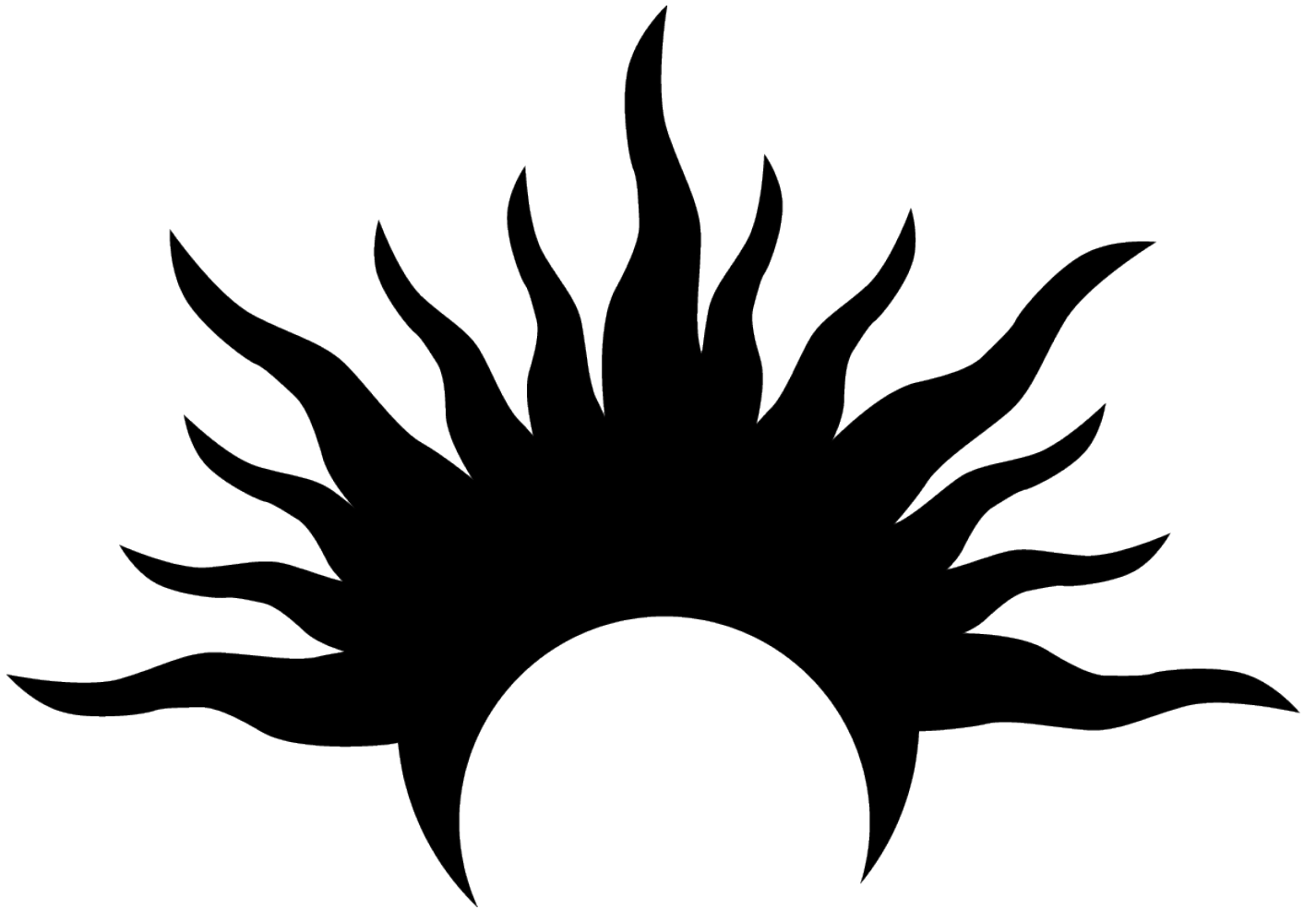


10,000 DAWNS



Bonus Stories

**Written by James Wylder
Art by Annie Zhu, Rachel
Johnson, and Raen Ngu**

Stories by James Wylder

Featuring ideas and characters by Josephine Smiley, David Koon, Taylor Elliott, and Jordan Stout.

“The Adventures of Mister Sprinkles the Cat” “Unwelcome in Nightmoore” and “You're Not Wrong if You're Right” **Art by Annie Zhu**

“The Day the Cats Spoke” “Don Your Armor, Throw Dawn Your Sword” and “A Christmas Meh Raconteur” **Art by Rachel Johnson**

“Knights and Dragons” **Art by Raen Ngu**

These stories wouldn't be possible without the support of you, the reader, who helped make these crazy tales possible.

These stories are dedicated to Ben, a boy from Elgin Illinois who passed away from cancer in 2015. “The Adventures of Mister Sprinkles the Cat” was originally written for a fund-raising drive for his treatment. If you enjoy this brief anthology, please consider making a donation to help fight childhood cancer.



The Adventures of Mister Sprinkles the Cat

Mister Sprinkles, to be absolutely clear, was an ordinary cat. While many people suspected that he was something more than that, he was in fact just that. A gray lump of fur and purrs, or sometimes mews and hisses. But from the moment he sat away from the other cats to look out the window of his enclosure and met the eyes of a young girl named Graelyn scythes, Mister Sprinkles was destined for greater things. She'd picked up his fuzzy body and held him all the way home, in awe of how soft and warm he was. They'd grown up together, and he could rely on her for food and shelter pretty reliably, until the day she disappeared.

It had happened before, getting dropped off at a place that housed other pets, but then it was usually only for a few days. Maybe a week. So at first Mr. Sprinkles just closed his eyes and waited. But those days went by, and Graelyn did not come back. Where had she gone? He paced his enclosure, eyeing the man outside it, who looked like he was about to fall asleep, which didn't take long, and the man slumped over in his chair, and hit the enclosure release icons for enclosures 23-25. 24 was empty, but Mr. Sprinkles saw a pudgy orange cat shove its door open and drop onto the floor. It gave the impression this wasn't the first time this had happened. Mr. Sprinkles pushed at his own door, and suddenly he was free! He literally leaped at the opportunity, and landed gracefully on the ground, strolling off through the rest of the building till he reached the automatic doors, that politely made way for him. Mr. Sprinkles was out on the town.

Jenna looked horrified at what Carl had built.

“That could kill people Carl.”

“That's the point Jenna.”

“Innocent people.”

“How else are we supposed to wake them up?” Carl threw his arms out wide, like this was the most obvious point imaginable. Jenna crossed hers.

“We wake them up to the evils of Earth's regime by showing them a better way, not obliterating them. Really, why do you think blowing people up would change their minds for the better Carl? Give me one good reason.”

He leaned in, his face getting redder, “They need something drastic, something terrifying that disrupts their everyday routine to-- why is there a cat in here?”

Mister Sprinkles had started his stroll through the city doing the normal things: looking at birds and halfheartedly trying to catch them, climbing things he shouldn't, and then smelled a delicious fish scent, which appeared to be a sandwich over on the counter, coming from an open window. He'd climbed up, and now the sandwich was within his grasp.

“Loud noises!” The man said to Mister Sprinkles, or rather, “Get down from there!”

“Meow!” said Mister sprinkles, which loosely translates as “I don't know what you're saying but there's no need to shout.” There were two humans in the room, each of them with distinctive red markings on their jackets, and a glowing hologram on the table between them. Mr. Sprinkles stopped to watch the pretty image. The man got up and darted towards him, so Mister Sprinkles bolted past him, and hopped up first onto the man's chair via a box, and then onto the table.

“Loud noises!” the man said again.

“LOUDER NOISES!” said the woman.

“Meow.” Mister Sprinkles replied, confounded. On the table were several pretty glass vials full of fluids. Mister Sprinkles held his paw up at one, and thought about knocking it off the table. That would be fun.

“Softer noises...” Said the man. “Softer noises? Sooooofter noises.” He continued. Mr. Sprinkles knocked the vial off the table. “LOUDEST NOISES” Said the man, and grabbed for him. He leapt off the table, and landed on an object that then began to move! Scrambling, Mister Sprinkles held on as the object rose to two legs, and made noises at the other humans. He was on this metal thing's head, holding on by only his claws!

This was not Carl's day. The vial that had fallen to the floor and shattered was now eating through it, the millions of microscopic robots chewing away at the floor. Eventually, they would eat him and Jenna to, and the dumb cat, as well as all of the other matter in the area, and rearrange it all to spell some Revolutionary message that had seemed a lot more important a few minutes ago than it did now. The cat was on his cleaning droid scrambling to keep ahold of it, and making lots of cat noises.

“This is all your fault Carl. We're all going to die because you wanted to try out terrorism.”

“I did not want to try out terrorism!”

“MROOW!” Said the cat as the cleaning droid tried to pull it off of its head.

“See, even the cat agrees.” Jenna scoffed. Mr. Sprinkles was thrown from the Droid's head, and landed on the counter. There sat the precious sandwich, smelling of tuna and preservatives, just the way Mister Sprinkles liked it. The floor by the counter was rapidly disappearing, and he had to run fast to grab the sandwich, which was luckily in some sort of wrapper so the insides didn't fall out. Success! Leaping from the counter, he landed on a shelf, and then leaped to the windowsill, where he carried his sandwich out. The cries of the human's stopped him. Sure, he had a delicious sandwich, made of the finest in scraps of preprocessed meat slathered in sauce to make it palatable, but he was a Cat of principles.

Running along the street, Mister Sprinkles hustled in front of a couple.

“MROW!” He said, and tried to gesture with his body. “MRROOOW!” He repeated.

“What's this cat doing man?”

“I dunno bro.” The other replied. The Cat kept taking a few steps and turning to meow at them, and they proceeded to follow it. Then they heard the cries from inside the building. Immediately the two men went to work, and Phil and Tre'von, if you were wondering, and called emergency services.

“You've got to get us out of here!” Jenna yelled to Phil and Tre, and they noticed the cat was tugging on some rope just inside the window sill. “Great!” Tre grabbed the rope, which he held onto for slightly too long, and threw it to Jenna, who began to climb it up, being careful to not touch the eroding building. Phil had run inside to pull the fire alarm, and people were streaming out of it now.

“Carl take the rope!” Jenna said as she was pulled up through the windowsill by Tre. She threw it to him, and then he looked out at the people in the building streaming out. There were families, children

with their parents, young people just trying to find a place to live. And here he was building weapons in the basement. A little girl clutched her pet goldfish to her chest, hastily scooped out of the aquarium into a drinking glass. Carl let go of the rope and stared into Jenna's eyes.

"I'm sorry." He said. She turned away as the nanites ate him away.

In a little over 23 minutes, the entire building had been turned into mush, and then restructured into a quote by Vladimir Lenin in big chunky letters you could read from blocks away.

"You cannot make a revolution in white gloves." -Vladimir Lenin

Jenna screwed her face up. "Well, maybe you should at least try."

The news drones had showed up, followed by the reporters. And Tre and Phil found themselves being interviewed.

"Yeah this cat stopped us on the street, without it all those people would have died. That cat sure is a hero."

"Where is this cat now?" The reporter asked, hoping to get the chance to put cute cat pictures on her newscast since it would boost the ratings.

"He disappeared just as quickly as he came. A really humble cat."

The reporter turned to the hovering camera drone. "We may never know the identity of this cat, but it will long be remembered as a hero in this neighborhood."

Nearby on the ground, the sandwich was gone.

Mister Sprinkles made his way back into the animal shelter, and hopped up onto the sleeping man's table, and into his enclosure. He had been carrying the paper wrapped sandwich all this way, and now it was time for his reward. It took some ripping, but he got it free and began to guzzle down the delicious food. Far better than the healthy stuff they served him there, not that he actually knew anything about their nutritional value. Still, he wondered why those people had lived in a house with a collapsing floor, that was funny. And how was his owner doing? He returned to his meal, finishing it before the sleeping man awakened.

"Oh crap." He said, noticing the open cages as he spring awake.

"Wow good thing none of you got out!" He lightly laughed to himself, "That could have caused some real problems!"

Deep underwater, beneath the Atlantic Ocean, Graelyn Scythes got ready for bed, she put on her PJ's, and slipped into her covers, putting her glasses on her bedside table. "Lights off" she ordered, and they turned off. She sat there in silence, her eyes closed, pretending to sleep, and then pulled out her phone, and pulled up the album of pictures of her old cat. Her heart felt a pang as she remembered giving him up for adoption to get this internship, but she knew she had to. Right? In the pictures she cuddled him lovingly, and he looked slightly annoyed to be held. She smiled.

"Oh Mister Sprinkles. I hope you get some fish today. Every good cat deserves some fish." She scrolled

through the pictures again and put her phone away to slip away into dreams, as Mister Sprinkles did up on the surface. She was a Doctor in her dream, stethoscope and all. “I need a nurse to help me with this patient!” She yelled down the hospital hallway. For some reason Mister Sprinkles, in cat size scrubs arrived and talked like he was Zorro.

“I have come to assist you Doctor Scythes. I just stopped an act of terrorism today you know.”

She reached out to the cat, and they joined together to treat her imaginary patient.

“Best team in the universe.” She told him.

Maybe it was just a coincidence, maybe it was something more, but that night in his enclosure, Mister Sprinkles had the same dream.



**Don Your Armor, Throw
Down Your Sword**

"To me, the Songbird is immortal, she's a symbol that will live on beyond any of us."

The ice cream dripped onto her shoe, and Alice cursed.

"The Songbird is the vengeance of the people incarnate, but also their conscience."

Alice stared at the two films in her cue on the projector and squinted. She sat there for five minutes trying to decide which one to watch before accidentally clicking on one and then just accepting it as her choice.

"I don't actually think she has a heart. She's cold, she's brutal. I wouldn't trust her."

Alice stopped her run at the playground where the little boy was crying. She came over and knelt down.

"Hi there, what's wrong?" He pointed at his skinned knee. "Well, lets see what we can do about fixing you up."

"I don't thinks she's ever scared."

She bolted up in bed. The gun was going off again. "I don't know what to do." Graelyn said. Alice tried to say something back to her but her lungs were filling with blood. The gun went off again. She was falling again. "I don't know what to do." Her lungs were filling with blood. She clenched the bedsheets, she was here, she told herself. She was in her own bed. The cat walked over her, which usually would have been annoying, but this time was useful. She tried to focus on the cat, focus on the sheets, focus focus focus. She'd put a poster above her bed to focus on for just this purpose, it had an alphabet of different world revolutionaries on it in colorful caricature. She started focusing on the reality of the poster above her to. Focus.

In time, the flashback was over.

"Have you continued having trouble sleeping?" Her therapist asked.

"No. I'm doing great." Alice tried her best to lie through her tired lips and past her encircled eyes. The therapist sighed.

"Alice I'm here to help you. It's okay, this a safe place."

"I can't show that I'm weak. The people need me."

"You're not weak. You've survived so much."

"I shouldn't be letting this get to me, I should be over this. I've seen far worse things than that."

"Trauma isn't that simple, it's different for everyone and sometimes it doesn't make sense what parts of it hold us down. Everything you're feeling is legitimate."

"I know it is." She says. She's lying, of course.

Jack's shoulder bag swung with a deep weight, it had a strong strap, but it still looked like it might snap. Alice shook her head, trying to clear it. "You alright?" She nodded.

"I'm fine. I can't wait to get back on the shooting range. I need to get back in the action, I'm tired of sitting at home. I'm no good at it." Jack nodded, and they walked to the desk, signed in, scanned their ID's and got into the range. It was nearly empty, they'd chosen a low attendance time on purpose, and the only other occupant was a scruffy looking east-Asian man who was fussing over some antique guns rather than firing them. Jack ruffled through the bag, and pulled out a box of ammunition, and set it on the counter. Then he pulled out a rifle, and set it next to it. "Lets start you off with something low-caliber actually..." he mused, and pulled out a handgun, which he checked and, handed to Alice. She took it, and held it. What was in her hand? She looked down, and tilted her head to her side. That was a gun. Wait- who was holding the gun. It suddenly struck her this wasn't her perspective, this was Graelyn's. Alice was in front of her, staring dumbly. She would shoot her on accident. That would be horrible. There would be so much blood.

"Alice?" Jack said.

"Who's Alice?" She replied, "Where am I?" Jack's face fell, and he gently put his hand on hers.

"Maybe this wasn't a good idea... Lets just put that down."

"I don't know what to do." She said, then, "What have I done? I shot her."

Jack slipped the gun out of her hand. "No, you didn't shoot anyone. No one is shot."

"Can't you see me? I'm right there on the ground."

"No, you're right here, you're in the shooting range."

"Why are we here, I was on the roof..."

"Let's go home." He packed the bag up quickly, and began to lead her out.

"We need to get back to the roof there are people hurt there. I went there to kill him Jack."

"Its okay. Everyone's okay." He led her carefully out to the car, and called her therapist.

Alice sat in Doctor Chamali Tran's office, wringing her hands. She couldn't remember what Jack had said had happened, which just made her feel even smaller. Why couldn't she control herself? Why? Doctor Tran came back in.

"How are you feeling Alice?" She just kept wringing her hands, and looked down at them. Tran sat down across from her.

"So I heard you had a dissociative episode."

"I don't remember it."

"That's fairly common. Dissociation can be scary, but it's sort of like an inborn defense mechanism. When it's too painful to consider the pain happening to you, you stop realizing you're yourself."

"I doubt it's that simple."

"Of course it's not. But I think that's a good way of explaining it for you. You keep trying to fight the healing process. Your post traumatic stress isn't going to ever vanish, but you can manage it, and you can heal. You won't always be like this."

"Of course I will. I should have died during that war. I was supposed to die. I was meant to die! I didn't deserve to live through it. I don't want to be here. I'm a burden on everyone now, I'm just excess weight for my friends to carry they'd be better off without me!" Tran leaned in, carefully.

"You're alive, and people love you. You're not their burden, you're their friend. And they need you, still."

The call came for the group to mobilize, and Alice listened intently from her desk. She'd wanted to get back to work, but she still couldn't hold a gun, and she had tried and tried. Eventually she'd stopped after she realized how much of a burden she had to be, needing aid every time she failed. She was now filling out paper work, and doing tactical advising. She was bored out of her mind, but at least she was being useful. Jack, Chantelle, Trevon, Yi, Gerald, Shona, and the others walked by her window, suited up for the mission, slapping each other on the back and getting revved up. The anti-Communist groups had taken longer than expected to really organize, but organize they did, and not stopping them was their job. Strange how the people in the shadows were now the capitalists. It was a topsy turvy world. "Lets move out!" She heard Jack yell. She was proud of him, really. He wasn't a natural leader, but he'd taken up the mantle with grace. Good on him. She began to fill out the next form, and tried to not be jealous. She failed.

* * * *

"Alice, could you come down to the R&D center?" Alice was staring off, and it took her a moment to realize she was being spoken to over the intercom.

"What? Oh, yes, I can. What do you need me for?" She said pressing the button to talk back.

"No idea, just go there." Weird, but not unusual in such a big base. Tidying up her paperwork, Alice went down the elevator to the Research labs, where she was greeted upon the doors opening to all of her friends standing around a pair of technicians.

"What if we made the flight take off radius higher? I mean, right now it has to be at an angle." One said.

"Even if it was at a right angle, that would still be an angle." The other replied.

“Oh, right.”

Jack and co waved at her, and several couldn't help glancing at a tall object with a sheet over it. So this was what this was all about.

“Hello everyone, what exactly is going on here?”

“Well Alice, meet Jim and Annie, they basically create everything there is around here.”

“Hi.” They said in unison, and continued to squabble over take off angles. She noticed Jim talked the most, but seemed incapable of putting the schematics down on paper himself, which Annie did.

“I take it they've been working on something for your team?”

“Not for the team,” Chantelle cut in, “For you.”

“Me?” It seemed obvious, but she was surprised.

“Of course its for you silly duck.” Yi replied. Annie and Jim moved away from the schematics and moved under the sheet with some tools, and there was a bit of noise.

“Well, what is it?”

“Are you two ready?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, we think so!” Annie replied, and they pulled the sheet off. Alice gasped. Under it was a full suit of mechanical armor like she'd worn on the roof in Nojpeten before it was demolished by Arch impacting it. “We managed to repair it, fix it all up-” Jim started

“-and make some improvements!” Annie finished. Alice walked up to it, and ran her fingers along the angles of the metal. It was painted black, with red highlights, and a rather generic looking bird painted in a circle on either shoulder plate.

“What kind of bird is that?” She asked.

“A songbird, of course!” Jim said.

“We couldn't actually decide on what kind of bird to put on there so its pretty vague looking. We can always change it to a new one.”

“I don't know what kind of bird you'd put on there anyways. Its fine for now.” She walked around the suit. It was fantastic, she could already tell many of the prototype's flaws had been ironed out.

“That's not all though!” Jim was practically giddy, “Should I tell her?”

“No I wanna tell her!”

“Okay you tell her.”

Annie looked very pumped about informing her of this next fact, “It flies!”

“What, you mean like, Iron Man or something?”

“Er, sort of.” She pulled out a remote control, and pushed a button: two short wings popped out of the suit, with a booster on either side.

“More like... The Iron Falcon.”

“The Iron Songbird.” Jim suggested.

“Just Songbird is fine.” Alice said. It felt nice to think of the suit being her persona, while her face was Alice, in a strange way.

“So do you want to do a test run?” Jack asked.

“What? Now?”

“Of course now, why do you think we brought you down here?” Alice's eyes lit up.

“Someone help me put this suit on, I'm not keen on hesitation!”

* * * *

She stood on top of the building, her metal feet somehow no heavier than her own. The motors moved as she turned her ankle in perfect synchronization. There was a heads up display in the helmet that ran her through the pre-flight procedures, and she payed close attention before booting up her wings. They sprung out of her back, and she grinned from ear to ear.

“Are you ready to go?” She heard Annie say in her ear.”

“Yes.”

“Then you're clear to fly!” Jim said.

She turned the boosters on, and her feet lifted off the ground, she hovered for a moment, and then leaned forward, the rockets pushing her further off the ground and into the sky. The ground was left behind her, and she soared higher into the air. There below her was England, and as she flew on, the buildings passed below her like someone's model train set. The people moved between places like little dots. She passed an especially tall skyscraper, and watched the people look up from their desks at her. She waved at them as she passed, and got a few confused waves back.

“Control, I'm going to try some tricks.” There was a moment of hesitation before she heard Jim say back:

“...Okay?”

She rocketed higher, and spun through the air, barrel rolling through clouds and doing loopy-loops. A flock of birds passed by her like she was a casual sight for them. Glorious. Then she dove, picking up speed and feeling the G's as the ground grew closer and closer, she pulled up and rose like a roller coaster, giving a jubilant whoop into the comm. This was the greatest thing she'd ever gotten to do in her life. Settling into her flight, she began looking through the updates on the HUD. Most were boring, but one struck her.

“Hostage situation.” Followed by an address and further details.

“Annie, Jim, whats this hostage situation?”

“Jack and the others are already gearing up to help, and the police are there. You don't need to worry about it.” But she did worry about it. She asked the onboard computer to figure out the distance to the address.

“Its barely any trip at all for me, and they haven't even left yet.”

“Alice, listen to me, you haven't been cleared to return to a combat situation yet-” she turned the comm off. She was going to do this. She needed to do this.

The baby wouldn't stop crying, and it was driving Andrew mad.

“Could you keep that brat quiet?” He yelled.

“Jesus, Andrew, its just a baby.” Glen said. The mother shushed the baby and tried rocking it, but since he yelled it was only crying louder.

“Are we ready for the broadcast?” Glen nodded in reply. Andrew walked over to the camera.

“To the so-called “World Revolutionary Council”, we have one message: we demand a free, seceded England from your Communist tyranny. Unless you comply, one hostage will die every hour. That is all.” They cut the feed. There were a lot of hostages, and plenty of hours. They'd no doubt get to up the number they'd execute. Glen was looking a bit shaky, as were Amy and Lawrence.

“Come on, shape up.”

“Andrew, I think we've gone too far. I mean, I believe in the cause but...”

“But what?”

“Executing civilians?”

“Lawrence, listen to me: These aren't civilians. They became combatants as soon as they capitulated to the communist government of earth. Anyone who accepts their system is guilty of violence to our freedom. These aren't innocents. They're pawns.” Lawrence nodded, he still looked hesitant, but he didn't argue. Good enough.

“Sir?” Miriam said from the monitoring station, “There's something unusual on the cameras?”

“What kind of unusual.” She turned the monitor, and he saw a tiny blip flying towards them through the sky. Was that a drone? They couldn't possibly think they could take them out without killing all the civilians in the—not civilians, he reminded himself-- in the building. But what was it? It was moving fast, and the camera wasn't tracking it well. Old tech.

“Sir, I think its a-” It sudden accelerated, and the wall burst open. Covering his eyes, he lowered his

arm to try to make out what exactly was there. In the fading swirl of dust from the impact stood a towering figure of black and red.

“What the hell?”

“My name is Songbird,” A modulated voice boomed out of the machine, “and you're going to surrender now.” Andrew's jaw dropped for a moment, before he remembered he was holding a rifle. Without thinking he raised it, and fired off a burst of shots into the thing's chest. Suddenly it hunched over, covering its head.

Alice panted. Her mind swirled. She lowered a hand from her head, and put it to her chest, she raised it to her eyes, and looked at all the blood on her fleshy hand. “I don't know what to do.” Graelyn said. She was dying and she knew it- no. No she wasn't dying. She needed to focus. She couldn't focus. She was being pulled between two places in time, and she couldn't control it.

“You keep trying to fight the healing process. Your post traumatic stress isn't going to ever vanish, but you can manage it, and you can heal. You won't always be like this.”

She tried to remember the techniques she'd been taught.

Focus on where you are. She tapped her own helmet, and heard the hollow thud. She was in her armor. Jack had given her this armor, and the rest of her team, her friends: Chantelle, Trevon, Yi, Shona, Gerald... She shouldn't do this alone. She'd shut herself away like she could just get over what had happened, and she was going to die and let everyone who cared about her down. Her friends. Heck, those two weird mechanics who had cared enough to set all this up for her. She would die and let them all down. She was in a room. She was squatting in some rubble. She felt hands on her shoulders. They're trying to break into my armor, she realized. Crack me open like a crab.

She tried to focus on her arm, just one arm. She didn't need the rest of her body, not yet. This was a nice arm. When she'd been little she'd used it to do one armed pull ups on the jungle gym for her dad to show off, trying not to let him know she she couldn't do them with the other arm yet, and could only do three. She'd used this arm to gesture while she was singing in the White Rabbit pub for her Dad and his comrades. She smiled. Yes, this was the right arm for this. She flexed her fingers, and felt her flesh.

I am here, right now, not anywhere else. I am here. I am here. I am here.

She swung her arm out, and knocked the wind out of a man, then reached out behind her, and casually grabbed a woman by the front of her bullet proof vest and swung her over her head to slam her down onto the floor. She moaned a bit.

“Like I was saying.” Alice said, “I'm the Songbird. And you need to surrender.” Andrew grimaced.

“So Alice MacLeod is back.”

“And better than ever.” She said, rising to her feet. She was actually trembling, not that he could tell.

“I've rigged this whole room to blow. I'll kill the symbol of this horrible 'revolution' and martyr myself. You've given me a gift.” Alice looked around at the room. This wasn't what she'd expected.

This was a Kid Kastle Fun Center. There were big animatronic animals paused in mid musical performance, and an abundance of arcade and ski-ball machines. There were lots of children, huddled with their parents or the people they'd gone to a birthday party with. Cold pizzas and abandoned cakes with pictures of cartoon characters topped the tables. She felt a stroke of rage. This man, whoever he was, was willing to put all of these children in danger for his little war?

Would she have done that?

It struck her how clearly the answer was no. It struck her how Manuel had thought the same, to put their fight somewhere no one else would get hurt. It struck her that Graelyn was willing to put herself in danger just to prevent her from crossing the line into murder. A red sheen coated her vision. She clenched her fists.

“You're a coward. I never once resorted to putting children in harm's way like this. Fight me like you stand for something.”

“Hah, bold words. Where's your gun?” She raised her chin.

"I don't need a gun. I've moved beyond guns. What's the point anyways? I'm not here to kill you." The words surprised her, but she kept going, "I'm here to offer you a chance at a new world."

"I don't want your new world!" he said grandly, "And neither do my soldiers. We don't want your false promises, we want Centro, a world where ambition isn't a sin."

"It isn't a sin. And you won't be punished for ambition. Trying to murder children maybe, but not that." "You've murdered more people than I ever will."

"Yes. And now the war is over. No matter what happens here today, we've won. You're holding up a children's pizza parlor. This isn't some bold move that will solidify the past you want to live in. That past is gone." Alice looked at the other soldiers. "It's not coming back. But we don't have to keep killing each other. You'll kill some of our people, and then we'll hunt you down and kill more of you, and then you'll kill more of us, and so on and so forth... And what? What will you get out of it?"

"You led a revolution. You're goddamn hypocrite."

"Maybe I am," She held out an armored hand, "but you're all going to die here, you won't see any future. Give me the chance to show you mine. It's not what you want but... But we have to live in this world together. You're going to disagree with us, but there will always be people that do that. You can't stop people from thinking, even if you don't like it. I thought I'd die in the war, and maybe you did to. I thought I wouldn't have to deal with the consequences, the aftermath. But I do, and we can all live in this aftermath. Live together."

Andrew raised a box with a button on it. The lights on the bombs around the room seemed to be eyes waiting for his order.

"I'd rather die."

Suddenly, a hole appeared in his forehead, blood flooding out as he crumpled down. Alice looked to where the shot came from. The man who she'd hit in the chest, nametag said Glen, looked over at her, and dropped his rifle.

"We surrender." The rest of the rifles dropped to the ground.

"We've got long lives ahead of us." Songbird said back, "Make them count."

She was greeted back at the base with cheers. After she got out of the suit, she was carried through the main hall on several people's shoulder's. No civilians had died, and other than the ringleader, the insurgents had all surrendered. Her friend's patted her on the back, and there was a cake that someone had drawn her flying to the rescue on in red icing.

"I drew it!" Annie noted as the first slice was cut.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh I love it! Annie, could you draw something for me on the armor? I know what kind of bird I want on it." Annie cocked her head to the side. Alice thought of those nights she sang for her Father and his friends in the White Rabbit, what they'd called her then. She flexed her hand.

"Make it a Nightingale."

Alice was early for the appointment for once, which surprised Doctor Tran. She was never early, only late or precisely on time. She hadn't expected that, so had gone to get coffee. The aroma filled the space between them, sweet and bitter.

"Alice, what are you doing here early? Are you okay?" Alice shook her head.

"No, I'm not okay. I'm... I'm really not okay. I can't sleep. I have nightmares every night. I freeze up when I hold a gun. I sometimes relive being on that roof in Nojpeten over and over again like I was there... I... I'm not okay. And I'd really like to talk to you about it." Doctor Tran smiled.

"I'm so glad to hear that. You're finally taking your armor off."

"Oh not at all Doctor, I'm finally putting it on."



Knights and Dragons

The horse was exhausted, he'd ridden it too hard that day, but the urge to get where he was going had pushed away his sense. They were moving at a slot trot now, towards the fire in the distance.

"Easy girl, we'll rest up soon." He patted her gently on the neck, wishing it was without his gauntlets. Finally, they were close enough to the fire he could see a lone figure sitting by it, who rose, a hand on the hilt of a blade.

"Stop. State who you are."

"Sir Archimedes of the House Ahnerabe. I'd like to use your fire if you don't mind, my horse and I can't travel much farther." The figure looked them up and down, and then nodded.

"You can tie your horse up by mine. There is a pond by the tree it can drink from if you leave the rope slack enough. You're welcome to the stew as well. You try anything funny and I'll gut you." Fair enough. The figure's voice was funny, higher than he expected. Still, no complaints from him. He tied Esmerelda up at the tree, grabbed a bowl and spoon from his saddlebag and clomped over to the fire. The figure was in fact a woman. She had red hair, cut short to fit under the helmet laying beside her, and the look of someone who had been in a lot of sword fights, with the nicks and scars of swordplay visible over her form. Arch ladled out some soup, sat down on a rock (she had already taken a convenient tree stump) and awkwardly began to spoon soup in through the visor gap in his helmet. She looked at him like he was an imbecile.

"You know, you can take your helmet off." He swallowed the spoonful of stew and shook his head.

"No, I can't. That's why I'm going this way. I'm sure you know what's at the end of this road." She got up, stirred the stew, and ladled herself another serving.

"You tell me." As if on cue, another figure began to approach through the darkness. Both of them reached for their swords. The woman called out again, "Stop. Who goes there." The approaching figure stopped for a moment, as if unsure, and then replied, "Just a bard passing through, looking for coin or a fire." The woman glanced at Arch again.

"Come closer." Then approached another woman, this one in garb most bizarre. She wore a long brown coat, on the breast of which there was an emblem of a sun and a moon that had crossed their forms together. Her blonde hair was shaved completely along the left side of her head all the way from the temple down, and the rest was combed over to drop down to the other side falling just below her jawline.

"What's your name, Bard?" The woman kept approaching.

"I'm Kinan Jans. I hope you don't mind my intrusion." The red head gestured for her to take a seat,

"What are your names?" She asked plainly.

"I'm Lady MacLeod, the Knight of the Songbird. This is sir Archimedes of the House Ahnerabe. My squire is around here... Somewhere." She trailed off at the end into a grumble.

"I'm pleased to meet you both." Said Kinan in the same monotone she said everything in.

"You're welcome to the stew. Jack made too much, again." Kinan's face showed no tell, but her eyes to arch showed a flash of recognition.

"Jack would be your squire then?" Songbird nodded. "And you, Sir Archimedes, I see you're still

wearing your armor. Songbird here took it all off. Do you know something I don't about her?"

Arch shook his head, "I can't, er, actually take it off. That's why I'm here."

"You were saying that before she arrived." Songbird said, gesturing at Kinan with her spoon. "So, why can't you get out of your armor then?" Arch sighed.

"Well, you see I've been cursed by the queen of this land. I accidentally insulted her taste in wine, and she lay a spell on my that makes it so that I cannot leave my suit of armor till I complete a task she set for me." Arch said.

"Then we're on our way to the same place, I'd wager." Alice replied, "You're off to rescue the Queen's daughter from the Dragon's tower aren't you?" He nodded in reply. "Then are we at cross purposes?"

"Lady Songbird, I just want this curse released. If you're after the reward, you can have it."

"I am." She said.

"Lady Songbird!" Another voice yelled, "I found some berries for us!"

"Jack." Kinan said.

"Yes." Songbird replied. He approached with a bowl chock full of blackberries, which the four of them split between them. Songbird reintroduced everyone, and they settled back in.

"So then, bard, why don't you sing us a song?" Kinan stared at Songbird. Songbird stared at Kinan. Jack and Arch glanced between them.

"Sure." Kinan replied. "I must warn you though, I never said I was a good bard."

"Okay, I get the part about 'do a little dance, make a little love', but what exactly does 'get down tonight' mean?" Arch whispered.

"Heck if I know." Songbird replied. They had been riding for some time now, Kinan walking beside their horses. She was wearing unusual white pants, but they didn't seem to be being stained by the mud. Sir Arch didn't know who their guest was, but he was fairly certain she wasn't actually a bard. They'd have to keep an eye on her.

"There it is!" Songbird said, pointing over the hill they were cresting at the tower that was rising into view. "The Dragon's tower, if we can get in there and slay the dragon together, then get the princess out safely, we can get everything we need."

"You say 'need', not want." Kinan noted, and held her gaze up at Alice.

"I have people who need this money more than I do. I am responsible for them." Songbird checked her sword. "They need me. And Arch needs to get out of his armor. So need." Kinan nodded. "Why exactly are you here then?" Kinan narrowed her eyes as Alice reached down to reassure her horse.

"I'm here," she began, "to find knights who are going to take on this Dragon. I'm looking for new stories, after all. Oh the songs they will sing, etcetera." Alice scrunched her lips to the left. Sure, right.

"You do know no knights have returned alive from the tower, right?" Kinan nodded.

"All the better the song will be if you succeed then."

They rode down the sloping hill to the tower, which loomed over them. It wasn't actually a very old tower, it looked like it had been constructed recently and fairly hastily (recently for a tower, so maybe a decade ago, maybe a decade and a half). The walls were no nonsense rough stone blocks which rose up to an equally simple parapet at the top. There was no ornamentation on the tower, and no door. Only a

charred archway large enough for two people to walk abreast, abet cramped with their shoulders rubbing.

“So this is it.” Alice said, “I’m not sure what I expected.”

“It looks awful simple for a tower. There’s hardly any ornamentation on the thing.” Arch said.

“If by hardly you mean ‘none’.” Kinan finished. They knew she was right.

“Tell me bard, in songs of Dragons, don’t the beasts usually prefer rich and ornamented places to make their foul nests?” Kinan nodded.

“That’s fairly regular in most western mythology about dragons.”

“Western?” Arch asked.

“Forget it.” Kinan said.

“Right, so... I guess we need to head in.” They rode their horses to a tree, and tied them up, and put feed bags on them, then changed their minds and let the horses loose (“If we don’t come out, no use letting them die.” Alice said) together they gathered outside the entrance and looked into the darkness beyond.

“So, do we want to draw straws or what?” Arch asked. Alice rolled her eyes, put her helmet on, and stepped into the unknown.

Her boots clanked on the stone floor. Even so, she moved carefully. Arch followed her, and Kinan took up the end of the line. Alice half expected traps as she walked, but the only change they found was when her foot crunched down instead of clanked. They Stopped, and she reached down, and felt the remains of a skull.

“What is it?” Arch whispered.

“The last group of unfortunates.”

“Ah.” They felt along the walls and crept through the hall, till eventually they hit a set of stairs. They carefully advanced upwards, and found themselves in a circular room that took up the whole floor of the tower. Scorch marks like the walls, and a few slits in the walls let in air and fading sunlight. A blackened steel ladder descended from a closed trap door in the ceiling. They stepped into the room, and examined it. Something struck Songbird as odd about the room, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“Looks like the only way is up.” Arch said. He was right, of course. “I’ll take first this time.” Arch climbed the ladder, and when he reached the trapdoor took a deep breath and turned a handle on it to undo the latch. He pushed up, and the other two follow him as he signaled it was safe. Arch climbed up into a girl’s bedroom, the bedroom of a girl who had been there a long time. Old stuffed animals sat on a shelf, as well as tons of books that varied across the age spectrum wildly. A set of iron doors with a latch were set into one wall, and directly across from it was a large four poster bed complete with canopy where a teenage girl sat wearing a beautiful an ornate blue dress. Her hair was black: long and intricately braided. One one of her shoeless ankles was a thick shackle leading to a big chain. That was anchored into the wall. She didn’t look as happy to see him as he’d expected. He climbed up and bowed, as Alice and Kinan scrambled up behind him.

“Princess, my name is Sir Achimedes of the House Ahnerabe. This is Lady Songbird and the Bard Kinan. We’ve come to rescue you.” The girl smiled politely.

“Okay, well, thanks for coming. But actually you should all leave. No rescuing needed, sorry!” Alice looked down at her ankle.

“It doesn't look like you aren't in need of rescuing, to be blunt.” She said.

“Really? I like it here. Its a very nice tower. Look, there is even a bookshelf. No need to worry.” She awkwardly made a gesture with her arms spread wide as if to say “this is all I need!”

“Princess, please, you've been here a long time. There's a whole big world out there for you to explore.”

“Nope, I'm fine. Seen that world. Not my thing. Personally this room is the best.” Kinan began walking through the room, examining the walls.

“There is literally a dragon keeping you here.” Arch said, “It eats people.”

“Yes!” The Princess said angrily, “It does, so get out of here before it returns. Do you know how many heroes have come here to rescue me? I've lost count. I really have. They've all died because they're stubborn like you and won't leave.” The princess ran to the iron doors and swung one open, revealing a balcony and the sunset.

“The dragon will be here when its night. You need to leave. The dragon will kill you.” Arch shook his head.

“So that's why you're pretending you like it here. You're tired of people dying for you.” The princess looked even angrier, and on the edge of panic.

“Please, please you have to leave right now.” She ran up to them and unsuccessfully began to try to force Arch and Alice towards the trapdoor.

“Go, go now before it eats you.” Alice grabbed her by the wrists, and Arch began to look for how to disconnect her shackle.

“No, no! Stop! Please, you can't unshackle me! You can't do this! Let me go!” The princess cried.

Kinan's eyes went wide, and she looked over at the trio. Arch pulled out a connecting pin, and the chain came off of the shackle.

“Aha! Done!”

“NO!” The princess cried. Kinan walked towards the three of them forcefully.

“Princess, how big is the dragon.”

“Its big! Its huge!”

“Then how did it get into the lower level when there is only a human sized doorway?” The princess stopped fighting back, and the sun lowered on the horizon.

“Run.” She said.

The princess began to wretch, and as she did her mouth began to elongate. Her skin began changing color, becoming a dark grey. Her pupils turned to vertical slits, and she started hunching over, her shoulders beginning to rise up under her dress and break the fabric. Arch and Alice stood stunned, so Kinan ran forward, jumped, and kicked the princess in the side so she fell through the trapdoor, hitting the edge as she fell. They heard her body make a cracking thud on the ground, a horrible sound, and then the sound of the dress ripping apart and the howling screech of a dragon. Kinan slid down in front of the trapdoor with her landing, and closed the door, latching it as they heard the howling screech turn into a crackling inferno. The trap door grew hot enough it changed color slightly, with a small column

of flame rising up from a hole just big enough for a chain to be notched into.

“So.” Kinan said. “I’d say we found the dragon.”

They spent the night in the room, listening to the dragon thrash around in the room below. An animal trapped in a cage. They managed to get a few hours of rest in between the noise, only to be awoken each time by the dragon screeching and slamming itself into the sturdy walls.

“So.” Alice began, “I don’t think you’re really a bard.” Kinan looked over at her.

“No.”

“So who are you and what are you doing here.”

“I’m a traveler. I protect places, and I’m here on an investigation.”

“You had suspicions the princess was really a dragon?” Arch asked.

“No, but I’ve been looking at... People similar to the princess. I’m trying to understand them. Princess Scythes is certainly the first person I’ve ever met who shapeshifts into a dragon, for the record. But I think it’s still useful information.”

“So this whole thing has been a trap for heroes, get them to go and save the princess, and lead them into a trap.” Alice mused. “But why? What does the queen get out of this?”

“Let me take a wild guess,” Kinan monotoned, “you’re secretly funding an underground resistance to the queen.” Alice’s jaw dropped.

“Who told you that?”

“You. Well, more like I’m good at putting two and two together. I figured out she was the dragon before she killed us, remember?” That was certainly true. The dragon thrashed beneath them, underscoring the point. “So the question is, what are we going to do with the princess?”

“You mean the dragon that has slain countless knights? Do you really think we can let a monster like that live?” Alice said.

“Do I?” Kinan raised both eyebrows very slightly, which struck them both as the most expressive thing they’d seen her do. “Consider the opposite, this is a young woman who has been chained up her whole life begging people to leave her alone so she won’t kill them when she becomes an uncontrollable monster. Is this her fault?” Alice bowed her head a little.

“Well when you put it that way...”

“So we don’t kill her.” Kinan concluded.

“Hold up here, you’re just making that decision?” Arch said. She looked at him. Arch tried to make out her feelings on him, and it sort of angered him he couldn’t read her one bit.

“Yes. Unless you have a counterpoint for why murdering children is okay.”

“She is a danger to everyone around her...”

“Only because the Queen tells everyone to go kill her. Tells knights she doesn’t want around to go kill her. Her enemies in court. People who stand up too much for the common folk. I’m just guessing, so tell me I’m wrong.”

Arch and Alice exchanged glances.

“You’re not wrong.” they said in unison.

"I thought so." Kinan looked out the window, "So we just wait till sunrise."

Princess Graelyn Scythes awoke naked in the transformation room, the charred threads of what was left of her dress in a few heaps. On the floor. She felt on her ankle, and found the chain had been undone. She moaned, and curled up in a ball, covering her face with her hands. She'd eaten those people. Just like always. The last thing she remembered was telling them to run, and then she was the dragon and... Wait. She stuck her hand in her mouth and felt around. Her mouth didn't taste like blood and flesh... there were no bits left in there... She sat up, and looked around the room. No bones. No corpses. She stood up and crossed her arms, trying to keep her heat in. The morning was chilly, and having no clothes didn't help. Cautiously, she walked towards the ladder and called up it. "Don't open it if you are, but are you alive up there?" There was a pause, and she thought she assumed she'd been too optimistic when she heard someone call down.

"Princess? Is that you?"

"It is. Could you please throw something down from my closet? Please don't look down." There was a scrambling from up above, and a simple dress came down the trap door along with some underclothes. Graelyn put them on, and climbed up the ladder. At the top were the three people from last night, the two knights and the strangely dressed bard.

"I'm very glad you all survived." Graelyn said, "I'm princess Graelyn Scythes... No one has ever survived a night here before."

"So we noticed." Songbird said.

"I suppose its best if you get it over with...." Graelyn said, pulling her hair to one side of her neck, and getting on her knees. She closed her eyes.

"Please make it quick." The three looked at each other, and Arch reached down, taking her hand. She opened her eyes, and looked up confused.

"Did you miss me turning into the dragon? I'm the dragon, if that wasn't clear. I eat people. So you're supposed to kill me." She tried to think of how to make it clearer. "I am evil. There is a dragon inside me. You need to kill me."

"If you were really evil, would you have asked for us to leave, tried to persuade us?" Kinan said.

"You're not evil. Sadly, you're not that important."

"What?"

"No offense."

"What Kinan means," Alice said, "is you didn't choose to be put in this tower did you? Or for knights to come here to fight you. You were put in a situation where you couldn't help but do bad things. You didn't have a choice." Graelyn looked to the side, her head down, her eyes inspecting the houndstooth pattern on the rug. Kinan knelt down.

"It was your mother, the Queen, you put you here, correct?"

"To protect people from what's wrong with me!"

"She is the one sending people here for you to kill." Graelyn looked up shocked.

"What? You're lying."

“She sent Lady Songbird and myself here to rescue you.” Arch said.

“All those knights? I... I thought they just...” Graelyn was holding back tears. “I still killed them though. I'm an animal when I'm a dragon. I just want to feed.”

“Do you keep your memories from when you change?” Kinan asked, and Graelyn nodded. Kinan looked at Arch and Alice. Arch whose face was trapped under that helmet, Alice who had fought in so many battles. Kinan had seen them before, and would see them again. The faces repeated. She knew them, maybe better than they knew themselves. The aesthetics changed, sometimes the motivations changed, but there was always something deep down that was the same. It often wasn't what people expected. She'd run into one person who she'd found their most consistent characteristic across their infinite lives was a love of peppermint, and then another whose was a fierce loyalty to their friends. But there was always something the same.

“Let's stay here one more night.” Kinan said.

“Are you crazy?” Said Sir Arch. “She turns into a dragon.”

“And as we proved, we're totally safe in this upper room. You two can stay up here, and I'll stay with the dragon.”

“That's insane!” Alice cut in, “It will literally eat you.”

“She's right.” Graelyn whimpered. Kinan knelt down in front of Graelyn, and with her thumb and forefinger turned her face up to look at her.

“I've seen a lot of things. More things than you can imagine. Do you know what I've learned in all that time?” Graelyn shook her head, moving Kinan's hand back and forth.

“I've learned that you can't change what's been done to you, but you can do what you can to manage it, and if you can find the right steps, you can manage it. The only solution isn't the first option you found. Its not just between hurting other people and holing yourself up in this tower till you grow old and die.”

Kinan rolled her sleeve up, and pointed out some circular scars on her inner arm. “When I was a young girl, some people thought they could make me their toy. And part of that came from making me afraid of myself, and making sure I didn't have the power I was truly capable of. Why do you think you're not dead? There's something inside you they are terrified of. Something they don't want you to know.” She held out her hand to Graelyn. It was a strong hand, calloused and tightly muscled. “Give me the chance to show you you're strong.” Graelyn looked up at the three of them, the other two seemed a bit amazed Kinan had just said all of that. She looked back down at the hand, and slid her own into it.

“I'll give you that chance.”

They wasted the day playing cards, Alice and Arch got the horses back and fed them again, and they took turns telling stories (Kinan was a bit hard to listen to because she barely ever broke her monotone, but it was still a goo story. Alice's was probably the best as she interspersed it with song and had the best singing voice Arch or Graelyn had ever heard. Arch's story was descent, and Graelyn's was clearly from one of her books). When night began to approach, Graelyn went downstairs with Kinan, and stripped down while Kinan turned her back, and then wrapped herself in a blanket for modesty.

“You can turn around now.” Kinan did, and coul tell Graelyn still felt awkward wrapped only in a

blanket in front of another person.

“Its okay.” Kinan said rather ineffectually. She didn't really know what else to say, then gave up and decided she may as well get to work. “Here, eat this.” Kinan said, pulling something out of a pouch at her hip.

“What is it?” Graelyn asked, peering at it. “It looks like... bluish Crystal dust.”

“It is crystal dust. Now eat it.” Graelyn began to eat it, it was pretty difficult to get it down, so Kinan offered her some water, which helped.

“Okay, now what?”

“Think of what I just gave you as medicine. It should help you control what's happening to you.”

“What if you're wrong?” Graelyn asked.

“You'll eat me.” Kinan deadpanned. It wasn't very reassuring. The sun began to drop below the horizon. Graelyn began to gag. Kinan stepped towards her, placing her hands on the girl's shoulders. She could feel them changing under her grip, the bones shifting and pulsing.

“Now Graelyn, I need you to focus. Focus on you. Remember who you are. Who are you?”

“G-G-Graeelyn.” She gasped out.

“Good. You don't want to hurt anyone do you?” She shook her head, and as she did so lurched downwards, the blanket falling away, the tips of wings pushing out from her back.

“You're Graelyn Scythes. Say it.”

“I-” she screeched, “Grae.” She forced it out.

“And you don't want to hurt anyone.” Her skin was turning to scales, her fingernails were elongating into thick claws, her body was expanding rapidly, her neck elongating with her features, totally breaking the laws of the conservation of mass (well, technically Kinan knew she was converting a massive amount of energy into mass, and then expelling it but for most realities this would be breaking fundamental laws). The dragon in front of her let out a howling screech, and Kinan got close to it, moving to the side of its head to look into her big eye.

“Your name is Graelyn Scythes, and you don't want to hurt anyone. Say it.” The dragon screeched, and bit at her. Kinan moved fast, and jumped around it's muzzle, forcing its mouth shut with her arms and thighs.

“You are in control Graelyn. You are Graelyn, and you don't want to hurt anyone.” The dragon thrashed its head, trying to throw the burdensome rider off, but Kinan just held on tighter.

“Think about your room. What was the story you told us about? You told a story.” The dragon tried to slam her into a wall, but she moved like a spider down its head onto its neck. The dragon rolled, and thrashed, but Kinan didn't let go even as she scurried across its body with a preternatural ease.

“You're not used to this are you? You want to eat me don't you? Well, maybe that's the next step.” She dropped off the side of the dragon, and landed like a cat, rising to her feet and staring the dragon down impassively. It charged her, blowing fire. As the smoke cleared, the dragon expected her to be charred remains, a burning husk. But there she was, a curved line in front of her as though the fire had stopped right in front of Kinan. She stared. She didn't blink. The dragon charged again, mouth ready to devour her, and Kinan did nothing. As the jaw reached the moment where it was about to snap shut around her,

she stomped her foot down, hard, and pushed her arm up. The dragon struggled, like someone had jammed a stick in its mouth. The dragon screeched, and blew more fire, and shook its head hard enough to break someone's neck, but Kinan just stood there, placid. Finally, it stopped moving. "Are you listening to me? I lied that you'd be able to eat me, obviously. But those lies are necessary. You aren't dangerous. I need you to realize that. You are Graelyn Scythes, and you don't want to hurt me, but there is another thing: you can't kill me. You cannot." It tried to bite down harder, to no avail. "You can't. Which means everything you've presumed about your condition is a lie. A lie to make you think you're a monster, that you're worthless. That you could never live a life outside of this cage." The dragon's jaw's went loose, and Kinan stepped out from it, placing her hand gently on its snout. "Do you know who tells that to people?" Kinan put her lips to the dragon's ear and whispered. "Monsters. Abusers. Controllers. People who want power over you. Who want to pretend they are your god." She gently stroked the dragon's snout. "But you are Graelyn Scythes. Do you understand that?" The dragon looked unsure. "It's okay, you don't have to understand it now. But you're in there. This dragon is a part of you. And you don't have to do what they want you to do." The dragon rumbled, and shuddered, and Kinan felt something thick and wet hit her shoulder. It was a tear.

She gently stroked the dragon's snout, and felt an anger rise inside her. Kinan knew she would be making someone pay. But she couldn't think about that now.

"Someone did this to you. You are Graelyn Scythes, and you don't want to hurt anyone."

Arch and Alice opened the trapdoor after the noise stopped, and saw the dragon curled up with Kinan, the two of them asleep. Arch looked at Alice, "I can't believe it." Alice couldn't either. She closed the trapdoor gently, and they slept soundly.

Graelyn woke up to find a blanket over her body, and Kinan standing over by the one of the thin slits in the wall, her back to her.

"You're awake." Kinan said. Graelyn nodded, and then realized she couldn't see it.

"Yes. I... I sort of remember last night?" Kinan nodded.

"You did well. You'll be able to control it more and more as you practice. You'll need more of the medicine I gave you."

"What was that stuff anyways?"

"It's too long a story to really explain in detail. In short, that dust allows you to tap into a version of yourself that isn't a dragon somewhere else."

"You mean my daytime self."

"No- well, sure. We'll go with that." Kinan turned around. "We need to pay your mother a visit."

Graelyn shook her head.

"I can't control myself yet."

"Then we'll wait until we can."

"We'll stay and help!" A voice from upstairs yelled. "We can hear you guys talking you know."

Graelyn smiled, "You guys will really stay and help me?" The trapdoor opened, and a fresh set of clothes dropped down, followed by an upside down Alice head that hung there smiling.

"Of course we will. After all, empowering the people is sort of my main interest." Arch groaned from somewhere behind her.

"That's all she talked about last night, by the way." Graelyn laughed. Maybe things would be okay after all.

* * * *

Queen Scythes drank deeply from her cup, and watched the jester juggle some balls again. Things seemed like it would be a generally boring day in court, up until the guard ran into the room. Everyone naturally turned.

"My Queen!" Said the guard, "Three adventurers have returned with your lost daughter! She has been saved from the dragon." She dropped her cup in shock.

"That's impossible!"

"My Queen, I have seen it with my own eyes. This is a joyous day for the Kingdom indeed. They are being brought here to the main hall post haste!" The Queen tried to think of something to say. How was this possible? She tried to think on her feet, but nothing came to her, and she heard the approaching cheers. Finally, she decided to call a guard. As the three adventurers and her daughter came into the room, she screamed: "that is not my daughter!" there was a collective gasp.

"Mother its me!" Graelyn said, "I've been rescued."

"I know my daughter. You're the dread dragon in disguise. Don't try to fool us with your sorcery." The guard's lowered their pikes into a charging position.

"Mother, how can I prove that its me? I'm no dragon!" Her mother grinned a wicked grin.

"Why, why don't you stay in this room past sundown?" Graelyn shrugged.

"If that would prove it to you, that won't be any problem at all." Graelyn sat down at a table, and smiled around the room. The room was tense as the day progressed, but as the sun set, Graelyn simply sat there picking at a sweet roll. The Queen was furious, but kept a polite smile on her face. The four of them, the whole plotting group just sat there politely chatting.

"Arch, you said she cursed you correct? How did she do that?" Arch gestured to the queen's necklace, a blue crystal. "Everyone knows that the queen has that magic amulet. She never takes it off." Kinan raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me, I need to go commit treason." Kinan said, and got up from the table. Her companions halfheartedly tried to stop her, but in the end just let her go. She seemed to know what she was doing most of the time, anyways. The Queen watched her approach incredulously.

"So, you're the foreigner who has riled up--" Kinan cut her off by drawing a blade from under her coat and carefully slicing the chain of the necklace so that she cut not a nic of flesh, and the amulet dropped down into her hand. Casually, she walked back to Graelyn, as the Queen back to gag.

"I guess you inherited the whole dragon thing. Who knew. Anyways, this should solve your problems."

She tossed the amulet to Graelyn, who caught it and clasped it tightly.

“Uh, Kinan...” Alice said, watching the Queen's wing's burst out of her back as the people in the room began to scream and flee. “...She's turning into a dragon.” Kinan shrugged and finished her wine.

“Well you guys are heroes, lets go deal with the problem.” Arch and Alice drew their swords, and Graelyn , clutching the amulet, seemed to make a decision.

“We're all heroes.” She said, and closing her eyes and focusing, began to gag. Two dresses ripped apart, and two dragons screeched at each other. Their wings unfurling, they belched fire at each other, sending the tables in the main hall flying and burning into walls. Alice, Arch and Kinan began to run towards the dragon, two of them with swords drawn. As the dragons circled each other, they waited. Graelyn tried to go for her mother's neck with a bite, but the queen tried to scratch her eyes out so she pulled back.

“Now.” Alice said, and the three humans leapt into action. Arch and Alice stabbed downwards, putting their swords through the dragon's front feet, and then pulling to stab their swords between cracks in the stone floor where they stuck. Kinan leapt, and wrapped herself around the dragon's mouth, forcing it shut. Graelyn took the opportunity, and tackled her mother, holding her to the floor as she thrashed.

“Guards! Chains!” Alice yelled. The guards poked their heads in through a crack in the door.

“Don't just stand there gawking, chains!”

* * * *

Graelyn knelt as the Bishop lowered the crown on her head, and she rose up to face the crowd.

“Long live Queen Scythes!” The Bishop said, and the crowd repeated it with a fervor. Graelyn smiled over at her Lord Protector of the Crown, Archimedes, and Lord Protector of the People, Songbird. They grinned back at her. She'd used the amulet to dispel Arch's curse (after some trial and error) and it was nice to see his face. Kinan stood there next to them, also clapping, but not smiling. Then again, she hadn't seen her smile once so she didn't take it as an insult. There was more pomp and circumstance, but she finally got the chance to talk to her friends soon afterwards.

“I owe you all so much. I can't believe how much things have changed in such a short time. I hope you'll all stay here at my court, we can truly make this land a great one together.”

“You know I'll help, the people of this land need lots of things. Safety, education, basic healthcare...” Alice said.

“And I'll definitely stay to.” Arch said, “I owe you as much.”

Graelyn held her hands out, and they took them, and knelt, but she pulled them up and hugged them instead. Then she turned to Kinan.

“Won't you stay as well? I owe you the most of all.”

“You owe me nothing.” Kinan said. “You were the one who learned to master your powers. Not me. Anyways, I have other places to be. I'm a busy woman.”

“Please, reconsider-”

“I'll check back in every so often to make sure you're keeping control of yourself, and leave some dust

in case that amulet doesn't do the job by itself. But I really do need to be off. I came here to learn about you, Graelyn, and I certainly learned quite a bit. I just hope its useful.”

“Still, I'm grateful.” Kinan nodded.

“Be better than the people who hurt you.” Kinan said, and turned and began to walk away.

“We won't forget you. You'll always be welcome.” Kinan turned her head, and for a moment Graelyn thought she might smile, but she turned her head back, and walked out the door into the great beyond.



**Halloween Special:
Unwelcome in
Nightmoore**

It felt like they'd been walking through realities into different dimensions all day. Kinan had of course made very little mention of where they were going, as was her way, but as they stepped through the next portal, Arch and Graelyn gawked a little. There were big orange and black streamers up everywhere, jack-o-lanterns beaming out from every doorstep, and fall leaves all over the ground blowing lightly in a faint but ominous breeze. It was chilly, but not too chilly, but most importantly of all, there were people rushing around in costumes. Graelyn's face lit up, and Kinan looked at her expectantly, still not changing her facial expression.

"What is it."

"Its "A Nightmare Before Christmas" land!" Graelyn said like she was four.

"You mean Halloween."

"Sure whatever! Can we stop and look around at this one?" Kinan looked down at her, and somehow without moving her facial muscles in any discernible way managed to look exasperated.

"Sure. Whatever." She monotoned back.

"I mean, we can arrive wherever in time or space or reality we need to so it doesn't matter if we take a detour."

"Yes." Kinan replied, "There isn't that much to do here though. We call this reality Nightmoore."

"Excuse me," Arch said, "Graelyn, why are you excited so much? Kinan, why is it called Nightmoore and not like... Halloweentown or something?" The two of them looked back at Arch, and exchanged glances.

"Well, That's actually a really good question. Why isn't it called Halloweentown? That's what it was called in a Nightmare before Christmas." Kinan looked around at the decorations, and walked over to a stand that appeared to be selling candied apples. The vendor, a nice old lady in a witch outfit, asked Kinan how many she wanted, and she looked back at Graelyn and Arch.

"None for me." Arch said.

"But yes for Graelyn." Graelyn said. Kinan held up a thumb and forefinger, and the lady got out one apple, to which Kinan shook her head and said, "Two." The lady corrected, and handed Kinan two apples, taking one over to Graelyn.

"The long and short of it is that "Halloweentown" is copyrighted by Centro Holiday Systems in this universe." Graelyn had been about to take a bite out of her apple, but stopped and looked up to see if Kinan was joking, before finding out that she still had the same damn facial non-expression.

"Sorry, did you say Centro Holiday Systems?" Arch asked.

"Yes." Kinan took a bite out of her apple, chewed it properly, swallowed, and responded. "There are a series of towns, each one centered around a different Holiday in this reality-" Graelyn began faintly singing "this is Halloween" and Kinan waited for her to stop, which she did, awkwardly. "-and Centro Holiday Systems owns the rights to their holidays and their terminology. We refuse to recognize the enforced names of oppressive regimes as a rule of thumb. So its Nightmoore."

"Welcome to Nightmoore." Arch muttered.

"But they're about to have Halloween here right? I'd love to go trick or treating."

"Even here there is usually an age cut off."

"I've never gone trick or treating though." Graelyn said. Kinan stared at her, again.

"Fine. Lets get you costumes."

They strolled through the city streets, a man without a head riding by on a horse, tossing a pumpkin head up in the air and catching it.

"I really don't know what Halloween is." Arch whispered to Graelyn, "Why are you so excited about it?"

"Its my third favorite holiday after Incorporation day and Alexander Hamilton's birthday-- and its really similar to Alexander's birthday in that children go around dressed up in costume, only they don't go to all the banks for a free share of a company of their choice, they go to different people's houses dressed up to get Candy!"

"Huh. I mean, I guess if you're showing all the skin you guys are--"

"- you mean any, don't you."

"Well, yes, but with all the skin you guys are showing it would be nice to have a holiday to cover it all up."

"The Candy and the getting to pretend to be a different person for a few hours are the really exciting bits for most people."

"Oh, huh." Arch said. They were passed by a group of girls dressed up as what looked like the Justice league (Batman had a tutu), their feet making little clompy sounds on the cobblestone streets. Kinan led them into another business, through a clothes size scanner at the doorway, where tons of costumes lined the walls. There was every sort of costume you could imagine: Graelyn recognized ones from movies and books, brain implant stories and video games. She ran her fingers through the fabrics, feeling the contrast of the silky dresses and the rough feeling of fake plastic silk. There was everything she could imagine. Graelyn smiled back at Arch, "What are you going to be Arch?"

"Er, I don't know. This isn't really something I've thought about."

"Don't you have a character you really relate to?"

"Maybe, but I'm not sure who I'd want to dress up as them... Who was that guy you mentioned earlier? With the birthday?"

"Alexander Hamilton? First secretary of the treasury of the ancient United States of America?"

"Sure, I'll be him." Kinan looked over at the counter where a teenage girl chewing bubble gum was reading a comic book, and occasionally scratching her head through her Afro.

"Do you have a Hamilton Costume?" She asked. The girl popped a bubble, looked over at her computer monitor, and asked it. The costume's location popped up on the register, and she pressed a button. The costume lowered down from an upper rack, the perfect size (which was impressive considering Arch's larger than normal stature.) Graelyn kept looking. There were tons of characters to choose from, and she felt like she had a lifetime of costume choosing to make up for. She needed to pick a perfect one.

Graelyn looked out the window at the children walking around outside. She knew from her father had told her that Halloween wasn't originally a holiday Russia celebrated, but that with the globalization of Centro Systems, it was now a part of their yearly lives. She looked back down at the textbook on her

tablet and tried to focus. The porch light was off, so no one came to their door, but Graelyn had positioned herself so she could see through the window. It wasn't the best place for focusing, but she wanted to see the other children. There was Dmitri, and there was Katya... They were dressed as superheroes she couldn't quite place. She saw some children she didn't know who were 100% princesses.

"How is the chapter coming Graelyn?" Her mom yelled from the other room.

"Fine." She said, and got back to reading. Another Halloween indoors. Then her eyes spotted it. From the corner of her eye she saw the girl go by, and Graelyn felt her heart clench in her chest. Jealousy rose up her throat. She wanted to be her.

Her hands stopped. The black fabric in her hands was soft, and her hands trembled a little as she held it. It wasn't her size, but she drifted back through the rack till she found one that a sudden hologram projection of a cartoon jack-o-lantern told her would fit. From the next rack, she pulled off her accessories, and told Kinan to pay while she ran into the changing room. She threw off her clothes as fast as she could, and put on the outfit. She nearly got it all the way on, but couldn't get it zipped up in the back, naturally. When could she ever get it zipped up in the back by herself? She was already looking at herself delighted.

"Can someone come Zip me?" The door to the changing room opened slightly, and Kinan slipped in.

"Kinan." Graelyn said amazed, "I didn't think you'd be dressing up to."

"I thought it would be in the spirit of the thing, since you care so much about it." She monotoned. She was dressed in some sort of Japanese outfit, with her sword still in its usual place at her side. Little red lines were on her cheeks.

"You're a witch." Kinan said.

"Not just any witch!" Graelyn delighted, "Elphalba!" She held up a can of spray on green skin coloring.

"I'm not familiar."

"You know, the Wicked Witch of the West."

"Ah. The villain."

"Sort of, I mean, have you seen Wicked?"

"No."

"I think she's just misunderstood."

"Right." Said Kinan.

"Who are you anyways?"

"You don't recognize me?" Graelyn shook her head. "I'm Seshomeru."

"Who?"

"From Inu Yasha. One of the all time classics of Anime." Graelyn blinked repeatedly.

"Well, I'm glad you found a costume. Zip?" Kinan helped her get the back of the dress zipped up, and then Graelyn sprayed the dye all over her skin. It colored her skin perfectly, without leaving any residue. Hopefully it came out easily.

Graelyn emerged from the room, to see Arch in full colonial American garb, wig included. She grinned

ear to ear, and looked him up to down quite pleased.

"I read up on this Alexander Hamilton on the web while you were in there. Interesting guy. Lots of articles saying he was not throwing away his shot, whatever that means." Graelyn Grabbed her broomstick, and bustled over to his side, putting her arm around his, her skirts shifting around pleasantly.

"Then we're all ready to go. Ready to go trick or treating?"

"Of course, Elphalba."

"You knew!"

"No, I just heard you practically yell it from the changing room and looked her up also." She laughed.

"Lets get going then."

The three of them strolled around Nightmoore, checking out the plethora of Costumes. "Look there's the 16th Doctor!" Graelyn noted, "and the 15th, and the 3rd and 12th. So many."

"This is an incredible place. Did you see that house with the robotic skeleton choir?"

"Hard to miss it. Are you having fun?" she looked back at Kinan. Kinan shrugged.

"Its hard to have fun. I'm always noticing parallels. You see enough alternate worlds, the patterns seep in. I haven't spent a lot of time here, it doesn't have much strategic value to the war, I suppose I'm learning about it." Above them a black crane nearly invisible in the darkness held aloft a grim reaper with real moving wings, and Graelyn spun as she walked letting her dress swirl, and she hummed a few chords of "Defying Gravity."

They went up to the next door, and Graelyn and Arch knocked, "Trick or treat!" They said in unison. The door opened, and a man dressed up as Count Olaf opened the door and dropped some candy in Graelyn's bucket.

"Yes, Twizzlers." She said as they walked away.

"We can just buy whatever candy you want when we leave you know." Kinan noted.

"Oh, don't be a spoil sport." As if on cue, a crying child ran past.

"I did not converse with that child."

"I know." Graelyn said, and lifted her skirts up to run towards where the child came from. There were lots of kids trying to make their way around an older teen who was standing with a gang of cronies at the corner. She stopped them every so often, and her cronies would take the candy out of the kid's pails.

"Hey what are you doing?" Graelyn yelled at the girl, who turned to look at her, and Graelyn skidded to a halt. There at the corner was Graelyn Scythes, dressed as Ayn Rand.

"Oh come on." She said.

"And who do you think you are?"

"The Wicked Witch of the West." Ayn Scythes pushed her glasses up towards her nose, just as Elphalba Scythes did. They then tilted their heads to the side while raising an eye brow in unison.

"You can't take candy from children."

"The right to take is one given to the strong. It is only parasites who sink so low as to offer another lesser being the fruits they rightfully earned for themselves." Graelyn looked at her angrily.

"You're really ruining my night. I wouldn't do that!"

"Well I would, as your better." Elphalpa rolled her eyes, and then saw someone gesturing to her from the bushes across the road. She couldn't make them out clearly. Elphalpa pointed a finger at Ayn Rand. "I'll be back." Ayn Rand just laughed at her as she walked off. Arch and Kinan trailed her lazily as she walked behind the bushes, to find Alice MacLeod behind them. She was dressed as an 18th century Sans-Cullette woman from the French revolution, complete with plastic sword and striped skirts. Her head had a cloth wrapped around it with a rosette with the French tricolors pinned to it. Next to her was Jack, who was dressed as Luke Skywalker.

"I see you're also standing up to Graelyn Scythes, the big bully." Graelyn sighed, and nodded, "apparently so."

"Jack and I have been planning a sort of... Revolt against her terrorism of the kids in this neighborhood." Graelyn looked back at Arch and Kinan a bit incredulously. Kinan made no move, while Arch shrugged, a question mark appearing on his face. "Of course, it will be difficult you know. She has that goon squad around her at all times..."

"I can take them out." Kinan said.

"Wait-- you mean beat them up? No that's-- whoa hold up there."

"Sorry I just thought you were all about violent revolution."

"This is Halloween not the raiding of the palace of Versailles by the Sans-Cullette on October 5th 1789." Kinan shrugged. "Okay. Whatever."

"We have a plan though, but most of the kids are too scared to stand up to her. With your help, and your mom's help," she said pointing at Kinan, "we can surely stop this." Jack actually looked more terrified than most of the kids who were running away, but Graelyn didn't mention that.

"Lets get some apple cider while we talk this over." Alice said pointing at a cart, and they meandered over, Graelyn picked up the cup.

"I'm in." Said Arch, "I'm not that familiar with your customs, but it seems to me like taking candy from children is wrong. Probably."

"Of course I'm in to."

"Whatever my kids need." Said Kinan with the driest sarcasm that had ever been spoken in that Universe.

"Awesome!" Arch's face lit up with fireworks. "Wait," Alice continued, "Can he light up his whole body like that?"

"Of course I can." Alice grinned, "Change of plans. Lets toast to our plot then! Grab another cup." Graelyn picked up a cup from the cart and promptly crushed the paper cup on accident, splattering herself with cider.

"Oh, ugh." She could feel it all over her face. Alice and Jack were looking at her, agast. "What?" And looked down to see the cider had washed the green dye out of the skin it had touched.

"I swear you look just like Graelyn Scythes." Arch giggled.

"What a crazy co-incidence."

"Second new plan."

"What was your first plan?"

"Well, give her laxative chocolate. But this will be much better."

* * * *

Ayn Rand Graelyn Scythes shoved Batman, and she staggered back, trying to hold her tutu in place.

"I said you're giving me your candy. Its my right to take it from you. Unrestrained capitalism or whatever." The girl wiped a tear and held her bucket out, Ayn reached out to take it, and then a booming voice came from overhead.

"Is this really the true meaning of Capitalism? Ho ho ho." There was a slight silence, as though someone was correcting him, "Ignore the ho ho ho." From the sky came the glowing ghost of Alexander Hamilton.

Ayn Scythes gasped, "Its Alexander Hamilton, first treasury secretary of the ancient united states of America!"

"Ho ho ho, yes it is." Alexander said, dropping money on the crowd below. "And you've been a very naughty girl!"

"No I haven't!" Ayn yelled. "I'm observing the right of those who create to enjoy the labors of those who merely produce."

"If you know anything about me, then you know that I was all about the ability of a person to make their own life. I was one one of the few founding fathers of the Ancient United States who supported the abolition of slavery. You," he said pointing down at her, "are a corruption of all my ideals!"

Ayn Scythes looked horrified, then her face stiffened. "You're not really Alexander Hamilton, you're just some guy in a costume."

"This is Halloween, all saints day, when the veil between this world and the next is thinned. And I, the ghost of Treasure Secretary Alexander Hamilton, am here to show you your fate if you don't heed my warning."

Ayn squinted up, "I think I can see a crane up there."

"Silence! I wrote two thirds of the Federalist papers! Heed my warnings!"

Ayn Scythes scoffed, but then from the shadows at the end of the block came a shambling figure.

"Graelyn?" A hollow voice said. Ayn looked around, and her posse formed up around her. "Alexander is right. Listen to him." She saw herself, Graelyn Scythes dressed as Ayn Rand walking towards her. She took a step back. That was impossible.

"I'm here from your future. Ruin will come to you if you do not heed our warning." Her posse promptly moved behind her, real brave bunch.

"You can't be real. You're just a hologram or..." The figure walked closer, real as the day, its eyes looked hollow and sunken.

"You will suffer a fate worse than death." Ayn gasped.

"Government oversight?"

"What? Er... YES WOOO So much Government oversight!" Ayn shuddered, then straightened her spine.

"You're just wearing a spray on face aren't you? The water soluble kind right? You liars."

She grabbed a cup of cider from a passerby, and threw it on the other herself.

The other-self screamed, and the skin indeed did melt away to reveal a bloody face filled with maggots and puss. It opened its maw and leaned in towards her, bloody teeth bared. She screamed, and began to run the other way as fast as she could.

"Leave the candy you took! Hamilton commands it!" The ghost said as Graelyn and her posse ran away into the night. Graelyn pulled the bloody silicon mask that they'd sprayed her own face over off, and laughed, "We did it Alice!" Alice charged out, toy sword in hand, and cried to the crowd.

"The tyrant is overthrown! Let no one harass our candy gathering again!" To which the crowd naturally cheered for, and then left to go scrambling through the buckets of candy Ayn Rand had taken from them. Alexander Hamilton's crane lowered, and Kinan walked out from behind the controls to go unhook him from the harness.

"Two of my favorite holidays at once!" Graelyn said, hugging Arch.

"Happy HalloHamilton day, I guess."

Alice ran up to them and basically tackled them in a hug as well. "I never thought we could be free of her tyranny! Maybe we can do even more next year."

"Oh, I bet you will. Its in your nature."

Kinan moved out of the way as a kid dressed as Iron man went by.

"Are you ready to go?"

"I barely go to trick or treat. Won't it be the same time where we go next no matter when we go through the portal if you want it to?" Kinan stared stoically.

"Don't eat so much you get sick." Graelyn grinned, "Time to change then."

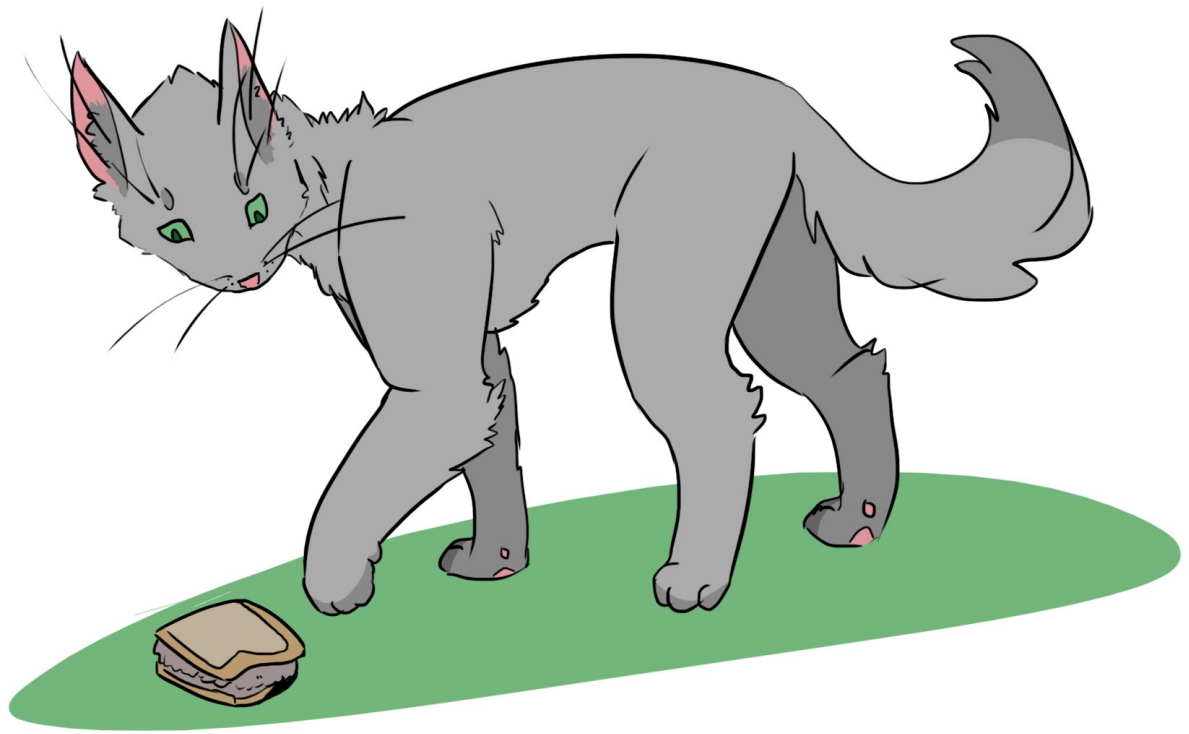
"Wait, one question." Alice whispered in Graelyn's ear, "Why is he dressed as Alexander Hamilton, it sounds like he only learned who he was today." Graelyn smirked with a shrug.

"Oh, Hamilton was my first crush. I thought it would be fun if he dressed up as him. I laid the idea out there subtly."

"You know Hamilton basically invented wall street as well as the financial--"

"Yes, look, I know you're Alice MacLeod, and that is totally the kind of thing you'd say from my experience, but he was also an outsider, a poor immigrant who suffered tons of hardships as a child and overcame them to rise to great things." She looked down at her Elphalba costume. "Misunderstood."

She thought about the other Graelyn, somewhere off in the night. "Or maybe I just need to believe they're misunderstood. Come on, lets get some candy."



The Day the Cats Spoke

**A Mister Sprinkles the Cat
and Ashlyn Oswin Adventure**

Did I die, she thought, reaching out for the stars?

Her hand was coming up from somewhere else into the sky, like the sky was somehow hers to grasp and hers alone, her fingers were constellations that really were just pinpricks of stars. She didn't have a shape, she didn't have a purpose beyond the near existence of herself. The stars winked out somewhere else, and she felt herself drown in the sea of shadows. It felt like it was a sink, like her hands were on cold metal sides and someone was holding her head down. When she clenched her hands though, she just felt the bedsheets, which shifted under her like cats adjusting their weight. She felt a light inside her, darkening her, illuminating her, pulling her this way and that way and forcing her out of herself into herself and beyond herself.

This was not an ordinary light, even though it was a dream, and she woke up. Staggering out of bed in her Uncle Sam t-shirt and knit pants, she wrapped herself in a robe, and exited her cabin. She wasn't sure why she'd chosen a ship. It was cold, and the waves rocked her. She didn't even like boats, as it turned out. But she was on one. Still, it seemed like it was important she was on one, and so she was. That was the way of things, and the Atlantic called her head to turn as she walked out onto the deck.

Ashlyn Oswin looked off the side of the ship across the endless blue of the Atlantic, of course there was an end to it somewhere. There was an end to everything. She sighed, and rested her chin on her wrist, settling into the position just as a violent blue flash erupted from ocean. Ashlyn perked up, that was certainly unusual! Scampering along the deck she looked for a way to get over to the light, which was still shooting upwards from the sea like a beacon. Finding a motorized lifeboat, she hopped over the sign that told no passengers to go inside it, and pressed the button to lower it. She got a few meters down before it stopped, and began rising.

"Oi!" she yelled up there, "Put me right back down there!"

"I'm sorry miss!" A young man's voice yelled back, "We cannot let any passengers go out to sea, its lawsuit fodder."

Ugh, they were ruining her fun, again. She thought up a lie.

"Well then get down here so there is someone supervising me! What's your name?"

"Uh, Ensign Abdul."

"Right, Abdul, you're going to raise me up, hop in this boat, and we're going to go out there together before that light dies down. Do you know what the Moscow scientific institute is?"

"...No?" Well good, because she'd just made it up.

"Its world famous you should be ashamed of yourself. Now I'm a member of it, and if they find out your ship prevented me from investigating a vertical cobalt light phenomenon, or VCLP as my friends at the institute like to call it, you'll be in big trouble! Centro has been wanting us to look into these things for years!" She could hear the Ensign talking to the captain over his radio, and then the boat finished rising, and he hopped over the side to join her. He was a scrawny thing, not that much older than Ashlyn, a fact he realized as soon as she started lowering the boat down.

"This better be good miss."

“Oh, it'll be more than good, it'll be spectacular!”

Abdul and Ashlyn made their way to the light in the small boat, Abdul navigating the waves with some real skill that Ashlyn had to admire. The light was strangely easy to look at for how bright it was, and didn't feel as warm as it should have.

“Get us in closer.” Ashlyn ordered. As they reached the light, she reached her hand out over the side of the boat, and touched the light. Her fingers sank into it like jello. “I think this might be some sort of plasma?” Ashlyn said. She actually had no idea. Looking deep into the light she saw... Too many things. She saw worlds filled with strange faceless creatures with blue skin, worlds with men who pushed through time with boxes, worlds where animals had cities... Here eyes grew wide and she felt a burst of energy surge into her arm, pulling on her. She lurched forward, and felt the light surround her, then it pulled away leaving her and Abdul stunned. Falling back, her arm aching, Abdul moved the boat back. She ordered him to take some readings and measurements. She had to at least pretend she was a scientist. The light died down in a few minutes, and the sea became still.

The light bothered her for the rest of the trip. She was fairly certain the crew had all checked that she wasn't really a scientist, but no one said anything and all she got was a bit of a cold shoulder. When she got off the boat, Abdul gave her a faint smile on the ramp, and she smiled back. Hopefully he hadn't gotten in trouble. She'd be sure to mention him positively in her travel review. Her destination, Annapolis (in the former state of Maryland), was a nice place, and she got set up there in an apartment with relative ease. She'd be back to school again in not that long, the summer was dying away, so she decided to enjoy the beach side while she could. Putting on her tennis shoes, she took a stroll along the sunny streets. Annapolis was an old town, and despite the refinements of the time, still had old style stone streets in places. She felt at home here. There was a crab shop she'd have to try, and there was a beautiful house, and passing her was a fuzzy cat.

“What are you looking at?” The cat said.

“Oh, nothing, you're just a very handsome cat.” Ashlyn replied. The cat looked at her, and kept walking “Ugh, humans. Can't even answer a simple question.”

“Well what did you want me to say?”

“You colonized Mars and you have to ask me that? Yeah, whoopty doo, I'm a cat.”

She shook her head, cats these days.

Mister Sprinkles had become accustomed to escaping. It wasn't unusual for the lights to flicker, the city powergrid was having problems and Centro was being cheap about it. When the lights did, the cages would open. It had been a problem at first, a few of the cats had decided to fight each other, and a few had had romantic rendezvous, but it had become routine at this point. The worst offenders now had padlocks, and many of the animals didn't leave their cages at all. Mister Sprinkles always left, but never got into the sort of trouble one would padlock a cage for. Like his former human caretaker, he

was curious, and exploring was his main hobby. Tonight the lights flickered, Jeff snored, and the electronic lock went out. Sprinkles nudged the door open with his nose, and dropped to the floor with a gentle plop. Getting out of the building was getting harder these days, occasionally the lady at the desk would grab him as he was leaving, or press the button to jam the automatic doors she had, but today he was lucky: she was in the back room making coffee. He didn't know this was where she was, but it suited him just the same. Slinking out the door, he sped out into the cool night.

The city was strange territory. Mr. Sprinkles was from Moscow, sure, but Moscow was a very different city, and he rarely left the apartment, if ever. Annapolis had a different smell, a different feel to the air. He couldn't describe it, and even if he could speak English he probably didn't have the depth of thought to put words to it, but it was true nonetheless.

Pitter-pattering down the street, he found a dropped falafel, which proved to be pretty tasty, as well as a chicken sandwich, which proved to be pretty tasty to (though perhaps it had too much mayo). But this night was not going to be a normal night. Mr. Sprinkles looked up at the sky, and saw the stars were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was overcast, and it would rain? The moon was clear as day however. A bright moon, full and overbearing like a crest of death.

"Mrow". He said absentmindedly, and continued to step down the lane. That was when he heard it. It was a set of footsteps, that of a man. The feet had to be in boots from the deep sound of their drops to the ground. That alone wouldn't be interesting, but there was also the sound of the pitter-patter of cat feet, and the boots were going towards that sound. Interested, Mr. Sprinkles sprinted down to where the sound was coming from, which happened to be an alley. Turning his head around the corner, he saw a man dressed in red and white striped pants, a blue coat, and top hat in all three of those colors (plus a white dress shirt with red bow tie) He looked old, but still sprightly. The kind of older man who could still chop wood and carry it back to his home without a complaint. He had a long white goatee, and equally long white hair that curled slightly at the ends. He had grabbed a cat by the tail, his eyes wide. The cat was thrashing, claws out, trying to swing at the man, but he seemed to know what he was doing and the cat never touched him.

Mister Sprinkles hissed loudly at him.

"Well well well, who are you little grey one?" He mewed, stuffing the other cat into a bag. "Uncle Sam loves kitties, come to your daddy's brother..." His hand snapped forward towards Mister Sprinkles, but he hopped backwards, and as quick as he could bolted back. He didn't understand the man, but he knew something was going on. As he ran down the street, he spotted another human, this one he knew. She was closing a door, and though he was tempted to try scratching at it, he decided that running was better. So he ran. He hadn't seen that human in over a year. She had been the partner of his former caretaker.

This was a city. But as she woke up, Ashlyn wondered if she had ever actually been here before. She'd traveled to Annapolis before as a child, she'd held her father's hand while looking up at him the way small children look up to any figure they think knows everything. Learning that wasn't the truth had been painful, but it was something every child had to do. She remembered both moments at once, like

they were the same moment, or somehow inexorably intertwined. The rise and fall of Icarus, in mnemonics. She held his hand both times, once in awe, and once nearly in confusion as he broke down crying trying to tell her that there wasn't anything the Doctor's could do. Her mother was a better person for telling that sort of thing to people, but she was too tired to fight her illness, let alone talk. Her father had been broken after that. He never really recovered, even though he remarried. In his smile she could still see a glimpse of that moment he broke down crying, and she suspected he had simply learned to hold it back.

This city was the same as that memory. It was interlinked, but not the same somehow. How was it that way? She closed her eyes and tried to make the system work in her head. Was it the cats? The idea wasn't that outrageous. After all, she'd always liked cats. What seemed odder was the view outside her window. The lights of the city had been shifted in hue, or maybe moved in waves in a slightly different way. She wasn't sure. Her uncertainty reached a climax when the cat walked across the window sill.

"Hello." She said.

"Your name is Ashlyn, am I correct in this?" The cat mewed, swirling its tail in the air. It was a rich black, and its eyes were a shining green.

"Yes, who are you?"

"My name is Salabaster. Like most cats, I didn't choose my name, so don't ask me what it means. Presumably it's a play on alabaster, but what kind of play the dramatist did not reveal. Its good to meet you, there is someone else who wants to meet you."

"Would you like to come in? ...Can I get you anything?" The cat hopped down off the windowsill.

"Thank you, a dish of milk would be superb." Ashlyn slipped out of bed, and went to the fridge. It wasn't well stocked, but she did have milk. She got out a bowl (that happened to have a cartoon kangaroo on it which moved when you moved the bowl around and charged it via a kinetic apparatus) poured milk in it, and set it down for Salabaster. He licked at the milk for a bit, and then looked up, refreshed.

"Thank you, it was a difficult climb getting up here, I was quite thirsty." It then struck Ashlyn exactly how high up she was, and how dangerous it had to be for a cat to climb along the ledge like that.

"You could have fallen! That's really not a risk you should be undertaking so casually."

"Oh, I've fallen off buildings before. Us cats can slow our fall, you know. It can still break our bones, but we're better off than you humans." She wasn't sure she believed him, but nodded anyways.

"Regardless, I come with a message: there is a cat in the city who wants to see you."

"A specific cat? I don't know any cats here."

"He thinks he knows you, but perhaps he is mistaken. He goes by the name Mister Sprinkles."

That got Ashlyn's attention. "Mister Spinkles? How could he be here of all places?" That he could be here was beyond what she could believe as chance. It seemed like an awful co-incidence, possibly literally awful.

Mister Sprinkles was the cat of her ex-girlfriend, Graelyn Scythes. The two of them had spent many hours playing with him, dangling toys in front of him to bat at, and many more hours with the cat simply in their vicinity as it went about its own business the way cats do, largely ignoring them. She'd

held a special fondness for the cat certainly, but no where near the fondness Graelyn held for him. That cat had been her lifeblood.

“What is the most important thing in the world to you?” She’d asked her, running her fingers through her hair.

“Mister Sprinkles.” She’d replied sleepily.

“Not me?” She shook her head.

“The cat is paramount.”

If Graelyn was anything, she was the kind of person to say “the cat is paramount” in casual conversation. Graelyn had cradled that cat, nuzzled its ears, kissed it lovingly on the back of the head. She adored it. If the cat was here, Graelyn was here, and she was not looking forward to seeing her ex girlfriend even if she had a nice cat.

“So where are Graelyn and Mister Sprinkles?” She asked. The cat swooshed its tail back and forth, its head tilting to one side.

“Graelyn? If this is a cat, I don’t know them. If this is a person, I know them even less.”

“A person. Mister Sprinkles’ owner.”

“Owner? No cat is owned.” Ashlyn made a vague gesture both uncomfortable and incomprehensible.

“I mean, look, you know, what I mean, the- look yes, cats are... Sorry. Okay um, Mister Sprinkles’... Human?”

“He has no human, he lives in a shelter.” That took her by surprise.

“Graelyn would never abandon Mister Sprinkles, I can’t believe that.” The cat got up, and began walking towards the window.

“Well, he’s there now. I don’t know why. The address is 1112 East Nakatomi Drive.” She put the address to memory.

“Did he ask for me?”

“Ask for you? He said for you to come. You will come, or you will not come. This is the way of cats.”

“If that is the way of cats why do they meow at you till you do what you want.”

“That is also the way of cats.” Ashlyn rolled her eyes.

The shelter was fairly nice for a shelter. The building was new (ish) the floors were clean (mostly) and as she entered in the woman at the desk gave her a smile that seemed genuine (almost).

“Hello, how can I help you today?” The friendly woman said, nearly convincingly.

“Hello (she looked at the nametag) Kaitlin, I’m here to talk to a cat.” Kaitlin looked off-put, which surprised her.

“Er, are you here for one of our animal playtimes? That’s not till 4:30.”

“No, I mean, I’m here to ask a cat some questions. You know. Chat it up! Get the juice of it.” Kaitlin looked more disturbed. “I’m not literally going to juice a cat! I mean, is that not a saying you use in Annapolis? I thought that they used that in America. They do in movies at least. Have you seen a movie? Of course you’ve seen a movie, who am I kidding. Movies, they’re a think you like, right?” Kaitlin nodded vacantly.

“Miss, uh, look, you want to look at the cats?”

“Fine, whatever, I'm sure your company has some strict guidelines on cat-discussion lingo perimeters. Yes, I would like to-- look,” she gave a gigantic wink, “at the cats. Specifically one named Mister Sprinkles.” Kaitlin looked surprised, or rather more surprised, and this time she totally sold the emotion.

“Mister Sprinkles? He's a cat here, yes.”

“Great. I'd like to go look at him. A friend, well, an ex friend, well, an ex-girlfriend left him up for adoption, and so here I am.”

“I can't imagine why she would have broken up with you.” Kaitlin deadpanned.

“Oh I broke up with her, don't worry, I'm well aware I'm perfect. So, lets not talk to cats!” She gave another big wink.

“Okay but uh, no offense, I'm going to have to monitor you.”

“Fine, fine.”

Kaitlin led her into the back, where she promptly threw the nearest throw-able object (a copy of some Murakami Novel) at a sleeping man. He bolted awake.

“I'm up! Wasn't sleeping! Did I miss anything?” Kaitlin rolled her eyes, and walked Ashlyn to a cage.

“Right, so this is Mister Sprinkles.” Ashlyn recognized him instantly.

“Hello!” Ashlyn said, leaning down. Mister Sprinkles looked confused.

“Hello?” He meowed back, and got up walking toward the cage door.

“Its good to see you again. Sorry to see Graelyn dropped you off here mate, you holding up alright?”

“No, this cage is cramped. The food is very dry. I prefer meat.” The cat paused. “I am talking to you?”

“Well of course, you act like that's not normal?”

“I don't believe I've ever talked to a human before.” Ashlyn was bewildered. Never?

“But what about all those conversations we had together with Graelyn?”

“We never talked. We can simply mew and meow and hope you heed our intent. Excuse me.” The cat itched itself. “Ah, good! That's nice. Of course, you just make nonsensical noises yourself.”

“But you can understand them right?” The cat pawed the door.

“Understand a human? No, that's never happened. This is new.” Ashlyn was puzzled. This was all very new.

“Something very wrong is going on....” Ashlyn said, “This doesn't make sense.”

“There is worse. Uncle Sam is kidnapping cats.”

“What?”

“Uncle Sam. Though I didn't know the name till now. I'm seeming to know a lot of things I didn't.” The cat paced the tight cage.

“Perhaps one of us is dreaming. I've seen and done strange things in my dreams. Gone to a city under the sea. Become a Doctor.”

“You do a lot for a cat.”

“Do I? Interesting.” Mr. Sprinkles lay down.

“Maybe I should take you home. There are a lot of things I'd like to learn about you.”

"I'm familiar with you. If you buy me the cat food that has meat, wet that doesn't crunch, I will be good with this." Ashlyn looked over at Kaitlin. "I'll take this one home please."

* * * *

Kaitlin walked the weird girl into the room, and showed her the cat. She leaned down, as if talking to a kind of short friend, and began to speak.

"Hello!"

"Meow."

"It's good to see you again. Sorry to see Graelyn dropped you off here mate, you holding up alright?"

"Meow. Meooow."

"Well of course, you act like that's not normal?"

"Meow."

"But what about all those conversations we had together with Graelyn?"

"Meow."

"But you can understand them right?"

"Meow."

"Something very wrong is going on...."

"Meow."

"What?"

"Meow.... Meooooow."

"You do a lot for a cat."

"Meow."

"Maybe I should take you home. There are a lot of things I'd like to learn about you."

"Meow."

She looked back over at her, "I'll take this one home please."

"I... Sure. Just let me get the paperwork." She shook her head. What the hell. At least the cat was going into some kind of home.

* * * *

She carried Mr. Sprinkles home in the carrying case, stopping off at a store for some litter, a litterbox, and some wet cat food. She carried it all home awkwardly, her arms feeling quite tired as she finally got into her apartment. She let him out, after she'd shut the door, and the cat spent a few minutes stretching itself out, and climbing on things it probably shouldn't. Ashlyn had to run and move a few badly placed things before he knocked them over, but that was cats.

Mister Sprinkles got up to her, and then reeled back, suddenly hissing.

"Whoa there, what's up?"

"You smell wrong. I thought you were Ashlyn, but your smell is wrong."

"Maybe I changed my shampoo, I can't control how I smell." The cat did not look convinced.

“Perhaps.”

“So, what do you mean people don't talk to cats all the time? That's normal, right?”

“I'm afraid its not.” Said a black cat on the windowsill, “And unless you are here, it wouldn't happen at all.”

“Salabaster, welcome back. I see you let yourself in.”

“Yes, you see that.” He replied, and hopped off the window towards them.

“Salabaster, you also smell wrong.”

“And I will. I'm afraid we both will. You see, Ashlyn can talk to you because she comes from a world where everyone can talk to cats.”

“Comes from? That has a lot of implications.”

“Yes it does.” The cat swished its tail.

“And the implications are rubbing off. Mister Sprinkles is after all, not usually so thoughtful. He is clever for a cat, but he cannot form language the way he is now. No cat here can. But now that you are here, he can. Does this make sense.”

“No, no it doesn't.” Salabaster sighed.

“You saw a blue light come out of the ocean, and you touched it, correct?” Ashlyn nodded.

“That blue light was a portal to another world, or more accurately, a sort of swapping point.”

“You're saying there is a version of me from this reality that can't talk to cats, trapped in a universe where people all talk to cats like normal people do?”

“Yes.” Salabaster said.

“Geez, that's got to be rough.”

* * * *

“Now, what is the cat saying?” The man in the lab coat asked.

“Meow?” Ashlyn said, confused. “Really, if this is a reality show, I'm not signing your waiver form.”

“Miss Oswin, everyone on Earth can talk to cats, from time immemorial. You don't just wake up not being able to talk to cats.”

“Uh, yeah, I kinda do, every day.”

The scientist looked over at the cat on the table.

“Meow?” said the cat.

“I'm worried to.” He replied.

* * * *

“I'm sure she'll be fine.” Salabaster said. “More important now, is what Mr. Sprinkles saw. Tell her again what you told me.” Mr. Sprinkles swished his tail nervously.

“Alright, well... Do you know who Uncle Sam is?”

“The old symbol of the Ancient United States of America? Yeah, I guess. I mean, I've seen him on t-

shirts doing a mean finger waggle telling you to join the army and blow up someone or something. Actually, I use an old t-shirt with him on it for pajamas.”

“I saw Uncle Sam stuffing cats into a bag in an alley.” Ashlyn paused.

“So, someone is dressing up as Uncle Sam and kidnapping cats?” Mister Sprinkles made a gesture she somehow knew meant no.

“No, It was Uncle Sam, the real Uncle Sam.”

“That's ridiculous. Uncle Sam is a mascot, he wasn't ever a real person, even when they made him up hundreds of years ago.”

“You forget,” Salabaster interjected, “that it was not long ago that you lived where everyone could talk to cats, and now you live where they cannot.”

“That certainly explains the weird looks from the lady at the animal shelter.”

“But if you could swap places with yourself, perhaps Uncle Sam could make this journey as well. Or just the idea of him.”

“But we already know the idea of him.”

“Do you? When you think of an idea, does it take form.”

“No, that's not how ideas work.”

“So, indulge me, what if the idea that ideas could become real could travel into this universe?” Ashlyn paused, and remembered the night she touched the light.

She had been wearing the shirt with Uncle Sam on it.

“Oh.”

“So it makes sense?”

“No, but I'm running with it.” She thought. This all seemed familiar. Oddly familiar. Then it hit her, and she scampered to her tablet, sending both cats scurrying out of her way. She pulled up a book on it, and showed it to the cats.

“I can't read you know,” Mr. Sprinkles began, before reading the title of the book, “oh, nevermind.”

“Kafka on the shore! This is plot of Kafka on the Shore by Haruki Murakami! Someone suddenly can talk to cats-”

“Except you always could talk to cats.”

“Shush, and someone is kidnapping cats!”

“Well, its not entirely the same, but its sort of close.”

“Yes, I've read it. I suppose there are similarities. But that's inevitable with stories isn't it? You tell enough, and you're bound to tell one close to another one.”

“But not necessarily one directly inspired by one. This is very close.” Salabaster did not seem swayed.

“Then it is a pastiche, playing with the tropes of established literature.”

“What if he came over from, I don't know, some world where Murakami books are real?” Salabaster was getting bored with this line of inquiry.

“Then there will certainly be alternate worlds, cats, and girl's with cute ears.” Ashlyn tucked her hair behind her simple yet elegant ear, whose perfect lines were in synch with the structure of her face more than anyone else's within memory.

“Don't you want to get home Ashlyn?” Mister Sprinkles asked, “After all, you must have friends there you wish to see again. And while we're certainly good company, we're certainly not the same company.” She considered this. It was true, if all of this was. These faces, these people, this world, they were in fact somewhat wrong. She was like a coin from another country that still worked in the vending machine. Sure, it panned out for now, but would it forever?

“So what do you two propose we do?” The cats looked at each other.

“We sleep, first of all. That is very important.” Said Mister Sprinkles.

“Agreed.” Said Salabaster.

“Then we find Uncle Sam. Perhaps he can get you home.”

“U-S-A.” Chanted Ashlyn.

They woke up early, and Ashlyn opened a can of wet cat food for each of the cats. A big day ahead for them. Ashlyn didn't normally cook, but she suddenly felt an urge to. She cracked a few eggs into a bowl, while she turned on the burner, and got out some cheese, rice, and soy sauce. She didn't have much in the way of ingredients, but it seemed a decent enough combination. The rice was leftovers, already cooked from when she ordered from a Chinese place, so she put it into the eggs to soak, then grated the cheese in it. She sifted through the fridge, and thinking of a tomato, found one, which seemed odd but she didn't question it. She cut the tomato in half, removed the part the stem attached to, then diced the halves, and dropped it into the bowl. Finally she added the soy sauce. She stirred it all up with a fork, and after melting some butter in the pan, poured the mixture in. She cooked it till the egg was solid, and then sat down to eat it with a glass of orange juice. Somehow, this seemed like the right meal to eat today, and she couldn't place why. When she had finished, wiping her mouth, the cats came up to her.

“Are you ready to go?” Mr. Sprinkles asked.

“Very much so, lets head out.”

They walked the city streets, and it became clear they really didn't know what they were looking for. One couldn't easily ask strangers if they had seem Uncle Sam, and though Ashlyn tried this, it only led to a young man with a false beard posing for the occasional photo for money. Things seemed to not be going anywhere, when Mr. Sprinkles had an idea.

“If he is a symbol of America, perhaps we can find him in a very American place.”

“This is America we're in right now you know.” Ashlyn replied.

“But is there somewhere that is more American? Somewhere that just... Screams the idea of America?” She thought hard about it.

“Wait, that uh, statue thing!”

“Columbia! The statue of Columbia! They used to call it the Statue of Freedom or the Colossus of Liberty or something, but after Centro took over they mandated we call it Columbia since less people know who Columbia is or something. But it was a big symbol of America back in the day. Its in New York, so we'd have to take a train to get there.”

Mister Sprinkles purred over it, “Isn't it over water? I'm not fond of water...”

“We can get a boat! ...In fact I know just the guy on shore leave.”

Abdul drank his juice, and looked across Central park from the bench he was on. He thought sitting on this bench, in this park he'd be able to feel something of the other people who sat on it, like he was sitting in history, here in this same park where so many famous people had been, so many lives had passed though it... But he just felt like he was a guy in a park with an overpriced bottle of juice. That was until the girl who had nearly lost him his job approached him.

“Hey Abdul. Hows the park?” He jolted in his seat.”

“Hey. What a... Co-incidence?”

“Oh, no co-incidence. I took a train here and I asked a cat to tell other cats to tell me where to find you, that tabby over there let me know.” She waved at a bored looking cat on the other side of the park.

“Uh, right. Could you please go away?”

“Actually, I need to ask a favor.”

“Nope.”

“And by favor I mean “pay in cash.”” He stopped drinking the juice.

“Okay. I'm listening.” When she was finished explaining, he sighed, and then moaned, but he didn't the thing anyways. As he usually did.

* * * *

The speedboat purred over the water toward Lady Liberty, Mister Sprinkles huddling in his carrying case to avoid it.

“Its okay, we'll be over it soon.” Ashlyn reassured him.

“But then we'll have to cross it again to get back. Maybe I'll just live on the island.”

“Shh, we'll be okay.” Abdul wasn't sure what to make of the woman talking to the two cats all the time, but he didn't really question it.

“If there are so many alternate universes, Salabaster, why did I end up in this one in particular?”

“Meow!”

“What do you mean “Narrative paramount.” That's the kind of thing English Professors tell you when they want to look like they're clever.”

“Mrroww!!”

“Yes, see, Mister Sprinkles agrees with me.”

“Hiss!”

“Well no need to get snotty about it just cause someone didn't take your side.”

“Mrow.”

“Apology accepted.”

Weirdo.

* * * *

They arrived on the island, and snuck on shore. There wasn't much security, most interest in the statue having long since faded away outside of school trips and a handful of tourists, so other than dodging a lady guard, they easily found their way inside. Abdul waited with the boat, already more than weirded out with the whole affair. The three of them climbed the stairs, needing to take a few breaks on the way, but getting the job done. As they began to get close to the crown, they could hear the distressed cries of cats, and quickened their pace. Reaching the top, they found Uncle Sam, who was busy putting a red white and blue top hat and a beard on a cat.

“Stop! Or.... Is that dangerous? Should I tell him to stop?” Ashlyn said.

“Well its certainly not comfortable.” The cat in question said.

“Oh hush.” Replied Uncle Sam. There were dozens of cats, all in carrying cases, many of them now wearing the tiny costumes.

“I'm not going to lie, I expected you to be doing something far more malicious like chopping their heads off or something.”

“Ludicrous.” Sam said. “I need these cats.”

“I really do not understand this.” Mister Sprinkles said.

“Its simple really, people have forgotten America.”

“Well yeah, I mean, it hasn't been a country for hundreds of years.”

“But I persist, you see? You know who I am, but I barely exist. I'm on the edges of your memory. What do I mean, or stand for you to you? Nothing! My time has passed. I'm just an image, an icon of ideas that are no longer narratively paramount.” Ashlyn grimaced at Salabaster.

“So why are you kidnapping us?” Mr. Sprinkles asked.

“Because you're cute. People love cats. Cats are eternal. People remember cats just because they are cats, the idea of cats translates down your generations regardless of who wrote about cats, because people just keep getting cats. You take cats to space. Do you know how silly that is? They have no natural prey there. They are wholly dependent on you for food in space. But humans take cats to space! Its ludicrous. Me, I used to stand for things. They drew me in cartoons to support whatever agenda someone wanted, I could oppose and support two sides of an issue on the same day! But what am I now? I'm your bedclothes.”

“I mean, that's not so bad, really. You're technically cuddling with me.” Uncle Sam frowned.

“You miss the point.” He pointed at a cat wearing the Uncle Sam costume. “Is that not cute?”

“Ha, yeah, its pretty cute. Let me take a picture of it--” Salabaster pawed her pants.

“That's what he wants you to do!”

“It is! I need to be relevant again. I want to exist, I want to be a symbol for something.”

“How is kidnapping some cats in Annapolis, then taking them to New York going to make you super relevant though?”

“Because people like you will take pictures of them, and then they will remember me. Or if they don't they will look me up. I just need to be remembered.”

“You could have done this without kidnapping all these cats though, that's kind of messed up, like, a lot.” He put down a tiny top hat, and sighed.

“You're right. But I don't know what else to do.”

“Look, if any of these cats want to wear the outfits, we'll let them go, but we're taking them off the ones who don't like it.” Uncle Sam sat down.

“Fair enough. But what is to become of me?”

“You are real enough, for we know of you. I can take you to a place where you can exist without having to kidnap cats.” Mr. Sprinkles and Ashlyn looked at each other.

“Excuse me, but you can take him there?”

“Well, a friend of mine can.”

“And could you have done that to get her home?” Mr. Sprinkles asked.

“Yes, I may have utterly lied about that, but I needed you to help me find Uncle Sam before he tried to become a meme. We can't have that.”

“No I suppose not.” Ashlyn said.

“And you can take me home?” Salabaster nodded.

“But, when she leaves, will I be able to talk anymore?” Mister Sprinkles asked.

“No.” Replied Salabaster. “I'm afraid when she leaves, she will take with her the part of her universe that lets her talk to cats.” Ashlyn leaned down, and smiled.

“Well, it was good to meet you a second time, Mister Sprinkles.”

“And good to meet you as well, and talk to you for the first time.” She picked him up, and felt him purr against her chest. As she did so, there was a flash, and a woman appeared in the window of Lady Liberty's crown.

“Are you ready to go Salabaster?” Kinan Jans said, leaning her lanky frame against the window sill.

“Yes, I have all the out of place people. You'll have to undo some paperwork at the pet shelter.” Kinan nodded. Uncle Sam looked up at her, she had an undercut.

“Nice hair.”

“Thanks Mr. America. Let me take you to your new home.” Kinan raised an eyebrow at all the cats with hats, and shook her head. Snapping, she threw dust in the air, and a white portal formed.

“After you.”

Ashlyn set Mister Sprinkles down, and walked towards the light.

“Oh, and someone can tell Abdul to leave with out me.” Kinan rolled her eyes and waved her on. She stepped through the portal, and the light enveloped her.

She decided something her other self would as well the next morning as she disappeared into the world she had always known before.

* * * *

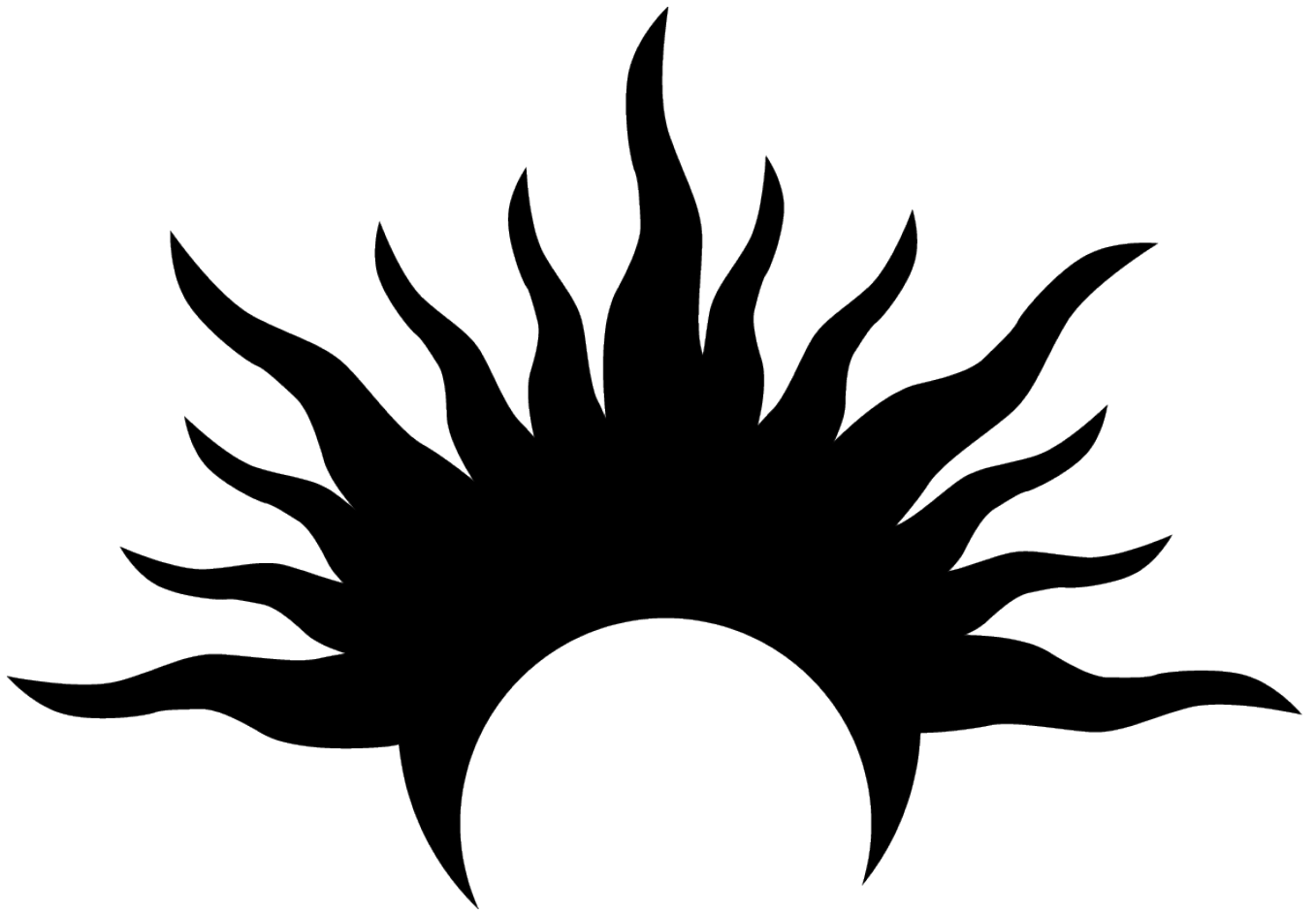
Ashlyn woke up in her bed. She'd had the strangest dream: everyone could talk to cats except her. They'd sat her in a room with cats, and tried to make her talk to them for a whole day. It was weird.

Stretching, she reached for her tablet to look over the day's news:

“Uncle Sam dressed cats at Lady Liberty spark meme, mass cat adoption.”

Well that was weird. Scrolling further, she noticed the date had to be wrong: it was a whole day later? Had she been that tired? She must have been. Getting up she nearly tripped over a litter box-- she didn't have a cat? There were a few tins of cat food over by the sink, and two dirty bowls on the floor. Frowning, she put the bowls in the sink to wash later. Had she gotten drunk and gone and bought cat supplies and then slept the whole thing off? The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like it had to be the only option. At least she wasn't hungover. Searching through the fridge she found some weird egg-rice-cheese dish she'd made (total drunk cooking, she decided) and had some for breakfast. It was good! Who knew. It tasted like it had soy sauce in it. Picking up her tablet again, she scrolled through her recent activity: she'd searched for the Statue of Liberty, Statue of Columbia, and Uncle Sam. History research? Whatever. Then she saw she'd opened a book. Opening it, she saw she had just started rereading one of her favorites: *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami.

“What if I could talk to cats? Wouldn't that be wonderful?” She thought. She began to read, immersing herself in the world of the book. It was then that she made a decision: She'd bought the food at the litter, maybe she should go to the shelter and adopt a cat. The more she thought about it, the more it sunk into her soul, and by the time she reached the next chapter, there was no turning back from the idea becoming reality.



**You're Not Wrong If
You're Right (A Jame
Morrel Story)**

She turned the cigarette off, and set it down with a clink in the period ashtray. No smoke rose from it, obviously, that would be dangerous. Jame couldn't help but think that Rachel's insistence on smoking and using the remaining aesthetic trappings of smoking was ludicrous, but whatever, it wasn't hurting anyone since they'd genetically engineered the carcinogens out of tobacco. Not that that made it at all appealing. Rachel leaned back at her desk, putting her shoes on it like she was an old gum shoe (indeed, there was actually gum on her shoe) and crossed her arms.

"I've got a client for you. Someone who needs a strong defense."

"They innocent, Rachel?"

"Are any of us really innocent, Jame?"

"Uhh, yeah. Plenty. Pretty clearly actually."

Rachel's looked either grumpy or deflated, and took her feet down, the illusion of her pretenses fading.

"You're no fun Jame."

"I'm lots of fun if you give me a decanter of whiskey and a strobe light but I actually take my clients seriously. Their lives matter, you know." Rachel waved her off.

"Fine fine... I guess that's why I wanted you specifically anyways." She wiped some stuff off a space on her desk, and pulled up a file on the surface. There was the face of a man, a scar (or series of scars) in the shape of an asterisk on his face.

"Okay, who's that?"

"Obelisk Alpha."

"You cannot be serious that that is his real name."

"That's his real name."

"Okay. Sure, Rachel."

"He's an agent from the criminal rim gang the Index, was being paid to do anti-revolutionary activities in Wabash."

"...Wabash?"

"Indiana."

"Indiana?"

"The incorporated province of Indiana, yeah."

"How many people even live in Wabash? Have I tripped over it on my way to LA before?"

Rachel silently shook her head. Lawyers. She pulled up picture's of Obelisk's arrest.

"He was found with documents related to something called 'Project Atlantis'." That stopped Jame.

They knew that name. Obviously, due to the highly classified nature of the information Graelyn had told her about it, they couldn't tell Rachel, but they couldn't hold back a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, I see you're skeptical." They weren't. They were intrigued. "He cracked under interrogation, said he was being paid by off world rebels who want to restore Centro Systems to retrieve something from this 'Project Atlantis'."

"You do realize the utter strangeness of the phrase "off world rebels who want to restore Centro Systems" right?" Rachel shrugged.

"New world order Jame. Rebels are Kings and Kings are renegades."

“I doubt many on the WRC would seriously like being called a King.” She shrugged again.

“Whatevs. Anyways, the guy is pretty clearly guilty of something. The question is if he is being tried as an enemy combatant or a traitor. It’s very hard to tell with the case. He’s lived in Wabash for five years now, but was under the Index’s pay the whole time. The WRC is still trying to decide if they should recognize the Rim gangs as governing bodies so it’s a mess.” Jame scrolled through the guy’s file on the table, and looked up incredulous.

“This case is a mess.”

“Hence why I’m asking you.”

“Just once I’d like a case that isn’t complicated.” Rachel shrugged. Jame relaxed their shoulders. They knew they were taking the case. They may as well get used to it.

* * * *

Obelisk was built like a load lifter. This wasn’t even that much of an exaggeration: he literally had parts from load lifters in his arms, including nubs on his forearms that were meant for boxes to clip onto. He looked tough, but Jame had met a lot of tough folks, and she could tell the different types. Obelisk wasn’t the cutthroat kind of tough, he was the “work 14 hours a day because I have to” kind of tough. He was strong, both mechanically and muscular, he had scars, but not from fights. They were the kind you got from box cutters and warehouse mishaps. The guy could be a spy, sure, but he wasn’t the kind who would be trying to shoot his way out of a situation. Still, the WRC thought he was dangerous enough she’d gotten her very own body guard: a gum popping girl in a red beret and black vest over the usual olive-beige uniform with red highlights of the revolution. She had short blonde hair, and a constant aire of being way too peppy about the whole affair. Her nametag said she was called Shona. Still, Jame could tell she’d killed people.

A newbie would think Obelisk was the dangerous one, Shona a little angel. She knew instinctively only one of them had taken lives, and she was obnoxiously humming “Holla Back Girl” a classical pop song from hundreds of years ago.

Jame slid into the seat across from him. He was silent.

“So, you’re a traitor to your planet huh? Selling off details to the Index, and doing dirty work to undermine the revolution.” He didn’t meet their gaze. Gears rotated in his arms. “So what I want to know, first off, is are these allegations true? See, I’m your lawyer. Or rather I’m gunna be your lawyer, maybe.” He finally looked at her. His metal eyes zoomed in on her face, then his gaze widened and he looked at Shona.

“Who’s she?”

“Extra muscle. So come on, give me the juice, bluce.”

“Bluce?”

“I don’t actually know what it means or if its a word, but it rhymes with juice.” He nodded, sure. He rubbed his metal arms with their oposite metal hands.

“Look, uh, you probably shouldn’t take my case.”

“Cause you're guilty?” He looked away.

“That's what I thought.” They set their arms down on the table. “But that doesn't mean I can't get you off.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Aren't you supposed to like...”

“Defend my client's? Of course. See, the thing is, I won't like for you either. You say you're guilty, boom, you're guilty. But I'll fight tooth and nail for a lower sentence. See, the thing here is that while you're guilty I'm not sure you're guilty in the way people want to think you're guilty. So like, you're guilty, but not guilty-guilty, you feel me?” He clearly did not feel them. Neither did Shona. “Okay uh, think about it this way. You admit you were selling off this stuff to someone off world right? The stuff you're selling, 'Project Atlantis' details, that's the funny bit. I read up on Project Atlantis. Some bro named John Aril was trying to start an underwater city years ago before he recently got kicked out a window. The project didn't work out, so the reason that people off world want it has to be something we don't know about. You tell me, I can probably get you a plea deal.” He shrugged.

“I don't know why they want it, honest. They just paid me.” Jame played with one of the piercings in their lip.

“Why Wabash to? Wabash isn't exactly the trade capitol of the world.”

“That's where the files were kept. It was supposed to be out of the way, but not too out of the way, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Well that's what their guy said?” Jame raised an eyebrow.

“Their guy?”

* * * *

Jame made Shona join them on the flight over to Wabash. Shona didn't really want to go, but there was no way in hell that Jame was gunna go to another continent to try to confront a mysterious person trying to steal documents from another planet without back up. Their only regret was that Shona used this opportunity to try to show them pictures on their phone during the entire trip, many of which involved animals wearing hats.

“That ones a Zebra! Its got a crown!”

“Yes, Shona.” Jesus. Eventually the vtol landed mercifully in Wabash. The city was a generic city in the American Midwest as far as Jame was concerned, but Shona seemed to find it fascinating. They stopped for lunch at some sort of local diner, and Jame found the address of the building Obelisk had broken into.

“So what's your plan, Jame?”

“We break into the building.” Shona lowered her sandwich from her mouth.

“What's your real plan.”

“You break into the building and I follow you.”

“Okay, this isn't what I signed up for.” Jame shrugged.

“Then stay here.”

* * * *

Shona didn't know how to pick a lock, and wasn't strong enough to break a lock, so Jame just called a locksmith and said they were some official from blah blah blah who needed some documents for some WRC blah blah blah and they popped the lock for them. Easy. The room was filled with filing cabinets, hard copy documents that couldn't be hacked or copied easily.

“So what's the plan now that we're inside?” Jame went over to a file cabinet, flipped through it, grunted as they looked at something, pulled the file out, and then looked around for a chair, and sat down. They pointed to another chair, nearby but out of cat picture range.

“We wait for someone to come arrest us.”

“Wait what?”

* * * *

Miles away, he got the call.

“Sir, uh, we've had another break in at the Wabash facility.” He cursed.

“Well take care of it then.”

“Sir, one of them is a WRC soldier.” He cursed louder.

“I'll be right there.”

* * * *

Jame had fallen asleep when Shona nudged them awake.

“Someone's coming.” The door opened to reveal a group of soldiers, led by World Revolutionary Council Member Ian MacLeod, Alice MacLeod's uncle. He crossed his arms.

“I'll give you ten seconds to explain why you've broken into a top secret records facility.” Jame stretched their arms up, and scratched themselves.

“I'll give you ten seconds to tell me why you have Centro secrets in here.” He sighed.

“Because the WRC is in charge of this planet now, not them now if you-”

“And why you're selling those secrets offworld.” There was a silence. They looked back and forth between each other.

“Excuse me? Do you know the implications of what you just said?”

“Do you know the implications of selling details on ex-living Centro Director John Aril's plans to Ariadne Moore on Europa are?” Shona looked shocked. Ian looked surprised.

“What?” He said, probably saying too much.

“Surprised?”

“You're making that up!”

“Then tell me I'm wrong.”

“You're... Wrong.” He obviously lied. Jame smiled.

“It was pretty obvious. I mean, I wasn't sure exactly why till I looked at the file, but I knew it had to be true. You were awful sure Graelyn was guilty. Your own niece wanted her off the hook at her trial, and there you were all pompous and braggarty, ready to throw her to the dogs. And how did Ariadne Moore get out of New York during the siege? How did she obviously influence decisions going on here? I mean, I'm not a rube I've played this game for a long time Ian. But what's in this folder? Even more surprising...” They flipped through it, smiling. He scowled.

“What do you want?”

“My client Obelisk Alpha is taking your fall. Get him off the hook.” He was angry, good.

“Done.”

“That's the main bit, but now I need to know... Why shouldn't I still turn you in? I mean, I have a ton of evidence here.” He looked at his armed guards, “And if you kill me, it goes public no matter what. So Ian, you scoundrel, me and Shona here are sitting here patiently, and we want to know why you should, of all people, get off here.” A bead of sweat rolled down his face, he looked uncertain.

“I'm waiting.”

“I've-- I haven't given her everything, I still have information she needs to do anything.”

“And?”

“And I'll turn it over to the WRC.” Shona smiled, and looked over at Jame, who nodded.

“Good. I expect you will. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to see if there is anything interesting in Wabash.”

“There isn't.” He spat.

“I'll let Shona be the judge of that. Come on.” As they left, Ian heard Shona get excited when she saw a passing dog. He rubbed his temples. He needed an out here.

* * * *

Alice sat watching Jim and Annie tinker with her armor. She'd taken out a terror ring yesterday, and it had gotten a bit dinged up. Nothing they couldn't fix. Then there was a knock on the door. She rose to get it, tapping the activator. On the other side was her Uncle.

“Uncle Ian! What a pleasant surprise! Have you met Annie and Jim?” The pair looked up from their work briefly to wave in unison, and then returned to it. He awkwardly waved back.

“Alice, I uh, I brought you something, for your eyes only.” He pulled a manilla envelope out of a bag, and set it down in front of her.

“What's this Uncle Ian?”

“This, this is the key to our future, which I just dug out of a Centro archive.” He flipped it open. Her eyes went wide.

“This... These are the plans to the machine that brought Graelyn here from her world to ours.”

“Yes. Only it never worked in our reality, for some reason.” Annie and Jim were clearly listening while

trying not to listen.

“If we could get this working....” Alice looked over at them. “Well then, I think we might have a new project in our spare time.”



A Christmas Meh Raconteur

Shona ducked back down behind the chunks of concrete she was using as cover just as a round of bullets went right where her head had been. That was close. Looking down, Shona saw a bag of cheese curls, and using her combat knife to open it, stuffed a handful in her mouth before ducking back up to pepper their opponents with fire.

"You know, Shona, that's really gross." Shona ducked back down, looking at Chantelle, cheese curls hanging out of her mouth. She chewed and mostly swallowed.

"What's gross?"

"Oh my God, those cheese things. They have to be stale."

"They're not super stale. Just sorta stale." Shona shoved another fistful in her mouth, before reloading, and popping up to fire again. Chantelle didn't pop up to fire again, she just stared at Shona, a sour look on her face. Jack came barreling towards them, crouched.

"Chantelle, we have to keep up the fire."

"Sorry Jack, just uhhh." She pointed at Shona. He looked at the bag, and looked up at her.

"Gross. Shona, stop trying to get an infection." Shona looked at him, mouth once again full of puffs.

Jack cursed and grabbed the bag ("noo!!") and chucked it over the side, where it got shot into bits.

Shona watched sadly as the exploded stale snack food rained down as orange dust. "Songbird will be flying in momentarily, we just have to keep them occupied till then." Jack said, then popped up, firing at the edge of the enemy hold out, just in time to see someone change their mind about trying to slip out. As this happened, Songbird shot across the sky, dodging fire and rockets, and slipped down to land seamlessly next to Jack.

"What's the status?" Her modulated voice said from the suit.

"We've got the Centro sympathizers penned in. There's no way out at this point." She nodded.

"So we're rushing them or waiting it out."

"Looks like."

"Maybe we could get Trevon to blow a hole in their fortification, that might force their hand to fight or surrender." Chantelle suggested. Songbird nodded again.

"That's a good idea. He'll need lots of covering fire though."

"Yi will be back with more ammo soon." Jack said, "Gerald is up on that mound with a sniper rifle, when she's back we should be more than ready. Songbird's armor slid up over her face, revealing the Alice beneath.

"Well then, I guess its time to wait." Naturally, their foes chose this moment to open fire again. And in unison, Shona and Jack popped up to fire, ducked down, and Chantelle popped up to fire again.

"Hey, hey do you think if we were dinosaurs we'd be like, really small ones? Like I can't imagine being a really big dinosaur can you?"

"Shona we're trying to kill people." Alice said.

"Sorry boss."

"Wait though, like do you think we'd be herbivores or carnivores?" Jack said. Alice shook her head. Shona rubbed her chin.

"Well, humans are omnivores." Something exploded.

"But what dinosaurs were omnivores? Like, I get the feeling they were the tiny ones."

"Like, the size of a dog?" Jack asked.

"Yeah!"

"So you could kick them?" Shona said as she unloaded at the encampment. Someone cried out in pain, hit.

"Whoa, I would not kick a dog."

"But what about like, a dinosaur sized dog?"

"Shona, Jack! We are literally shooting people right now!" Alice yelled. Yi and Trevon arrived, and Yi passed out the new ammo.

"I'm out of 9mm, did you bring any?" Chantelle asked.

"Sorry, I didn't, but you can have some of mine!" Yi said cheerily. Looking at his watch, Jack sighed.

"This is gunna be a siege isn't it. We're waiting them out. I just want to get home before Christmas." Alice paused, "I forgot it was Christmas soon."

"Well you already celebrated the Solstice, I'd expect you'd forget."

"It's more like I've been so focused rooting out these insurgents I nearly forgot my own holiday till Shona asked when the party was." All eyes turned to Shona, who was firing again. She looked back, finally, like a deer in headlights.

"What I like parties? Well, small parties. Well, I like buffet tables and those coolers with free drinks in them. Well--"

"Okay anyways, we're gunna be here a while. How should we pass the time?"

Chantelle tapped her cheek, and then replied, "Story time. Lets just all tell something about ourselves, not about the war, something else. Get Gerald down here to."

"Sounds good to me." Yi said. Alice nodded.

"Works for me, someone go get Gerald." Jack grumbled, like someone had volunteered him, as went ahead and moved to go get Gerald. When they returned, Alice asked, "Okay then, who will start?"

"I've got a story," Yi said, "Not too exciting, but well, its a story."

Yi's Story

"When I was nine, my mother got on this weird 'from the Earth' food kick. You know, she was one of those people who wouldn't eat anything that was printed or vat grown, even though it was healthier than the 'natural' stuff. So we had to sit through all these days of going to the farmers market, and picking out food to eat. Which wasn't so bad, the farmers themselves were pretty nice, even if the food wasn't always great, and it was annoying we couldn't always just pick out whatever we wanted and print it out. But I digress. So, long story short, my mom started packing my lunches. Now this was a very confusing thing for the Centro Schools, as no one had brought their own lunch in that district in over a hundred years. But there I was taking out an apple, and a peanut butter and jam sandwich, and all the kids just staring at me. The principle actually took me into his office and awkwardly and redfacedly tried to give me a lecture about my wrongdoings, while also making it totally clear he had no idea why he was, in fact, angry. They sent a letter home to my parents, who sent back a picture of their Gold-Level Centro Citizenship, which proved they had more cash than the principle, and he had to back down. So I got to keep eating my lunch, and even though it didn't taste as good and was mighty inconvenient, guess what? All the rich kids started bringing their lunches. Suddenly, the farmers market was filled with my classmates parents, who had to shop there for social standing reasons. Some of them bought food there, and then printed what they wanted and boxed it up at home pretending it was what they'd gotten at the market. When it became popular, my mom lost interest, and I went back to getting school lunch in a much shorter lunch line."

They all laughed, and they heard some gunfire from the enclosure, which seemed a bit confuse they weren't shooting back.

"I'll go next." Jack ventured.

Jack's Story

"Okay, Alice has heard this story, but its a good one. I used to have a job hover-biking handmade stained glass between this guy's art studio, and a church that was being renovated. It was tough, not everyone is good enough at flying to get the job done quickly without damaging or breaking the glass. I was, so for a brief time it was pretty good pay. One day though, things went wrong. Like a lot of couriers, I kept the engine running. I was in a hurry, and there was just no point turning it off, especially since the bikes were all insured and protected by a mob-run company that rented them out

just for that purpose. They took a cut of the check, but if anyone took your bike or your product, they'd never see the light of day again. Most of us considered it a fair trade off, if kind of creepy and brutal. Thing is, all the bikes looked the same. So one day, some guy parks his bike by me, and I rush in to get the plates, put them on the bike, and then get called in for something else, I don't remember what else. I come back out, and there is only one bike, engine running. So I hop on, and drive to the church. I open up the crate when I get there to see that nothing is busted, and well, there was a puppy with a bow on it's head and a tag that said "For my lovely daughter, Annabelle".

"Wait- did you say a puppy?" Shona cut in.

"Let him finish!" Alice said.

"It was a cute lil thing, and I realized what had happened, so I called the company and told them what happened. The guy on the phone told me to drive to this big sky scraper, which I did, and take the package up to the top floor. I was very out of place there, it was very... Posh. Lo and behold, on the top floor was the head of the mafia corporation, yelling at the other courier with my box of glass plates on the table. I politely gave him is box, and he thanked me, gave me a tip, and told me to never speak of this to anyone. Naturally I told Alice ten minutes later, but still, that's the time I accidentally delivered a puppy to a mob boss."

Everyone was a bit slack jawed, which allowed Alice to give a small lecture on how the Mafia had become a subsidiarity of Centro systems like everything else, which was pretty weird come to think of it.

"I've got one." Trevon said. "Nothing like that, though."

Trevon's Story

"When I was a teenager, there was this boy I was all about. He had that real kind of manly stubble, though in hindsight that was basically as far as he could grow it out without looking weird. So, there was this big dance coming up, and I decided to invite him. But, I was pretty shy, so I decided the only way I could make sure he noticed me was to make it a big event. I set the whole thing up, I got my friends to set up this big thing where they'd come marching around where he always left the school to go get lunch, and they'd break out in this big dance routine, and unfurl a banner that said "Will you go to the Winter Ball with me?" While I stepped out from behind a tree with flowers. All set, good to go. We even did a dress rehearsal at night. That's when it all went to heck.

We get there, we set up, and he comes out, and bumps into another guy, someone I'd never seen before. Turns out he was from another school there for a swim meet. They start talking. They keep talking. We're all set up, waiting, and they start flirting, laughing. They lightly touch each other. Their eyes are glittering, and he turns around with the guy and goes back into the school. My friends and I are just standing there dumbstruck. So, I'm near tears, everyone's confused, and then this other kid, I don't know him, comes out of the school and my friends are just like, "Whatever, we're doing this, we're here, why not." So they jump out in front of this guy, do their dance routine, and I step out with flowers, and the kid is so confused, but he takes the flowers, and that folks is how I met my husband."

"You're kidding." Yi said.

"Nope." Trevon said, "I've got it on hologram to. Its something to see."

"That's amazing, Tre." Alice said, smiling.

"I guess I can go next?" Gerald said. Another explosion. Someone yelled something from the building. More gun fire, this time sporadic, unfocused.

Gerald's Story

“My dad was a cook. You have to be really stellar to be a cook, you have to be able to offer something on par with a machine that can replicate the best chef's in history by programming. So the guy had a lot of pressure. My dad was cooking for some hotshot lawyer, not really a big deal, but thought he was, and the guy was backseat cooking. In the end, the food my dad made while following the guy's instructions was terrible, but he had to serve it. Still, if he served it, he'd be blacklisted, no one would want to hire him again. But if he didn't serve it, same thing. So he came up with a plan. I went out into the room where the guests were, and served them up wine. When I stopped by each guest, I asked, “Since its such a rare delicacy, are you aware of the proper wait to eat Rathi stew?”

“Why of course!” Every guest would answer, insulted.

“Oh good. We just want to make sure. Only the most refined palates can enjoy the taste of it, and we knew that eating it the improper way ruins the subtle flavor. Of course, you would know.” They'd of course get to be angry at the nerve of us, but when the time came for the terrible over salted under spiced food to be served, they were all ecstatic. Several asked to thank the chef personally. It was a good day.”

There was once again laughter, this time punctuated with an awkward silence from the compound.

“My turn.” Alice said.

Alice's Story

“I'll keep mine short. Once, in high school, I tried to dye my hair a deeper red. Like, revolutionary red. Unfortunately, I didn't know about how chlorine could affect hair dye, and we had mandatory swimming lessons that week. So I went into school with hair as red as the flag of Mars, and came out with bright green hair. Until I dyed my hair back, I actually told everyone I had dyed it green to show my support for the environment, trying to make it look like I hadn't just radically messed up. I ended up being forced to join a march for environmental regulations, which I totally supported, but I didn't know enough about to actually fit in at, so I just stayed quiet there and tried not to get noticed. Naturally, a reporter tried to interview me, and on the news I went, green hair and all, with the amazing statement, “I love the environment, and we should do things to make things better, and stuff.”

Which was actually my verbatim quote, gods help me.”

More laughter. A few puzzled shots from the compound.

“I've got a good one.” Chantelle said.

Chantelle's Story

“I used to paint, a lot. Not because I was good at it, but because I liked it. I'm not an artist like Annie, I'm just a hobbyist. I can't even paint people well. In fact, usually, I painted the same thing. There was a river by where I grew up, and it had a bend in it. I used to sit on a hill overlooking it, and paint the bend. I'd paint it in different seasons, on different days, in different weather. It wasn't the only thing I painted, but I painted it a lot. There I would sit, a hat on my head, watching the weather change the world, and the only thing that didn't change was the old woman. Every day she would arrive at 10 AM, and start knitting. She'd eat lunch at noon, and then keep knitting till 4PM, when she'd take what she'd finished, and hang it on a tree. I would always wait for her to leave, and then see what she knitted. It always varied. Sometimes it was baby blankets, sometimes it was tiny sweaters or socks. They were never there in the morning. So I waited one night, and just stayed to watch. A woman came, took what was hung on the tree, and left. The next day, the woman came back, so I asked her why she knitted these things. What she told me amazed me.

“When I was growing up, people thought I was a boy. Luckily, I got the money for the surgery and replacement organs to remedy that. When I got pregnant with my first child with my husband, oh, it

was a joyous time for me. But my family, well, they were jerks. They had essentially disowned me at that point, and even though I had all the things I needed for my children, my siblings got hand knitted garments from my mother, but I didn't. I hated that. After Johnny passed away, I had a lot of time on my hands, and I realized I could do that for other people. I could be the grandma for people's children, whose grandmother's didn't want them. So every day I come here and knit something, and there's an online group who chooses who gets what. I'm just glad I can give a baby a hand knitted blanket.' I thought she was wonderful, and gave her one of my paintings. We even started eating lunch together. Still, one day she passed away, and the knitting stopped. It stopped for two days. On the third, a woman and a man came together, and each started knitting. They hung their work up on the tree at the end of the day, and came back the next morning. I gave them each a painting. Soon, others came. I gave them a painting to. Eventually, people who didn't even know the old woman came, and I gave them paintings to. I didn't stay there forever though. I moved on, and someone else took up painting the river. Now, its called the Riverbend Club, and they've started a home for homeless mothers and fathers. Every member gets a painting of the Riverbend. Not all of them know why anymore. But that's how it goes, our stories go on without us."

"That's amazing." Alice said, in wonder, "What an amazing woman, what an amazing group."

"They really are." Shona agreed.

"Why don't you go next Shona?" Alice asked.

"Oh, I don't think I can follow that up."

"Give it a try Shona!" Yi encouraged. She smiled, and had a go.

Shona's Story

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a young woman rode her dinosaur over the prairie. Suddenly- there was movement. Her dino-mount turned its head at let out a roar to note the Halzi clan was coming over the blue grassed hill.

'Halt strangers.' The woman said, 'Where do you come from?'

'We bring word from King Punelia, the Last Ordinance has been obtained.'

The woman narrowed her eyes, this was worse than she thought."

"Shona, we're telling non-fiction stories."

"Oh. Sorry." She thought for a moment, and her face soured, but she began to speak.

"The last day I spent with my dog was the best day I spent with my dog. He was old. We used to run in the park together, but his heart couldn't take it anymore. He'd lived far longer than a dog should live, and had all sorts of treatments, but there is just a time, you know? We had to carry him to move him poor guy was in so much pain. It was Christmas Eve when we put him down. We spoiled him that day, and he lay with his head on my lap, and I stroked his head. He got to eat all sorts of tasty treats, an open his Christmas presents early. After we got out of the clinic, I cried by a tree for twenty minutes, but then I stopped, and looked up at the stars. I thought about those stars, some of them were actually planets, and people had dogs on them to. There were parks with people and lives in them, and they were living their lives. My dog Charlie had been a good boy, and I'd loved him, but he loved life, and living life was what I should do. Even when it looks silly, life life. Even when people make fun of you for it, as long as no one is hurt, enjoy yourself. I know it sounds silly, cause it was a dog and not a

person, but I really felt that. I still feel it. I looked up in the sky and saw life in the starlight, and my dog was somewhere up there, and I went home and enjoyed my Christmas.”

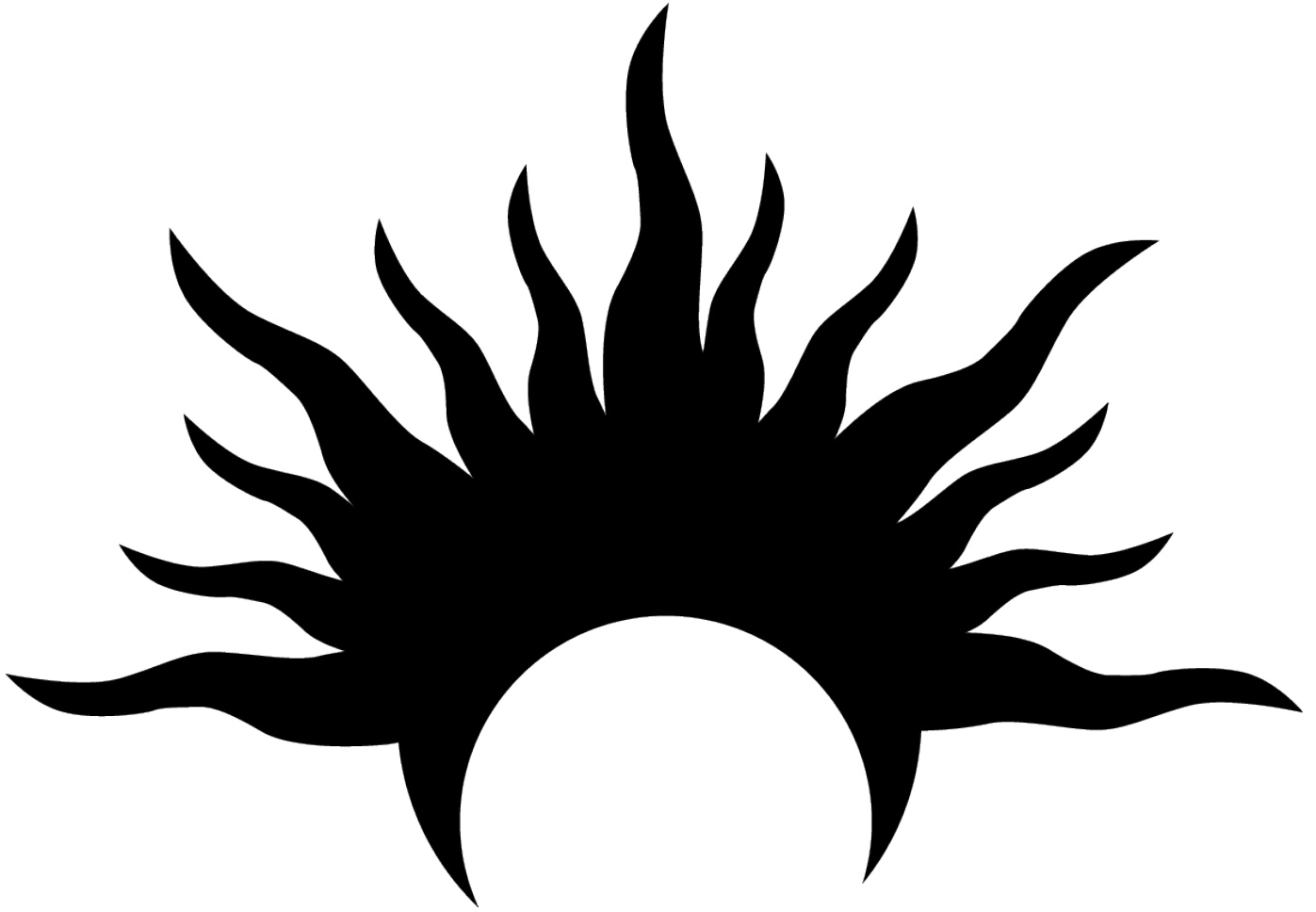
Chantelle smiled, and put a hand on Shona's shoulder. She smiled back.

“Hey, you, World Revolutionary Council Army?” A voice yelled. Cautiously, they popped their eyes over the side. “Look, we know you're planning something, you haven't been firing back, so we'd like to surrender if its all the same to you?”

“Sounds great!” Alice yelled back. “Lay down your arms, and Merry Christmas.”

“And a Happy New Year.” Jack added.

As the enemies filed out, the squad led them back to the base for processing, and giving each other hugs, went their separate ways for Christmas. They went home to families, loved ones, and sometimes each other. But the stories stuck with them, and when they met again, their hearts were filled with starlight.



And a Star Spins Dark

World Revolutionary Council Prison, Songbird's World.

Tuesday.

Out of a cardboard sleeve, and a thin paper one inside that, Graelyn pulled out a black disk.

"What is that?" Arch asked.

"It's a Vinyl record." Graelyn replied, "Specifically David Bowie's album Blackstar."

"Do you like it?"

"Well, his next one was better."

The prison didn't let the prisoners have digital music devices, as more than one person had managed to use the components to cause havoc or attempt a breakout, notably one hacker who'd set all the intercoms to play the famous ballad "Never Gunna Give You Up" for ten hours. Instead, they had a library of Vinyl records, complete with a turntable that was as analog as they could make it. Graelyn flipped the disk around in her fingers, and set it on the spindle.

"Did you ever listen to Bowie, Arch?" He shook his head.

"Not till I met you." She picked up the needle, and put it down on the groove.

"Do you think they named dancing along to music 'groove' first, or the notch in a record?"

"What's a record groove?"

"It's the thingy that the needle moves across to create the sound on the record." She held the record up to him. "Take a scan of it, I'm sure your brain can figure it out." His eye flitted over it, measuring the depth of each groove. His processors went into motion, and his speaker started playing the first notes of the song.

"Shh! I'm about to play it."

"Sorry."

The record started.

"Wait, what is a Blackstar?" Arch cut in, after the first track ran for 10 minutes. Graelyn stopped the record.

"Well, what do you think it is?"

"I mean, that's like a classroom teacher question."

"I'm great with kids."

"That is literally the opposite of what you have told me literally every other time I have brought that up." She rolled her eyes, and leaned on the wall next to the record player.

"Fine, I'm a bad teacher. But my annoying question still stands." She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows.

"Well, Bowie certainly lists off a lot of things he is not, while still being a Blackstar."

"See, context clues!"

"Please, no."

"Fine." She picked up the album cover, looking into the star on its front.

"David Bowie was a huge star, I mean, they even founded a religion about him on the Rim and on Mars, if you can believe that." Arch tapped his head.

"I can believe a lot. People are weird. Especially you skin-showing folk."

“That’s still most people Arch.” He shrugged.

“Anyways, he did it by being different. He broke the norms, he was bisexual when being that meant it lowered his opportunities.”

“Didn’t they pass laws against that in this alternate reality?”

“Well yeah, but they also had a communist revolution here, so...”

“Ah, well, continue then.” Graelyn held up the star to Arch.

“He wasn’t like other stars. He shone in a way he wasn’t supposed to, but he still shone, and he gave people hope who were hidden. A star that shone into the murkiest depths, of hidden identities, of ways of just being alive deemed horrors by the bigoted. And he did it through rock and roll. That’s pretty nifty.”

“You just used the word nifty to describe a guy you said they have a religion based on him on Mars.”

“I apologize for nothing.”

The cell, despite the best intentions of a benevolent alternate reality revolutionary communist government, was really cold. Graelyn curled her toes up, and then her knees up to her chest, pulling her blanket around her tight. Still, she shivered. That was when she heard the noise. She bolted up, reaching in the dark for something to threaten the breathing coming from inside her cell that wasn’t her own. All she had was a hard rubber spoon, so she used that, while fishing for her glasses with the other hand. As her eyes actually gained the ability to focus, she made out the figure in the darkness. He wore a black frock coat, and his white sleeves popped out from the edges. The hands attached to them moved rhythmically on the walls, as though searching for a hole in them. His hair was sticking up with gel. He looked old. His eyes were covered with a rag, buttons sewn over the eyes.

“How did you get in here?” She said loudly.

“Baby girl, you’re dreaming.” He said, stroking the wall.

“Who are you?” She got up, the blanket wrapped around her like a cloak.

“The name is the greatest pop star in the history of the universe.” Graelyn lowered her spoon.

“Wait, David Bowie? You’re like... Well, you died several centuries ago. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” He turned around, his hands clenching the wall.

“Like I said, its all a dream. Just like the movie makers when they run out of plot threads.”

Graelyn examined him closely, “Wait! You’re Blackstar era Bowie! With the button eyes, and the....” She mimicked his weird movements, “you know the thing you do with the stuff. I mean, I liked your next album better, but still.”

“You’re very articulate.”

“I’m a scientist not a songwriter.” Bowie nodded, and flashed his teeth. “So, what gives me the honor of a dream visit from a rock god turned weird Martian/Rimward pseudo diety?”

“Just a reminder for you babe, that you’re not what they make of you, you’re what you are.”

“Does that mean something?”

“You’re a Blackstar.” She sat back down on the bed, pondering with the spoon pressed to her chin.

“They want to execute me here, you know, for being myself.

“Their loss.” He threw up his hands as if in hallelujah, “Minding the minds, when they couldn’t mind at all,

taking control when you were always who you are.”

“I’m a Blackstar.”

“You’re a Blackstar.”

“But what does that mean? I could die here, just explain it.” Bowie sat down next to her, crossing his legs and looking into her eyes with his buttons.

“I died to you know. I was no god, just flesh and blood.”

“Yeah, but you were a flesh and blood marvel!”

“That’s the joke, moonbeam, you’re just a flesh and blood marvel to.”

Graelyn was delivered her clothes for the trial. She’d picked them out before hand from a giant selection Manuel had given her. She had to have a guard there when she got changed, so Shona, from Songbird’s squad, stood in the room with her, awkwardly looking at the room’s upper Northwest corner as she got out of her clothes. Hesitating, Graelyn walked over to the record player, and put the needle back on, blowing a bit of dust off it.

“Music?” Shona asked oddly.

“It helps me relax. Helps give me a reminder.”

“What kind of reminder?” Graelyn smiled.

“That I’m a Blackstar. I’m not a gangster.” Shona gave her a weird look, and then looked back up at the corner embarrassed.

“Still not sure I get the whole Bowie thing.”

“Its like turning on an old friend.”

“An old friend? You never met him and he’s been dead for centuries.”

“He’s keeping us company long after he turned to dust, what more could you ask of a friend?”

"Something happened on the day he died

the spirit rose a meter, then stepped aside.

Somebody else took his place, and bravely cried:

'I'm a Blackstar! I'm a Blackstar!'" -David Bowie, Blackstar

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