulling it down, she handed it to Gideon.

“Cranford?”

“It’s Jane Austen’s last book that she never finished. Does it inspire curiosity from that fact? Of course. Have people tried to finish it? Definitely. Have there been film adaptations of it? Naturally. But tell me, Gideon, did you even know it was a Jane Austen book? If I’d thrown “Pride and Prejudice” at you, would you have just read the title back to me?”

He handed the book back to her. “I’ll let everyone know you need more time.”

* * *

On Christmas morning, Auteur bit into the cookie Graelyn had made. It was essentially perfect. The little chemist was relentless with her baking precision. “It’s quite good!” she said before she could stop herself.

Graelyn’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, Miss Auteur!”

She waved her off, and then pushed F.I.D.O’s muzzle away who was angling to try to get one of the cookies. “Stop it, F.I.D.O, you don’t even have a stomach.”

“Then fix my programming fixation on treats,” he countered, “if a being’s nature is insurmountable to its—”

“Oh fine, just don’t give me a lecture.” She threw a cookie at him, and he chewed it up happily, the entire cookie’s crummy remains ending up in a pile on the carpet. Graelyn laughed. Auteur found herself laughing too, and stopped herself. She stared at the girl, in the bad Christmas sweater she was wearing, watching as she shook the present she’d pulled from under the tree. Auteur had failed, and she knew it. She’d been too kind. She had stalled for time with Gideon but...it hit her suddenly, watching the girl look back at her with real affection. She’d gone about it the wrong way this whole time. The real solution was simple, and all she had to do was lean into her own mistakes.

She’d announce the moratorium on having children within the town was over.

She’d let everyone get attached to the town.

The horror that was going to follow, well...

Gideon would understand the change, and what it would mean for everyone here. When she got results, who would care, after all? You had to break a few eggs to make cookies,

“Can I open the presents, Miss Auteur?”

She smiled. “Of course, go wild.”

“Did you see the one I got for you?”

She hadn’t. She looked at it under the tree, and as Graelyn carefully removed the wrapping paper from her present (a microscope), Auteur ripped open her own present, and stared down at the

perfect set of brushes. They were her favorite kind, made from the hair of an animal on Vo'lach prime. She hadn't seen a set of these in decades.

"How did you know?" she said, legitimately stunned.

"I asked the shopkeep for help! He asked Mister Gideon, and they found a set of them somewhere. They made me promise to tell you that, actually."

Her stomach churned. "Merry Christmas, Graelyn."

"Merry Christmas, Miss Auteur!"

Interlude: Auteur

Auteur walks into her office, and sits down in her chair, letting the chair spin from the force. She drops her gauntlet onto the desk, letting the metal clunk reverberate. A slow sigh comes from her lips and she closes her eyes. Pulling the mask off her face, she rubs them and opens them, looking right at us.

"Oh shit. Uh, hi there. I didn't realize you were reading this. How's it going? What day is it for you, Thursday? I can't really tell, but I hope it's a Thursday. I like Thursdays." She reaches into her desk and pulls out a styled decanter and two glasses. She pours something fizzy and purple into both of them. "Would you like some? Er, wait, you can't reach it from here. Sorry. It's...difficult to tell how you can interact with me. I suppose this means it's working? I'm breaking through?"

She wipes her brow and downs one of the two glasses, "Relax, it's just grape pop. I hope you don't think too badly of me, with what I've been doing. Wait—has that been revealed to you? Or is the story structured so it's not clear yet?" She squints. "Sorry, you're still faint. Look," she gestures broadly, "no matter what happens here, this isn't going to impact you. You're safe reading this. Maybe you're worried about that little girl, Graelyn, but she's not so little. Not really. Not in the future. No one is a child forever and she's so artistically...dull."

She steepled her fingers and smiles vaguely in your direction.

"This is all going well. So when this is all over, I think you'll be grateful."

She downs the other glass.

"So cheers. Thanks for stopping in."

Chapter 5: A Flicker

FIVE YEARS LATER

Cá Bậy Mầu was far far past tipsy, despite his protestations to the contrary, which meant that as the youngest member of their group it was Axastyakis's job to keep an eye on him while Mullion stewed in her own thoughts. He was trying to flirt with everyone, in a way that somehow managed to stay charming in its content even though it was annoying in its repetition.

"I'm cutting you off," Axastyakis hissed.

He downed the rest of his drink in defiance, but still acquiesced as Axastyakis began to pull him to the door. Mullion only gave them a disapproving glance as they left.

"Do you need help, Mister Axastyakis?"

He turned his head slightly, to see Graelyn there, loosely holding F.I.D.O's leash. He smiled, showing his needle-sharp teeth. "Always awaiting aid, but never asking for it."

She returned the smile, and dropped F.I.D.O's leash to help stabilize Cá Bậy Mầu as they walked him home.

"I hope that we'll still continue the usual route upon completion of your neighborliness, Miss Scythes," F.I.D.O said, taking a scan of a dead bird.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, F.I.D.O, I assume you have much more to tell me about Sandifer."

"I do think Neoreaction a Basilisk is an important work."

She looked back at Axastyakis. "He does."

Two other girls called at Graelyn, and she waved, keeping her other hand under Cá Bậy Mầu as they came closer.

"Are you coming with us to the premiere tonight, Graelyn?" one of the girls, dressed in 1700's French clothing, said.

"Like I'd miss an Archimedes film. I have to do my session with Auteur first, but I'll be there."

They kept walking and reached Cá Bậy Mầu's abode. Axastyakis started rifling through his pockets for the keys, but F.I.D.O picked the lock with a laser, which wasn't exactly how any laser actually worked, but Axastyakis wasn't really complaining.

"Thank you for the assistance," he said, "I will finish his care."

Cá Bậy Mầu managed a wink and a sort of salute at Graelyn, which was still somehow charming even though he couldn't support himself.

"Welcome, always good to get to know the new arrivals a bit. I'm Graelyn Scythes by the way, I'm a student at the school."

"Oh, we know who you are, you're practically...celebrity," Cá Bậy Mầu crooned.

"He's drunk, and is called Cá Bậy Mầu. I am Axastyakis. You may see our comrades Hole and Mullion around."

"Oh! You know Hole? I wasn't sure if Hole was...alive fully or not."

Axastyakis shrugged. "See you, young one."

The girl and her dog kept walking.

"Glad to have some new neighbors around here, isn't it F.I.D.O?"

"They seem alright, of a larger concern however is Sandifer's influence on pop culture criticism in the 2000's."

* * *

Graelyn knocked on Auteur's door, but was already opening it as she did so. Auteur was busy painting, and didn't even notice Graelyn at first. The canvas was filled with a picture of a child in a field, sitting on a grassy hill looking up at the sky. There was no one else in sight.

"Miss Auteur?"

She startled, and held a hand to her chest in mock fright. "Ah, Graelyn! I see you let yourself in."

"I brought a cake for us to share?"

Auteur eyed it. It was a nice cake. The girl's baking skills were quite incredible. Graelyn's eyes were on the painting, though. "Curious?"

"She looks like a lonely child, whoever you're painting."

She rose from the easel and took off her smock. "That's me, actually. I was a fairly solitary child, not by choice even. There just...weren't other children around. You might even say it was an experiment for me to be a child there at all."

Graelyn looked at the girl. She looked nothing like Auteur.

"You think it's a bad likeness?"

"Honestly?"

Auteur posed the same way as the child, and then laughed. "I haven't always had the same face, or gender, or a lot of other things. When you live as long as I have, you want to have a few options after all. I didn't even like most of them, but different can be enough."

Graelyn's brow furrowed. "How old are you?"

Auteur winked. "Enough secrets for today. So what brings you in? We didn't have a meeting scheduled for today, therapy or otherwise." They'd long ago moved beyond a therapist / patient relationship into something mildly guardian-like. Auteur still wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"I...have something for you that's surprising."

Auteur nodded. "I'm curious."

"...It's a...dream."

Auteur sprung up, and snatched the journal from Graelyn's hands as soon as it had come out of her handbag.

Dream Journal Entry 3

Everyone tumbled out of the portal in a heap on the floor of a massive library. Archimedes, unfortunately, was the last one through, and the massive cyborg apologized profusely as he climbed off of the group. The Emissary sat up, holding her stomach, trying not to retch, as Graelyn felt around for her glasses, which Arch handed to her. Lady Aesc stood up dizzy, stumbling, and felt someone steady her arm. "Oh thank you," she said to a young man who looked exactly like Harry Styles from the band One Direction, wearing a suit and a badge that said, "How can I help you today :)?"

He looked the group over. "Did you check in at the front desk when you came in?"

"Sorry, we arrived via crystalline incision portal."

He nodded. "I'd rather not learn about that at all, but sure."

Graelyn squinted at him. "Alright, I hit my head too hard."

He looked down at himself, reached into his own chest, and disappeared instantly, in that same awkwardly quick way people vanish in silent films. In his place was what seemed to be empty air. Then he became a cactus-person, then vanished, then finally a massive, writhing ball of tentacles. "I'm sorry, is this a more pleasing look?"

They all just stared.

“It’s fine,” the Emissary said, “we’re here to look at a book?”

The tentacle mass pointed to the left. “I’ll lead you to the desk, we can help you there. Come on then!”

They walked along rows of bookshelves, the lines of them going on as far as the eye could see.

“So uh, are you a Plume Coterie then?” Arch asked.

“A Bookkeeper, me? No, my name is Coloth. I’m an Ulk-Ra. I work here, which is a long story that could be a book in itself. The Plume Coterie run this place, though, one of several places that claim to be the biggest library in the Universe.”

“Is it the biggest?” Graelyn asked.

“I’m contractually obligated to say yes!” he replied.

The Emissary wagged her hand up and down and scrunched her face up.

Graelyn ran her fingers along some of the spines. “I could live here. Imagine the knowledge you could learn.”

Coloth squirmed his tentacles in an emotion none of them could read. “Er, sure. Anyways, here’s the front desk. Marissa! We have some people looking for a book!”

Marissa, a girl wearing robes, screwed her face up upon the sight of them. “Coloth, could you chose any other form? Literally, any other form?”

He vanished, and then reappeared as a wild-west cowboy. “Better?”

“Perfect, so you’re looking for a book? What’s the title?”

“The Book of the Enemy,” Arch replied, as Graelyn rested her gauntleted hand down on the desk.

Marissa looked disapprovingly at the gauntlet before reaching under the desk, and pulling out a card catalog, which apparently was a catalog of which card catalog she needed to look in next. She pulled out another drawer and flipped through it, pulling out a glowing card. “This is a fairly dangerous book, as far as books go. I’d be careful. Coloth, could you take them to it?”

Coloth the cowboy took the card, and led them far into the shelves, where he pulled the book down and handed it to Graelyn, who handed it to Arch, who opened it to page one, and then put up a live video feed of the book on his body so everyone could read it. It wasn’t long before they reached a chapter in the book called “Cobweb and Ivory” that detailed an incident with the Painted Warriors...and revealed who their masters were.

Graelyn crossed her arms and stuck her lips out. Lady Aesc nodded, a bit puzzled. The Emissary raised an eyebrow.

“So...” Graelyn began, “they work for Mammoths?”

“Not just any Mammoths, the Original Mammoths. They’re a powerful force, if an old one,” the Emissary said. “I don’t know why they’d invade the 10,000 Dawns, though.”

“What does that even mean,” Graelyn asked dryly, “Original Mammoths?”

“It means,” the Emissary replied, “they have a spaceship.”

“What would a Mammoth want?” Lady Aesc pondered, stroking her chin. “Anime?”

“The Mammoth’s didn’t invade the 10kd for anime,” The Emissary growled.

“I mean, are you sure you have it in this universe?”

“Yes! Now the question is, what are we going to do?”

Graelyn shrugged. “We have to confront them. They have Kinan, and, well...everyone. I know I’ve dealt with dangers like this before but...the scale of this is just so hard to fathom.”

“She’s right,” Arch added, “we know who they are, our course is set. But this didn’t give us a lot of hints on how to stop them.”

“If we had an incentive we could give them to leave...hell, if we had an army. But we just have the four of us.”

“I get off in five minutes, and an Ulk-Ra lives on bravery,” Coloth added.

“Five of us.” She gave him a smile. “Thank you.”

“Is it too much to hope they’ll listen to reason?” Arch asked. “Maybe this is just a misunderstanding.”

“A mighty big misunderstanding. They kidnapped everyone we care about, Arch. You really think this is just an awkward whoopsie?” Graelyn said, her eyes narrowing. “They invaded our home, Arch. Spiral, Dawn, you, it’s all I have. I can’t lose it. I can’t.”

Arch got up and put a hand gently on her shoulder. “I think whether it is a mix-up or not, we don’t have the resources to do anything else. We can talk to them, and make a quick exit if it goes badly.”

“Alright, problem!” Lady Aesc said, raising her hand. “We don’t know where they are.”

Graelyn’s eyes lit up. “We don’t need to. The Quantum Whisk, you said it can help you find things?”

Lady Aesc pulled it out, looked at it, and shrugged. “Maybe? Honestly it might just be a whisk, I’ve never been able to find anything special about it.”

“Well it’s our best bet. If I can make a portal while holding the whisk, maybe it will guide us through the tear, through the void, and to where the Original Mammoths are.”

Arch looked down at the whisk. “I hate to be the skeptical one here, Grae, but that really just looks like a whisk.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Graelyn said, throwing her arms up.

“I don’t,” he admitted.

“Do any of the rest of you? Please, I want you to have a better idea.”

There was silence, and Graelyn looked between each of their faces. “If you don’t want to go, that’s fine. I understand. You don’t have the kind of stake in this I do. I get that. But-”

“I’m with you,” The Emissary said, “I’m actually not supposed to do anything to interfere in other people’s affairs but...well, sod it, let’s be naughty.”

“I’m in, of course,” Arch said.

“Me too,” Lady Aesculapius said, “let’s save the 10,000 Dawns from space Mammoths.”

“I’m not sure what I’m agreeing to, but I’m in as well,” Coloth finished.

Lady Aesc handed Graelyn the whisk, and Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out a handful of crystal dust. She steadied herself, standing equidistant from the shelves to her left and right, and held the whisk out in her gauntleted hand. It felt like there was a circuit between her hands, an energy running between one hand and the other, flowing into the crystals...though honestly, she couldn't tell if it was the gauntlet or the whisk that was doing it. It really could be just a whisk. But that was a distraction, she needed to focus. She pictured the Mammoths as she'd seen them described in the "Book of the Enemy," pictured their stone servants, and pictured a path from here to there.

Usually, she did the hand motions quickly, and by rote. It didn't matter if they were imperfect, it just had to be close enough if you knew where you were going well enough. But this was different. She was diving into black water, and she didn't know what dwelled in these seas. She moved both hands in the motions, twirled both arms, felt the circuit connect, felt her body channeling the energy, and she spun the dust in the air and felt the small crackles between each tiny mote, moving her hands through them, adjusting their path in the air slightly. The dust spun for a moment, a hollow circle crackling with tendrils of white lightning, and then Graelyn took a deep breath and shoved the whisk and the gauntlet into the middle of the circle.

She stared up at the mammoth skeleton, and her father put a hand on her shoulder. "It's big, isn't it?" she nodded. She wanted to see one for real, alive, but here were its bones, and it was so close to being real.

"We'd better keep moving, I need to get you back to your mother by seven—"
He'd left. Everyone always left.

The white light exploded out, throwing books off the shelves and pushing Graelyn back, her heels digging into the carpet, but she held firm.

Great beasts, lifting their trunks high in the air, in a room of clockwork and bone, surrounded by painted stone bodies. Their furs are rich and long, their tusks sharp. They trumpet a call of victory, their bones rattle inside them from the depths of history.

Mammoths.

Painted Warriors.

Kinan Jans.

Mammoths. Painted Warriors. Kinan Jans.

MAMMOTHSPAINTEDWARRIORSKINAN—

The light became blinding, and the world was nothing but a white and empty void, and then it faded, and a perfect white portal stood in the middle of the library. Graelyn fell to her knees, panting, a thin layer of sweat over her body.

"I..." she said, panting, "I think I did it?"

“What the heck is going on over there?” they heard Marissa yell, and Graelyn scampered up and hopped into the portal, followed in a clump by the others. The portal hovered in the air, crackling, and vanished as Marissa came around the corner.

“Coloth?” She looked around at the mess of unshelved books and sighed. Library patrons were the worst.

* * *

“So, that was...interesting, to say the least.”

Graelyn nodded. “It picked up where my last dream like this was five years ago, I checked my journals, both the originals and your rewrites of them. There’s nothing off between this one and the last one, and I’d...practically forgotten about these dream journals. We stopped doing them-”

“-Cause they got boring, yes.” Auteur steepled her fingers, “So the question is, why are they back?”

Graelyn shook her head. “They’re just dreams. Dreams don’t mean anything.”

Auteur couldn’t help but chuckle, the girl had been growing up among ritual magicians for years, and still she had the mind of a skeptic deep down. “So then, what does that tell you about these dreams?”

Graelyn’s eyes lost focus, but she was intent in concentration. A moment passed. “It means...these dreams either do mean something, they’re not dreams, or they’re not normal dreams.”

“And which do you think it is?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“Of course. In my opinion, they aren’t normal dreams.”

The girl’s eyes went from unfocused to hyperfocused. “Explain.”

“You have to know by this point that there are parts of the world that don’t function by normal laws.”

“Like the white canvas?”

Auteur scrunched her face up. “The what?”

“The endless white outside the town. It looks like it’s ready to be painted on, to have something pop out of it created and alive.”

“An interesting description. We need to think on all of this. Are you going to the movie tonight?”

Graelyn nodded. “I’m so looking forward to it. Archimedes movies are always my favorites.”

“Then you should go have fun with your friends this evening, and we’ll talk more about this once you’ve had time to let it sink in. Sound good?”

Graelyn picked up her bag, and took the journal back from Auteur. “I’ll let you know if it was good or not.

* * *

176 and Hollow were already outside the theater when Graelyn arrived, Hollow dressed up like a Goth princess, 176 in casual clothes, though casual for the 1700's. Graelyn was decked out in Archimedes swag, from her Arch satchel to her Arch shirt, to her earrings in the shape of his eyes.

"Well aren't you fancy, back in my day—"

"They would have guillotined me for that, yes, I know, 176." Graelyn wasn't sure 176 to this day understood the intricacies of the French Revolution, but you weren't going to argue with someone who was almost executed about nuances.

"You should tell your girlfriend that," Graelyn said.

Hollow and 176 suddenly tensed, eyes askance, hands claspings.

"Oh, sorry, uh...I thought since you guys made out that..."

"Nooo we're just best friends!" Hollow said.

"Who made out for three hours so I couldn't leave the party last weekend," Graelyn monotoned. 176 scratched her temple. "Let's uh, go into the movie huh?"

Graelyn was not convinced, but she let it slide for now.

They got their snacks from Hole: 1. A big tub of popcorn to share, 2. 1 pop [Graelyn], 3. 1 slushy [Hollow] and 4. 1 tankard of mulled wine flavored with the lost memories of dreams that you feel like you could remember upon awakening, but which slip from your mind the more you focus on them [176]. They also got some Red Vines (5).

Going to the theater with friends was so much nicer than going alone. Even when the other teens were jerks, the three of them were together, and they could laugh at the same things, and whisper to each other at the good bits. Having friends was such a wonderful thing, though Hollow and 176 were spending more time just with each other recently. Graelyn was both happy for them and worried that she would become first their third wheel, and then forgotten. She's thought, last week, when she rolled her eyes and gave up all pretense with a "Just kiss already, Jesus," and they did in fact just kiss already that the problem was solved. But no, the two of them were still dancing around whether they liked each other. The trailers began, and Graelyn watched Hollow's pinky edge towards 176's, which twitched a little closer too.

Come on.

They nearly touched and then—they both pulled away, and Graelyn let out an audible sigh. She really didn't care that they knew she knew at this point.

Finally after a trailer for the Lady Aesculapius movie, which Graelyn really wasn't sure was going to work (It was really better suited for TV?), the titles for the Archimedes movie began, like they always did, pulling out to reveal that everything was being projected on Arch's chest. Classic.

Scene: Arch is being held captive in an underground facility, there is a man with a bad German accent, a monocle, and a big scar on his face who has tied him up in a way that the director clearly didn't think was provocative, but also clearly hadn't looked up anything on the internet since 2006.

DR. VON BADGUY II

Now, Archimedes, you will tell me the secret to Dawn, or...

The lighting darkens and the camera zooms in a little bit.

DR. VON BADGUY II

...You die.

ARCHIMEDES

You'll never get me to...Wait. What do you want, specifically, Dawn is a lot of things—

THERE IS AN EXPLOSION! And CELESTE ROTH comes charging in with CANADIAN, BRITISH AND AMERICAN SPECIAL FORCES! It's now clear that this is supposed to be set in World War II.

CELESTE ROTH

Arch, are you okay? What did you do to him, Dr. Von Badguy?

AN EVIL LAB ASSISTANT

The second.

CELESTE ROTH

The second!

ARCHIMEDES

I'm okay, Just get me out of these—

Graelyn lost the rest of the dialogue. She remembered this. She remembered...Arch was taken, they had been on...on...a moon, a dark cold moon. They'd been chasing something, been on a mission, and...he'd been taken. She'd searched for him, and found him in the past.

She'd had a cat named Mr. Sprinkles. She'd lived underwater, there were fish...She remembered her mother beating her. She remembered....she had a mother? She...Archimedes. She knew him. She knew Archimedes.

She rose up, barely aware she was rising, reaching a hand out towards the screen.

"Arch?" she said.

"Oh geez, you're way too into the fandom, come on sit down," 176 muttered.

On the screen, there was an awkward pause.

CELESTE ROTH

Arch? Did you hear me?

ARCHIMEDES

Graelyn?

CELESTE ROTH

No, Arch, I'm Celeste, your best friend—

“ARCHIMEDES!” Graelyn yelled, “I'M HERE!”

He looked out of the screen at her,

ARCHIMEDES

Grae, what's going on—

The projector shut down, and a worried attendant ran to the front. “Sorry everyone, looks like there was some sort of projector error—

“PUT IT BACK!” Graelyn screamed. “What aren't you telling me?”

The theater was silent. Then the sound of footsteps grew. Auteur entered, followed by F.I.D.O.

“I heard there was an issue, what exactly is the problem, it's just a—”

She came into view from the entryway and saw Graelyn, saw the look on her face. Saw the silent crowd.

“Everyone, get out. Except you, Graelyn.”

There was a slow move to start getting up, and Auteur snapped her arm out, her gauntlet pointing at the attendant. And then, there was no attendant, and there was the sound of something small but heavy hitting the floor like a dropped book.

Then it was pandemonium.

Graelyn didn't stand still. She vaulted over seats, vaulted over the side of the stairs next to the entryway, and dropped behind Auteur, her knees hurting, but kept moving. Auteur yelled something, and F.I.D.O followed, the crowd too. The whole building fleeing, shoving Auteur out of the way even as they tried to get away from her. Graelyn pushed past people, F.I.D.O edging through the crowd.

“Mistress Graelyn, please, I am only following the order to catch you, I shall not hurt you.”

Graelyn had reached the doors of the theater, people streaming around her. Her heart was pounding. F.I.D.O sat. Hollow and 176 caught up, and then so did Auteur.

“Graelyn, you don't need to be afraid,” Auteur said.

Graelyn's face was red, her eyes watering. “You think I haven't known something was going on here? Something weird. Something that didn't make sense. What just happened, Auteur? What aren't you telling me?”

Auteur gave her a sad smile. “You have to have figured out that Hollow and 176 are both projects for the cult, correct?”

Graelyn nodded.

“Of course, you are too. And there’s parts of that that...would be hard to tell you about.”

Graelyn shook her head. “No, I’m not an experiment, I’m not!”

“Of course you aren’t!” Auteur crooned. “You aren’t anymore, at least.”

They held each other’s gaze. Hollow and 176 stood to the side frozen like Painted Warriors.

“Then tell me what’s going on,” Graelyn said.

Auteur’s lip quivered. “I’m trying to win a war.”

“Using me?” Graelyn asked.

“Yes.”

Graelyn broke her gaze and looked at the floor. She stared at the skull pattern for a moment before bolting out the door, her two friends following, melding into the darkness.

As the theatergoers fled into the distance, Mullion stared at the chaos till Auteur came out of its glass doors. Under her mask, she scowled.

Auteur waved excitedly upon seeing her, and Mullion walked away.

Graelyn, Hollow, and 176 tumbled into Graelyn’s house, which wasn’t the nicest, just the closest, and locked the door behind them. Not that locking the door would stop anyone hell bent on grabbing them, but it made them feel a little safer.

Graelyn dropped into a chair and stared at her hands. She remembered things. Things she shouldn’t remember. Things she had dreamed. But it was hazy, not all there.

176 was crying, and Hollow was holding her.

“He was there and just...gone! What did she do to him?”

“I don’t know,” Hollow replied, and they looked in each other’s eyes, “but you’ll be safe. I’ll keep you safe. I’m the antichrist, and I can fight back and...I love you.”

“I...love you too, Hollow.”

And they kissed.

And this time, Graelyn knew it was something different than last time.

* * *

Gideon threw the pictures of the smiling girls on the table. “Do you—do you...” he had to steady himself, he had never been so furious at Auteur. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

She nodded. “I had to modify the plan, like I told you.”

“You can’t break everyone else’s toys just because you think yours are nicer. You’ve...you’ve ruined the antichrist! She’s supposed to-”

“Stand at the end of the universe and laugh amidst the tears or whatever, I know. I wrote a lot of prophecies myself, you know.”

“You wrote short stories about how people you didn’t like had bad things happen to them. It annoyed everyone back home.”

“Same difference.”

“Don’t be so glib about this, the Hollow Childe was a coup for me. And now she has friends, and she’s...drinking milkshakes and going to movies. Not to mention what you’ve done to the rest of the members here.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Oh?”

“You’ve domesticated them! You had to build playgrounds because they’re having kids. I checked in on an orgy last night where they decided to end early because they had to get up in the morning. We’re a death cult! Or we’re supposed to be! This is...” Gideon threw his arms up.

“The new plan,” Auteur said.

He looked at her. “You’re serious.”

She nodded. “And oh, my good friend, what terrors await.”

Chapter 6: The Screening

TWO YEARS LATER

“Are they going to set up a college for us to go to or not?” 176 moaned.

Graelyn shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it depends on if Auteur thinks us getting an education matters to whatever her plan is.”

Hollow and 176 didn’t reply, but the silence was the answer, really.

“I want to go to college,” Hollow said, “it looks like it would be fun.”

Graelyn tried not to think about her old memories, to try to reach in and see if she had gone to college. Maybe she had. But how did she have those memories? How did she know Archimedes, who was in a movie? How had he spoken to her? She was seventeen now, and the questions didn’t have answers. She’d looked into reincarnation, it seemed possible given the circumstances, but it also didn’t seem to be the correct answer.

“Do you think Auteur will make me destroy the universe?” Hollow asked, her voice cracking.

176 shook her head and cuddled her closer. “Don’t think like that, you don’t have to destroy anything.”

“We can’t just ignore these questions every time they come up, 176! We’re all here for a reason.”

Graelyn booped Taranis. At 17, Hollow and 176 were the only people who didn’t make fun of her for keeping the Mammoth Toy in her bag at all times. “I wish I knew the answers, Hollow. But we just don’t know enough...”

* * *

Mullion had been waiting for ten minutes for the rest of the group to arrive, which was putting a damper on her plan to storm into Auteur’s office like she’d power-walked right over here. Auteur had seen her through the window by this point and asked if she wanted some tea, which had only made her more incensed when she had to politely say no. She couldn’t let it out yet. The proper place, the proper time. Hole had arrived first, which made her only madder at Cá Bảy Mâu and Axastyakis.

“Well, did you all sleep in?”

“If we are being honest...” Axastyakis began.

“We really don’t want to do this meeting at all, and we’d rather be sleeping in,” Cá Bảy Mâu finished.

Hole just stood there. It creaked.

“You’re coming with me to this meeting—”

“Did you think we just showed up to tell you we weren’t doing it? I’d have stayed in bed,” Cá Bảy Mâu cut in.

Mullion didn't have a retort, so she spun on her armored heel and pushed the door open to Auteur's office. Auteur had made tea, and put out a nice tray of biscuits. She waved cheerfully.

"Hello everyone! Tea? I made four different kinds, I'm not sure what everyone likes. I put some broken dreams in them for flavor..." She squirmed her lips to the side. "I take it this isn't a friendly visit about the Christmas Eve festivities tonight?"

"We're here," Mullion said forcefully, "to demand you let us go back to the Empire."

Auteur looked her in the eyes, and cocked her head to the side. "No." She went back to the tea.

"This isn't a request." Mullion charged up to the desk. "I come from the same people as you, and you may be able to tell these lesser people that—"

"Please stop this is very awkward."

"—they have to stay here at your whim, but we are leaving. Now."

Auteur poured the tea, and handed cups to everyone but Mullion.

"We came here together, and you had the gall, the sheer gall to bring Hole here five years before the rest of us—five years! We didn't agree to that."

"Oh, you didn't have to, luckily," she said, eating a biscuit.

"And I was willing to let that slide, willing, but we've been here two years and I've got to be honest, I'm not sure you're even a member of our group. I think you just found out you joined later and you're using us because you know Gideon to—"

Auteur tapped out a pattern on her desk. It was the heartbeat of their people. She kept tapping it. Mullion was thrown off her rant. Auteur looked at her companions, "Do you share her grievance?"

Hole creaked, and the other two shook their heads.

Auteur smiled. "Just you and me then. So you think we're equals?"

"We are—"

Auteur twisted her wrist, and Mullion was swallowed up by the floor, the carpet breaking as white goo surrounded her and pulled her away.

Little Mullion, how cute. You think you know me?

Mullion was crawling the grass, she was a child. The sky was the same color as the town's, Auteur's little hint of home. Auteur was in front of her on a hill. Standing by her parents.

"You think you have any control?"

She fell forever. And then after falling forever, she fell for a day, and there was Auteur's face huge as a mountain, opening her mouth and—

She was in the Empire—surrounded by everyone she knew in their little death cult. One by one they removed their masks. Auteur after Auteur was revealed. "You think you're my equal?"

She was on a pillar of white, surrounded by white, the goo entrapping the bone armor around her. Auteur walked up to her, white goo rising to each of her footfalls.

“So then, Little Mullion...”

“I’m not ‘Little’.”

“You shouldn’t be so rude. You shouldn’t say things, or make accusations like you did,” she grinned, and a swirl of rainbow color rose up from the white, and stroked her cheek. “Even if maybe they’re true? After all, I want the best for all of us. So, if you’re right and I’m not a member, think of me as family. As... Your Godmother! After all, if you call me that and I’m not a member, it isn’t even copyright infringement!”

Mullion’s eyes went wide. “There’s something wrong with you.”

The color wrapped around her neck as a rainbow noose. “Say it. Say you’re sorry.”

The noose tightened.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Who are you saying it to?”

“I’m sorry... Godmother Auteur.”

“That’s better.”

She was back in the office. Her companions were staring at her.

“Did I adequately address your complaint? Sticking around?”

Mullion nodded, grabbed a biscuit, and walked out.

* * *

Graelyn Scythes awoke in a cold sweat. She was still in her room, still in the town. The dream was vivid. So vivid that even though she took a minute to steady herself, staring at her cat pattern pajamas, she still remembered every detail. She scrawled it down, and when she finished, she knew that this would be the final dream journal she ever did. For better or for worse. She re-read it. She stared at Taranis on her nightstand. She re-read it. She fell back on her bed and rubbed her eyes. She re-read it. She knew what she had to do. Or rather, she knew that it was time to do something. The details eluded her. But she had to begin. She got dressed, despite it still being dark out. The *Diosca Eitilte* in the sky no longer held her fast by its cycles. It was time to see Hollow and 176.

* * *

Her friends read her dream journal, and then spent the next ten minutes freaking out.

“This all makes so much sense!” 176 yelled.

“Be quiet! What if someone is listening!” Hollow countered.

“Then they’re listening! Whatever! Graelyn, do you know what this means?”

Graelyn nodded. “I wish I didn’t.” She picked at the upholstery on the couch.

“So what are we going to do?” Hollow asked.

“What Alice MacLeod did in ‘Songbird IV: Revolution Rising’: confront it.”

176 slumped in her chair. “You’re right, but...”

Graelyn threw her hands up. “But what? We’ve been waiting years for this.”

176 leaned in. “We were going to tell you later when we met up, you know, not before breakfast.”

“I brought my whisk so I could make pancakes,” Grae noted.

“Okay, that’s good cause I’m starving, but Hollow and I learned about a secret movie screening.”

Grae narrowed her eyes. “Okay, I’m interested.”

* * *

The showing was a secret, and Skinflint needed to keep it that way. Getting the film had taken years of work, trying to get a message out at all from the town was nearly impossible. Yet he had done it. By sheer force of will, he’d brought the film back into existence. Throughout the town, the whispers had carried long and far. But, as far as he knew, never to Auteur. And so the screening went on as planned. He was nervous and excited, and so were Graelyn and her friends as they snuck in.

“Okay, but if they do build a college,” 176 said, “this is absolutely going against our applications.”

“176,” Hollow said, “sweetie, do you really think they have enough people to turn anybody away who’d want to be there?”

Graelyn raised her eyebrows and waited for 176 to reply.

“Alright, fair, but I don’t think that really matters anymore.”

Everyone in the theater itself looked fearful of everyone else in it, like it was a roomful of snitches. Skinflint came to the front, to say a few words before it started.

“Thank you all for taking the risk to come here. I hope you all enjoy the movie it’s taken me years to smuggle in here, a masterpiece of winter cinema we know of as “Ice Age 2”.”

There was scattered applause.

And the movie started. It was decent enough, there was a mammoth, and a squirrel, and a screaming Auteur who blasted the doors to the theater open with a flick of her gauntlet.

““Ice Age 2”. You brought in “Ice Age 2”!” she yelled, and from the ground, white tendrils broke through the carpet, wrapping around Skinflint. “You never should have told Mullion, Skinflint, you little artistically dead rat.”

The theater, for the second time in Graelyn’s life, ran for the exits. Auteur only had eyes for Skinflint and his conspirators, though, and Graelyn, Hollow, and 176 followed through on their plan and slipped into the bathroom. Not that they’d thought the movie would get raided, but it worked out either way. The screams died down, and they heard Auteur cursing as she left the theater.

“Don’t tell me I was too harsh, F.I.D.O, you can’t tell me that I reacted too hard to someone showing my town “Ice Age 2”, so—” and then the door shut behind her. They waited a while longer and slipped out. 176 and Hollow went to the projection room and sorted through the film cans. When they found it, they put the reel into the projector.

Graelyn went to the theater. And as the projector flickered on, Archimedes' opening logos appeared. She walked to the light.

* * *

"Come in!" Auteur said, and Graelyn slipped in the doorway. She pouted her lips. "Well, you look like you're having a bad day. Come in, I'll make us some tea. F.I.D.O?"

The dog poked its head in the door.

"Grab the kettle if you wouldn't mind."

"Mission acquired," he replied.

"There's a good boy. Now, Graelyn, what's going on?"

Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out the dream journal. Auteur slowly pulled it from her hands and began to read:

Dream Journal Entry 4

The green void tore around her body, a violent wind that ached and pulled and squeezed. She could see faces in it: friends, enemies, strangers. There was Alice MacLeod, giving some sort of big speech. Manuel Salazar, asking for a surgical tool during an operation. Her mother, screaming at her. A woman she'd never seen before in a Batman t-shirt standing by the Berlin wall. And then, a Mammoth. She fell from the end of the portal, and rolling neatly, came to her feet as though she'd planned it that way, shoving the whisk into her bag as her comrades rolled out of the portal behind her.

The room was as she'd seen it. Bone and clockwork, a great vessel of a construction unlike anything in her own home. A circle of Mammoths turned, their huge, dark eyes blinking at her. Painted Warriors lined the room. The walls ticked and groaned.

"Original Mammoths! My name is Graelyn Scythes of Dawn. I'm here to talk." She stood as tall as she could, and the other four spread out as wings behind her, five against history. One of the Mammoths, who had parts of his fur braided and laced with beads, stomped ahead of his fellows.

"Talk?" it communicated...somehow. Graelyn strained to figure out if it was telepathy or something else. Whatever it was, it was...old. Older than words, or paint on rocks. "Your realm has fallen, you have nothing to do but beg to your conqueror, Taranis."

"I have plenty to do but that," Graelyn snarled, "in my time you're bones, history, and you have the nerve to steal my own future."

Taranis trumpeted, "A future of infinite bloodshed! Do you think we have not read the prophecy? Know your plans, she-with-the-arm-of-gold."

Graelyn furrowed her brows. “Uhh,” she looked at her comrades, “no, this is the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Yes,” the Emissary said, “I can’t say I’m familiar with this prophecy.”

The Painted Warriors moved closer, and so did Taranis. “Then you shall know your fate. The Prophecy states that from the realm of 10,000 rises of the sun, the end of the Mammoths will come. That she-with-the-arm-of-gold will be the herald of the end, and the end of all things for our kind. That Mammoths would be massacred by her, and then by all of the armies of the sunrises. We learned of the theft of the gauntlet from those who guard the ticking of the eons, and knew that we had to act to protect ourselves.”

“I didn’t steal the gauntlet!” Graelyn cried out, “I took it from the people who did steal it!”

“A cheap lie,” Taranis said, “We have given your realm more compassion than it deserved. We found holes between your realm and ours, and sent our Painted Warriors through. Freezing every person in a moment in time, and harming none. We will give you the same option.”

The ceiling lit up as Taranis spoke, showing the path of the Warriors through the holes, bright lights that seemed to form a shape, like a constellation or a sigil.

“Taranis, please, this is a misunderstanding, the prophecy is wrong, we don’t want to hurt you, or any of the Mammoths. We didn’t even know who you were till today.”

“Lies! I give you one last chance, Graelyn Scythes of Dawn.”

That was when the Emissary started cracking up. She had tried to hold it in, keeping her lips pursed tight, putting a hand over her mouth, but it all just came out, and she doubled over, trying to hold her belly with her heavy laughs, and then falling onto the floor. Everyone just watched her, confused.

“Your friend has lost her mind,” Taranis said.

She stood up, wiping tears from her face. “Oh, oh, I’m sorry about that, I really am, but I just...you guys were being so sincere. This could have been a BBC drama, well, the effects would be too good, but you get me.” She stepped between the two groups and applauded. “Truly, a great performance by everyone here. I was nearly moved.”

Taranis reared onto his hind legs, and dropped down, causing a thunderous boom that staggered most of the beings with two legs. “I find no humor in this.”

She rolled her eyes. “You Mammoths always were so dull. No wonder you went extinct.” She reached an arm out, and Graelyn’s arm began to tug. She pulled back, trying to hold onto the gauntlet, Arch reaching over to attempt to hold it in place, but it shot off, hurtling across the room, and sliding right onto the Emissary’s arm. “Graelyn wasn’t lying, by the way. She didn’t steal the gauntlet. I did.”

Coloth, somewhat unexpectedly, yelled from the back, “You’re a coward and a traitor! Your gods will shame you when you die!”

“And you will die,” Taranis said, one of his big eyes shifting to Graelyn with a soft sorrow. “The *Diosca Eitilte* shall never bow. Warriors, destroy her.”

The Painted Warriors began to vanish, and The Emissary simply waved the gauntlet, spinning her body in a circle, and the bones on the walls were filled with new paintings: warriors, fierce but shocked, frozen in illustration.

“You’re so simple!” she guffawed again, prancing around the room, whirling with glee. “Oh, Taranis, you don’t get it, do you? Who do you think wrote the prophecy?”

“The Sisters at-”

“I did! I wrote it, not my best work admittedly, a few too many rhyming couplets, but you believed it. And then my people and I stole the gauntlet, and cut a bunch of holes in the universe. Little ones, nothing that would be noticed by the powers that be, but enough for, say, a single warrior to slip through.” The lights on the ceiling lit up brighter. “And now all of you have done just what I thought you’d do!”

She looked at Coloth pointedly. “Except you! Good on you for the bravery thing, I mean, it didn’t make a difference, but still!” She gave him a thumbs up. “Gold star for effort.”

Lady Aesc, Arch, Coloth, and Graelyn began edging towards Taranis, whose Mammoths were forming up into a battle line.

“You’ve lied to us this whole time,” Lady Aesc said, “so who are you?”

She grinned. “Oh, no one really, my name’s Auteur. And you’re part of the greatest piece of performance art ever accomplished.”

The Mammoths charged and they fell to the floor, their fur turning to pages, their bones to spines, their brains to ink. Each landed with a dull thud.

“I made the largest ritual circle in history. Oh, come on, be impressed,” she frowned, “I think it’s impressive.”

Arch walked over to one of the books and picked it up, opening it to the first page.

Luigsech was born under the waxing moon to her parents—

“It’s her life story...” he said softly.

“Yep!” Auteur said, and Arch fell to the floor, clattering in his complete film boxset case.

Graelyn screamed. She ran towards the case, trying to make any sense of this, trying to understand how this was even happening. This was lunacy, this couldn’t be real. She was dreaming. She picked up the case. It had Arch’s picture on it, jumping away from an explosion. It was just a case. She heard Coloth charging, and then he dropped to the floor too. Lady Aesculapius pulled out some Gizmo, but she dropped to the floor, a pile of 276 Blu-Ray disks.

Graelyn didn’t even realize that she wasn’t on the floor anymore, that she was being carried, at first, wrapped in Taranis’ trunk as he charged down a corridor.

“Small one, I have made error. I don’t know how to fight her, and I have wronged you.”

“She’s going to turn us into stories, we have to...”

She looked up at him. “Taranis, you made statues that were alive?”

“We did, yes.”

“Then...I have an idea. It might be stupid but...”

Auteur found her, standing alone in a room lined with tusks.

“So, the last one, ey? You held out well. Where’s Taranis? He run away?”

Graelyn stared at her. “Go on then. Do it.”

Auteur shook her head. “This is the end, you know. I thought you’d want some sort of great last words. You’re the sole survivor of 10,000 Universes, that has to be a big burden on your heart. Don’t you want revenge? Come on, give me drama!”

She looked at Auteur sadly. “A long time ago, there was a girl named Graelyn Scythes.”

Auteur waited for more and gestured with her gauntleted hand. “And?”

“And she knew the story wasn’t going to go the way Auteur thought. So she was brave, even though she was scared.”

Auteur shrugged. “Weird, but okay.” She did a flourish of her arm, and Graelyn dropped to the floor as a book.

Auteur cracked her neck and walked over to the book. Finally, all these years of planning, all this work— and the book began to shake.

She stepped back. That wasn’t normal. Or part of the plan. Her eyes grew wide. She opened the book even as the thing spasmed, and turned to the last page. She looked above Graelyn’s last words, and saw—

“And Graelyn wrote on her arms, knowing that the text would become lines in the book, and those lines read:”

“Aw, crap,” Auteur said, and the room went white.

* * *

Auteur looked up. “The prose here is much better. I didn’t even need to rework it this time.”

Graelyn pulled her lips in. “Miss Auteur, I don’t think that’s the thing we need to talk about.”

Auteur drummed her fingers on the desk. “I suppose it isn’t. And I suppose there’s no convincing you this was all a dream.”

“Of course not.”

“So you know why you’re here.”

“I know enough, at least. But a lot of it doesn’t make any sense.”

Auteur unlocked a drawer of her desk, and pulled out a piece of paper. “I figured I owe you at least the end, whatever happens next.”

Dream Journal Ending, by Auteur

Auteur looked down where there should have been a book, and there was a baby. A crying baby on the floor of the *Diosca Eitilte*. She picked it up and soothed it. She'd been a mother and a father before, and a parent. But her mind was already filled with dread at the next conversation as Gideon arrived.

"Auteur, Congratulations. I take it things went according to plan?" He was dressed to the nines, as always.

She held out the baby. "Nearly, I'm afraid."

Gideon frowned. "Why haven't you killed her?"

Auteur nearly threw the baby in exasperation. "I can't, because then I'll ruin the whole ritual. The girl needs to get old enough so she can end the story, presumably by writing herself the ending we want."

Gideon rubbed his chin. "That'll take years."

Bellow them, the endless unmade white stretched. "I can build a scenario for her...a few years is nothing. We can salvage this. Trust me."

Auteur's Office

Graelyn stopped reading and looked up. "Who fed me as a baby?"

Auteur frowned. "I had to, obviously. You really wasted my time, you were a clever girl, are a clever girl."

"I had to live a whole other life here."

"Oh come on, you're a time traveller. Don't tell me you didn't lose track of time before, spend years in a place. Spend months in a high school for a mission. Wait on an empty moon. Infiltrate a World War II special operations mission to rescue a friend. Seventeen years is nothing. We don't live like other people, Graelyn. We don't even live like the rest of this Town."

Graelyn shook her head, "You want to erase all the people I knew and loved, to make them stories."

"Stories to rewrite history with. To make an alternate history, one strong enough that it can overpower the entirety of the old one. And I can do it. I just need you."

"I won't let you."

"You really think you can stop me?"

The door swung open, and Auteur's jaw dropped.

"It looks like you're trying to erase me from existence, would you like some help with that?" Archimedes Von Ahnerabe said.

* * *

“Arch,” Graelyn said, the glow of the screen illuminating her. “I need you. I need you more than ever, and you’re not even real. You’re a character. A story I read to make myself feel better at night. But you’re here, aren’t you? You’re my friend. And...”

The face of Arch on the screen turned to her, and she touched it. The fabric rippled, and the light grew, and her hand bled into it. She felt something and grasped it. It was a hand. She pulled, and from the screen, a glowing figure came. Their skin was light, and then it dimmed to a carapace of screens, with one electric eye.

He looked at his hands, and looked up at her. And the memories flooded back.

“Arch!” she hugged him. “You’re real! You’re really real!”

He returned the hug, and they held each other tight. “I...suppose I am, yes.”

Another figure came out of the screen.

“Where are we, Arch?”

“Oh uh, hi Celeste. Meet Graelyn.”

Graelyn waved. “Big fan.”

From the projection booth, Hollow and 176 were freaking out.

* * *

Auteur rose from her desk. “You can’t have brought him back. He’s fictional.”

Arch struck a pose. “Not anymore.”

Auteur looks at you, and mouths, “Well, sort of.” No one really notices this, though. “It looks like I’ll have to move ahead on the plan then.”

The Hollow Childe, Citizen 176, and Celeste Roth rushed into the room after them, Hollow rising into the air, objects trembling around her.

“No, Auteur. This whole plan ends now.”

“It’s Christmas, though. We can always put this off.”

Graelyn sighed, “I’m sorry.” She pulled the toy mammoth from her satchel, and Auteur laughed.

“That’s what’s going to stop me? A toy?”

“Auteur, it may be Christmas, but welcome to the ice age!” She threw the toy, and the toy suddenly began growing, its fur becoming real, its plush tusks hardening, till in the air ready to drop on Auteur’s head was a full-sized mammoth. It crushed her desk, breaking the wall and the ceiling, Auteur scampering out from under it, bloody, and hurling the Hollow Childe through the air and out of the way with a flick of her gauntlet as she charged through, running out her own door. Outside, Auteur was stopped in her tracks.

In the sky, Songbird was swooping about on her dragon, Jack and Aladdin on the ground fighting the members of the cult. Lady Aesc and Coloth were back to back, taking on a group of her own people. There were hundreds of characters, and more were spilling out from the movie theater every second. Auteur looked back at Graelyn in shock.

“You are clever.” She gave a smile that seemed too honest. “I’m proud of you. I hope you know that’s, uh, not something I usually tell anyone.”

“It’s over, Auteur!” Celeste yelled. “Give up.”

“Please,” Graelyn said, “surrender. I don’t want you to die.”

Auteur nodded. “I lose. Thank goodness. There’s no way I can beat this.” The cult was being subdued all across the Town, every resident held by their fictional captors. Graelyn’s dream journal glowed through her bag, and Auteur grinned. “And it looks I lost just in time.”

THE END

The journal flew from Graelyn’s bag, and into Auteur’s hands, and Songbird and her dragon were sucked into it, then ten members of the cult.

“What’s happening?” Hollow yelled, covering her ears.

Graelyn’s face fell. “She was trying to turn everyone into stories.”

Auteur threw her arms up, and did a weird little jig. “You figured it out!”

176 watched as her hands turned into letters, drifting to the book. “Hollow, I—”

But she was gone, and Hollow screamed, her eyes turning black, her scream shattering windows, which in turn vanished with Hollow in a puff of fiction..

Cá Bảy Mâu and Axastyakis were trying to pull Hole with them, but Mullion shoved them forward.

“It’s too slow, leave it behind!”

But it was no use either way. The White Canvas swallowed them, and like the rest of the town, Auteur watched as they were written into her book.

Celeste vanished, the buildings vanished. Taranis charged Auteur, and vanished again. And the book filled up.

“Arch, hold onto me, come on now. You’re the brawn, right?”

He was already melting into letters as he shook his head. “I was never the brawn, you know that, Grae. I give kids candybars, and—”

He whispered into ink, and flew into Auteur’s book. Shutting it, the snap echoed in eternity.

“Well, that worked out. Whew. I was worried there for a few years. Yipee!”

Graelyn sunk to her knees. “I...Auteur...” her eyes welled with tears. “Auteur, what did you do?”

“Turned everyone into stories! I realized I was never going to get you to crack, so instead I realized there was another way. If your story ended, I could just take everyone else’s, and that would finish the ritual like I’d planned. Sure, it meant a few hundred members of that stupid little death cult would get fictionalized, but who cares about them anyway.

Graelyn shook her head. “They’re people, Auteur. You can’t...”

“No, pretty sure I just did. Nice sentiment, though.”

“So what now?”

Auteur shrugged. “I don’t really need anyone. Especially not that cult. Ugh. They were a bit...extra? I mean, I know I’m definitely a member in the future, but I can fix that. Fix anything. All the plot holes in history especially. I mean, really, reality is ridiculous. I can do a lot better.”

Graelyn shuddered. “You’re going to kill me now?”

Auteur paused. She looked at Graelyn, and walked over to her, arms open for a hug, but Graelyn shirked away.

“Please don’t be like this.”

“You killed my friends!”

“They’re not dead, they’re just fictional!”

“Bring them back.”

“I can’t. Well, I won’t. I certainly can, but that would mean ending the whole ritual, and this has taken decades of work, and so, no.”

“This can’t be what you want.”

“Uh, no, actually this is exactly what I want and I’m very happy about it.” Auteur held a hand out.

“You can be my co-author. I don’t say that lightly, you’re not even particularly good at prose, but you can learn. And I like you. I…” she bit her lip, and scrunched her face up. “I…oooh don’t make me say it.”

Graelyn furrowed her brows through her tears. “Say what?”

Auteur waggled her arms. “You know!”

Graelyn shook her head. “I really really don’t.”

Auteur looked away from Graelyn and pivoted her foot back and forth. “I uh, I love you, um, kinda like a child? You know. Not a big deal. But uh. You know. I did sort of raise you on accident, and um. Wow, this is awkward.”

Graelyn looked at her, tears still in her eyes. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t do this to me.”

“Of course I would! Parents don’t have to be good people! Now come on, let’s rewrite the universe.”

“Your universe,” Graelyn said, “there are others.”

Auteur mused on this. “Well… Yeah, I guess so.”

“Get rid of it,” Graelyn said.

Auteur took a step back. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll join you, but you have to make your own universe fictional. We can play with others, but if I don’t get a home, you don’t.”

Auteur rubbed her chin and thought on this. “I…I didn’t think about that but… You know, fair enough, Graelyn.”

She pressed something on her gauntlet. “I already did 10,000, what’s one more?”

Graelyn wiped her tears away. “A mistake?”

Auteur raised an eyebrow, and then felt her past and future self, still in that universe, pulled into the book.

“Oh, come on,” she said, as she vanished into ink, the gauntlet dropping to the ground.

Graelyn stumbled over to the gauntlet and put it on. “Of course, I have to be the last person to exist in 10,000-some universes. The sole survivor. Figures.” She fiddled with it till she found the “eject” setting. “Someone else can take that next time.”

She hit the button, and all of reality spilled out.

It would take too long to describe it all, but everything that had existed existed again. People were dropped into their homes, their universes fitted back in place.

And Graelyn was still alone in there, but she knew it had worked as she picked up her dream journal and found that her dreams had all gone to other people.

“Figures,” she muttered.

“You did well,” F.I.D.O said as he flashed into existence.

“F.I.D.O!” she tensed. “You’re not going to...”

“No, you’re safe. I’ve tired of masters. But I fear that Auteur has written herself into a corner. I fear wherever she went when you ejected her, it’s gone badly.”

“She tried to kill 10,000 universes,” Graelyn replied.

F.I.D.O nodded. “But thanks to you, she didn’t. She’s somewhere living the rest of her life. But she remembers all this, and I don’t think she’ll take it well. She’s destroy herself trying to get here, trying to get to places like here...”

Graelyn shrugged. “And that’s my problem?”

“It’s Christmas, and as much as I try to pretend I’m a bad boy...I’m not.” He bowed his metal head. “I’m asking you to come with me, one last time, to save my Mistress.”

Graelyn walked over to him and pet him. “Good boy, F.I.D.O. Let’s find her.”

Chapter 7: An Artist Lies Dying

Auteur had died, that wasn't a big deal. She'd found a new face. But that old trick was at its limits. Now they were a man, or was a man before his skin had been ripped off. He'd even thought he died, but he clung on. He couldn't even get to death, that was annoying. The world collapsed around him, and his eyes were unable to close. Even so, he wrote in his head. He imagined his blood as paint swirls. If he was human, he'd have died ages ago. But he could cling on. He would cling on.

Ghosts appeared to him, that girl from ages ago, and the dog he'd had once.

"A Christmas Carol!" he shouted as they grabbed him. "You need a third one!"

"Sorry," Graelyn replied, "budget cuts."

They took him back to the White Canvas, and F.I.D.O tried to stabilize him as Graelyn held his bloody hand. "I'm sorry we didn't find you sooner, Auteur."

"Oh, I'm fine, just a flesh wound."

"You are not fine, Master Auteur."

"I know doctors, we can—"

"No doctor can save him in this state...he...I only know one group of people who can..."

Graelyn took a swallow. "That death cult?"

"Oh," Auteur said, "have I joined already or not? I keep forgetting."

"Call them," Graelyn said.

F.I.D.O did, and they whispered in as darkness. The man she recognised as Gideon stepped forward. "Friends, I give you the greatest artist there is."

Graelyn smiled down at Auteur, and up at Gideon. "You can save him?"

"We can."

She let him go, and he vanished into the shadows.

F.I.D.O looked up at her. "Thank you. Our service is done."

Graelyn patted him. "Do me one last favor, you can teleport and stuff right?"

"Yes, Mistress Scythes."

"I uh, don't really have a lift home."

Chapter 8: The Christmas Needle Agreement

Graelyn hadn't had any say in where the negotiations were taking place, but she sure wasn't complaining. The station they were on was the biggest she'd ever seen, and she'd seen dozens of realities. It went on farther than she could see out the window, a size so ridiculous she wondered how practical it was.

"Your first time on the Needle?" The speaker was a floating spinning disk of purple and yellow, only as large as a dime. So, that was new. It spoke incredibly quickly, like it had already moved on from its sentences by the time it started.

"Yeah, first time," she replied. "I'm Graelyn Scythes of Dawn."

"We're Ambassador Galaxy Violet, of the Quoth."

"A pleasure to meet you. If I might ask, when you say 'we'..."

"We're subatomic beings."

"Right, so, a lot. Well, I'm honored to meet the family."

"The pleasure is ours. The Empress is a just negotiator, so I'm sure you'll end up with a very fair treaty. The turnout to witness is impressive, though, representatives from throughout time and space are here."

Graelyn looked past the spinning disk, which wasn't hard since it was so tiny, at the myriad other guests. The Original Mammoth delegation was chatting with a big fuzzy creature she'd heard called a Vo'lach and a member of the Knights of Sky, while ambassadors from the Great Assimilation were chatting up the representative from this universe's equivalent to the Firmament (though she'd been told not to call them that publicly, since apparently they weren't actually remotely the same species, they'd just ended up with the same job), Sergeant-Instructor Littlejohn, who looked extremely unimpressed with the Great Assimilation's bragging about having a multi-universal empire. Kinan Jans was talking to a dejected-looking Gideon, dressed to the nines, who was clearly only here out of obligation and trying not to make eye contact with any of the people he'd nearly helped annihilate earlier. The Firmament was here as well, having a very heated chat with the Bookkeepers. Lady Aesc and Arch had set up a card game with a big mess of aliens, one of whom had just thrown down a losing hand in disgust with the tentacles under their chin. Coloth had apparently won the hand, and was loudly proclaiming his victory, while Lady Aesc was doubling over laughing. Arch popped a few candy bars out of his arm, and that seemed to diffuse the situation. A few painted warriors stood in the corner exactly like how stone statues stand there without doing anything.

Littlejohn walked up to Graelyn, nodding at the Quoth. "A marvelous job you did, giving that death-cult a black eye. You should be proud of yourself, kid."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, "wasn't particularly fun, though."

He nodded. "Never is. I do believe you have something belongs to us, though."

"Oh, right." Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out Autuer's gauntlet. "She stole this from your people, and I'm happy to return it to you."

He took the gauntlet, and turned it over examining it close. "Well, at least she took good care of it. Thanks. See you around, kid." He gave her a salute, that she awkwardly returned as a proclaimer in full regalia called for attention from the whole room.

"Please rise for the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, Miranda Dawkins the Last, empress of the universe, commander in chief of the imperial fleets, custodian of the artefacts, mistress of the four keys, head of the galactic bank," the proclaimer took a breath, "...and absolute ruler of the known and unknown planets."

The empress entered, wearing a long ceremonial robe woven from gold and threads so black they vanished the light that trailed behind her, the tails held up by a pair of floating drones. Under the robe, she wore a Batman t-shirt and jeans.

“Welcome everyone, I’m proud to be here to negotiate a truce between the 10,000 Dawns, and the powers from our own universe.” There was polite applause, ululation, clicking of pincers, and membrane tapping. “So, let’s begin.”

The negotiations themselves were boring. Dawkins told a few anecdotes about her father, which everyone seemed to find more interesting than the stories really were for reasons Graelyn didn’t understand, and after agreements were decided upon, one by one, the representatives agreed to various terms and stipulations.

“Taranis,” Graelyn said, “you were a good friend to me, even when I didn’t know it, so I wanted you to have this.” She slid the Mammoth a button with the Dawn Logo on it across the table. The Mammoth picked it up with his trunk, examined it, and then pinned it to his fur, letting out a loud trumpeting that disturbed the proceedings.

“Small Graelyn, I am honored deeply by your gift, and the symbol of your people. As a representative of the Original Mammoths, I ask you to hold your hand out.”

Graelyn looked at Arch, who nodded enthusiastically, and she did. Taranis touched her hand, and a sigil appeared on it, glowing bright, and then sinking in and disappearing.

“You are now marked as an Original Mammoth, granted the privileges of the herd and song. Welcome as friend and equal, and known to all to have the spirit of the tusk.”

“Oh!” Graelyn looked at her hand. “Thank you!” she replied, quickly. “You’re welcome in Spiral, whenever, too.”

The mammoths all trumpeted, and Miranda had to politely ask them to quiet down.

Graelyn hoped the mammoths didn’t know the button was a mass produced giveaway she had a pile of in the bottom of her bag. “I’m very honored.”

“This bond cements our peace more than any paper. Never more will the mammoths threaten your 10,000 Dawns.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Miranda muttered, and moved onto the next point.

Soon, the documents were signed, hands and limbs were shook, and the Christmas Needle Agreement went into effect. Guests began to move to the banquet hall where the celebration would truly begin. She found Arch, and cozied up to his side.

“Hey Grae.”

“Hey Arch.”

“It’s good to be back.”

She nudged him in the side. “I missed you. Your filmography just wasn’t the same.”

“Graelyn!” they turned to see Hollow and 176, holding hands and running up to them as 176 started jabbering. “You’ll never guess what happened, we talked to the Empress and she said there was a place for us here on the Needle!”

Hollow, who was floating a few millimeters above the ground in excitement, grinned. “So we decided we’re going to stay here, and build a life.”

“Congratulations!” Graelyn said, and Hollow and 176 piled on her in a hug as Arch stood awkwardly on the side.

Hollow wiped the tears from her face as she started laughing with happiness. “We’ll have a home here, at the end of the universe.”

Graelyn took her friend’s hands. “You two don’t be strangers though, okay?”

“Promise,” 176 said.

“Oh! I know this song, come on,” Hollow said, and pulled her girlfriend to the dance floor.

As the party really got going, one figure slipped away, however, angling for an empty hallway. Graelyn squeezed Arch’s arm and scampered after them.

“Wait, Gideon!” Graelyn ran up to him, as he was attempting to start up some sort of doohickey she assumed was his ride out.

“I have nothing to say to you, you insolent brat.”

“Hello to you to. I have something for you to give to Auteur, can you do that for me?”

He paused, looking her in the eyes, one of his own twitching. “No promises. What is it?”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a notebook and a pen. “One last Christmas present. Maybe some art therapy will help them.”

He took them from her and sighed. “Fine, sure. You know Auteur was the most powerful person I knew, once upon a time. She ruled planets, created wonders, defied everyone and got away with it...even if they were insufferable, they were my closest friend from face to face...now...I just want you to know that I blame you.”

“They did it to themselves. I didn’t make them.”

“I don’t care. I blame you.” He flipped through the empty notebook and read the note Graelyn had written inside. “Even if perhaps I know you’re right, deep down. I will give this to him. Merry Christmas, Graelyn Scythes.”

“Merr-” but he was already gone.

Graelyn headed back to the celebrations. There were old friends to see, and new ones to meet. And most of all, an Archimedes to bother lovingly. She didn’t know what the future held, but maybe having a white canvas wasn’t so bad after all.

About the Author

James Wylder is the creator of 10,000 Dawns, and founder of Arcbeatle Press. He's written numerous books including three novels, has edited several anthologies of short fiction, and has had five of his plays produced for the stage. James spends his free time enjoying video games and podcasts, petting cute dogs, and watching Doctor Who. As one does.

You can find more about him at jameswylder.com.

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