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# 10,000 DAWNS



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# **Chapter 0: the Application**

The Universe began in chaos. Matter exploded outward, clumped together, tumbled off, and over a timescale nearly unfathomable formed the space we all live in. Through all of that, order formed, and order was the thing that kept the universe from falling into the anarchy of creation. In the grand scheme of things, there was no form of order more stern and heroic in its unwavering necessity for precision than the human invention of the Internship Application.

This particular internship Application was being filled out on an old maglev monorail that was old when other trains people called old were still sucking on their pacifiers on the assembly lines. The form was in the hands of a girl with black hair tied back in a pony tail in a blue skirt and suitjacket who gave off the distinct impression she'd worn a different copy of the same outfit yesterday. She shoved her glasses towards her nose, and tried to follow along with the instructions:

Welcome to your application to Project Atlantis, a subsidiary of Anubis Corp. Simply complete this short questionnaire of 270 questions, as well as your personal information, four recommendations, and a cover letter, and you'll be all set to-

She sighed. 270 Questions? She wasn't above putting in a little elbow grease, but the number seemed a bit excessive. She tapped in by rote her personal info, as well as the contact info for her recommendations, and began the long questionnaire. Whatever they needed to feel safe and secure, she supposed.

1. What would your reaction be if you found yourself unexpectedly drowning and being crushed by unsurvivable pressure?

Graelyn wasn't sure what she was expecting on the application, but it wasn't that. She held the tablet up to her mouth, and bit it lightly, as though the infantile gesture would help her think. It did, apparently, as she quickly tapped in the answer, "Die." May as well be practical about this.

"Everyone on the ground now!" the man said, standing up, while he and several other men and women pulled out railgun-rifles. Graelyn looked up at them, as the rest of the compartment got to the ground. She looked at the time in the corner of the screen: 3:45. The application was due at 8 and she had to answer 269 questions. She groaned, and slumped down out of her seat onto the floor, trying to get back to her application as the people with weapons did whatever it was they were doing.

2. Consider the hypothetical situation where you meet yourself from another reality-- what would your first reaction be?

This was a tougher question, certainly not a one word one, but also not one that she'd need to spend a lot of time on. The revolutionaries casually went through the train, occasionally rifling through people's bag's, until they stopped at her.

"You, where's your bag?" Graelyn pointed to her purse, which was still up on the bench, and went back to her application. Graelyn supposed she wouldn't do anything rash, if she met herself. She'd probably

just compare notes. She filled the blank in and moved onto the next question. “No devices.” The man said, leveling his gun at her. “Sorry, this is really important.”

“I don't want you reporting us.”

“You've already been reported by the automated camera system, calm down.” She said trying to focus. It wasn't like this was the first time she'd been in a hostage situation, she did live in the city after all. The man grimaced, and spitefully dumped her purse out on the seat, for which a woman who seemed to be in charge yelled at him, and made him apologize. Graelyn accepted the apology and tried to get on with the application. She breezed through a few questions, as the man rifled through the pile of her lip gloss, hair ties, sanitary pads, and tissues. “Nothing here ma'am,” he yelled and moved onto the next occupant, finally. She kept going, finally she was really in the zone on this!

24. A farmer has a chicken, a fox, and a bag of seed he needs to get across a river-

Easy. She'd memorized that puzzle.

25. If you were-

“You seem awfully calm.” The leading woman said. She'd walked up to her, rifle held patiently, a bandolier of ammo and grenades striking the light like she'd rehearsed this spot before.

“You guys have held up my train before. I have a lot of work to do.”

“You should care more about what's going on around you.”+

“You should get on with finding whatever you're here for.” She gave a curt laugh, like the kind gruff men make to bad jokes in movies.

“You'd make a good soldier.”

Graelyn ignored that, the woman was just distracting her now. She kept looking at her, and turned away as though disappointed. “Ma'am, we found it!” The man who had bothered her was now holding a balding man in a sportcoat by the elbow, and holding up a datacard in the other hand. “Good work, lets move out.”

“You'll never get away with this!” The balding man cried, “Centro has eyes everywhere. We'll find you!”

“You haven't yet!” Said the woman with a gleam in her eye, and punched the emergency release button for the door. The revolutionaries jumped out in perfect order, their feet and backs lighting up as they began a controlled flight downwards onto a rooftop. An older woman got up, and shut the door. For some reason there was applause, and Graelyn briefly took the time to put her things back in her purse. She looked down at the tablet, and was struck by how close she had nearly been to something totally different. She could have tried to foil the plotters somehow, she was clever, they might have just shot her, but it would have been memorable. The woman in charge, with a little talk in a different direction,

might have offered to let her go with them. She could be in some dank basement learning how to assemble a railgun blindfolded, or glide through the air with an energy pack. There were so many possibilities, and she had chosen to finish filling out this internship application. It seemed heavy, like it was made of the plaques on buildings, or was secretly some monument.

She turned to the next question.

Graelyn Scythes got back to her one-room apartment, took off her blazer, skirt, and tie, picked up her cat Mr. Sprinkles who was desperately wanting some cuddling, reheated some old stir fry, and sat down on the couch. Only a hundred questions to go. She strokes Mr. Sprinkles, who purred deeply into her lap, grounding her, his soft fur felt nice on her bare legs.

171. Are you, or have you ever been, a member of the communist party?

Graelyn laughed, and checked no, but her face grew still. She didn't give a damn about the communists, but she suddenly wondered if she'd be able to believe in anything like that. She rubbed the cat behind the ears.

“I'd make a bad soldier Mr. Sprinkles.”

The revolutionaries had gotten something important she'd never know about. She never saw them again. Maybe they were shot dead. Maybe they made some secret victory. Rain started hitting the window pane, and she at least knew they would likely be wet. Mr. Sprinkles adjusted himself, making it very hard to move between the questions and picking at the stir fry. She resigned herself to the situation, as she had done through most of the day, and focused on the internship application.

“I'd make a bad soldier.”

# Prologue

It was not a golden age. Sure, everybody said so: the great architects of interstellar travel hammered away as Hephestus on great hulls to travail the void of space, the financiers rising higher and higher above the flesh of Earth and Mars till they were barely mortal and called their penthouses Olympus, the people of grit and gumption strapped themselves into strange devices that contorted space and tore at gravity, and all of them said, “This is the time of mankind, this is the time of great deeds we will be remembered for, never to live in History’s shadow and to bend and bow but to conquer it!” and they were all completely wrong.

The last great colonization of the Solar System had already taken its final step and, with a vain attempt to live on Venus tripped bloodily, leaving a sort of skinned-face spacestation hooked to the ground by an elevator in a synchronous orbit with the planet. It was hailed as a marvel as the sweaty men and women who made it smiled shakily knowing the true cataclysm of their failure on the planet’s surface. No, this was not a Golden Age. This was an age of Fools Gold: a pyrite age. The suckers bought the tagline of course, and the solar system kept spinning. The great companies of earth took in massive profits, the exact same amount as the year before nearly to the decimal, and again and again. There was a repetition to it all, and then for a moment Mars got uppity, tired of corporate greed and tyranny, they threw off their shackles in a full scale revolution: students yelled from rooftops about freedom, heroes were martyred for a list of ideals, and the red planet ran red in a war so brief it would be forgotten if there were any other wars around it, and if the scale of its brevity were not still massive.

And for a moment, it looked like it could be a Golden Age: Earth came down from the clouds to innovate and show that their ideals were more than a Cloudcuckoland, Mars began an attempt at real communism, letting a massive computer run the equal distribution of wealth, giving the celestial body a brain-- things seemed almost glorious, flowing towards a climax, and then it stopped. Mars went from bold fierceness to stunned normality as quickly as it licked its wounds. Earth forgot about its dreams of capitalist innovation, and settled back into its chair, churning in smaller but still substantial profits, and the poor suckers scattered on the rim scavenged their way to another meal. The last gasp of progress exhaled, the Pyrite Age entered full swing, and the great men looked on last years dreams they had yet

to realize and said, “this is the time to be alive.” Little did they know, it soon would be.

Down below the Atlantic Ocean, a man turned away from the Stars and hid his eyes from their broken promises of light. A man with few redeeming qualities, and fewer qualms, but certainly not stagnant. That's the thing about being interesting: it has nothing to do with goodness or wisdom, it has to do with action.

John Aril, CEO of Anubis Corp., put his foot in the Stagnant ocean, and churned up a hurricane. He sat in the room his invention was being built in, a room of bolts and steel plates fighting tirelessly to avoid being crushed by the water around it. Fish swam by, in ignorance of what was being done. The woman in the lab coat tightened a bolt and the metal and mirrors spun around each other, a pulsing sound began to drift from it like a stillborn heartbeat, “Its not quite ready sir.” He nodded, “We're not moving forward. We're stalling.” He looked up at the woman, “We need fresh blood. Pick out some new scientists to bring down here. Ones we've been overlooking, maybe because they're odd or don't work well with teams. Someone has to be able to solve the last hurdle.” The woman nodded, her name was Hiriwa, not that John cared, he'd be the one in the history books, and she knew it well. “Sir, could I also request we bring in an intern? I understand you're desire for a barebones staff, but it would help the team immensely to have someone to take care of mundane tasks like the Coffee. John put his two index fingers against his lips and nodded. “Done.” He pulled out his tablet, and scrolled through the top candidates-- they'd all been accepted elsewhere at this point, he'd delayed too long for the sake of saving a dollar, he coldly enforced a new rule in his brain to not do that again. Patience was a virtue, but only for the right reasons. He scrolled down into the second tier of candidates. All were the exact sort of people you'd expect to not quite make it into true excellence, the kind just one cent short of a dollar. He picked one at random. Sixteen year old girl, good at math and science, blah blah blah. She'd be getting the coffee anyways, the choice didn't really matter.

It was strange, that choice. Because as John Aril clicked the “accept” button next to Graelyn Scythe's smiling face, nothing noticeable happened, no men shouted on rooftops, or proclaimed that things were now not as they would ever be again, but the river in the ocean broke through its dam-- and flecks of gold began to spill into that sea of pyrite.





# **Chapter 1: The Cat That Missed Atlantis**

Graelyn looked into the backseat, where Mr. Sprinkles the cat was pacing inside his cat-box, an awkward sort of pacing for such a small space that might be better described as ‘walking in a circle.’ She didn’t say anything, didn’t sigh or shake her head, just stared at the cat. The car was driving itself to the dock, she didn’t have to do anything as it went the regulation speeds throughout its trip, but she almost wished it had some manual controls so she could drive it today. Just sitting here felt wrong, and there was one stop before the docks. The car came to a halt in front of the facility, the large friendly sign at the front showing many animals each in a solid color looking happier than most animals ever did. Mr. Sprinkles meowed, and Graelyn popped open the car doors, and grabbed his carrying case out of the back seat. No one was there to greet her, this was solitary work, the kind of work one can only do yourself because if you don’t you’ll grind your teeth down with regret. She’d had the cat for a very long time, since it was a little kitten, and now it was time to say goodbye. She heard its claws scratch at the cage door to the box, and another meow. She almost began to shush him, but in the end couldn’t get up the heart.

She went inside, the cool green-blue colored glass doors moving apart like a biblical sea, and leading her into an equally chill colored room. “Hello, how can I help you today?” Graelyn walked up and matter of factly set the cat down on the long front desk. “This is Mr. Sprinkles. He is my cat. I am here to give him up for adoption.” The woman nodded, “Did you fill out the requisite paperw—“ The paperwork appeared in front of her, though of course on a tablet, not as actual paper, we’re not savages. “Ah, alright then. Everything seems to be in order... Ah you left blank 41B empty.” Graelyn peered over at it, “It says its optional.” “It says its optional, but its not.” Graelyn sighed, bureaucracy at its finest.

41B: Why did you choose this shelter □ ?

Graelyn paused for a moment, and then entered her answer into the form: “This is a no kill shelter.” “Good enough.” The lady smiled at her, “We’ll take good care of Mr. Sprinkles! Is there anything else we should know about his care.” There was a pause. Graelyn felt like every moment here was a waste of her time, this was only a cat after all, it wasn’t like she was giving up anything important... She went to bite her lip, but held back with perfect self control. She made a decision. “He likes Mozart. Specifically the operas, mainly the Magic Flute. Don’t play him any junk by Handel. He hates Handel. Other Baroque is okay.” The lady opened her mouth, and closed it, “Er, of course. Thank you for that information.” Graelyn left, knowing full well the woman didn’t give a damn about what music her cat liked to listen to. Still, the effort felt somehow worthwhile. She got back into the car, and told it to start for the docks. It began moving, its electric motor silently chugging away towards the ocean. She adjusted her skirt. She checked her pony-tail in the mirror, and shoved her glasses back towards her nose. There was something in her chest, and she couldn’t quite place what it was or what it was doing. She looked back at the friendly animal sign, and squirmed in her seat. *Goodbye, Mr. Sprinkles*, she thought, *this is all for the greater good you know*. She started thinking about who would miss her when she left, and came to the quick realization the only one who had a chance to was the cat.

Graelyn had received Mr. Sprinkles as a concession. The court ordered therapist had sat with her and her parents, and told them that what had happened was a serious matter the courts couldn't simply overlook, and that something had to be done to show that Graelyn's parents were doing their best to help their daughter. "But what she did was selfish, shortsighted, and unpragmatic." Her mother monotoned. The therapist's face seemed be a perfectly controlled mask, "That may be, but we still need to do something for Graelyn to show we're helping to meet her needs. "Great she gets a trophy for it to." Her mother snarled. "So Graelyn, what would you like?" Graelyn thought for a moment, swinging

her legs under the chair. Her mother slapped her knee, and she stopped swinging her legs.

"I want a cat." She said.

"Out of the question."

"No, now wait a minute, cats largely take care of themselves aside from litter and food, and the courts love animals and think of service animals as a really good step towards recovery, probably because they are, but regardless, I think this is a very good move for all of you."

Her mother nodded, "Okay. I think we can make this work then."

Later they went to the petstore ("No second hand pets for my daughter, if we're doing this she's not getting a hand me down."), the biggest one in the corporate sprawl of Moscow. There were hundreds of tiny cats running around in glass cages, meowing and mewling, taking naps or playing. Plenty of people came to watch the kittens, and today was no exception. Squeezing through the crowd, pushing her black hair out of the way of her glasses, she looked at them: there were brown kittens, black kittens, gray kittens with black spots and orange kittens with black stripes. There were Kittens like Dalmatians, and kittens with blots of different colors everywhere. There were energetic kittens practicing pouncing, and lazy ones taking naps. There were cuddly kittens curled up with each other, and loners away from the bunch. She gravitated toward the loners. One kitten was by itself, simply staring out the glass, as though it could make out some meaning beyond its prison walls by observing hard enough. Little Graelyn ran



around the case to the other side, and lined her eyes up with the kitten's, it tilted its head.

"I want that one she said." Her mother got the attendant. "I'm naming him Mr. Sprinkles." Her mother screwed her face up, "You're not naming him-"

"I'm naming him that or I'm complaining to the therapist." Her mother snarled... But she looked proud. Like her tiger cub had learned to bite.

The car started again, and Graelyn requested the car begin playing Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. It asked her, as it always did, if she meant Beethoven's. No, she responded, Mozart's. She didn't know why she liked Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> so much, but she did. Ever since she was a little girl she would curl up and listen to it with Mr. Sprinkles. He would purr, feeling like a groundquakes as the grass of his hair rolled over the plains under her hand. Combined with the notes, she felt at peace, like the earth itself was singing her a lullaby, the music softening the sounds from downstairs. The grass outside the window waving in the wind made her think of Mr. Sprinkles. It was good she'd left him, she told herself, that wasn't a name fit for a woman going to work at a state of the art research facility.

Woman? You're sixteen!

There were a lot of voices today. Maybe all of them were idiots. The car pulled in at the dock, and she stepped out into the shoreside sun. It was still a cresting dawn on the horizon, bathing the waters in a white flood of light.

"Miss Scythes?"

She turned to face the envoy, who was wearing a suit jacket over a light-fiber t-shirt that was currently playing somewhat distorted images from Japanese horror movies on his chest. She could tell this job was going to be tasteful. "I'm Dan Kahn, I'm gonna be escorting you down to Atlantis. I take if you have the paperwork?" Always paperwork. She handed him the tablet, which again had no paper. He skimmed through it. "I don't see a parent signature."

"I'm emancipated."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said frowning in that responsible adult way, "I'm sorry there was trouble at home."

"There wasn't. Not anymore. They were holding me back." Naturally, he didn't know what to say to that, so she walked past him and adjusted her shoulder bag. She was wearing the sort of outfit she'd wear if she was a cartoon character, a skirt cut just above the knees with matching blazer over a blouse and a tie. Usually the tie was black, and the blazer and skit were a deep blue. Today though, they were gray with a green tie. She wore a pin shaped like a smiling fish on her lapel, not because she felt particularly festive, but because she'd learned it put people at ease with her if she forced the effort. Her glasses had rectangular black rims, and were simple but stylish in all the best ways. Glasses weren't the most common thing to see these days, and as they walked over to the diving pod, she hoped Dan wouldn't ask about them.

"So you're wearing glasses?"

"Yes."

"Heads up display? Don't like retinal implants?"

She stepped onto the damp metal framework that led to the pod, reminding herself what a good idea it had been to wear flats today (she hated heels anyways), and didn't look at him as he responded.

"My eyes are fine the way they are."

"So they're fake glasses?"

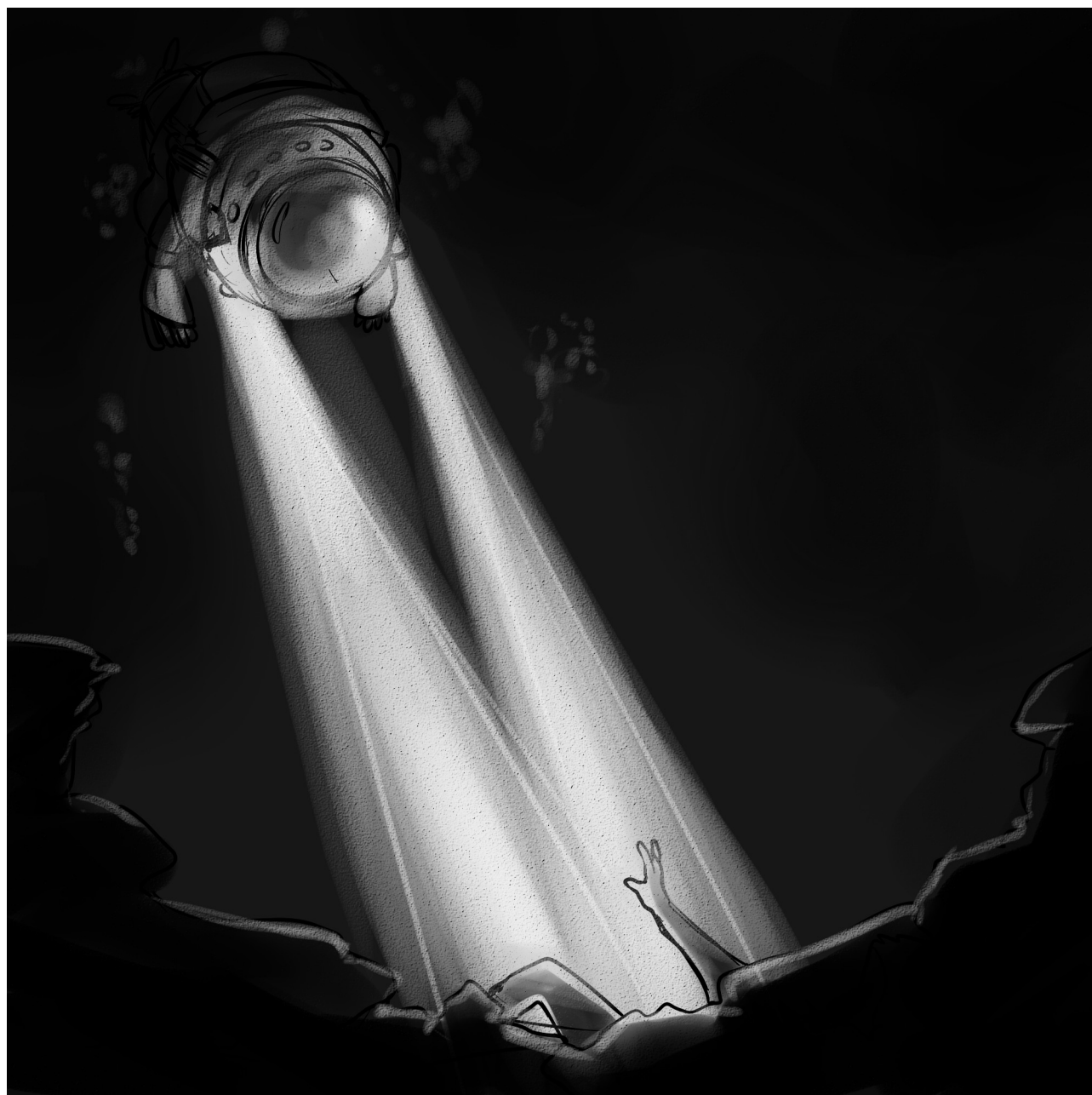
"No."

"You could get corrective surgery you know, the company would cover the cost..." Graelyn turned to look at him, her eyes narrowing beneath her glasses. She didn't raise her volume, or change her expression, but somehow what she said felt like it cut a rib from his chest. "My. Eyes. Are. Fine. The. Way. They. Are." She held his gaze for a moment, and walked up to the hatch of the pod, standing by it impatiently as if there was a late train.

"Sorry, geez." He muttered as he opened the door. "Welcome aboard ice queen." Graelyn gave him another look, almost piteously, and stepped inside. It was slightly rusty, which wasn't a good sign, and a bit cozy. She set her handbag down next to her as he took the seat opposite her, putting her hands in the pockets of her blazer.

"Only us?" He nodded, and as he shut the hatch felt a tingle move down his spine. What if she is some sort of weirdo and kills me? He nervously looked back at her, she hadn't changed her expression. Graelyn looked out the video screen connected to a camera on the exterior that acted as a window on the pod. Slowly, Dan pressed the button to begin lowering the pod. She kept her gaze on the ocean, and watched as the sky turned to sea, the green-blue waters enveloping her vision—and then there were fish! Swimming about in schools. Beautiful fish colored like rainbows, and shiny gray fish like darts. She let the half of her face Dan couldn't see smile, and took her trembling hands out of her pockets to rub them. You can't let them keep getting to you, you're better than this, she thought. But no matter how she tried to hide it, she was scared. People would walk over you if you let them move a boot close to you. She suddenly thought about her cat. Not her cat anymore, she'd burned that bridge. Was he meowing for her? Did he even miss her. She knew that cats were more affectionate than some claimed, but she knew that he would forget about her and take to a new owner who fed him. The thought for some reason made her feel cold. She didn't want to think about the cat anymore, but she began to imagine him swimming through the water outside the window, chasing the fish. Good ol' Mister Sprinkles. Good ol.... She was freezing. She put her hands back into their pockets.

"So Dan, tell me about Atlantis."



## **Chapter 2: The Lost Kingdom of Capitalism**

Out in the ocean, there was a city. Not a city in any way that was really recognizable as one-- there were no skyscrapers, or parking-lots, or massive glowing signs. Instead, there were mushrooms: great bulbs of steel on stilts settled deep on the ocean floor, nestled in the darkness. Graelyn could see them through the thick spotlights being poured on them for her convenience: the massive pieces of architecture that could house far more people than were actually living in them, not that she knew that yet. The bulbs were linked together by tunnels of some transparent thick material that held back the sea, and she was surprised how many windows there were.

“That's Hydrosight.” She could almost hear the words “Trademark” slip out after it, “It's John Aril's invention, a pressure resistant transparent material. It's what they're using on spaceships now-- it's really expensive to make, but it's as strong as what they make star dreadnaughts out of. Of course the military demands a huge discount, capitalism be damned.” Of course the military did, that was their job as the last real vestige of the United Nations (or any government for that matter) that still existed anymore. Centro Corp tolerated their existence, only in the way one might tolerate any sort of necessary evil. If they could rule the solar system through profit alone, they would. If they could rule the solar system at all they would. Sinking beneath the Atlantic, Graelyn closed her eyes for a moment and felt the rules slipping away. There was no Centro down here, no military, just John Aril's vision.

“Will I get to meet Mr. Aril?” Dan shook his head, “No, Director Aril is a very busy man.” He emphasized the word Director, and Graelyn knew instantly what kind of man he was.

Director was a very special title, the kind of title everyone on Earth wanted to have, and few would ever get. In a land of equal opportunity, Director's were more equal than anyone else. Once you got the title of Director, you were part of the corporate Oligarchy for life. Some chose to take a direct part of the day to day running of Centro Systems, but most chose to take the title and run with it, using the lack of regulation it provided to essentially do whatever the hell they wanted. And by chance if you were a person who made their underlings correct new underlings about calling you a Director instead of Mister, you were probably an asshole.

“I see.” Said Graelyn. She respected John Aril immensely, he was the kind of person she wanted to be: a free and powerful scientist, no holds barred, doing what they wanted. A fish swam by the viewport, it was blue. She closed her eyes again. Maybe being the kind of person who forced people to call you Director was what she needed to do-- no one would walk on her, no one would push her down... She took a breath, and opened her eyes. The blue fish had swum back, a bit farther away now. “It's amazing you're building a city down here-- do you fish the fishes?” Dan laughed, “You really don't know do you?”

“You don't fish the fishes?”

“This isn't a city. It's a laboratory.” Graelyn blinked, and looked back at the huge steel mushrooms. She'd been anticipating helping to build a sustainable underwater community away from the surface, away from people, away from everything, but she didn't feel betrayed or lied to. Her eyes grew wide. Curiosity grew in her. The cat meowed in its cage on the surface. She turned to Dan, fully invested, not even caring that she really didn't like him at all, “So what are we here for?” He grinned, “I'll show

you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The bathysphere connected with the station, and Graelyn made her way with Dan through the hallways that alternated between industrial steel with uncovered rivets, to what was nearly aesthetic excess with long corridors of thick transparent material that had works of art molded into its very form so that it was like walking through some sort of witch's ice palace. She supposed the duality fit a man like Aril, she knew very little about him personally, but she knew that he'd modeled his spaceship to have its front shaped the ancient Egyptian God Anubis' head, but was also a keen pragmatist who tolerated little that didn't advance his goal. “A man of art and means.” She muttered, hoping Dan wouldn't comment on it. “Precisely, you see, Aril...” He didn't say anything useful as he droned on for the next few minutes, so I'll spare you. Graelyn didn't have that luxury, and tried to remain polite to the person she'd be in close proximity to for the next... How long would she be down here anyways? Dan put a pass code into a door, placed his hand on a panel that took and tested a sample of his DNA, and stepped aside as the door opened to let Graelyn see exactly what was going on inside.

The door opened to industry: men, women, and people outside the gender binary were hard at work on what looked like a boring steel box the size of a building. Cords were being attached to large ports on the side, and people rushed in and out of a set of doors in the front of it. The area around it was largely paved, with holes for various tubes and cables dotting the artificial landscape. The room was huge and open, which seemed like a big waste of space for the amount of money it would have taken to make underwater, the ceiling had huge transparent sections, so it looked like there was a dark bluish green sky overhead, filled with the occasional wriggling scaly bird. Graelyn stepped into the room, and looked back at Dan, “Okay, I'm interested.”

“This must be the new intern.” She turned again to see a woman wearing the most stereotypical lab coat imaginable, as well as ornate but functional shoes with a moving pattern of an animated sea beast circling her feet, and unusually, also glasses. “Graelyn Scythes?” Graelyn extended a hand, “The very same. Doctor Kalama?” She nodded, “Hiriwa Kalama. You'll be down here for a while unless we have a sudden breakthrough, so we may as well get on a first name basis.” Graelyn nodded, “Of course. I'm a bit sketchy on what exactly we'll be having a breakthrough on however?” Hiriwa grinned, “Well, be prepared to have your socks knocked off.” Graelyn wasn't wearing socks, but whatever. Hiriwa gestured for her to follow her, and began walking towards the building at the center of the room, and was quickly followed.

The building opened up into a scene right out of a science fiction movie: a series of disks like a gyroscope were located at the room's center, spinning slowly. Pipes and cords lead into it from all over the room, some of which glowed a distinctive light blue. “This is the great experiment, the real reason we're all down here. Can you guess what its for?” Graelyn looked at the slowly rotating device, and furrowed her brow. The design was strange-- there had to be a reason for the twisting gyroscopic motion of the disks, but the gyroscope wasn't stabilizing anything, she could see, and didn't seem to be outputting any data.

“Don't force her to figure this out Hiriwa, I wouldn't be able to guess in her position.” All heads turned,



and several people suddenly began to look much more productive. “Mr. Aril, I'm surprised to see you here.” Hiriwa said without a hint of inflection. He waved his hands dismissively.

“So you're the new intern then? I've got to warn you, you'll mostly be carrying coffee.”

“Comes with the job, sir,” She replied curtly.

“Eh, you can cut with that. We all know why we're here. But you seem curious, and that's a trait I want in my employees. So then, I am curious what you were about to guess?”

“I figure that the gyroscopic disks are meant to stabilize something they are also generating. I don't know what though.” He gave the thinnest smirk, which on his face gave the impression of a full faced grin. “Clever girl. Yes, that is what it does. But why I'm trying to do this would baffle most. Now, do you know why we're underwater?” Graelyn could see Hiriwa rolling her eyes as Aril did exactly what he'd said not to do. “No sir, not a clue.”

“The crushing pressure of the ocean is actually used to power the station, along with nuclear reactors naturally, but there is another reason. The underwater location gives us an advantage in the type of research we're doing, as we're trying to tap into some of the fields that underlay the universe itself, to cut through them to the other side.” Graelyn naturally raised an eyebrow.

“You're... You're trying to... Mess with the fabric of space somehow?”

“Not just mess with it. Since I was a little boy I've always known I wasn't alone. I've had this feeling that there was another version of me, trying to find me, trying to reach his hand out far enough to raise me up.” Graelyn looked over at Hiriwa, whose face was stoic.

“I can feel the tug through the space beneath me, I just need to cut through somehow, and there I'll be. Another reality.” Graelyn tried very hard to figure out what facial expression she should be making.

“Oh.” She said. Aril chuckled, “It sounds ludicrous, but its a certainty that other realities besides ours exist. We're trying to touch them.” She walked toward the device, and ran her narrow fingers down the metal. “How did you get Centro's approval for this? They would never-”

“Of course I didn't get Centro's approval. I don't need them to like me. I'm an innovator, and this will be something that will last beyond all of us.” He walked next to Graelyn, and put his hand on top of hers.

“We're going to do this. Hiriwa, why don't we show her our progress.” Hiriwa gestured to a man in a labcoat with dreadlocks who began flipping switches. “You might want to step back.” The disks began spinning faster, and the cords glowed blue. In the center of the gyroscope, a single pinprick of light appeared, and then as they grew faster, expanded. They spun faster and faster and then they stopped moving, and the ball of light began to flatten out into something like a pane of light, shimmering like a lake. For a moment, Graelyn thought she saw figures through the disk, but then the light collapsed, and the machine shut down after trying to stabilize it.

“We're so close.”

“I saw something on the other side.” Graelyn said, her eyes like full moons.

“Of course you did. So then, are you in?”

“I'm in.” She said, and she believed, “We're going to get this done. We'll solve this problem. Its just out of our grasp and we'll figure this out!”

“That's a good girl.” Aril crooned, “But first, we need some lattes.” Graelyn had no idea where the coffee maker was, but she walked off to find it with her head held high. With her here, they'd no doubt get to the bottom of this problem in no time!

One year later.

Graelyn spun around in her desk chair, over and over again, she tried to keep her head twisting like a ballerina in order to avoid being dizzy, but she very much failed at that task and found herself getting very woozy. Kicking off one of the desks to send the chair into another rotation, missed the blip on the radar. She kept spinning, and then pushed off the console with her legs, and spun the chair faster around the center of the room. Ten minutes passed like this, then Graelyn got up, and put the coffee grounds in the machine. She was very careful about the process, if halfhearted, and made sure the measurements were precise. Then she spun around the room some more, and let out a droning “ugh.” Finally, the coffee was ready, and she poured several tall cups, fixed them to the drinker's specifications by memory, and grabbed her wireless earbuds. Popping them in, she pulled out her tablet and selected a song, “Miracle Goodnight” by David Bowie, the usual choice. She let the first few beats sink into her system, and balancing a tray of cups on each hand, slipped out of the monitoring room. Alone in the slick glass and steel hallways, Graelyn began to bob, her feet getting into the rhythm of the music.

“Heart tell me, turn it around. Head tell me, make it alright, nobody dancing--

Miracle Goodnight.”

She broke out into a dance, passing the statue of Artemis, and then instantly stopped as she entered Dan's office. She set his coffee on his desk silently as he examined a chart of something, and slipped back out, breaking back into her groove as soon as she was out of sight. She repeated this process, looping the song again since she was into it, as she dropped off the other cups of coffee. Yossara's, Jerry's, Layla's, Hiriwa's, Director Aril's... She caught glimpses of documents on desks; space/time fabric theories, something about a '2227 incident', none of it lingered on as she floated. Through the glass hallways, she danced to the melody, free of the coffee she slid around corners, and began to do some more complex moves, jamming all the way back to her office. The fishes got quite a show for certain. It was like a reverse aquarium.

“Ragged limbed and hungry mama, miracle no more.”

She sat back down, and began to spin in the chair again. Day in day out. She almost missed the radar again, but as she turned she caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. Still spinning. she stopped herself, and tried to focus on what was on the radar screen as the world shifted slowly back into focus. Lots of things showed up on the radar, but nothing like that. For one thing, it was descending way too rapidly, and wasn't wagging around like a big fish. Something must have fallen from the sky and plopped right down through the depths of the ocean to say hello in an uncontrolled and deadly plummet. She first pressed the wrong button on the console, and cursed, but then hit the comm button, “Hey Jerry, anything scheduled to be dropped from the surface for some reason around here?” Jerry was silent for a moment, and she heard the sound of crunching popcorn. “Uh, no. I don't

think we've ever had something like that scheduled ever?"

"That's what I thought, thanks." She flipped the switch off. Alright then, not a normal occurrence. She'd been down here a year with nothing to show for it. She was seventeen now, and her time separated from the rest of the world was beginning to show on her. She thought a lot about her cat, and how Mr. Sprinkles was doing, she thought about hypothetical people she could have been friends with, inventing them whole cloth. There was Tannis, a dark skinned pre-med student who she could talk about biology with, but also classical Opera, something she'd had a bit of trouble with, and he could sweep her off and show her how to appreciate it, or Angela, a light skinned woman her own age with too many freckles in a band over her nose who loved to exercise and scale mountains. She imagined these friends, and their adventures together, but in reality she was mostly in this room watching the monitoring equipment, spinning in her chair, occasionally leaving to make coffee.

"Jerry, I'm going to take one of the mini-sub's."

"Uh, don't you need clearance for-"

"Oh come on, seriously? When was the last time anyone cared about clearance."

"Aren't you underage to drive it?"

"I've driven them plenty of times when you weren't giving me grief, and I'm going to now once you shut up. I was just letting you know." She turned the comm off, and started walking to the sub bay while Jerry ran his fingers through his hair in worried confusion. It was easy enough to do anything on the base if you just acted like you were allowed to do it. She stripped her clothes off and put on a wetsuit, then hopped into one of the docked minisubs. It was a strange looking little thing, with a big viewport, floodlights, maneuvering jets, and two mechanical arms she could control from the inside. She could tell that it was bought from an old scrapyard, or maybe a navy sale, but it worked. She closed the hatch, checked the pressure, and shot off into the murky beyond. The darkness enveloped her, and as she realized what the plummeting object was, she couldn't have been more surprised. The floodlights took it fully into view, and she made out arms and legs.



## **Chapter 3: The Metal Man**

Graelyn was still wringing the seawater from her hair as she looked at her catch. It hadn't been easy to bring him inside, he weighed an incredible amount, and the little sub had strained and strained to pull him up into the station. She hadn't been able to lift him herself, so she'd used the sub's arms to load him onto a cart on the side of the docking station. She'd tried to move him herself out of curiosity, but mainly just ended up getting herself very wet.

"What secrets do you bring?" She said to herself, only to mentally chastise herself for sounding like a crazy scientist in a film.

Its face was an oval with one eye, on it's right side, and the rest of its face was a flat blank. Its fingers were segmented, as was most of its body, but it was in the shape of a human male. On the nape of the neck it said its name was "Archimedes" along with a serial number. Weirdly, it was wearing a trench coat. Graelyn ran her fingers along the material-- it was clearly some durable polymer, but the outer layer was transparent, and she couldn't think of who made anything like it. Was it a pose-able mannequin? A robot? She felt around, and noticed a few hidden bolts. Taking their covers off, she carefully unscrewed a few, and looked inside. There was an intense network of electronics and motors inside him, and from the way it was laid out she was guessing the outer layer of the carapace acted as one big screen. Maybe it was an automaton meant to display ads on its carapace? Closing the limb up, she explored further and found a latch on the back of the head with a standard data port in it. She plugged into it without a second thought, and as the drive she connected to loaded up, she suddenly felt invasive. She pushed the thought away, it was just the automaton's hard drive. The files were arranged by date, but one folder stuck out to her: 'hidden files'. She looked at the blank one eyed face, and clicked it. There were a ton of videos in it, so she just scrolled a bit and clicked one at random. She saw a first person perspective of this unit watching a Hispanic man in a blue jumpsuit with a wrench adjust something on its arm. The date in the corner was from seven years ago. She could see rows of similar people to the metal man all still and silent, and another man in a black blazer with red and white stenciling on the lapels and breasts smoking an old style cigar, not even an e-cig. "Raise your arm." The arm raised in front of the camera. "So much can happen when you're asleep can't it?" The man turned to the camera and said in a Central American accent, "I think its about time you wake up today, no?" These were memories, these files were this person's memories. This was a person. She felt a rush of terror and power flow through her, and scrambled to exit the system. *This was labeled hidden files. Why would that be in a person's brain? It can't access this.*

Graelyn dropped the tablet, and pulled the cord out of the metal man's neck, slapping the latch closed. She put her hands over her face, and then lowered them trembling. There was silence, her heavy breathing filling it, and then a gentle humming began.

"You're awake." He heard, it wasn't a question. It was a statement as clear as the existence of matter. Yes, he was. Exactly why he was awake was a different question. He tried to move his limbs.

“Shh, its alright. Stay calm. I've been examining you. It says your name is Archimedes Von Ahnerabe on your carapace, if you don't mind me using the term?” He found he could still nod, so he did.

“You've got built in weapon systems in your limbs, and even if you didn't your arms are strong enough to literally pull me in half, so I figured it would be best to take some caution till I knew who you were.”

“Who are you?” he said, his voice sounding tinny and water logged.

“Graelyn Scythes, I'm an intern here at project Atlantis.”

“Never heard of it.”

“I also rescued you. You had quite the fall, and you're very heavy.”

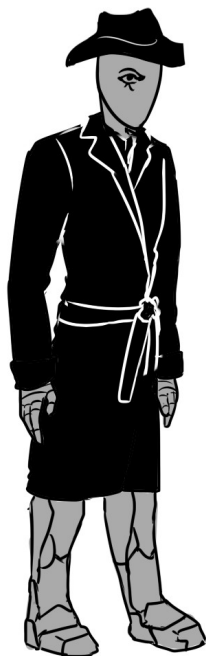
“Thank you... Does anyone else know I'm here?” Graelyn shook her head.

“No, but don't get any ideas. Most of us keep to ourselves here. We're all working on the same project, but I can't say any of us are particularly... Social. My boss wants this project done, so I'm doing it. Even though I don't get to actually do much. Pays pretty well. Well, for an internship.”

“Could I sit up?” Graelyn had almost forgotten.

“Oh, sure. Its not like you could get out of here alive if you tried to hurt me anyways.” She wandered around his body, and made a few adjustments. “Should work now.”

Archimedes sat up, keenly aware that her hands had been inside his limbs. It wasn't very different than a doctor messing with your insides he supposed, but it still felt funny. He tested his fingers, and got down from the table with a “thud” that rattled the room. Graelyn took a step back.



“No need to worry, I'm not going to hurt you.” She nodded, though it wasn't the most reassuring thing in the world. It was one thing to know logically someone had no reason to hurt you, and another to stand in a room next to a walking tank coated in enough airtight alloyed metal to not be crushed by the ocean, who knew you'd been messing with his servos. “Er, follow me,” she said. Graelyn lead him into a hallway filled with portraits and sculptures of various sea gods and myths. Whoever picked them out wasn't too picky, and a lot of them just had to do with water. Arch stopped to look at them. “You alright?” He nodded, “My family raised me on Greek Mythology. They're all gone now, but I still love it myself. This one is Odysseus trying to get home, over there is Artemis bathing and

punishing the hunter who watched her, Poseidon's wrath..." He trailed off, and Graelyn wondered if patting him on the shoulder would be the appropriate response. "Never mind," he finished, "its in the past."

"I've always found the oceans fascinating, its one of the reasons I came here. Though the project itself isn't about that."

"What is it about?"

"I'll show you later for now lets just get lunch."

Arch looked around the vacant cafeteria, built large enough to house a feast for a small town, with its few dozen occupants munching away on this or that.

"This is... Weird." He intoned.

"Yeah. Mr. Aril built the whole place as a front for this project. Its pretty large. He wanted people to think he was trying to build cities on the bottom of the sea floor and iron out all the problems people had had with that so that it was, you know, workable." She walked over to the empty lunchline, and then to a touchscreen machine. Arch watched as she tapped a few buttons on the screen and a soft buzzing followed it, immediately joined by a meal dropping down onto a tray below the screen.

"Its a printer." She explained, "It makes all the food down here from component parts. Its pretty good. Not up to real cooking, but you know, that's what happens when you sign up to live in a fake underwater city for a mysterious rarely seen benefactor." Arch nodded. Sure, that's exactly what that's like. A common experience. He tapped the touch screen a few times, and chose a dinner of nutrient paste. Graelyn scrunched her face up at that, but he didn't care. This was home cooking.

The pair of them sat down at a table together, and Graelyn began cutting into an artificial chicken breast that had previously been a bag of deconstructed protein. Archimedes pulled a tube from underneath his mask and stuck it in the hot bowl of smooth nutrient soup.

"So, I have to be honest, I haven't ever seen a person like you before Arch. Are you from the rim? I hear the Rimwards out there are super keen on body enhancement, but it looks like you took it to another level."

"I'm not from the Rim." Arch clarified. Or didn't. Graelyn nodded and put some seasoned carrots on her fork. "So you're military then?"

"No. Not military."

"From Earth?"

"Nope."

"Mars?"

"Neither Earth nor Mars." Graelyn furrowed her brow.

"You're a bit more complicated than I was anticipated, unless you're lying. Which honestly seems the most likely thing..." She chewed the carrots, swallowed them, and repeated the motion. They tasted a bit like honey and chilli peppers.

"But lets assume you're telling the truth."

"I am."

"If you are, this means that your answers probably are showing you come from a technicality. For instance, you weren't born on Earth, but Luna. Or perhaps you were born on a space station that is in the inner system rather than past Mars."

"One of those is right."

"Spacestation."

"Correct."

"Well this is a fun game. I'm from Russia, if that matters. You know, Mr. Von Ahnerabe, your last name is the weirdest part for me. I mean, there are a lot of weird things about you. You fell down the depths of the ocean, and didn't die for one, but also you fell in the middle of the ocean. You had to have gone quite a bit away from shore to have dropped that far. At first I thought you were a spy, but you haven't acted like a spy."

"Maybe I'm just a bad spy."

"Hardly. You have enough firepower built into your carapace you could have killed every single person in this base twice over and maybe just had to take a water break."

"My suit keeps me constantly hydrated."

"Great! So no water break when you kill me."

Archimedes suddenly looked awkward, "Okay, I'm not going to kill you. I mean, no. That's not a thing that, no, not that." Graelyn smirked, "Well that's pleasing to be aware of. So why are you here?"

"I fell out of an air vehicle."

"Fell? You really should work on securing yourself on your overseas journeys."

"I was pushed." She stirred her orange juice, "So this was an entirely unchosen journey. You had no idea we were here imitating John Galt." Arch searched his memory banks, and returned no results about John Galt.

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the name."

Graelyn made a subtle dismissive gesture. "It's from an old book my Mom made me read, this man named John Galt makes a city in the mountains where all the richest, smartest, most powerful people can seclude themselves from the rest of the world and leave it to die."

"Does the world end in the book?" Graelyn shrugged, "It's been a long time since I read it, I only ever did once. I think we're supposed to assume it did." Graelyn looked up at the ceiling, which was a glass passage for sea animals to swim through between the stories of the main compound. There were brilliant yellow fish, and some so clear you could see their veins and organs.

"No, I mean, the world clearly didn't end. That's the thing, there isn't ever really an apocalypse is there? Something always lives on. There's never really a cleansing."

Archimedes was silent. Graelyn went back to her food. She'd probably said too much again.

"Are you familiar with Tubol Cain?" Graelyn shook her head as she ate some potato wedges.

"It's a myth from the apocrypha of this book series called, 'the Bible'."

Graelyn laughed, "You talk about it like I might not have heard of it."

"You're a fan to?"

"I wouldn't call myself a fan, but I'm familiar with the basic plotline." She enjoyed carefully wording that response.

"Well, the book is connected by this being called Yahweh, who is a God." How fresh off the boat was



this guy? Graelyn jabbed another wedge into her mouth to obscure any tells she had, and the thought occurred to her, wherever this guy's boat came from, it had to have been rather secluded.”

“Yahweh goes in between all these characters, and sort of like... Influences them and sends them on missions. Its similar to how my gods do things, but Yahweh doesn't have to deal with any of the intra-Pantheon squabbling so it goes a lot easier for the God.” Graelyn nodded, this was more entertaining than Archimedes knew, but not for the same reasons he thought it was.

“So anyways, Yahweh had made some humans, Adam and Eve, and made this pact with them they could live in this awesome place away from everyone else, but they broke the contract so Yahweh kicked them out. They had some kids named Cain and Abel, and Cain killed Abel cause Yahweh liked Abel better, or something, and Cain got cursed. A bazillion years later, Yahweh decided to end the world in flood cause- oh sorry I left out an important bit. Yahweh has these servants called “Angels” they're pretty neat. Like, its probably why the God doesn't have to put up with a Pantheon. Anyways, some of these Angels decided to mate with humans, and had monster children called Nephilim. Yahweh thought this was messed up, and also realized the Nephilim were convincing the humans to be jerks to each other, so Yahweh was like, “screw it, I'm going to flood the whole Earth and start over!” Which can't have gone well with the other deities, but they don't deal with that part so I just have to imagine how those conversations went down. Yahweh decides a few people are going to be spared, just this guy named Noah and his family and their families. But this guy named Tubol Cain, at least according to the spin off books, he snuck on their boat and hid out. When the flood stopped Tubol Cain went off by himself, as this... Sort of lone survivor of this other way of living. Maybe it didn't deserve to survive, but it did in the form of him.”

Graelyn sipped the rest of her orange juice. “Its a pretty interesting story.”

“I always thought so. It reminds me of your John Galt story. I mean, isn't it just sort of naive to think that other people won't find a way to survive if you leave them to die?”

“That's what I didn't like about the book John Galt is in. Even if you buy the overall premise, the end doesn't work. They'll hide themselves away, but they won't spring up to claim the world when the rest of the world has died, there are too many Tubol Cains, and someone will find a way in the end. By hiding, they just ruin any chance they had of becoming the great people they wanted to be.”

Archimedes rolled the tube up from the empty bowl, and tucked it under his mask.

“So why are you hiding under the ocean then?” Graelyn was silent, and looked back up at the fishes.

“That's a complicated question. I'm not sure I can answer it.” Something large and dark swam above her head. “Maybe I'm searching for something.” Whatever it was, its tail swished in the shadows.

“Do you have any idea why we're down here?”

“None at all. Aside from it apparently not actually being a city.”

Graelyn looked back at Archimedes. She was still perplexed he was here at all, sitting here in front of her, his nearly featureless mask staring back at her. She wasn't entirely sure what the point was, but he'd certainly arrived.

“Yes. Yes that is the case. You know... Maybe that's been the problem.”

“That it's not a city?” She shook her head, “No, I mean, that we're trying to start something new, be explorers forging our way on our own... But that's just a story isn't it? Explorers find things because they follow in other people's footsteps, or get lucky or...” Graelyn's eyes went wide. Arch had no idea

what she was thinking.

“Or hitch a ride on someone else's boat! Of course! We're not Noah, we need to be Tubol Cain!”

Arch wanted to nod, but that would almost feel dishonest under the circumstances.

“Sure. I guess.”

“I've got!” She stood up, her face beaming.

“It only took me a year but I did it!” She bolted out of the room, running into a chair on her way, and continuing down the hall way. Arch looked around the cafeteria; no one seemed to be really paying attention to him. He wasn't sure what to do with himself, so he kept seated. So many things were out of his control today.

Graelyn ran as fast as she could, hindered only by her skirt being a bit less functional than it could have been. She rounded the corner to the main facility, and ran in. Aril and Dr. Kalama were pouring over some data, both looking somewhat bored. “I figured it out! Dr. Kalama! Mr. Aril! I figured it out!”

“You got the Cappuccino maker working again?” Hiriwa asked seriously.

“No, I solved the problem. I figured out why the machine isn't working.” Hiriwa rolled her eyes.

“Miss Scythes, we brought you here on this internship so you could learn, not interf-” Mr. Aril waved a hand to cut off Dr. Kalama.

“Miss Scythes, you believe you have a solution?” He asked. Hiriwa grunted.

“Right now the machine is attempting to sort of... Carve into another dimension to put it roughly?”

“Yes, very roughly.” Hiriwa answered with a bit of spit.

“Well if the premises of the experiment are correct, there are an infinite number of alternate realities, including one where this experiment to cut through into another reality has not just already been successful, but is being successful at a concurrent moment.”

“Go on.” Aril crossed his arms.

“What we need to be trying to do is piggy back onto that attempt. Calibrate the machine not towards the fabric of another universe, but so our portal is linked with their own portal.” Graelyn looked up from her tirade of information hopefully, her eyes glinting with excitement.

“That's the same baloney as sitting there saying “maybe this will be the reality where another reality will cut into from their end' its not worth our time.” Hiriwa said.

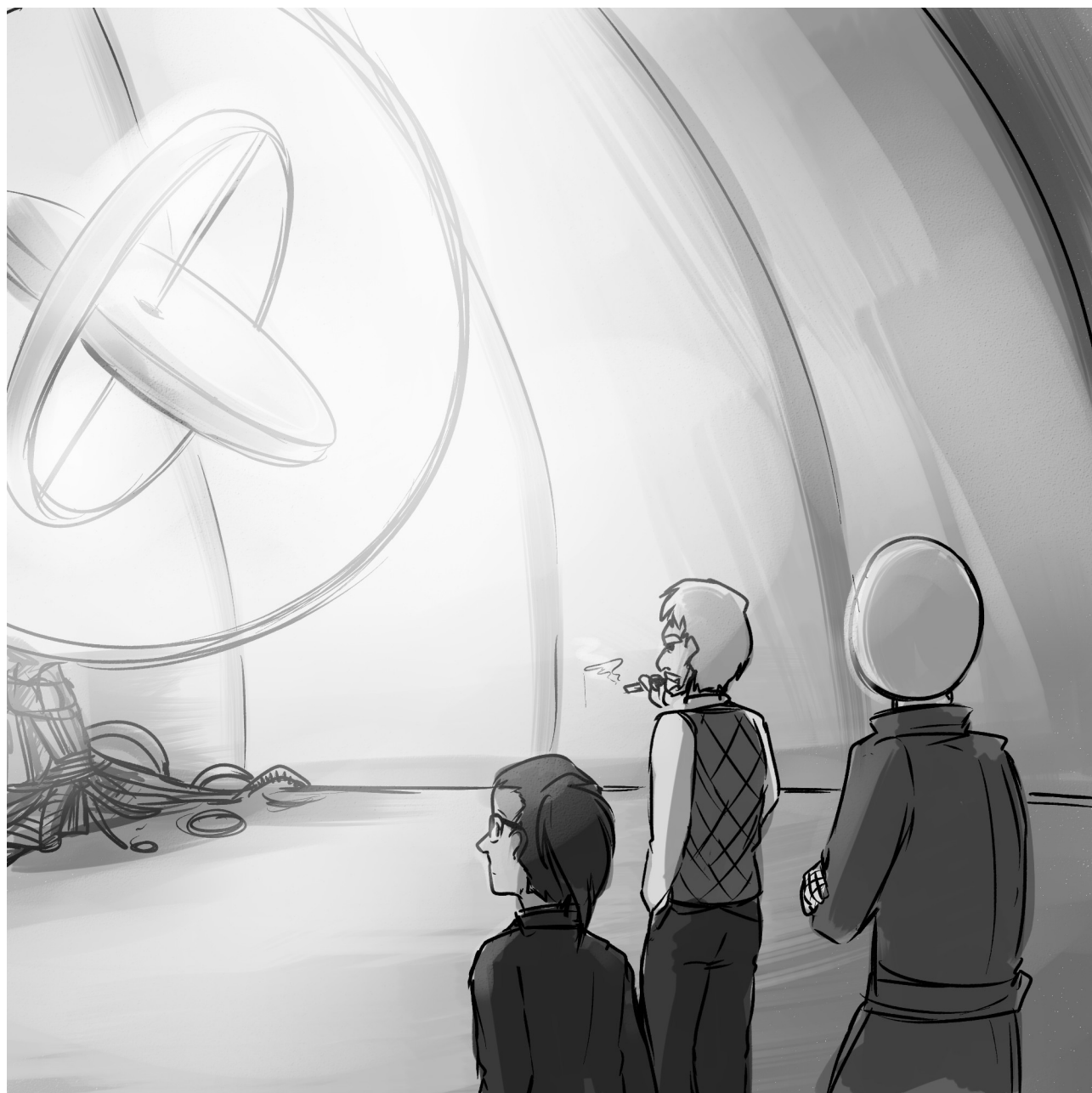
“But its not-- we're familiar with our own device, it should be a lot easier to link it with itself rather than attempting to make a stable link with an unknown universe.”

“You're just--” Aril gave Hiriwa a look, subtle but clear. She became quiet.

“Recalibrate the machine. We'll try intern Scythe's idea. Its not like anything else has worked so far.”

Aril walked away, and Hiriwa glared at Graelyn before walking off to begin her work. Graelyn felt her heart pounding, her skin flush. This would work, she knew it. All of this waiting would lead to the greatest scientific discovery of her lifetime. Things had been so stagnant here, nothing moved, but finally it would. Finally.

She watched them begin to modify the machine, and then she remembered she had just let an unauthorized cyborg with built in weapon systems on the station and left him alone. Her eyes widening for a different reason, she scampered out of the room.



## **Chapter 4: There's more to life than you expected**

Graelyn was utterly shocked when she returned to the cafeteria.

“Arch.” She said breathlessly, “You have a hat.” He did indeed have a hat, a top hat, and on the front of his mask slightly above where the mouth would have been was the image of a cartoon mustache. Next to Arch was Jerry, who had a concerned look on his face. Across from them on the other side of the table was Dan, as well as Layla and Yossara.

“Dan gave it to me.” Arch said, waggling the mustache on his face. Graelyn blinked, and reminded herself that Arch had enough weaponry to kill them all a few times over.

“Okay.” Graelyn said.

“We're playing 'Robespierre' Jerry said pointing at a board game box. Graelyn nodded.

“Ah. Game night. Or whatever time it is.” She really had forgotten.

“Want to join in? Arch is just about to kill off the Girodins, which means he'll win and we can start a new round.” Graelyn hated game night. She avoided it at all costs whenever possible, and usually hid in her room saying she had work to do when it came up.

“Are top hats and mustaches period appropriate to the French Revolution?” She asked blandly.

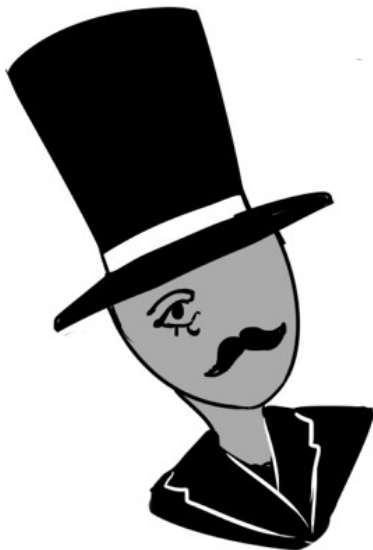
“No, we were playing 'Steam Trains of Callisto' before this, and we thought it'd be funny.” Layla said, holding up the game box, which had a man with a top hat and an exact replica of Arch's mustache on his face. Graelyn nodded again. “I'll watch.” She said plainly, and sat down, back straight, hands on her lap.

The game was fairly interesting to watch, if a bit predictable. Every player was a different faction in the French Revolution and had to try to get the other factions executed either one at a time, or all at once. Once a player died they got to play as the 'mob' and tried to screw everyone over. Graelyn didn't know

much about the French Revolution, and she couldn't tell if the game was actually educational or not. She was pretty certain that it was at least more educational than 'Steam Trains of Callisto'.

Arch was pretty good at the game, though he ended up losing to Yossara after she framed him for trying to smuggle an aristocrat to England. The whole table thought this was hilarious, for some reason, and Arch seemed pretty adept at making it funnier for the group by projecting weird things on his body, culminating in his own execution by guillotine displayed on his chest, where after his head was separated from his body and raised to the crowd, his mustache waggled, causing Jerry to fall out of his seat. Graelyn sat calmly, observing the whole affair.

Wiping a tear of joy, Yossara stuttered a bit



through the last bits of her laughter before asking,

“So, when did you get down here? I wasn't informed we were having-”

“He's a special project.” Graelyn cut in. “Mr. Aril wants to see how he works in the undersea environment.” Yossara frowned slightly, “And he left you to manage him?”

“He's not much trouble, getting the coffee doesn't take that much of my time. You guys have important work to do.”

“Of course.” She replied back.

“Speaking of which,” Dan said, “I'm actually ten minutes late for my shift. Not like Daria will care, but still.” He grabbed the top hat off of Arch and waved goodbye as he headed off. The others began packing up the games.

“Well, I hope your special project sticks around. He's ended up being a lot of fun.” Graelyn gave a faint smile.

“Well, the life of a special project is a weird one.” Arch said glumly, handing Jerry some cards. The game club headed out, and Arch looked over at Graelyn. He waggled the mustache. No reaction.

“So... What do you do for fun around here?”

“Not that, clearly. We have some time before things are ready.” She stood up, and gestured to him.

“Come and see.”

Arch looked at the mini-sub warily. “Are you sure it can take my weight?” Graelyn had already ran off to the lockers to get into a wet suit, and was re-tying her hair back as she walked out.

“Yeah, I'm sure. I managed to pull you up with one of those you know.”

“Still, I might fall through the bottom.” Graelyn shook her head.

“I checked the internal weight limits. You could fit the crew of a ship in there. Well, not by mass, but you get the picture.”

“Gotcha.” Arch climbed the ladder up onto the sub, which did unbalance it a bit, but didn't flip it, and slipped into one of the passenger seats. Graelyn dropped into it, and closed the hatch.

“So whats the name of this sub?”

“LX-23.”

“What do you call it?”

“LX-23.”

“You're serious?”

“I'm not good at coming up with names.” She said, flipping several switches, and Arch felt the sub roar to life beneath him before dampeners activated and the sub was silent as a 1910 film.

“This is where I go to escape.” The sub began to dive, and exited the city, its search lights cutting through the darkness. Graelyn fiddled with something on the touchscreen on the dashboard.

“Do you like music?” She asked. Arch shrugged, “Yeah, sure.”

She tapped a few things into it, and after a few moments of silence, Arch heard the sound of violins. The music started soft, then slowly rose like it was reaching towards the surface of the water, before diving quietly back down. As it played they surged through schools of fish more brilliant than rainbows, and through a rock trench that was filled with weird tube like creatures. As they did, a new movement started, this one more somber. Arch wasn't sure what wind instruments were playing, but

they wove in and out of the strings as though participating in some slow dance. The ocean seemed the perfect place for this song. Something large and dark slipped by in the distance. And then, the strings rose! He could tell Graylin pushed harder on the acceleration. It wasn't even fast, but after that feeling of darkness, it felt so much brighter. The piece closed, and Graelyn looked over at him expectantly.

"I liked it. What was it?"

"Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony."

"Oh. I don't think I've ever heard it before." She looked pleasantly surprised.

"Good. Most people say 'I thought the 5<sup>th</sup> was the one that goes 'dun dun dun DUN!?' but that's Beethoven. I've always loved Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup>, even though no one knows it. Its frustrating at times, but I suppose it makes it mine in a way. Still, I actually wish more people were familiar with it. You almost never hear it."

Arch thought a moment, "I'm not really familiar with what music people like."

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who would."

"I wonder though, it didn't have... A melody that sticks in your brain easily?"

"No, it doesn't. Its not catchy in the traditional sense, it doesn't have a hook. But it seeps into you. Or, at least it seeped into me." Graelyn stopped the sub, and held it steady over the trench they'd passed over before (they'd apparently made a loop) letting the fish swim by again.

"Do you have a favorite song, Arch?" Arch thought hard.

"I haven't really put thought into that before."

"No one has asked?"

"No one has asked." Graelyn pulled her legs up onto her chair and tucked them into her chest.

"Well then, special project, I'm all ears."

"I'd like it if you wouldn't call me that." Graelyn didn't look so much sorry as though she had updated an internal spreadsheet. "Understood, Archimedes."

"I guess... I like ride of the Valkyries by Wagner?"

"Richard Wagner. Interesting choice." Graelyn reached over and tapped the screen a few times, pulling up the song, and playing it.

"Is it a bad choice?"

"A lot of people don't like Wagner. He had a lot of views that haven't aged well at all, to put it nicely, and well, the Nazis were super fond of him."

"Nazis?" Arch said. Graelyn raised an eye brow.

"You're kidding right?" Arch shook his head.

"Should I... Know who the Nazis are?"

"Arch, do you know what that board game was based on?"

"Which one?"

"Robespierre."

"I'm guessing it was based on a story about some sort of revolt in a fantasy land called 'France'. The manual had a lot of background info. Was it based on a book series?" Graelyn's eyes got incredibly wide.

"Arch, you said you were born on a spacestation. What did they tell you there about the outside world?"

Arch looked away from Graelyn, out the window into the faintly lit sea of shadows, “They told us there wasn't one.”

On the way back, Arch asked to hear Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> again, and they were silent as the sub came back into port. Both of them waited for the last minute of the song to finish before disembarking. Graelyn went to the lockers to get changed again, and Arch stood out on the dock area, the only living thing in the room, silent as a manikin.

Graelyn emerged, dry and ready to go.

“Graelyn, one question.” She nodded for him to go ahead and ask.

“Did you go into my systems while I was asleep?”

“Yes. I didn't realize you were a person at first. I only discovered it when I realized your files were memories...” She felt a pang of guilt in her throat. She turned away from him, covering her face with her hands.

“I'm sorry.” He shook his head, “Its okay. I doubt you've seen anyone like me before. You were just examining a piece of junk you found.” He gently put a hand on her shoulder. She slowly lowered her hands.

“I don't feel like its that simple.”

“It is. I don't blame you, its okay, stop worrying about it. If I'm going to be down here, I'll need a mechanic anyways. Just consider that your first observation as my mechanic.” Graelyn exhaled, and nodded in relief. She felt like she had almost crossed a line drawn in the ocean's waves. She never wanted to hurt another person, even unintentionally. Taking a deep breath she put a smile on and turned back to Arch.

“So then Archimedes, are you ready to see why we built a city under the ocean?”

Near the center stood a man in an argyle sweater vest over a dress shirt, a tie loosely hanging around his neck. Despite the sign noting otherwise, he was smoking an electronic cigarette, the vapor rising up from it at regular intervals with a small blue glow.

“Who's the hunk of iron?” he asked, as though he had turned away from looking at the gyroscope.

“I think its something for a special ops project. I'm showing him around.” The man nodded, and glanced at the nape of Arch's neck as though that explained everything. A woman in a lab coat who Arch guessed was Polynesian in origin looked up from connecting a big tube to look incredulously at the man, “Really Mr. Aril? You're not going to inquire further than that.”

“I know what I'm doing. Get back to work.”

“So, what is this place?” Arch asked. The question caused Graelyn to grin wildly.

“This my new friend, is a portal between dimensions.”

“You can make those? I thought that was something out of science fiction?” said the towering cyborg who had survived the crushing depths of the ocean.

“You can.” Said the man at the center of the room. “Or rather, we can, and we will.”

“But really, you shouldn’t.” said the man who had suddenly appeared in the room along with an equally towering figure that was identical to Archimedes but black and with no coat. The man finally looked away from the gyroscope, his e-cig going limp in his lips. “How on Earth did you get in here?” Graelyn could hear Dr. Kalama mutter something about not asking that a minute ago, even as she backed up. “And where did you get one of those?” He continued, pointing at the black colored version of Arch.

“One of those?” Arch asked, getting no reply.

The man began looking around the room as though he was looking at a child’s science fair project.

“Decent, fairly decent. You haven’t stabilized the holding pattern though. No wonder you’re using such touchy methods of finishing the project. Not that it matters. I’m here to shut your operation down.”

Grae’s boss chuckled at that, “really? On whose authority?”

“I work for a people who regulate things like this. You’re about to mess with the barrier between universes, and that is something I’m afraid I simply cannot abide.

“I’m on the board of Directors of Centro systems. I can do what I want. That’s the reason we have a corpratocracy. I would have heard of an organization like yours. Surprise: I haven’t heard of such an organization.”

“A small species like yours wouldn’t have.”

Graelyn raised an eyebrow to that, as did Hiriwa, but Aril stayed stoic as though that was a normal thing to say in conversation.

“Even with one of those on your side, you’re outnumbered, and there are security systems that were never listed on the plans if you’ve been snooping on them. There’s no way you can take us all down.”

“Oh really? Did you forget where you are?” As if on cue, the doors began to open. All of them, all over the base. Graelyn scampered from Arch to a switch board which she began to operate at intense speeds. Arch could hear the water coming into the base, rushing through the halls, as the gyroscope started spinning. The man who had appeared began yelling at Graelyn’s boss, who yelled back, and the black carapaced Arch began to move towards Archimedes. Arch shifted his shoulders, and pushed out swords that were apparently loaded in his arms as his opposite marched towards him, casually batting a man in a lab coat from his path as he did so. The opposite’s blades extended, and he began to raise his arms in a fighting stance, till Arch felt someone tugging on his arm. He began following the tug by rote, only to turn and see Graelyn leading him towards the spinning gyroscope which was now.... Glowing. “I turned it on!” she yelled over the din, “You’d better hope I was right about Tubol Cain!”

“WHAT?”

The water surged in, smashing men and women off their feet, or forcing them to clutch for their lives to tubes and consoles. The yelling intensified, and Graelyn and Arch stood right in front of the spinning machine. It was hard to tell where Aril was, maybe he’d left. Graelyn saw Dr. Kalama knocked off her feet, and the hand of security guard reach out for her before a rush of water blotted them out. The water

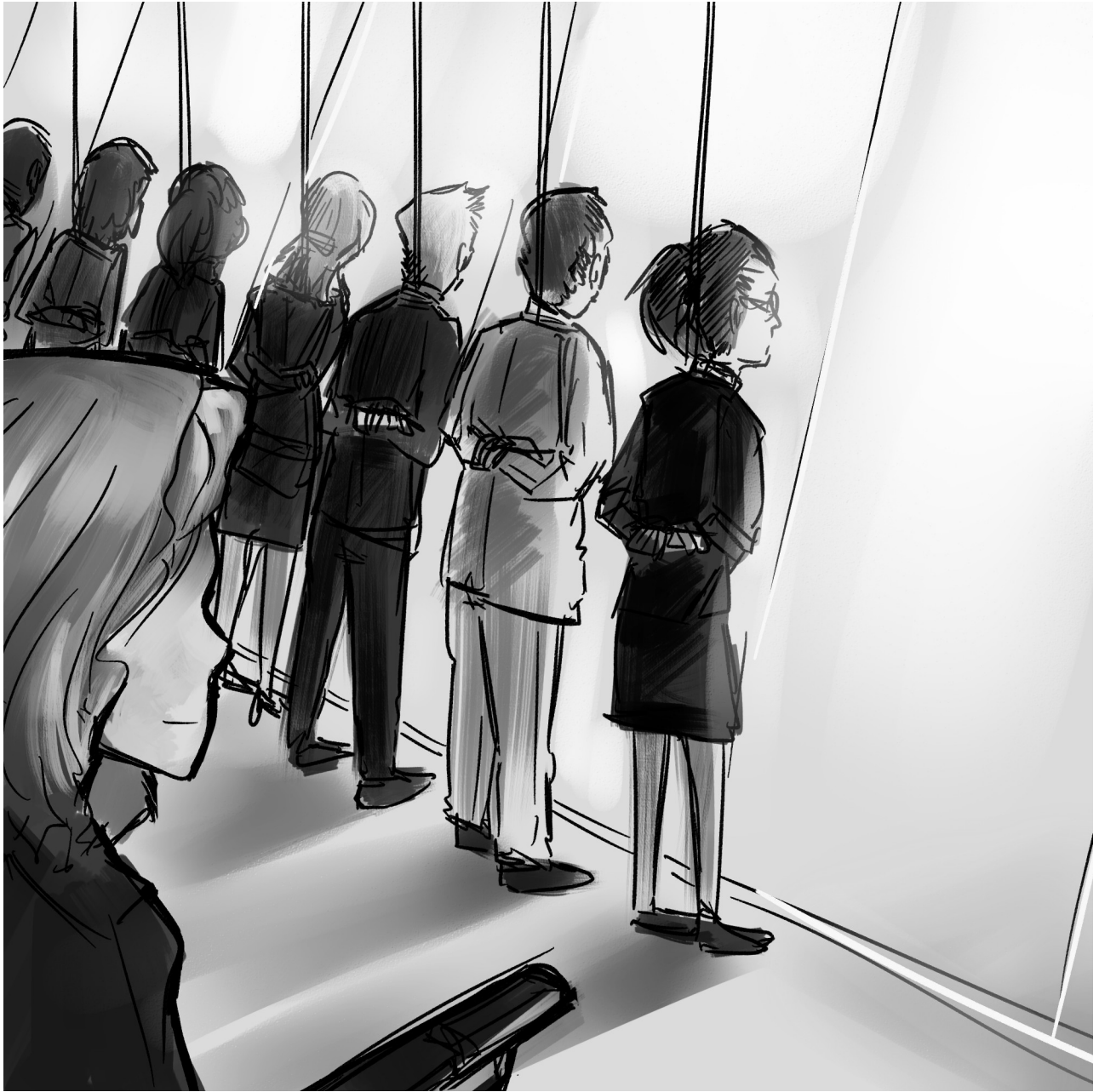


was rising rapidly.

“Jump in it.” It did not look exactly safe.

“Are you crazy?”

“We’ll drown!” He felt like saying, “No, you’ll drown.” But then again, yes, she would drown. And whatever this was, it was dangerous. She looked at him, waiting, the water rising around her feet, the dark Arch sloshing towards them. He felt her grab his arm as a wash smashed into her side. Arch looked at her one more time, she bit her lip, and he stepped into the spinning glow.



# Chapter 5: Alternatives

They spun through nothing. Graelyn felt her eyes take in light and things that weren't light. Her ears rang, and sang, and she heard colors and saw scents. Her dreams seemed to replace her blood, and her vomit was flower petals. The floor vanished and reappeared, and for a moment her feet were on a plane of endless glass with fine sand under it with a single moon in the sky. A man at a desk looked up at her from writing, and set his pen down.

She was then falling, clutching Arch's arm tightly as they dropped through airs filled with birds the size of jetliners with a hundred eyes. And then she dropped again, but this time onto metal.

It took her a second to move, to think, to do anything. Eventually, she heard the sound of her own breathing, that calm and saccharine in and out of air, calm trustworthy air. She looked down to see her glasses a blurry shape on a steel floor that seemed to be fading in and out between being red or silvery gray.

She tried to pick them up, but ended up collapsing. She pushed herself up to a sitting position, and grabbed her glasses, placing them back on her face. The floor was changing color because there was a flashing light. That should have been obvious, but clearly she wasn't entirely cognizant at the moment. Her hands were rough, like she'd been rubbing them on sandpaper, and her knees were a bit bloody to. Looking to her right, she saw a railing, and pushed herself up on it. Her legs could hold her up, though they were a bit shaky. Where was Mr. Sprinkles? Was he okay? She tried to shove the cat out of her head, but somehow she couldn't. The distance she was from the cat felt tangible, like she had touched it when she went through the portal. That was silly though, she was clearly not doing well, and there were more important things going on than her cat like... Wait-- where was Arch!?! She looked around, and spotted him a bit further down the corridor she was in (ah, okay, a corridor) trying to pull himself out of a dent in the wall he'd made. As she crept towards him, he succeeded.

"Hey." She said, raspily.

"You don't look so hot."

"Worry about me later. We're lucky we can breathe. We could have come out anywhere." That she was in an alternate dimension was not as exciting as she'd hoped. She could be anywhere, the people here could be nothing like those she knew, or not even people all together. That she was breathing and the corridor was built with handrails seemed to be a good sign though. Still, she was in another reality. The thought was awe inspiring, and she only wished she was more capable of enjoying it.

"Any idea where we are?" Graelyn shook her head, and kept walking down the corridor, till she reached a sign that she stared at for quite a bit of time.

"All Anubis Corp. Employees must make sure they are wearing proper protective gear before entering this area." Graelyn staggered forward a bit more, and saw there was a door next to it. She really was struggling.

"Anubis Corp. Its possible this means we're... In... Sorry I need to catch my breath... A universe where John Aril also exists and is also doing things like he was in our reality. At least probably." Arch reached out, and supported her.

"You got through all that pretty well it looks like."

"I'm pretty durable."

"Built Ford Tough."

"What?"

“Forget it.” The hallway didn't seem to lead anywhere they could get through, locked and sealed doors, so they returned to the door with the sign telling them they needed protective gear.

“Want me to go first?” Arch asked as Graelyn stood wobbly in front of it.

“Utterly.”

She pressed the button by the door, and a hand print scan appeared. Throwing caution to the wind, she placed her hand on it. The scanner took longer than those things normally did, but finally responded in a cheerful voice: “Welcome Director Scythes!”

“Director?!?”

“You must be a big shot in this reality.”

“We must have arrived in the future of it. No way I'd be a Director at 17.” She neglected to mention that being a director wasn't a surprise at all, just that the technology also could make portals through time. She hadn't anticipated it being able to do that, which meant that she had a lot of recalculating to do.

The door slid open. Graelyn and Arch saw a vast platform, stretching out into a beautiful view of the stars. Corpses littered the platform, strange corpses, some human, some... Decidedly not. There was a glowing light at the platform's end, and it seemed to be spiraling out of control. It reminded Graelyn of the light from the portal. Standing not very far in front of them was an older man, not elderly, but his hair had lost his color. Vapor trailed up from his eCig.

“...Mr. Aril?” The man turned, and looked her up and down.

“Miss Scythes. You're looking Twenty years younger. I'm impressed.”

Graelyn followed the handrails, staggering as the enter structure shook.

“Where are we Mr. Aril?”

“This is my great creation, a machine that can draw in anything I want from any reality. Unfortunately some people weren't as keen on it as me, and its going to explode. Maybe implode. Honestly it will be educational to find out which.” Arch walked ahead of them both, and looked at one of the corpses. It was a Korean man in a suit with mechanical parts interspersed all over him, his head tilting in Arch's grasp.

“So it worked, we latched onto your portal.” Graelyn almost sounded proud. Aril looked at her, and puffed again at his eCig. “Really. I'm impressed. I wasn't expecting any stowaways on my project.”

Graelyn smiled, not realizing there was some blood in between her teeth.

“Doesn't look like it was an easy journey for you.”

“Doesn't look like your facility is going to last the night.”

“Its not night, this is a spacestation.” That made sense.

“Oh.”

“But no, its not. I'll need to be getting off here soon-” He was cut off by a rush of metal that threw him and Graelyn against the walls. The dark Arch ran toward Arch, swords out. The two collided with the sound of a car crash-- swords jabbing and gnashing lightning fast at each other. Graelyn turned to see if Aril was alright, only to see him running far off into the distance. Graelyn got up, and ran toward the fury. She needed to save Arch, not that she really knew anything about him, but he was the only familiar thing here and that meant something. Looking at the corpses, she saw something she'd recognized from research, and picked it up. It was heavy, and she could turn it, but she managed to turn

it so she could access the selection screen, and point it in the general direction of the two Arches, tapping on the screen on the dark Arch over and over, who was going in for a blow at Arch's belly. The machine began to whirr, and then activated a powerful electromagnet and gravity distorter. Dark Arch looked at her for a moment, feeling a tugging and then flew back towards the wall smashing through it like a cannonball. Graelyn ran towards Arch, who looked impressed, taking his hand again and pulling him towards the violent blue swirl.

The dark Arch began to crawl out of the crumpled hole it was burrowed in. How much damage could he take? She and Arch ran. Hard. Behind her, she thought she saw a person in a strange gray sweatshirt, but she had to still be groggy. The dark Arch lurched forward.

“You can't seriously be thinking we go into another one of these.”

“Name another plan.” She tugged, he relented, and the two jumped into the blue swirl. She could see a face as she dived in, a red haired woman. She didn't recognize her at all.

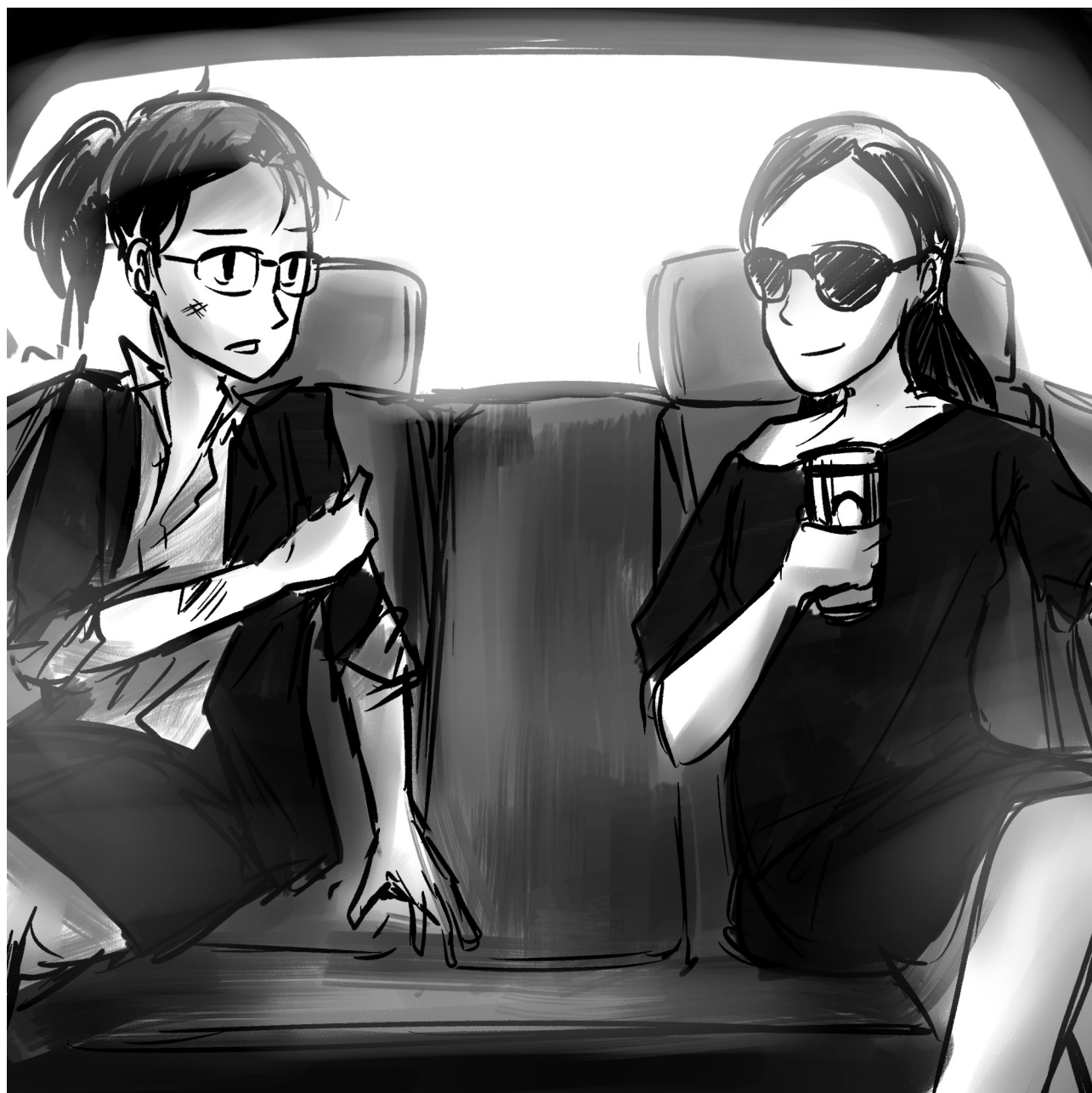
This time was worse. Her legs felt like they were being torn apart. Her eyes rolled back so far in her head they ached. Her senses blurred. She felt sick. She landed in a pile of rubble that used to be a wall, looking into a bathroom. She worked herself back to her feet, checking Arch was still beside her (he was).

She worked forward again, towards some voices coming from the end of the hallway. Loud clear voices, she recognized one but couldn't quite make it out. Working her way out an open doorway, she greeted the sight of other humans welcomingly for half a second, before the reality of the scene set in. She was high up in a skyscraper, and there were men and women there with guns. They were wearing sort-of-uniforms with matching patches that said “WRC”, like they were some sort of rag tag resistance. The wall in front of her was all glass, and she could see the Skyline clearly. She was fairly certain this was New York City. One of the people with guns was clearly in charge, a red-head with a beautiful round face and sharp chin, her hair short and practical. There were people lined up in front of the glass windows who were not armed. They were wearing suits. Many were sweating. There were nooses around their necks. Her eyes focused in on one in particular. A woman wearing a blue blazer, a blue skirt, a white blouse, and a black tie. Her lapel had a pin on it of a cat. She wore glasses over the small lines on her face, she was probably in her mid thirties.

The red-head spoke, and listed off a lot of names, but really Graelyn phased most of them out as she stared at the woman in front of her. “...John Aril, Vivian Marvel, and Graelyn Scythes, you are hereby sentenced to death by the World Revolutionary Council. May the gods have mercy on your souls.”

Graelyn rushed forward, towards herself, as the men and women with guns each kicked a member of the lined up people with suits through a glass pane. She met her own gaze for just a moment. She could see her pupil's grow wide. Graelyn watched herself fall out the window, the rope going taut as she disappeared out of view.





## **Chapter 6: Coffee Cat**

Kaitlin looked into the darkness of the cage, the all consuming shadow seemed at war with her eyes. "Okay, really no one has changed the bulb in there? It went out at 3 O'clock."

"Sorry." Jeff mumbled, rubbing his eyes, "Not exactly my best day ever." She rolled her eyes at him, useless as ever.

"Fine. Whatever." She'd have to do this herself, again. She went over to the supply maker, and tapped on the screen till the option for the type of bulb in the animal cages came up. Selecting it, the machine went to work printing the light bulb for her, and it popped out onto her waiting palm from the fabricator. It took seconds, the damn thing was horrificly slow. Kaitlin went to the cage, and opened it up, reaching into the ceiling of it, and unplugging the dead bulb before replacing it with the new one. It lit up to reveal a bland looking cat that blinked its eyes as though it had just been awoken from a pleasant nap. "Poor thing, you've been in the dark because Jeff was a big lazy meany."

"Hey!" Jeff yelled from across the room. She reached in and scratched the cat's ear, it closed its eyes and made a soft rumbling purr as she continued.

"What's your name pretty cat?" She lifted its tag up to reveal the answer, "Mr. Sprinkles. That's quite the name."

The cat had no discernible reaction to her running dialogue.

"I wonder who left you here huh? You're such a pretty cat." No reaction.

"Hopefully someone comes in and adopts you soon. Poor thing. Being alone is the worst thing in the universe."

Graelyn heard herself yell. Maybe there was a word in there, like "No!", but it could have just been a yell. She couldn't remember regardless. Her eyes were fixed on the point where she had dropped off the side of the building. The rope hung there, swinging gently back and forth like a cradle. The woman with the red hair turned towards her, her eyes open wide, "What on Midgard?" Graelyn took a few steps backwards instinctively.

"You're dead." The woman said to Graelyn, as a very pure statement of fact.

Graelyn turned and ran. She realized she'd passed Arch, and that he was now following behind her.

"We need to get out of this building." Arch said. Graelyn nodded, she found she couldn't speak, so she just pointed downwards.

"No chance. They probably have this place locked down." They hit a corner, and rounded it into another room filled with glass where two women with rifles were playing a boardgame. Through the window, another skyscraper could clearly be seen. The sound of footsteps behind them was deafening.

"Don't argue. Get on my back." Arch ordered, and Graelyn complied, as he squatted down, wrapping her arms around his head and her legs around his torso. She was too shocked to really protest regardless, but his plan made sense, sort of. Then again, she felt panic run through her. He was actually going to do this. This was crazy!

Then the bullets started.

The glass in front of them took several hits, as did a potted plant, and Graelyn heard one ping off of



Arch's calf. Then Arch began to move. It was like he'd been unleashed, his legs pumping like pistons, his feet charging forward. The two women began to reach for their rifles. Arch shot forward like a bullet, tearing up the carpet with his charge towards the window-- and smashed through it. Graelyn tucked her head down to avoid the glass, and saw the city underneath her, Arch's feet hanging beneath her like she was looking down into the water from a boat. The buildings and people went by in an instant, and she felt them falling in an arc. She braced herself, and felt the impact hard. They smashed through the next pane of glass, and Arch tumbled onto the floor, Graelyn losing her grip and tumbling off onto the lush carpet. Her heart was pounding like a hammer. She knew the adrenaline was staving off the feeling, but as she held her hands up above her face she could see they were littered with shards of glass.

“Graelyn? Graelyn you need to get up!” She felt large metalish hands pulling her into a sitting position, and she realized she didn't have her glasses as he was very blurry.

“I don't know what's going on but we have to keep mov-” Arch was cut off by a streak of fire and smoke that caught him in the torso, and pushed him back from Graelyn, out another window, and into the air. The streak then exploded, and she realized it had to be a rocket. Graelyn couldn't make noises, her voice was lost somewhere inside her and it wouldn't come out. She scampered up, and turned around to see the blurry shape of a vertical take off craft, a woman with red hair lowering the barrel of a rocket launcher.

Graelyn bolted, her instinct to escape kicking in stronger than she'd ever felt in her life. Was Arch dead? She had no idea. He'd survived the depths of the ocean, maybe he could survive a rocket launcher? She didn't know. She didn't even know where she was going, as her feet took her down an empty hallway to the emergency stairwell where she barreled down it, slamming into the metal railings and probably pushing bits of glass further into her body. Where was the damn cat? What was going on? Was she going to die? She tried to push all these thoughts out of her head, but she couldn't. She just kept running, her lungs were burning at this point, her legs felt like they were going to collapse, but she kept descending the stairwell, floor after floor, till she saw a nondescript door by the wall and shoved it open into an alley filled with trash. She kept running, out the alley, into a street where she could see some Centro company soldiers were exchanging bullets and plasma bolts with some of the Revolutionaries. She ran the opposite way. Okay, so she knew this was a full scale revolution then. She wasn't sure how long she could keep going before she collapsed, she was probably losing a lot of blood wasn't she? That couldn't be good. At that moment, she couldn't go any further. Her legs gave out, and she fell onto the pavement. This time, she got up quickly, but she didn't keep running, her head was woozy. She saw a black car coming through the fray, dodging a flaming barrel and clipping a running soldier from one side or the other.

“Hey, Graelyn.” She turned to the voice. She saw the fuzzy shape of a gray hoodie with something yellow on the crest of the hood, shorts... She'd seen that shape before.

“Come with me. I can get you out of here.” The shape held out a hand. The car pulled up to the other side of her, and a window rolled down.

“Get in. Honestly, darling, you should have flagged me down.” It was a woman's voice, and Graelyn found the candor of her somehow reassuring. She acted on impulse, and ran into the open car door. The car door closed, and the gray hoodied figure lowered its hand.

“Well, you are a mess. And great deal younger than I expected. Been getting gene therapy Graelyn?” Graelyn squinted at the shape. It looked like she had big alien bug eyes.

“Who are you?” The woman make a slurpy sound, and Graelyn realized she had a gigantic iced coffee.

“Ah. Alexis, please fabricate a new pair of glasses for our dear Miss Scythes.”

“Of course, Mistress!” A voice said through a speaker, and there was a short buzzing sound, followed by Graelyn feeling a hand place an object in her own palm. She slid the glasses on- they were a perfect prescription. Her injuries were pretty bad, and she was getting blood all over the leather seats. “Alexis, send back the medical kit as well. And make a note to have the car sent to the detailer's if it's not obliterated in the revolution.” A box shot out of a hole in the wall, and the woman in front of her, who looked like a thin magazine model wearing big shades and a fashionable dress handed Graelyn the box, which she opened to find packets of blue gel. Graelyn picked it up, and looked back at the woman puzzled.

“Do you not recognize them?” the woman asked.

“I've never seen one before in my life.” The woman looked either confused or disappointed, it was hard to tell.

“Just put some of the gel on your injuries. Actually, a lot of it, I'll be realistic.” Graelyn ripped open the packet and began doing that. She felt a tingling on the back of her hands as she applied it, and the glass shards seemed to start dissolving! She stared down in awe.

“That's incredible! Are those nanobots?”

“Yes, that's right. I'm surprised you don't recognize them.”

“Are they common here?”

“No dear, you invented them. They cost a fortune.” Graelyn looked down at her hands, which were being stitched up before her eyes. “You'll still need some new blood, but you'll be alright.”

The car did a swift turn around a corner, and there was the sound of an explosion outside the window.

“Mistress Moore, I'm going to be taking the 54th Street route. It looks like there is a fight down 52nd.”

“Of course, Alexis. Use your best judgment.” She sipped more of the coffee, and dug into a bag for a biscotti, which she delicately dipped into her coffee after lifting the lid. “So, the billion credit question is: who exactly are you? Because Graelyn Scythes would never *not* take credit for that nano-cream. In fact, I daresay her pride is one of her most insufferable aspects.”

“My pride is not insufferable!”

“My point, precisely.” She smirked smugly at Graelyn, who grumpily pursed her lips as the woman

took another bite of her biscotti, seeming to mull something over with every chew. A bomb went off in the distance. “Now, Graelyn has never made a clone of herself. Personally, I believe a properly modified clone is an indispensable asset for women of our caliber. But she never had one made — it’s not in her nature. Yet here you are. Which means I need an explanation.”

Graelyn looked out the tinted window. There were a group of fighters behind some rubble shooting at what must have been some sort of tank, before the car zoomed out of view of it all again.

“I am Graelyn Scythes. I’m just not in the right place.” She rubbed her temple, “You may find this hard to believe, but I’m from another reality. One where John Aril invented a way to cut into other dimensions.”

“No, that makes sense. I’m familiar with the science behind it. I actually put some money into that endeavor, but it never panned out. Besides, Graelyn has never been good enough an actress to pull off the confused and disheveled... thing,” she gave a waggle of her hand in Graelyn’s general direction. “You’re doing, and there’s no one else with the skill or motive to impersonate her so convincingly and come up with such a story. Biscotti?”

“Uh, sure.” Graelyn said, and found one of the cookies in her hand, and a small bottle of iced tea rising out of her arm rest.

“You said...” Graelyn began, her brain felt like it was sloshing back and forth in her skull and she couldn’t seem to find the words in there for a moment, “you said a modified clone?”

“It’s a fairly basic principle, you can’t have someone just as clever as you mucking about instead of taking your orders. So you pay handsome women and men in designer lab coats to make them more docile. Of course, that golden age is over as far as this planet goes.”

The woman tipped her sunglasses down, peering out the window and heaving a sigh before returning to her coffee, which Graelyn noticed was silently stirring itself. “I’m afraid I’m done with Earth. It was getting a bit stale anyway, really not my style. Too stuffy, too many ideologues. Is there a revolution where you come from?”

Graelyn couldn’t help but think she was taking everything way too well, especially as an aircraft careened into a building in the distance, the explosion left a blinding flash in its wake. This woman didn’t even flinch.

“How are you so... Reserved?” Graelyn said after the jolt from the plane crash had worked through her system.

The woman gave a curt bark of a laugh. “Darling, empires rise and fall, but the truly exceptional keep going. I’ve had a way off of this planet for years, and I already have some say in the working of the Revolution. Money works wonders, even with Communists as it turns out, so I’ll still be able to keep track of things and minimize my asset loss. But as I asked: revolution. Your world. A thing?”

“No, not seriously. There are some scattered groups but they’re not organized enough to really achieve much.” The woman on the train who’d asked her to join that revolutionary group came back to her, and she could almost feel an alternate life where she’d said yes in her fingertips. She shook her hand as if

that could make her forget the sensation.

“I'm still surprised you believe me, that I'm from another reality.”

“This isn't my first rodeo. Not that I enjoy rodeos, mind you. I always thought Aril might be able to achieve his dream. If there is a reality where everything is possible, then he must have done it somewhere. Just a pity you showed up in this place at such a barbaric time. Speaking of which, there must be another version of you around here somewhere.”

Graelyn turned her face away from the woman, “Yes. They executed her.”

“Pity. A waste of a good brain. Even if her hubris did border on the intolerable. Ah well, c'est la vie. I'm nearing my stop. You can come with me, or I can let you off somewhere else.” Graelyn turned back to her.

“Where are you going?”

“To the rim. I own a moon there. A fairly nice one, as it were. You're welcome to join me.”

Graelyn felt a flood of feelings: going with this woman, this 'Mistress Moore' would probably be the safest route possible for her. She'd certainly not be on the hit list of a revolution. But two other thoughts left her unable to take the offer up. She didn't know if Arch was alive or dead, and if he was alive, even charred and barely living, she had gotten him into this and needed to get him out of it. Second off, if the version of Aril in this reality hadn't developed the technology to make portals... It could be because Graelyn hadn't interned with him. It was a somewhat narcissistic thought certainly, but she wasn't above thinking it. If that were the case, this Graelyn might still have her cat. Maybe the cat was dead though? It was apparently sometime in the future from her own time, the dead Graelyn had been much older than her. But the two chances were things she could not let go of-- those possibilities took over any certainty of safety, and she shook her head.

“No, I'm afraid I can't. I have responsibilities here.” The woman raised an eyebrow.

“So soon after you pop into a new reality? You are quick for commitment. Ah well, your loss. Shall I let you off at your apartment? If I know the you from this reality, and I do, there's bound to be something useful in there. Or at the very least something interesting.”

“That sounds acceptable.” The car pulled to a stop.

“I knew it would. It's been real, alternate reality teenage Graelyn. Mind the bombs.” As if on cue, the car door popped open, and promptly slammed behind her as she stepped into the sunlight. As she stared up at the building the car's window rolled down, and the woman lowered her sunglasses to look at Graylen in the eyes. She hadn't gotten a good look at them before, but they looked off somehow to her, as if eyes here were different somehow. She felt interrogated. “And Graelyn?”

“Yes?”

“Do take a biscotti for the road.” The woman extended a biscotti to Graelyn with a perfectly manicured hand. She took a hold of it as if she was being handed a baton, and in an instant there was only one hand

on the biscotti. The woman raised her sunglasses and the window slid shut. With a screech of rubber the car sped off at top speed, only getting faster, till it made a wide turn into another avenue. The wind kicked at her hair, and Graelyn realized that she was totally alone on the street.

Her legs felt a lot more stable, after that blue goo, and she didn't have any trouble walking up to the building, where she put her John Arilhand up to the scanner on the door, and waited for the door to greet her with its pleasant, "Good afternoon, Director Scythes, can I do anything to make your return home more pleasant?"

"Yes." She replied curtly, "I can't remember my room number, could you remind me?"

"Of course!" it replied.

Graelyn smiled, and stepped through into another life.



**FOLLOW HER SONG**

## **Chapter 7: Viva la Impact**

He tumbled through the air, again. He'd lost count of exactly how many times that had happened today. He'd been lucky to, the rocket hadn't detonated when it hit him for some reason, just kept pushing, and his processors worked faster than his brain in order to let go of the projectile before it detonated of its own accord. He watched the explosion above him as he fell, and even though he was really lucky to have not been killed by the high yield military technology, heard a little voice in the back of his head saying, "well, you survived the missile only to crack like an egg on the ground, so lucky is relative." He sighed behind the mask, and spread himself out. His body actually could easily take this hit if he took the right precautions. He was made to take hits. He needed to time this perfects though. His internal sensors told him he'd hit terminal velocity, which wasn't good, but it did set clear perimeters for his landing. He neared the ground, a nice big area of tiled concrete, and just before he would hit, activated the weapons in his hands and feet. He pushed the energy out full force, draining the energy cells, and ruining the concrete he was over, which pushed him up enough that he went two feet up in the air, and then dropped back down with a loud 'clunk'. A few feet wasn't so bad.

Standing back up, brushing concrete dust off of himself, he examined his surroundings to see a small group of the fighters in rag tag uniforms with their jaws open, or eyes wide, or both, who appeared to be tying up a smaller group of uniformed soldiers who were equally shocked, their hands on their heads.

"Uh, don't mind me." Arch said inadequately, "I'm uh, just passing through." He gave them a thumbs up, and tried to casually walk away.

"Wait. Um, don't move?" One of the rag tag group said, raising a gun. Arch sighed, again.

"Can we not do this please?"

"Whose side are you on?" The man yelled back at him. His face was covered in a thin layer of grime from battle, his stubble sticking out from it.

"No one's side. I'm really not interested in this fight." Arch took a few steps away from the group. He just couldn't catch a break.

"You're either on the side of the Revolution, or the side of the oppressors, there is no inbetween in a warzone."

"I mean, traditionally don't medical staff—never mind forget it. Look, I don't know what you're standing for. I don't know what your revolution is, I just need to find my friend." The man did something to the gun, Arch honestly wasn't sure if he was cocking it or taking a safety off, it didn't look like either, but it got the man's point across.

"Who's your friend?"

"No one you know."

"Civilians have been evacuated from the area."

"Have they? Great. Well she's a curious girl and you know what they say about curiosity."

"It killed the cat."

"It did? Okay, actually I didn't know they said that about curiosity, consider me educated. My point here is—"

The man's walkie-talkie buzzed. He answered it.

"Really?" He said into it. Then, "Right."

He raised his gun again.

“Sir, you're under arrest for interfering in the execution of known criminals. Your safety is guaranteed if you co-operate.” Arch weighed his options: he could definitely take all of these troops. His internal processors had already mapped out how his body would move, how he could disarm each of them in turn. It had laid out different movement plots for killing, disarming, or capturing. But he also knew this was a group who knew his location, and who had vertical take off and landing craft (a vtol for short). In close enough proximity they only hadn't shot him again because of his proximity to their own troops. He needed to make sure Graelyn was okay, but there was more than one way to secure her safely.

“Okay, fine, I surrender. But I want to talk to your Commanding Officer. I need to make sure my friend is okay.”

“Oh don't worry,” the man replied, “she wants to talk to you to.”

Alice MacLeod stepped off the vtol, and handed off the rocket launcher to Xhang the special weapons expert, who was waiting for her to get off the thing. “The rocket's are defective, they probably sabotaged the software remotely since they couldn't get them out of our hands.” Xhang nodded, he looked exhausted, so Alice put a firm hand on his shoulder. “You're doing good work here Xhang, we wouldn't have been able to use any of these if it weren't for you. He smiled a bit, and she kept moving. She had a war to win still. Chantelle approached her from the door to the base, and began talking to her as soon as she was within clear listening distance. “Progress taking the city has been swift ma'am, word that most of the board of Directors are dead caused half their remaining forces to lay down arms all over the world. Unfortunately the other half are pretty entrenched.” Alice wiped her brow with her sleeve as she walked and nodded. “Half is better than I was expecting to be honest. That's great news.” Chantelle nodded, and then ran down some other information that wasn't much of a surprise. Long story short-- they were winning but taking out the fortified enemy positions was going to be tough, especially if she wanted to avoid civilian casualties.

She wanted more than anything to avoid civilian casualties.

“There is one more thing ma'am,”

“Please, just Alice.”

“Yes ma'am. The man you shot with the rocket survived the fall.” Alice stopped walking, and turned to fully face Chantelle.

“Excuse me? Did you just say he survived a fall out of the upper levels of a skyscraper?”

“I'm saying he fell, hit the ground, and then surrendered to some of our soldiers while trying to make some lame jokes. I said you'd want to talk to him.”

“Lame is an ablest slur Chantelle. Please don't use it.”

“Yes ma'am.”

“And call me Alice, please.”

“I'll try to remember, Alice.”

Archimedes hadn't actually ever been in a jail cell before. The guards weren't quite sure what to make of him. They'd taken his coat, and tried to disarm him, but finding nothing of value in the coat and no way to access his internal systems gave up and gave him back the coat. He found the experience somewhat comforting, actually. Archimedes had grown up in enclosed spaces on the space station



Ahnerabe, his room had been smaller than this cell. Everything on Earth had seemed to large when he got there—skyscrapers were towering over him filled with spacious apartments the tenants thought were tiny. There was no roof outdoors, and the sky seemed to go on forever into a heinous blue. He felt overwhelmed sometimes walking around out there, but he had acclimated enough to get through it. No one could see his face anyways. No one could tell when he was uncomfortable, and that was the way he liked it. Sitting there, cramped, he could finally exhale, and if he shut off his visual receptors off, it was nearly home.

Nearly.

A knock shattered the illusion.

“Hey, you've got a visitor.” An invisible voice said through the door.

“Let them in.” He responded calmly.

“She wants to meet you in a more comfortable location.” Arch looked around the cell, and turned off his microphone as he sighed, before turning it back on.

“Well, lead me there then.”

They didn't cuff Arch as they walked him down the hall, which showed either kindness or a basic knowledge of his mechabiology, and that he was clearly there because he chose to be. A glimmer of reason gave Arch a nudge of hope.

Alice MacLeod had a warm cup of tea, and an expansive view of the jailyard. Alice had been to jail many times, for protesting, for stealing food for her family. She had never been to prison though, and she'd always been in and out of the doors fairly quickly. Bailed out by her dad, or mom, or Jack, or any number of family friends. Standing here on the other side of the wall felt wrong.

*We've won, she thought. We're the ones running prisons now. Good gods, if we get this wrong we could end up just as bad as the people we overthrew.* She sipped her tea with a little less certainty until a knock came at the door. The woman who stepped in wasn't Chantelle, it was a different woman in revolutionary fatigues, one she didn't recognize. “I'm sorry, I was expecting someone else.” She said with as much certainty as she could.

“Sorry ma'am.”

“Alice.”

“Right, well, I asked to bring the prisoner up to you so I could give you the report myself. I'm Maria, I'm from the Central and South American branch.”

“Oh, well you've come a long way.” She nodded briefly.

“I came to let you know we've brought Director Manuel Salazar here for trial.” Alice lowered her tea and raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me, for trial? Cells were given explicit instruction to execute the Centro Systems Board of Directors upon capture. This is a revolution, not a parking dispute.”

“With all do respect, Alice, you don't understand the situation on the continent. Executing Manuel without a trial would have totally destroyed the faith we've managed to instil in our followers there.” Songbird stared back at Maria, her brow furrowed, and then loosened.

“Of course. We're far away from there, keeping the revolution together and preventing a civil war is of the utmost importance right now. I hope you also understand the necessity of executing the Centro

Directors.”

“...The necessity you feel is apparent to us, yes. On that front, you'll be pleased. There are only two survivors.”

“Who is the second?”

“Ariadne Moore has fled off world, we're not entirely sure, but it looks like she'd made arrangements with a criminal collective on the rim to hole her up.” Alice nodded, it was unfortunate, but not unexpected. Getting all but two of them was, to be fair to herself, more than any one on the World Revolutionary Council had estimated they could realistically catch. Manuel Salazar would be dead soon anyways, his trial would be a magnificent work of theatre, they just had to make sure their theatrics paid off.

“Thank you for the report, Maria.” Alice said, putting on a politic smile.

“You're welcome. I'm sure people back home will be impressed I met the famous Songbird of Liberation.” She gave a dismissive gesture.

“I didn't chose that name, it sounds too grandiose anyways.” Maria nodded, “Anyways, I have a prisoner you wanted to talk to.”

Arch had been waiting outside the door patiently with his guards, and had taken to amusing them by showing off different patterns on his carapace, taking off his coat so he could show off as much of it as possible.

“Do a lava flow!” a stubbly man said. He complied, and the group of soldiers erupted into shouts of jubilation.

“That's amazing man!” A woman said, “Er, you are a man right.” Arch shrugged.

“I am most of the time. Not all, but whatever. Not sure there is a word for that.”

“Like, Genderfluid?”

“Sure. Maybe.”

“Waterfall!” Another voice yelled, and Arch laid the pattern over himself, his whole body projecting the image of a rolling waterfall over it. The group erupted again, as the door opened back up.

“What exactly is going on here?” The group froze, and fell quickly into line. Arch threw his coat on, and found a hat being shoved on his head as he did so, “Thanks for the show, bro.” The stubbly man said as he did so.

“Nothing ma'am.” The woman who'd asked for his gender said. Maria screwed her lips up, and inspected the group.

“Alright, prisoner, go on in. Songbird awaits.”

Alice tapped the console that was supposed to select music for the suite. The machine was supposed to take voice commands, but was rejecting every one that she tried to tell it. She guessed the thing was only supposed to accept certain people's voices, and after a bit of cussing, she'd found the touch screen she was looking for. She quickly input the correct data, and then stared, unsure of what to put on at first. After some thought, she chose a classical playlist a CEO had uploaded to the system. The sound of strings filled the room, and she rose to her full height just in time for the door to open and the strange metal man from earlier to enter in.

“Ah, welcome. Please make yourself comfortable.” The man sat down on a large cushy sofa, and she wondered how exactly he wasn't breaking the thing.

“My name is Alice MacLeod, I'm sure by now you've heard of me.”

“Not really, I mean, I did a few seconds ago. And you shot me with a rocket. But other than that, no.” He paused, and without a hint of sarcasm asked, “Do people normally shoot strangers with rockets here?”

“No.” Alice said. She wasn't sure what else to say, “Who might you be?”

“Archimedes Artemis Von Ahnerabe.” He stood up, and made a sweeping bow, including pulling his cap off in a broad sweep before replacing it, “Well, what do you want to know about me? I'm afraid I'm still trying to get myself placed here. He seemed to focus on the music. Even with no facial expressions, she seemed to sense he recognized it.

“I have a lot of questions. For one you seem awful cavalier about getting shot at with a rocket.”

“It wasn't that bad. I'll gladly answer all of them, though I also have a request.” She pushed her lips out a little.

“Sure. Lets start with that.”

“I have a friend, a 17 year old girl. I need to make sure she is okay.”

“Seventeen years old you say?” Songbird brought up a hologram with a snap of Graelyn running into the room people were getting executed in. Arch had been a half second behind her, and there he was in 3D as well, with Songbird standing there in front of them with a shocked expression. He felt a touch of luck that the hologram was shown after the other person who looked like Graelyn had already disappeared. He didn't want to see the execution again.

“See, I think she might get confused for someone else.”

“Bring up Graelyn Scythes.” The machine refused to follow her command, and Songbird cursed again before squatting down next to a screen and putting in a command manually. A picture of an older Graelyn came up. She was standing next to a bunch of people in lab coats Arch didn't recognize, clearly positioned as their superior.

“This woman you mean?”

“See this is kind of what I was worried about.”

“Then explain it to me. What is Graelyn Scythes, who I personally executed, doing alive and seventeen years old guarded by a cyborg built by Nojpeten Inc. over twenty years ago, according to your tag.” He tilted his head to the side like a bird.

“I wasn't built by Nojpeten Inc.? I was built on Ahnerabe station.”

“I've never heard of that.”

“Its beside the point I-” The music began to loop, playing the same song again. Songbird looked at the computer like she was going to kick it.

“I know this song.” Arch said, “Graelyn played it for me. Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. I thought I'd recognized it.”

“Its beautiful.” Alice said, “Though I'm surprised I've never heard it before.”

“I was to.” They sat there, letting the music seep into the room. First it hit their ear drums, because that's where music always looks for first, but then it went into the windows and the birds outside became notes on the staff. It sank into the couch that shouldn't have supported Arch, and it became its

strength. "Hold in there," whispered the bass. The violins flooded the air-ducts, and the flutes made their way in between the folds of the carpet. The room took on the air of the Symphony, and it became hard to disconnect the two from each other.

"This is Graelyn's song then? Your friend's hidden melody?"

"I suppose it's something inside her, yes. Something she can't express but Mozart wrote down as a bunch of notes before any of us were born. Something lucky like that." Songbird shook her head, and took a seat in a practical faux leather chair.

"I'm afraid it's anything but lucky. You have confirmed your friend is Graelyn Scythes. You have confirmed that this is her favorite song, which I knew already I'm afraid. She paid the Moscow Philharmonic to play it four years ago. And yet, you want me to think your friend is not someone I'm looking for, when I am indeed looking for Graelyn Scythes. Indeed, I thought I'd killed her."

Arch was silent. His face was silent. His body language was absent entirely, and might have been playing hookey. Arch spoke his next words surely. Carefully. Like a cat walking out a skyscraper window.

"What if I told you that she was not Graelyn Scythes, but was Graelyn Scythes. That here, where you are, she is not, but she is somewhere else."

"Explain." She said curtly.

"Do you know about the other world's theory?"

"That outside our own universe there are other ones, where every other possible existence is happening. Somewhere I lost the Revolution. Somewhere I went to prison. Somewhere humans have discovered aliens by now, or can't creal."

"Wait what, sorry, I know I'm the one who is supposed to be trying to explain stuff right now, but what the heck is creal?" Songbird shifted in her seat.

"Uh, you know, crealing? You know...?" She threw her hand out in front of her like she was trying to explain her hands.

"Do you have a dictionary or something?" She dismissed that.

"How can you not know what crealing is? Haven't you ever done it?"

"I've never heard of it before."

"It's..." She took a moment, "It's like, when you're going to do something and you want to do it really well, so you push a part of yourself really hard, and then you're focused on it. Your ability to do that one thing grows, and you're better at that one thing for a short time. You know, Creeling."

"So it's like a biomodification?" Alice looked indignant and shocked.

"What? No of course not, every human has had it for as long as humans have been humans. Dolphins have it to, for what it matters. You have it. Graelyn has it."

"Is this like, a recent discovery?"

"No! Every human ever has had it. You're messing with me." She looked angry. "Stop playing with me. I am not here to play games with every little counter-revolutionary who wants have their fun before they meet their end." Her eyes bore into him. The music changed movements with perfect timing.

"Okay well, uh. I'm not playing with you. I'm from another universe. Another reality. Graelyn was part of some experiment to cut a hole into another reality, and it worked. In fact it sort of worked too well, because we're here and we don't have a way back."

“A project to cut through realities? I've never heard of that.”

“Well, maybe it didn't work here. Graelyn was working for some guy named John Aril--”

Alice looked interested, or puzzled, “Graelyn never worked for Aril. She worked for Manuel Salazar.” Arch pointed, and made a sort-of-snappy sound as he did so. “Ah! See, alternate reality. So she isn't the Graelyn you're looking for, she's a different Graelyn, and you shouldn't kill her, because she is innocent in all this, and so am I.” He tried to make a gesture to show he was done with his speech, and it came out looking like he was going “ta-da!”

“I find this difficult to believe to say the least.”

“Why don't you... Crealg about it?”

“Crealg. And... That isn't how it works.”

“See, I have no idea how it does.”

“Let me explain something to you, Archimedes. I've been the leader of this revolution since the government jailed my father for treason.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yes, he was freed last year in the siege of-- I'm getting off track. I've seen Centro Systems do anything within their power to maintain their control over this world. They've killed their own people, they've shot us with drones, they've burned down towns. I would put absolutely nothing past them. The technology to make a person look infinitely younger has existed for a long time now, as has the technology to make clone replicants of a person at any age. Of course, such things are very expensive. But which is easier for me to believe: that your friend is really Graelyn Scythes, and a replicant of her was killed? Or that this version of her is from another dimension? I find it more likely to be the former. Its also possible that your version of Graelyn is a replicant that broke loose and just thinks she is Graelyn Scythes, but we'll be able to tell that when we take her into custody.”

Arch leaned in, “So... You're taking her into custody? Not killing on sight?”

“You haven't convinced me of your story. But I'm not in the business of killing innocent people. That's what this Revolution was founded to stop. If your friend is really innocent, she will be fine. She'll get a fair trial just like anyone else.

“A trial?” Arch rose.

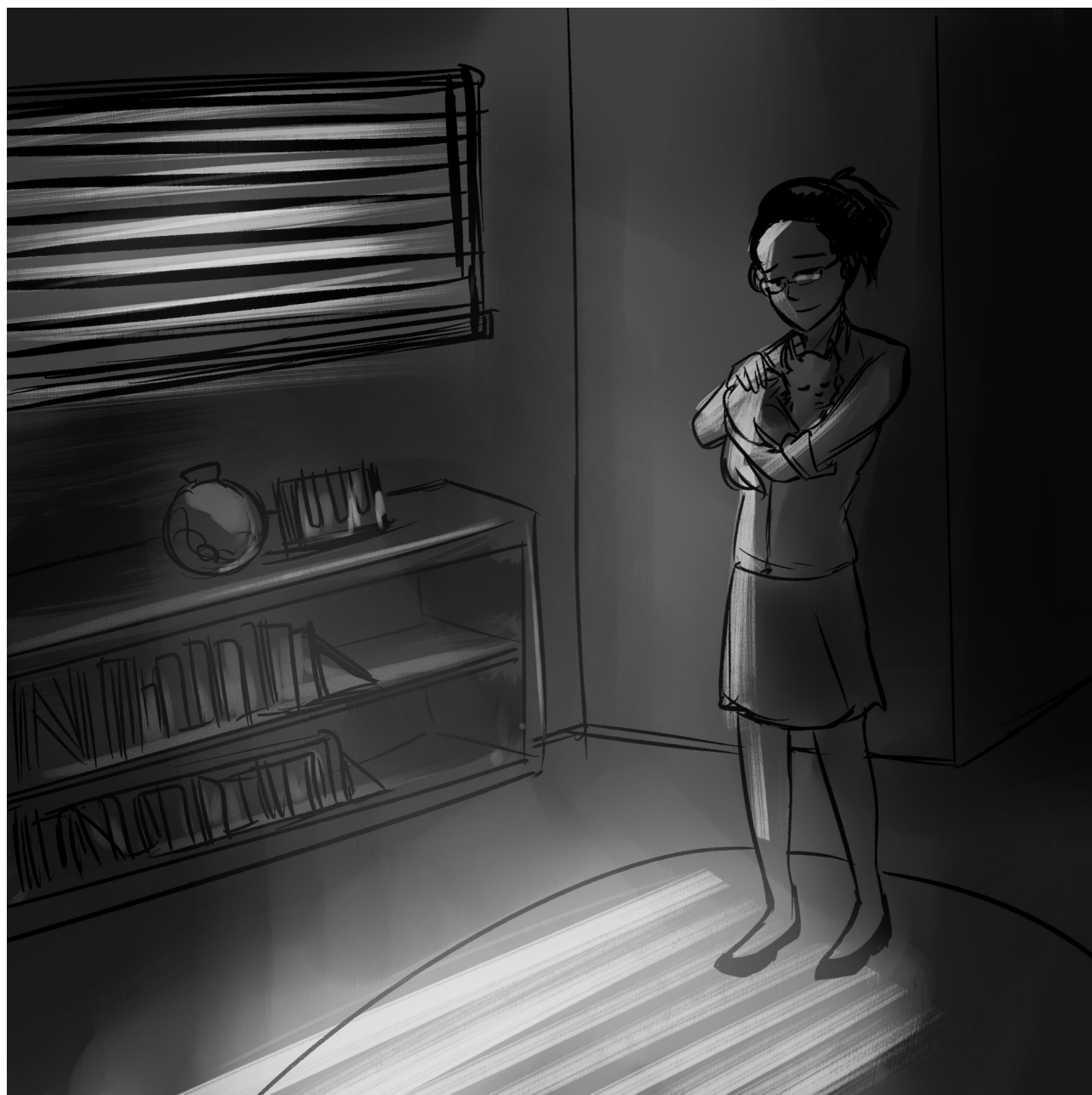
“How else do you decide who is innocent and guilty? Do you really think the rest of the World Revolutionary Council would be willing to accept my word she was innocent even if I did believe you? As it is, you're not wanted for any crimes, and while you did attempt to aid an enemy of the state, I don't think you're a danger. After all,” She said standing up, “You helping us is probably the bet way to ensure her guaranteed safety. Because we know where she is.”

She walked out the door. Arch watched the door shut. On the back of the door was a poster, bold red with a black outline of Songbird's face. The word's “Follow Her Song.” Were written beneath the image. The still face of Songbird stared back at him.

He supposed he didn't have a choice.

The music looped again. He stood there silently. The music looped again.

He supposed he didn't have a choice.



# **Chapter 8:**

# **Feline Inhibitions**

Its Undoubtable, I love my Cat

Topic: What is Most Important to You? (Be Creative!)

Graelie Scythes

Mrs. Andropov's Class

Language Arts

Age 9

Grade: A-

Teacher's note: Graelie, please stay on topic. While I understand your therapist is encouraging you to be more expressive of your feelings, next time try not to go off on so many tangents.

“The only escape from the miseries of life are music and cats.” -Albert Schweitzer

No one wanted me to have a cat, not my mother, or my father. But after the incident, my therapist made them. Indubitably, this was not the finest of circumstances for me to receive a cat, but nevertheless, I received one. His name is Mr. Sprinkles, which was also not what anyone wanted me to name him. My mother said I should name him after someone heroic and respectable, like Vladimir Putin, or Ayn Rand, or Josef Stalin. My father stayed silent on the matter. But I did not budge. I wanted my cat to be my cat. I love my cat.

He is very fuzzy, and purrs when he sits on my lap. His jaws have been tempered by evolution to make him a natural predator, and his teeth are like needles. His claws have a natural retraction function, so they become nearly invisible beneath his fur. His body structure enables him to control his weight when falling to allow minimal damage to his structure when falling. He likes to listen to Mozart with me! He likes to eat fish! He is a carnivore, and has long whiskers. He is my best friend and I love him very much.

Some people say that cats are only looking out for themselves, and this makes them unkind. This is a lie, and lying is bad, unless you are lying to someone for their own good. Like if they are going to put their hand on a hot stove and you said, “don't put your hand on that stove!” and they said, “No that stove is not hot I do not believe you, uninformed child,” and so you said, “That stove is very dirty I cooked raw meat on it and used it as a cutting board and if you put your hand on it you will catch an easily preventable illness.” so they would stop, that would be okay. But lying about cats not being nice is bad. Cats look after themselves, which is a kindness. If more people would look after themselves, the world would be a better place after all. Mother always says that I can't count on anyone except myself, and if I leech off other people and don't do what I'm supposed to, I will be not only a burden on society, but be betraying my own potential. I do not want to betray my own potential, and I am scared of that. I am very scared I will amount to nothing. I am already nine years old and I have not made any significant scientific breakthroughs. I can already tell I am a failure.

Mr. Sprinkles does not care that I am not living up to my potential however. He always comes and rubs on my leg when I get home from school. I have started wearing more skirts so I can feel his fur on my calves for just this reason. He is the only person who doesn't judge me.

I love my cat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Graelyn waited for the elevator to finish rising, and stepped into a dark hallway. The light flickered for a second, and then failed. "I'm sorry Director Scythes, we appear-pear-pear to b-b-be having technical difficulties."

"Its alright." Graelyn said, and pulled out her small tablet computer from her pocket. The screen was still repairing itself, but it seemed to be working enough to use as a flashlight. She shone it around, and took in the luxurious hall. The carpet was so thick and lush you could fall asleep on it, the walls had gold leaf in the artworks, and the lights were all dead.

As she waved the light around, she saw a hand raise in front of a set of eyes in the shadows. She took a step back. "Director Scythes?" A trembling voice asked.

"Who's there?" She someone get up and edge closer to her. It was a girl, about her own age, her hair in neat cornrows, her dark skin still wet under the eyes from crying. She was wearing fairly similar business clothes to Graelyn, except she had a better eye for style and could manage heels better.

"I'm, uh, the new intern. I've been with you since last tuesday, Director." The girl stopped, she looked scared.

"What's wrong?" Graelyn looked behind her, as though a swarm of revolutionaries was creeping up.

"Nothing miss. I just, uh, you look so much younger."

"Long story." Graelyn fudged, "How long have you been waiting here?"

"Since the bombs started falling." Graelyn nodded, she wasn't sure what that meant, but she knew it had to have been a long time.

"You don't have to stay here you know, you can leave." The intern shook her head.

"I don't know where to go, Director. They've been executing collaborators." That was certainly true.

"Come with me then." The intern nodded, "I'm just going into my room." This lie was strange to keep up, playing a boss of someone who was in reality her peer. She found being in charge like desert, however.

"If its all the same to you Director, could I wait out here?" Graelyn raised an eyebrow, but she didn't really care.

"Alright, wait out here then. I'll be back out in a bit."

Graelyn turned, trying to pretend she was a figure in authority and not an intern herself. Walking along the wall she counted room numbers till she found the one she was looking for: 41-17: Director Graelyn Scythes.

Her hair bristled. She could feel an electric rush move through her. Her hand reached towards the panel on the door, and quivered in the air in front of it. When she moved it just another centimeter, the door would unlock, and she would be inside her own room, but a totally different her. Older.

Accomplished... Dead. She shivered. She was excited, she was terrified.

She pressed her palm down on the pad, and the door made a clicking noise. She pressed, and it pushed open into an equally dark apartment.



Holding the tablet out in front of her, she examined the inside: there was quite a lot of scientific equipment she could already tell, not to mention a very nice sound system. The floor was alternately lush and highly practical, with half the room looking like a lab, and the other half like a living room. It looked like there might be some sort of divider on the floor that could rise out of it.

Then she heard it.

It wasn't a loud noise, in fact it was quite soft, but it was all she needed to hear. Like it was muffled through a pillow, she heard a meow. Graelyn barreled in that direction, tripping over something square in the shadows and wincing, but not stopping. She opened another door to a room filled with all sorts of cat toys and structures: things to climb on and sit in. There was an empty food bowl next to an equally empty water bowl, and a litter box that looked like it was automated. The cat meowed. She ran over to the cage, and fiddled clumsily for the door latch. There, through the aperture, was a different cat. It was white with black splotches. "Of course its not my cat." She thought, "Wherever I am, that woman in the car said I looked twenty years younger. A guess, but a good time frame. Its unlikely my cat could have survived that long." The cat moved towards her hand, and began to rub against it. Instinctively, Graelyn began to scratch it behind the ear, and the cat closed its eyes in pleasure.

"You poor thing, left alone here. I bet you're hungry." She picked up the cat, and cradled it against her breast. A little warm bundle, shifting and nuzzling. Graelyn foraged around awkwardly for the catfood, not wanting to set the cat down, but also needing to hold the light to actually see things, which left her having to set the tablet down and pick up over and over to reach for things. Finally she found the catfood, opened the meal, and squeezed it into a bowl. She pulled another dish from the cupboard, and filled it with water. Setting the cat down, she watched it begin to eat, its jaw moving in a perfect rhythm, its neck muscles working to move the food back. She smiled, and reached for its collar, feeling for a tag, which she found. Holding the light to it, she squinted, "Captain Fudgesickle." Good name, she thought admiringly of herself. She ran her hand along his back. No, this wasn't her cat, but this cat had no one here. A Graelyn had picked him out, had raised him, and that Graelyn was gone. He wasn't Mister Sprinkles, but Captain Fudgesickle was still in need of a home. She would take care of him. The good Captain began to drink some water, and Graelyn continued examining the room. There was a workbench where this Graelyn had been working on some sort of robotic limb... Then she noticed it. There was someone else in the room. Sitting there the whole time, silently. She dropped the tablet, and heard the screen crack again.

"Hello." She said as calmly as she could.

"I'm Graelyn, who are you?" Silence.

"Why are you here?" Silence.

She took a step towards him. It was a man, but she could tell he was... Modified. His skin bore numerous scars from surgeries, and she could see lines under his skin that were the trademarks of biomodifications. He looked at her, and remained silent.

"Can you talk?" He shook his head no.

"But you can do yes or no?" He nodded. She nodded back.

"Well then, are you going to kill me?" He shook his head.

"Do you want to?" He nodded. She leaned in closer: there had to be an incredible amount of biomods in this man. The only person she could think of with more was Arch, and he was a pretty ludicrous

exception.

“Did... Did I do this to you?” He nodded.

“Did you volunteer?” He shook his head.

“Where did I?” He pointed to a wall, “Show me.” He rose, and walked over to the wall, somehow doing so in a way that was both stilted and fluid. Like a clockwork ballerina.

He pressed a button on the wall, and it slid open to reveal a room that was still completely lit. The whole thing was utterly white. An operating table sat in the center of it, and a large tray of surgical instruments sat on a tray next to it. Graelyn looked back at him.

“Me? I did this to you? I did this to you.” Her eyes grew wide. She looked back at him. She could feel her body trembling, like there was an earthquake in her heart. He squinted at her, and looked puzzled.

“I'm not her. I'm not... It wasn't me. I couldn't do...” She covered her face with her hands, and after a moment peeked out from between her fingers. She looked at the table. She could see herself there, slicing him open, crossing that line she'd felt in the ocean she hadn't wanted to believe she could leap.

“Could I?” As she stared at the operating table, the silence was deafened as three calibrated charges went off on the apartment door, and a crack team of Revolutionary commandos entered into the apartment, their guns trained on every living target.

“Hello Graelyn” A red haired woman said.

“You're under arrest.”



## **Chapter 9: Four Flashbacks and a Set Up**

*“I think a big mistake we make when looking at our current society is we think of it as a pinnacle: that is to say that all of history has been leading up to where we are now in our world. Certainly we have more technology, and we have made strides that to our ancestors were unimaginable, but that doesn't mean that we are the first, and it doesn't mean that we are the best versions of ourselves, or even that our descendants will be. The equality of one society can drain away into oppression with the flip of a regime, and people can lose their rights just as quickly. Ideas can be forgotten, or called heretical, and the world can revert into a state that would have been called barbaric a few decades before while still being more advanced than it ever has been before. This happens when we stagnate. When we give up that desire to reach for the sky, and instead lower our arms with a shrug and say “eh, good enough” we will lose the Golden Age we have fought for, and have to perform alchemy to bring about a new one from whatever ours is made of. And I don't know about you, but I've never seen a politician who can pass for an alchemist.” -Professor Freeman Xavier*

Graelyn looked down at her hands. These were hands that had done hours of pipeting, had stroked cats, had carried coffee, had run along the silent glass walls of Atlantis. There were cuffs around these hands, sturdy metal cuffs that didn't bend. Her wrists were sore as hell. Next to her, the intern of her other self sat frozen, her face trying awfully to conceal her terror. She glanced at Graelyn occasionally for support and she gave her back thin smiles, which was the most she could manage at the moment. Across from her was a man, she guessed from central America. He didn't look particularly bothered by the situation. Grey lines dotted his black hair in that signature way that screamed the man was at the strange meeting point between the wisdom of age and the physique of youth. The lines on his face showed he might be older than he looked though. The van bumped, and they both rose from their seats as far as their bindings would allow, only to crash back down. Graelyn stifled a grimace. The man looked totally non-plussed. She had seen him before. She stared at him. He raised an eyebrow.

“You look surprised.” He said. Songbird glanced over at them. She looked serious.

“I hadn't placed the name and the face before.” Graelyn replied.

“So no introduction needed?”

“I could afford one.”

“Director Manuel Salazar, Nojpeten Inc. Doctor, designer, medical revolutionary.”

The woman with red hair scoffed.

“Shut up, no talking.” One of the guards barked repetitively.

“Its alright.” The redhead said, “They're not getting out of this van.” Graelyn let the vehicle roll on a few more moments before she replied, staring at the redheaded woman.

“Who are you?” Graelyn asked the woman. The man snorted comically. She didn't look up.

“Don't tell me you don't know.” Graelyn shook her head, and despite the redhead not looking at her, she seemed to notice it.

“I'm Alice MacLeod, you might have heard me by the name the people have given me, the Songbird of Liberation.” Alice looked her in the eyes as she said 'songbird', narrowing her gaze into pinpricks of light that burned her retinas to meet. She turned her eyes away away.

“I take it you're important then.”

One of the guard's laughed, the Intern seemed to think Graelyn was trying to be snarky.

"You can't be serious."

"I'm very serious. I don't know who you are."

"You're either a fantastic actor or a terrible one and I can't decide which." Songbird idly checked her assault rifle.

"What's this Revolution all about anyways?" Graelyn asked, a little too innocently, "I mean..." She couldn't actually figure out how to repair the implications of that statement.

"I've been wondering about you. What exactly you are. You know I threw you out a window earlier today."

"Yes, I was there."

"You were there twice. Not everyone can watch their own execution. So are you a clone? Or was the one I threw outside the window a clone?" Manuel laughed.

"Graelyn Scythes would never make a clone of herself. She's got too much pride in her uniqueness." Graelyn stared daggers at him for that, and he just laughed at her.

"Are the rest of the Directors all dead?" He asked Songbird. She didn't reply, "Its not like we won't all find out later. Are Graelyn and I the last ones standing?"

"If that is Graelyn, then no, Ariadne Moore escaped to the rim." Manuel scowled at that.

"The rest are all dead?" The Intern said, her voice cracking, her eyes brimming with tears.

"We're still alive, we can pull through." Graelyn tried to reassure her.

"Oh, I wouldn't count on that." Songbird replied, and the Intern began weeping.

"Intern, INTERN!" Manuel yelled. "Don't listen to her. She's not a god. Now what's your name?"

"I'd rather they didn't know who my family was if I can help it."

"Fair enough, Intern. I can respect that."

"You're all responsible for numerous atrocities, or collaboration to them. We've noted them."

"I'm certainly somebody with noting." Somehow Manuel came off as charming rather than self-involved, but Graelyn wasn't sure how.

"Noted for your crimes." Alice added.

"So, how did you get here?" Graelyn asked.

"Here is such a broad term. Here, there, time, place. Its all so transient. I'm sure it was a labor for all of us."

\* \* \* \*

## 1: The Hands of Manuel Salazar

Manuel's hands worked with a fury, dancing through the incision with precision. The nurses had their roles choreographed perfectly, and the operating room was not so much full of blood but ballet, though there was certainly blood. Above him, the usual cadre of onlookers was observing the transplant, joined by a stranger they hadn't seen before. No one paid him much mind though. Salazar finished joining the last piece of flesh, and looked up at the nurses.

"Totally stable Doctor Salazar." Salazar let out a pant.

"It didn't feel like a challenge."

"That's good sir." He shook his head as he exited the operating room, and began to remove his garb and wash up. The other nurses could take the patient from here, so he and Nurse Maya exited.

"That boy's genetic abnormality should have been untreatable fatal sir, but you surgically corrected it. That was a miracle. No one has your hands."

"Now that I've done it we can run it into the machines, they'll figure it out. These hands are nothing irreplaceable." He splashed water on his face, and looked up into the mirror. Such a young face for a Doctor. Not ludicrously so like they did in the movies, but still younger than most. He dried his face, and got ready to greet the well wishers as he exited. There they were in a throng, wanting to congratulate him, get on his good side, invite him to their dinner parties. He didn't pay attention as he nodded, smiled, and responded by reflex. At the edge of the throng was a man though, so nondescript his face was replaced when Manuel looked away by the idea of a man's face in his mind. He waited patiently for Manuel to finish with the others. He didn't try to cut in till the last one sauntered off, leaving the two of them alone in the hallway.

"You're certainly patient."

"Some things are better said carefully." He didn't rush his words either.

"I am a busy man, you understand."

"I won't waste words then. I work for a man on the Rim who wants you to perform an operation."

Manuel shook his head, "I can't be bought to leave my work on Earth for some backwoods Titan. Excuse me." He began to move past the man.

"An operation you won't be allowed to do on Earth. Something no one has ever done in the history of humanity. Something that is impossible." He stopped. Manuel turned. The nondescript man's face didn't seem to hold any expression he could pull ulterior motives out of.

"Go on."

"A complete skeletal transfer. In one operation."

"That is impossible. You can't keep a human being alive and perform that operation. Maybe over the course of years or multiple operations--"

"With a completely metal skeleton." Manuel stared at Mr. Nondescript, and broke down laughing. He laughed till the wall volunteered itself as his support to keep from flopping over on the ground like a fish.

"That- that is impossible. You have me there." The man hadn't changed his impression.

"If you say so. However, we heard you were interested in a challenge."

"That sort of operation would be illegal anyway, I couldn't do it. Too risky. The insurance company

would never allow it.”

“They wouldn't know about it. No one would. But you would learn it was possible.” Salazar stood up again, and met his gaze.

“And if the patient died?”

“Then we would learn not to pursue this line of research any further.”

It was tempting. It was so very tempting. He had run out of work to do here that was meaningful. He had his own medical technology company, but they were unable to compete against the existing monopolies in any meaningful way. He did surgeries that there was no known program for the machines to do, and each time lessened the number of possible surgeries for a human to work on in the process as the machines learned from him. He was in all likelihood making the last significant gains in surgery any human would.

Taking the final step was almost too much to resist.

“I am curious, ambiguous Seniõr, how did you learn about me?”

The man changed his expression for the first time. He smiled.

“She is already a fan of your products.”

Manuel stood in front of the door to the medical ward, running his hand along his smooth chin. The flight to Europa had been long but harmless, and Manuel was itching to begin. He had brought Maya with him, of course, but no one else. This was a sort of secret mission, medical espionage. He found it both funny and exhilarating to be going behind the backs of Earth's leadership. The unmemorable man opened the door, and gestured for him to enter in. Inside was a teenage girl's room, though one decidedly of a girl who didn't leave it often. There were medical apparatuses all over the place, and a large rack of books many of which were on seemingly advanced topics, especially anatomy, chemistry, and biology, a few on famous serial killers, some romance novels, some scifi novels about something called “The Next Generation with a man with a band over his eyes on the cover, and some of those inspirational essay books. The wall had a few paintings and posters, mainly of flowers and pastoral landscapes, but also of a death metal band or two. From the bed, his patient looked up at him. Not an inch of her skin was visible, as she was wearing a soft flexible suit from head to toe, her face an oval mask with a single eye on the right side. Manuel recognized the design well, it was his. A giant exclamation mark appeared on the girl's face, and he saw she was using it exactly as intended. The plush-lung was supposed to be a way for people who had incurable debilitating illnesses to live. The suit worked directly off signals from the brain, and made communication and movement possible for people it had been impossible for. Micro motors in the joints aided movement, the suit kept any extra germs out, and helped stabilize and treat any conditions of the patient within. For these patients, Manuel had figured that been trapped inside such a suit would be horrific as well as liberating, for even though it allowed patients with paralysis to walk thanks to its machinery, their expressions were muted by it as well. Thus he'd made the faceplate a screen that could instantly display images the patient wanted, helping them to express emotions and feelings without speaking. For those who had been in need of one, it was considered a miracle.

Of course, another company had claimed copyright infringement, and he had to be very careful about how he sold them, even though they were not selling them. Usually the suits had to be 'gifts'. But he was rich, so he didn't care.

An image of a happy face appeared on the faceplate. "Mister Salazar!" A voice said from the mask. She waved at him, and began to get out of her bed, the motors clearly doing the work for her limbs. She made her way over to him, and he gladly embraced her.

"You must be Sarah, I've heard a lot about you." A heart appeared on her face.

"Probably not everything. The Librarian is always leaves a lot of omissions."

"Omissions?" She made her way back to the bed and sat down.

"Well, did he tell you why he wants me fixed up?" Salazar followed her back to the bed.

"I was told he had a vested interest in you."

"That's a way of putting it." She reached over to her side table, and pulled out a tablet, which she pulled a picture up on, and handed to Manuel. The picture was of a 12 year old girl with white hair and eyes so pale blue they could only mean she was blind wearing a bright blue flower print dress. She didn't seem to realize the picture was being taken. A pair of sunglasses were on the coffee table in front of her. She was seated on a couch, next to two very burly men who'd clearly been jacked up on bio modifications. On the coffee table was a giant pile of money, as well as a giant pile of what were clearly bags of drugs. He looked up at her, surprised to say the least.

"I started learning how to make drugs at a very young age to make a living as an orphan. Bye the time I was ten, I had cornered the market in my neighborhood. By the time I was twelve, I had my own gang." She sighed, "Naturally that didn't work out well. I got pretty badly hurt. I would have died if the Librarian hadn't taken me in."

"So you were an ambitious twelve year old."

"He thinks I'm special. I just did what I had to do to eat."

"It looks like you did a bit more than that." She held his gaze for a minute, or at least appeared to. She wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Well, anyways, I wasn't able to move at all until I got this suit. The Librarian had to pay under the table to get a hold of it, but it was for me," he mouthed the words with her, "a miracle."

"I read about your condition, the deterioration of your bones is pretty severe." She nodded.

"Its not just my bones anymore. Everything is basically turning into fatty tissue in me. I'd be dead right now if I wasn't encased." Manuel soured: he hadn't been told she'd deteriorated that much. He couldn't just do a skeletal transfer. The wheels in his brain began to turn, then spin, then they formed gyroscopes. "I see. Sarah, how much are you attached to your current body?" Sarah thought a moment, "I really couldn't care less about it. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking a skeletal transfer is small." He grinned, "We could do a lot more for you." She seemed to perk up, the servos in her back straightening her spine.

"Do whatever you want. I'm in for it." He rose, "Then I'll begin planning-"

"-But I want to have electronic eyes." He frowned.

"You could have the finest biological eyes in the solar system."

She shook her head, "I was blind when I was born, and the first time I saw was when I was put in this suit. I don't want to learn to see again. Just give me the best sight you can. I don't care if it looks



funny.”

“One last question Sarah, who is on those books? The “Next Generation” ones.”

“That's Geordie! He's blind but can see through an electronic band over his face.” Manuel smiled. It was so important for kids to see people they thought of like themselves on book covers. He walked to the exit, “Then Sarah, I'd say we have ourselves an operation.”

The operation was difficult to say the least: everything had to go, nearly. The skin had to be removed to be reattached later, as it was one of the few things worth saving. Her muscles and bones were basically mush, and most of her organs had failed at this point. He replaced all of them. Using a printer, he had manufactured her new body parts using an improved version of her genome, and carefully removed and reattached them to her system. He had to work carefully to assure compatibility. If the body rejected a new part, it would make the whole new system buggy. The new muscles were engineered like machines, and could lift more than an Olympic athlete. Her skeleton was the strongest metal alloy he could find that wouldn't be toxic to her system. Her organs were better than any person's. Her brain and nervous system remained, it was in some ways all that was left of her. In the end he threw out her skin to, after realizing that it just wasn't worth the effort to shape it to her new form, and had a machine print a new one around her. The surgery was exhausting, and took more than one day, during which Sarah remained totally sedated. When it was done, Salazar sealed up the final incision, and started at the person in front of him. She had been trapped in a body that would have died without him, and now he had made her a wholly new one, grown the organs and stitched her together.

“Good God.” Manuel said to Maya as she began to dress the unconscious girl in a hospital gown.

“I've broken the barrier down Maya. If I can do this, we can save anyone.”

“Anyone who can afford it.” Maya said without a hint of playfulness.

Manuel clenched his fist.

Sarah MacLachlan woke up to feel air on her skin. When was the last time she had felt that? She tried to recall, but it seemed too far away to nail down in any way. Her vision cut on, and she could see the ceiling, raining light down on her from luminescent panels. Raising her hands in front of her, she saw skin and nails. Her arms felt strong. Sitting up, she felt down her body, reaching under the hospital gown to feel her shoulders, her back, her breasts, her stomach, her sides, her hips, her legs, her toes. She felt her face, her cheeks and neck and ears and her new stubbly hair. She let out a shriek of joy, and carefully moved her legs out of the bed. Her touched the tiles-- they felt... cold! What a wonderful sensation, cold. She had been perfectly temperature controlled in her suit. What a joy to be cold! She took a breath and got to her feet. She stood, without any help, without motors pushing her. It was all her own body. She wanted to run! But she was still attached to the iv and didn't want to try to remove it herself. Pushing the iv with one hand across the room, she went to the mirror and stared at her own reflection. This was her face. Her own face, hers forever. Her hair was just stubble, but it looked like it would be brown when it grew out. She thought she'd have the white hair she had as a child, but whatever, she wasn't complaining. But the best touch was her eyes, because she didn't have them. Instead there was a half oval on her face running from temple to temple over where eyes would have been.

“Geordie LaForge.” She smiled, and the first real surprise happened. Her teeth, like the rest of her bones, were a shiny metal alloy peeking out from behind her gums. She was shocked, then shocked to see a look of shock on her new face, then she grinned.

“I like it. Chrome teeth.”

There was a knock on the door, and she said, with her own vocal chords, “Come in!”

Manuel entered, with his nurse Maya, and the nondescript man.

She scooted over with the iv as fast as she could, and embraced Manuel and Maya each in turn.

“You like the new digs?” He said with a smirk.

“I love them.” She became keenly aware she was smiling with those shiny teeth. Maybe she'd use that as a moniker.

“We know that you'll be working for the Librarian now, probably doing very illegal things, but try to remember what it was like to not have power.” She nodded.

“I will. What will you do now?” Manuel's face seemed to take on some sort of operatic tone.

“I'm going to remember what it was like to be powerless.”

The CEO of Algen-Hoser medical systems rubbed his 400 credit haircut warily.

“These numbers aren't good. How on Earth did this happen?”

Linda, a vice president, shook her head, “Earth is exactly how it didn't. Nojpeten inc. has been selling heavily off-world at discounted prices, and we suspect has found a partner in the rim who can smuggle the goods to earth and give them a cut of it.” The CEO looked up, “That's illegal!”

“We can't prove anything.”

“Well buy them out!”

She shook her head, “They are privately owned. We can't buy stock in them.”

“Unfortunately,” a new voice cut in, “Your investors aren't so faithful as mine.” A man in a gaudy black blazer with red and white stenciling on the breasts walked into the room like he owned it, holding a black briefcase.

“Excuse me, you're not allowed in here.” The man pulled up a chair to the CEO's desk, and put his feet on it. “Actually, I think you'll find I am.” He reached into the briefcase and pulled out a pile of documents, which he handed to the CEO, who looked over them bewildered.

“Sir?” Linda said.

“It says we've been bought out. The majority shareholder is now someone named... Manuel Salazar?”

The interloper grinned and stretched back in the chair. “Yes, he now owns it. Really, he owns you. And being that I am him, I own you. So you can call me sir.”

The man set the forms down, “You insolent bastard. You can't just walk into my office and buy my company.” Manuel looked around wide eyed.

“What? I can't? Why didn't anyone tell me? Well, I suppose then I can't terminate you immediately. And cut your prices to something people here can actually afford.” The CEO stood up, gritting his teeth, “You can leave this room right now!”

“No, you can. Do you want me to call security on you?”

“This is my office!”

Manuel smiled, and gently dusted his shoulder off.

“Maybe you gringos aren't used to being at the bottom of the food chain, but its too late for you. You're part of Nojpeten inc. You need to accept it, or you can be devoured.”

“Linda, get security get-” Linda bit her lip.

“No sir, I... I think its time for you to leave. I'm sure mister Salazar has a lot to get done today.”

The former CEO's jaw dropped, and Manuel reached over and ate one of the candies on his desk.

“Its my pleasure, “ Director Sarcozy began, “to welcome Mr. Salazar to the board of Directors of Centro Systems. Nojpeten Inc., has successfully taken the world stage in medical technology in only a few short years. We're honored to bring him on board today.” Manuel walked up to the front, and shook Ebenezer Sarcozy's hand. The rest of the room applauded him, and he smiled. A woman in a very stylish black dress really stuck out to him though. He'd certainly heard of her, the illusive Director Ariadne Moore. She was smiling, but Salazar had seen a lot of people give him fake smiles before, and he knew this was a fake smile meant to show it was a fake smile. He could tell they were going to get along great. The meeting with the Directors was about what he expected, generic shadow government stuff. The cocktail party afterward was the really interesting part.

“So.” Ariadne said, walking up to him, putting on her sunglasses indoors, “You made it onto the board of Directors. I have to say, I'm surprised.”

“I have to say, I'm surprised you look so young.”

“You didn't invent medicine you know. You just undercut the people who did.”

“That's Capitalism for you.” She gave a polite smile, and he was reminded of Sarah's perfect smile he had crafted for her.

“Is it Capitalism? Well, let not get hung up on petty things like the correct definitions of words.”

“Oh I wouldn't dare to be petty.”

“But if this is Capitalism, then I may be interested in supplying capital to you.” Manuel raised an eyebrow.

“Really.”

“Don't act so surprised. I'm a business woman. I know when to invest.”

Manuel nodded, “Then I have an idea, a project, I think you might be interested in.”

\* \* \* \*

The car bumped again, and Songbird steadied herself against the side with her hand. Manuel looked like he was off somewhere else. Graelyn seemed like she was trying to avoid looking at anyone. Songbird assumed the girl was overwhelmed, which added to the clone theory. Outside the car a father put his arm out in front of his son, stopping him from walking any further towards the military caravan. A day ago, their world had been totally different. Maybe their home had been hit by a shell. Maybe they supported the revolution, maybe they were against it, but they would have to live in a world with it

either way now. Two people couldn't tear down the whole world, let alone a caravan.

Songbird thought about those people as they kept driving. She'd never thought she'd win this, live in this new world. She thought she'd die clegging as she fired her last bullet into a Centro soldier. But here she was, alive. What would that even mean for her.

“What happened to the man in the apartment?” the girl who might have been Graelyn said.

“I'm surprised you're curious.”

“Of course I'm curious. I want to make sure he's okay.”

“You have no right to ask that. He'll be taken care of and given the best treatment.”

“You'd better. Him, the cat, and the intern here shouldn't be punished.”

“I've spent my whole life protecting the innocent, unlike you.”

There was silence following that, and Manuel looked between them like he was waiting for a commercial to end and a drama he liked to continue. The intern looked at the guards, hoping for one of them to be sympathetic towards her.

“How did you get here then?” maybe Graelyn asked, “Those people call you the Songbird of Liberty. What does that mean?” She turned back to her. She looked uncomfortable in the cuffs, and she remembered the first time she'd been forced to wear them. She bit back reflecting on it.

“It means that I've become a symbol of freedom against the oppressive systems on Earth.” Manuel scoffed at her.

“Well I've heard his story, though I'm still annoyed he won't tell the end of it.”

“He certainly talked himself up.”

“That was the truth, whether you believe me or not is your fault. I have to admit, I'm curious about your story to now.” Alice looked between them.

“I suppose we have to fill this drive somehow.”

\* \* \* \*

## 2: The Cry of the Songbird

Alice held her hands out to have the cuffs removed as her father finished signing the paperwork to get her released. “How you doing Donovan?”

“Oh, you know. It’s hard to get work these days.” The guard nodded solemnly.

“They'd certainly take you in the police force, regardless of your record--”

“You know that isn't happening Lisa.” She nodded without meeting his gaze.

“Come on Alice, let’s go.” She hugged her dad, and the two of them stepped out of the chilled police building into the summer sun.

“You can't keep doing this Alice, we can't afford to have you locked up... Longer.” She nodded.

“I'll be okay dad, I haven't gotten caught doing anything too bad.” He smiled, “Well, your mother would be worried sick to know you were doing anything too bad even if you weren't caught.” She held in a chuckle.

“This revolution dad, it needs everyone it can get.” He didn't argue, but he didn't agree.

Alice worked a boring job day in and day out, trying desperately to keep it for her family's sake. Her dad wasn't working anymore, thanks to being found out as a radical element and they needed the money more than anything. She walked home from work that day, her feet aching and sore from standing all day at the counter. Her shift didn't leave her much time to eat, but she didn't feel hungry, even though she knew she hadn't taken in anywhere near the calories she was supposed to. She felt wobbly, but she didn't complain, and tried her best to look less tired than she really was. That was when it happened: her day suddenly lost its monotony, lost its simplicity, and she rocketed into an adrenaline fueled awareness.

There were two Centro officers dragging a pair of men down the street, their faces against the concrete, scrambling with their hands to try to hold onto something in a desperate and futile attempt to not get arrested. One of the officers lowered a truncheon to one of the men's legs, and it was clear from the reaction that followed that the rod was electrified. Alice's face grew red.

Things had been better than this, but they were just spiraling worse and worse. Her fist clenched. She couldn't turn away from this. She couldn't. She didn't know those men, but she knew why they were being arrested: the “Anti-Sodom” law that had passed with a wide margin. Rights were being whittled away right out from under every person living on this street, and they all started at the two gay men being dragged on the concrete like this was still 500 years ago.

Alice walked toward the police slowly, and made her way to their right. She didn't make eye contact. The police glanced at her, but ignored her, and she got right beside one. Her bag shifted on her shoulder, and then she swung!

The shoulder bag hit the guard right in the side, knocking him off balance, and Alice followed it with her whole torso, clegging hard to make the impact as effective as possible. She heard a rib break. The other officer rushed her with his truncheon, but she ducked it, and reached a hand up beneath his face

mask, and slid her fingers into the officer's stunned mouth, right between the cheek and the teeth, and then slid them out. The officer tilted his masked head to the side, started walking towards her, and then became wobbly, then fell over as the pill she'd slid into his mouth dissolved and took effect.

Alice grabbed the man's truncheon, and threatened the other officer with it who held her hands up. She grabbed the officer's cuffs, and bound both of them, then ran to the two men, trying to help them up.

"You need to get out of here."

"Thank you." the first man said from his bloody mouth.

"No time, you need to run, the police will be back in force, you and your partner need to run." One helped the other up, and supported him with his arm. She watched them scamper down the alley. She stood alone in the center of the street, baton in hand. She tested the shock button.

"Well then, looks like prison it is." It didn't take long for vehicles to float down from the sky and land around her, men and women dropping out in their best SWAT gear. Aw, they really did care.

"Unidentified person, please set the weapon down."

"Unidentified? I'm Alice MacLeod. Would you like me to write it down for you?"

There was a brief silence. "Alice MacLeod would you please set the weapon down?"

"No. Viva la Revolution."

She was told later she shouldn't have been able to live through the number of Tasers she was hit with.

Alice expected to go to prison. But she didn't. Instead she found herself released from custody like usual, with the guards being extra polite to her.

"I don't understand." She said to Lisa, "I attacked corporate officers. That's a corporate offense." Lisa screwed her mouth up, and then decided to tell her something.

"Someone paid for you to leave. The prison system is corporate, and if you want to pay your way out, you can." Well, yes, everyone knew that. But no one she knew had enough money to pay to get her out of prison. When she was taken to the lobby, there wasn't her dad waiting there for her like usual, but a woman.

"Hello Alice. I'm Miranda." The woman was Hispanic, probably mid twenties, wearing a gray hoodie under a suit jacket, and over a nice top, with slick black pants as well as oddly shaped sunglasses. The hoodie stood out like an elephant entered into a mouse beauty pageant. Miranda smiled at Lisa, and tipped the jailer appropriately.

"Hello." This had to be some sort of corporate requiring gig.

"You must have a lot of questions, but first off, no, this isn't some sort of corporate requiring gig." She gestured for her to follow, and intrigued and confused, Alice followed her out the door. Miranda led them out of monitoring range of the police station before she spoke again.

"Well then, you made quite a mess of things. And while it would have been nice for you to have run your whole prison riot, I'm afraid things aren't going fast enough for my friends."

"Excuse me, who on earth are you?"

"That's really none of your business."

"I'm afraid it is, and what do you mean prison riot?" Miranda gave her a sly look.

"Do you really think you wouldn't have caused some sort of ruckus while you were in prison? I mean, look, you're a troublemaker. That's why we've been keeping track of you. We want this planet's

revolution to get underway quickly and cleanly, without any of that messy in between.”

Alice nodded, “So you're part of a revolutionary organization on Earth?”

“Not on Earth, but I suppose revolutionary is the correct term. The revolution is inevitable, as is your victory.”

“I'm glad you have such confidence in the cause.”

“I have a certainty in it. But regardless, I can enable you to make this war short. Shorter than anyone thinks it will be. It will still take months, but not years.”

“That's impossible. I'm an idealist but Centro is so dug in...” Miranda put a finger to Alice's lips.

“Shh. Think bigger. What if I told you I could get you the codes to all of Centro's automated defense systems. You could shut them off. Appropriate them. Drop their drones from the sky. Turn off the camera system that lines the entire city.”

“That's impossible.” Alice laughed, this was insane.

“Then explain that.” Miranda pointed at the cameras on the street.

They had all turned to face the sky.

“I don't...”

“We're not being watched. And you don't have to be. We have made the arrangements.” Miranda held out an old stye paper business card. On one side was a symbol of half a sun and half a crecent moon merged together, the sun's rays somehow seeming the twins of the moon's horns. On the other side was a post office box number with a key code beneath it.

“In that box is everything you need to overthrow the planetary system. You can only access it once, and the codes will be the codes for that week. Don't blow your opportunity.” Miranda took off her suit jacket and threw it at Alice, who caught it. It was a nice suit jacket. She turned and began to walk away, the back of the hoodie showing the progression of a sun into a moon through subtle metamorphosis.

“Why should I trust you?” Miranda shrugged.

“I don't care if you trust me. Fight a decade long war and decimate the planet. Your call.” Miranda turned into an alley, and Alice bolted after her, but she wasn't in the alley when she reached it.

She looked down at the thin piece of cardboard.

If this was real...

She put on Miranda's suit jacket, and slipped the card into her pocket. If it was real it meant the world.

It had taken a lot of persuading, a lot of yelling matches with different leaders over encrypted phone calls, but it was happening. Or would be, if this was real. She'd staked this all on trust in a stranger. But if it was real, it was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. A once in a lifetime chance. If it wasn't real then Miranda was right, Alice would fight that ten year war. But... If she could avoid that. Turn the world over with minimal bloodshed. Alice inhaled, and held her breath as she walked towards the post office boxes, and held it still as she tapped the code into it.

“Okay, be real... Be real.” She reached inside, and found a small grey box with that same half moon half sun image on it. Pulling it out, she turned it over and over in her hands. There was a single hole in it: a standard computer connector port. It seemed pretty obvious how the thing had to work. Stuffing it

inside her bag, she hurried outside. The box carried a heavy weight in her bag, and it drug her down. It was like she was carrying enough gold to buy the world from the hands of the corporate overlords she'd been fighting her whole life. She went back to her family's apartment, and got ready to make the call.

General Yul Hammontree had fought against Mars, he had been there during the great disaster there that ended the rebellion in Mars' favor. Yul had been at Venus during the disaster of the failed base there, and barely escaped with his life. But nothing prepared him for that Tuesday. Monday had been boring, he only remembered that he'd eaten a cheese sandwich during it, but Tuesday, oh, he'd never forget Tuesday. Pacing the room things seemed to be going in order for the first few hours of the day, and then... Then he noticed something.

“Corporal Talzin, bring up screen 51.” The Corporal did as ordered. He watched the footage. It was a street filled with people bustling through it.

“Corporal, bring up monday's footage, same time.” The Corporal did. They were the same. It was the same footage. The General yowled, and ran to the alert station, he jammed his finger at the touch screen, but nothing happened.

“What is going on?”

“I've lost control of my station sir!” Someone yelled, and then more voices joined in a chorus of it.

“We can't lose London, someone get in touch with the drone center--” Then he heard several shots, and turned to see a woman, flanked by a swarm of raggedy rebel soldiers walking into his command center, holding a battle rifle.

“I'm afraid its too late for you. You know your people outside have been yelling into their communicators for half an hour while we fought our way in. You might want to put your weapons down on the floor. Several people did. Several tried to draw theirs. The latter were shot with cunning efficiency.

“Who do you think you are?”

“Alice MacLeod of the World Revolutionary Council. Who are you?”

“GENERAL Yul Hammontree. Now young lady you'll stand down.”

“The people are singing for liberty General, now get out of my way.” He puffed his chest out, and straightened his back.

“I'd rather die.” She shot him in the leg.

“Lets compromise.” She stepped over him and took out the box from her bag. They'd used it to break into the base, and it had done gloriously. But now... Now was the real test. She plugged into the console, and the screens in the room all lit up with that same sun/moon symbol.

“Hello, my name is Alistair.” The box crooned through the speakers, “Could you please supply me with your name and user name.”

“Alice MacLeod.” She said, kicking the General's hand away from the holstered gun he was reaching for and grabbing it herself. “User name....” She looked around the room. She used to sing in the tavern her Dad's friends met up in. They said her voice was pretty as a Nightingale, a wonderful Songbird. Well, it was her friend Jack who called her that first. She smiled at him, he was nervously holding a gun towards the crouched room of technicians.

“Call me Songbird.”



The screens displayed a black and white image of a songbird, and Alastair spoke again, "Alright then Songbird, I am at your command."

She smiled, "They always said I'd set the world on fire. Lets get this started. From one bird to another, lets take theirs out of the sky."

For hundreds of years the world had been monitored by a linked system of satilites and drones. For hundreds of years everyone knew that everything they said was being recorderd. And then, on a Tuesday, the drones fell from the sky. Next, the cities began to fall, and the people at the top who had feasted on the fruits of those beneath them came tumbling down, as it turned out, often fairly literally as Alice took a predilection towards executing CEO's by hanging them out of windows.

The prison labor camps were the next thing she freed. The people there, being worked to death for having wrong ideas, or wrong lifestyles cheered her as she liberated each camp. Their bodies thin and bruised, their cries weak. She got out of her vehicle and hugged them, touched their hands, talked to them. Soon they began to call her the Songbird, and it stuck. City by city fell, and it became clear the world would fall far quicker than the ten year war they had anticipated.

Then she wen to Mexico city.

Jack was by her side of course, he always was, as the hovering craft flew towards the city.

"So, Alice, I was thinking... When this is over..."

"There will be a lot of clean up work. We'll have to be really on top of the left over Centro elements."

"No um, Alice, I mean, I was thinking about us." She checked her rifle, it was in perfect order.

"About us what?"

"Alice, you know how I feel about you." She sighed.

"Jack, I'm not interested in you. We've been through this." She counted a moment in her head. "Nine times, actually. Well, maybe ten. Not sure if that counted."

"Okay but, when the war is over..."

"Jack! I'm not interested in you. I don't want romance. I'm an aromantic asexual. You know what that means right?"

"Yeah, but I thought it might change when the war is over." Alice scooted away from him a bit.

"I'm not who you want me to be Jack. I'm sorry." The hovercraft landed, and they stormed off. She raised her rifle and tried to get back into the mindset she needed. The first Centro soldier popped up, and she was fast on the trigger, capping him right in the forehead before he could level his gun. The gunfire moved into full force, and she lost track of herself. She shot through the smoke, diving over barricades and obstacles, slamming her rifle butt into the jaws of enemies who slipped through the smoke, and leveling again quickly to take shots at those far away. She was made for this, and she was merciless, not out of anger but out of precision. Her violence was exact, and total. Her heart raced as she ran through, and shot a soldier trying to close a side door into the base before he could, slipping through right after him. She had forgotten that there was still a battle behind her as she stormed the hallway, not that there were many people in it. She shot those who opposed her, and tied up those who surrendered. The rest of her troops made it into the building, and she stood in the cleared space, leaving

the rebels who saw her with the bold and ludicrous impression she could have done this herself.

“Is the outside secure?”

“Yes ma'am!” said a burly woman with vitiligo.

“Call me Alice. And good, what's your name soldier?”

“Chantelle ma'am.” Alice nodded.

“Lets move out then.”

The base was nearly empty, eerily. She'd expected more resistance. They walked through darkened barracks, and empty mess halls, till they reached a thick sealed door. Alice looked at Trevon, their resident door opener, who went to work on the lock with quick skill, and the aperture opened to reveal a room filled with several people in lab coats trying desperately to pry open a door.

“We need to get the back up hard drive wiped! Open it!” One yelled.

“The bomb will take care of it lets just get out of here!” Another yelled back.

“Can't you tell its meant to survive the explosion open it or-”

“Or what?” Alice said, striding into the room. The scientists huddled together.

“Where is the bomb?” It was an order, and the people knew it.

“Its... In the main factory floor.” One of them said, pointing towards another door. Alice strode confidently towards it, opened the door, and walked through.

There was a moment where no one could see Alice, and the room was silent. Then she walked back into the room, her rifle hanging loosely from her hand, then clattering to the floor. She shook gently, her eyes wide and full of lines of red. She nearly stumbled over and put her arm against the wall.

“Alice what-” Jack began, but she interrupted him. She threw up, keeling over to her knees, still shaking. Jack hurried over and put a hand on her. “What's wrong?” She looked up, her eyes boiling over, tears running down her face, and her hand finding the handle of the gun properly again.

“You. You did that.” She looked at the scientists.

“I.. How could you I...” She began gagging again, and threw up a second time. She staggered up and pointed the gun at them.

“Hold up Alice, don't do anything hasty.”

“No this isn't hasty. This—Jack you don't want to see what's in there I promise you.”

“There's nothing that could provoke you killing these people.” She looked at him like she had seen hell. And he shook his head and walked towards the door.

“Jack, don't go in there. I promise you, you can't unsee that. Don't.” He ignored her. He walked in. All they heard for the next two minutes was him screaming. He walked back in, even more shaken than Alice had been. He looked at her.

“Do it.” He muttered. “Do it.”

“We were just following Graelyn Scythes orders!” One of them yelled, “Please!”

“Just following orders?” Songbird's voice was loud enough to echo through the building.

“JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS? There is no order that could justify that.”

There were seven scientists in the room. Alice's hands shook so much she used ten bullets, but the effect was the same. Standing over their corpses, she motioned for Trevon to go in and disarm the

bomb.

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to see that." He nodded. He needed her help in the end do to shaking himself. But the bomb was disarmed. As they flew back, Songbird stared at the giant complex, the complex she never ever wanted to see again. She only had one thought that she said outloud during the trip back.

"I'm going to kill Graelyn Scythes."

No one argued it.

\* \* \* \*

Graelyn stared at Alice, her hands were shaking. Her jaw trembled. She fingered the rather banged up cat pin on her lapel, but couldn't get a grip on it.

"What did you see in there."

"You know."

"I don't know!"

"YOU KNOW." Alice yelled. "You can't tell me if you're really Graelyn Scythes you don't know what was behind that door and the only reason you're not dead yet is we don't know and the WRC is starting to cool down enough they want trials instead of battlefield executions. That and your friend made a strong case for your survival."

"Arch?" She asked, full of hope.

"Yes. You can thank him later. If you're a brainwashed victim in all this, some poor confused clone, or... What he said you were in that elaborate story of his..."

"What did he say you were?" Manuel asked.

"The truth, I hope."

"He said you were from an alternate reality. Balderdash, of course."

"Ma'am, should you really be talking so much with the prisoners?" A woman with vitiligo skin said.

"Its alright Chantelle. I have leeway on this matter. The WRC is just as curious as we are.

"Well if we're telling our stories, what about you Intern?"

She shook her head, "I don't want to say anything I shouldn't. Get family in trouble."

"Of course. How about you, Scythes? What kind of a last name is Scythes anyways, it sounds made up."

"Its my real last name."

"So then Graelyn," Songbird interjected, "How did you get here?"

"Its... A long story."

"Its still a long ride. We have time. Start from the beginning."

"The beginning?" She knew where the story really began, but she didn't want to start there. She thought she'd begin somewhere easier to talk about, but when she started talking things spilled out she hadn't intended, and she kept talking. As beginnings go, it wasn't one she would write down.

\* \* \* \*

### 3: Happy Birthday Graelyn Scythes

Graelyn shifted her hand to swirl the beaker, holding it up to her eyes. It wasn't exactly reacting like it was supposed to, which was curious. The lack of reaction was just as interesting as getting one si--  
“Graelyn didn't you say you had to be somewhere at 7?” She turned to look at the person speaking, it was Professor Hanson.

“Uh, yes I've got a date with Ashlyn then.”

“You probably want to get ready to go its a quarter till.” Shit, she was right and she'd late no matter what at this point. She jotted down the lack of reaction, cleaned up, took off her lab coat, and hustled out the door to the bus stop, checking the time on her phone over and over. The bus arrived a tiny bit late, and she bustled onto it, finding the perfect seat on it. The city rushed by the window, and she closed her eyes as the bus jostled her against the window.

Graelyn ran into the diner a fifteen minutes late, looking past the greeter for Ashlyn, who was sitting alone at a table for two looking boredly at her phone. Graelyn pointed to the table and the greeter let her through. She sat down, and hoped she looked decent. “You're late.” Ashlyn said, scrolling through her phone. “Sorry, I got caught up at work. I was testing reactions to a compound they've been developing at the lab for the team there-” Ashlyn put the phone in her pocket and gave Graelyn a look that said “shut up.”

“Look Graelyn, we need to talk.”

“Okay, well, I'm here so go ahead.”



“We can't keep doing this.” Graelyn was silent for a moment.

“If you mean me being late, I can set an alarm next time or...”

“No Graelyn. That's just a symptom. You forgetting to take enough time to set an alarm to remember our dates is a symptom. Honestly, why are you even in this relationship?” They stared at each other for a moment in silence. Graelyn rubbed her fingers together under the table. The waiter came by, and each of them ordered something, which felt like more commitment than was prudent with how things were going.

“Of course I want to be in a relationship with you, I dumped Petyr so we could date.”

“Yes, and when you dumped Petyr he told me to watch out for you because would act like you cared about people more than you did so they wouldn't leave you. You're fifteen Graelyn, you don't need to hold onto this like its going to be forever if you don't want it to be. I'm seventeen and I don't have to put up with this. Also you dodged the “why?” question.”

Graelyn squirmed in her seat she felt her face turning red, and her hands becoming ice. “We have so much planned out together. Getting an apartment together when you go back to London, supporting each other.” Ashlyn pursed her lips. Her shoulder length brown hair swaying back and forth as she leaned in. She always wore such nice outfits, summer dresses or skirts and sweaters. A few times suits, but the way she preferred skirts and dresses to pants was one of the things that had drawn them together in the first place.

“We do have a lot planned out. And that's why this is important, cause I'm not going through with a plan with someone who is only half involved in it. You're always late, you're nearly always distracted, when we are-”

“Not so loud!” Graelyn said glancing around as though anyone had been listening.

“Okay, quieter! Its like you're doing calculations in your head!”

“...But yeah I am doing calculations in my head. There's nothing wrong with that.”

“Did you ever think I might want more than you're giving me back? You always hold part of yourself back. You listen, but you don't talk about yourself, just your work. And who spends all their time at a lab at fifteen? I mean, I started dating you because you seemed a lot more mature than you are, you're two grades up in school and doing lab work, at fifteen. That's impressive, it really is, and I thought there would be more to you than that, but what else is there outside of it? Its like you were never a child.”

“I love music.” Graelyn said, her voice cracking, “and cats.” there was a pause, “and you.”

“Great, three things. I won't be here forever, I'm going back London when the summer starts, and I keep asking myself, will I miss you, will you miss me, or is the fact that you can move in with me just convenient for you?”

Graelyn's stomach churned, “Well, yes its convenient, but...” She struggled to find the words.

“I...” Ashlyn looked at her sadly. Their food came.

“We may as well enjoy one last meal together. Dig in.”

“Last? So, you're breaking up with me? That's it?” Graelyn's face drained of all its color. Her muscles retreated and she was only alive by the sign of her breath.

“I, look, I didn't want it to go this way, but it has to. I can't keep doing this Graelyn. You're not my only option you know.”

“How much does it hurt?” Graelyn asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I need to know how much it hurts, you. Right now.” Ashlyn looked over her face, it was strangely impassive.

“To break up with you?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you ask me that?” Graelyn shrugged.

“I want to know.”

“It hurts a lot, for the record.” Graelyn nodded. The gears were turning in Graelyn's head.

“I'm very disappointed this didn't work out. I'll have to take other measures.”

“Other measures?”

“The plan has to change.”

“The plan? That's what I was to you, a plan? You just needed me around for some benefit?”

“That's why we keep other people around. For their benefits. That's what a relationship is.”

“No we don't! Not normal people. Normal people think about how they care about other people, or their feelings.”

“I do care about you. I did think about your feelings, I asked how much this hurt you.”

“Like I'm an experiment. I didn't think when I'd break up with you you'd find a way to break my heart even more.” Graelyn shrugged.

“You can never achieve anything if you aren't willing to cut out your own heart. You can never advance unless you sacrifice what matters to you. You cut me out of your chest first. I don't benefit you anymore. And I can respect your calculation.”

“You sometimes barely talk like you're human. I didn't calculate leaving you.” Graelyn looked down at her plate.

“I'm good at calculation. I notice things. I just didn't want to believe them. But that's life, cutting things out, I should have expected it. I've been trying, I really have. You've always made me feel so free. But I can see I had things scrambled. Still, I notice things. So... Is there someone else?” Ashlyn looked awkward. She couldn't meet her gaze and stared off into another table's candle flame.

“Oh.” Graelyn said.

Graelyn had met Ashlyn when she had gotten bumped up another grade at the start of the school year. She was a foreign exchange student from London, or maybe Blackpool, she said both of them at various points, and Graelyn was instantly attracted to her. She had a sort of wide round face that was both beautiful and adorable, and she was always making funny quips. She'd mastered Russian in a flash, and was already making terrible puns. Graelyn and her began talking about each other's clothes, a topic Graelyn usually couldn't care less about but which suddenly took on a whole new dimension with her. Graelyn definitely thought she was hot, but there wasn't a romantic spark. She had only rarely felt that, for people she'd known a very long time, like Petyr, but Ashlyn was so much more interesting than Petyr, whose idea of a fun date was going somewhere and walking around for two hours, she decided it didn't matter. Maybe if she waited, the spark would come. She waited, and waited, and it never came. It occurred to her around this time that she could be attracted to anyone if they had enough charm or looks, so she was definitely Pansexual, but she had to be DemiRomantic, only attracted to people she'd developed an emotional connection to. She dumped Petyr for Ashlyn, and they seemed mostly happy together. But Ashlyn was right, she couldn't open up to her, she kept trying, but she couldn't. It didn't mean she didn't care, she wasn't sure what it meant.

“So who is it?”

“I didn't want you to find out this way.”

“All that stuff about what I've been doing, and you're telling me you found someone else. I may be a terrible girlfriend but at least I'm a loyal one. Who is it?”

“Just hold your hand still.”

“I'm trying.” Graelyn looked down as the machine began to carefully treat her nails. Ashlyn laughed

from the chair next to the other machine, "Its just a manicure, you said you were cool with getting one when we were getting coffee."

"It seemed like a good idea then." The needles and lasers and other devices went to work layering color and detail onto her nails, when a holographic popup appeared.

"Oh not that, use your left hand, not the one being worked on right now, to close it." Graelyn read the holo display.

"It says it can put a hard drive into the paint on my nail."

"Yeah, its a cheap trick. Handy I guess. Handy, yeah?" Graelyn rolled her eyes.

"Right, well... Nothing subdermal or permanent right?" Ashlyn shook her head. Graelyn tapped yes, and the machine got right back to work. When they had finished, their nails were short, bold, and beautiful, layered in carefully chosen colors and shades.

"Ooo, yours are very nice. You got an ocean pattern."

"I like the ocean." She said plainly.

"Clearly. Look at mine!" Graelyn held her hand gently and examined the stylized blinking eyes on her fingernails. "They move!"

"That shouldn't surprise you, that's not that fancy." Graelyn threaded her fingers through her own and smiled. "I like them." She smiled back and running her fingers through Graelyn's hair, kissed her. They kissed deeper, and several adults walked past rolling their eyes as they are wont to do at teenagers. Graelyn felt Ashlyn working at the back of her head, and then her hair dropping down from her pony tail. She pulled back.

"What was that about?"

"Just a subtle message to let your hair down once in a while." She blushed, and leaned back in for another kiss.

"...Marilyn."

"Marilyn." Graelyn stood up. "You're dating another Lyn? Seriously?"

"Lyn and Lyn!" Graelyn held up the paper she'd drawn the words on sloppily. "Like a duo!"

"Well, definitely a duo, but I think we can do better than that for a couple name." Ashlyn gestured for the pad of paper, and Graelyn handed it to her. She turned to a new page, and scooted over on the bed so Graelyn couldn't see it. Graelyn glanced back over at her homework.

"Lyn squared!" Ashlyn said holding up the paper, which of course had "Lyn^2" written on it. Graelyn grinned, picking up her homework.

"Its perfect."

"We should make t-shirts." Graelyn lowered her homework slightly.

"My goodness we should."

"That was our thing, Lyn^2..." She sat down, collecting herself.

"You're giving her one of the spare shirts aren't you."

"No... No I wouldn't do that."

"You're lying." The waiter refilled their glasses.

“Okay maybe I am, but...” Graelyn slumped down, took off her glasses, and began rubbing her eyes. “Oh no, no no no, no I've really hurt you I'm sorry I really didn't mean--.” Ashlyn reached out a hand nervously.

“Its just.... I... You couldn't have waited three days?”

“Whats... Whats in three days?”

“My birthday.” Ashlyn looked paralyzed.

“Oh.”

“Don't worry about it,” Graelyn said calmly, “it was clearly my mistake.” Graelyn pulled the cheap ring on the necklace from over her head, and set it on the table.

“I'm sorry I wasn't good enough for you. I hope she likes this.”

“Graelyn...” She got up, paid at the counter, and went out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Graelyn got back into the house from work, she'd been doing the usual lab work: pipeting, filling out other people's paperwork, cleaning the equipment. She had texted a few people, but no one had responded. That was okay. She'd find a way to make today work. As she stepped into the living room, her mother was there, wearing a loose fitting blouse and beige slacks.

“And where have you been.” It wasn't really said like a question, so Graelyn didn't answer. She just tried to walk past. An arm reached out in front of her.

“No, not today, you're going to stay in here and talk to me.” She was tired of talks this week.

“Could I please just go to my room Mom...”

“No. I've had enough of 'your room' I went in there today—”

“You went in my room?” Graelyn's eyes went wide. She pulled her phone out of her bag, tapped the screen carefully, then set it on the mantle.

“Yes, I went into the room I gave you, and guess what I found?”

“What did you find?” Her mother reached down to the table and picked up several internship fliers.

“What did I find? I found these. Fliers for internships outside of Moscow. They weren't there when I checked your room yesterday.”

“I can go where I want.”

“You're just a teenager. What do you know about anything? Are you going to go off and explore the world like some useless hippie? You are staying right here, and you're going to be useful. You've never been as driven as your sister, or as smart as your brother, but I'm not going to let you be a total loss.”

Graelyn gritted her teeth. “You mean like Xandra. Maybe I'd like to be Xandra—” Her mother glared at her, and Graelyn's voice caught in her throat.

“You're not going anywhere, and that's final. You're staying here, and if you try to leave, I'm calling the police on you. And you're not seeing that... 'Girlfriend' of yours anymore. Ah yes, you thought you could keep that from me to. Many may have accepted that immoral bullshit centuries ago but us Scythes are better than that.”

“Well you got your wish she dumped me three days ago.” Graelyn muttered.

“Good. Then you won't be mad I burned everything with her name on it.” Graelyn gasped. She'd still



held the Lyn<sup>2</sup> shirt while she'd slept this week, not that she'd ever let Ashlyn know that.

"You burned my things?"

"Yes. And I'm going to be keeping a much tighter leash on you, you little slut. I'll be picking you up when you finish your shifts now so you don't get up to anything. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other. I thought you might amount to something Graelyn." She shook her head, "I really did. But you're just as much a disappointment as Xandra. Maybe we should set your sights lower, I don't think you can get into the programs I was expecting you to. You've put such a burden on me, I've worked so hard for you. How could you hurt me like this? My own daughter. I bet Andrei wouldn't have put us through this. It probably would have been better if you'd done a better job when you were 9."

Graelyn had been making the slow shuffle back towards her room, ready to grab her phone and leave. But that stopped her. She gripped the edge of the mantle tight, her hands shaking. She'd been ready to give up. She had been.

"What did you say?"

"You know exactly what I said." Graelyn began shaking uncontrollably, her teeth clenched together, she tried desperately to keep herself calm but it wasn't working.

"H-h-h," she tried to breathe but it hurt to, "h-how dare y-you. How dare you!"

"How dare me?" Her mother reared on her, putting her strong hands on her and spinning her around like a beanpole. "HOW DARE ME?"

"S-s-see," Graelyn stuttered through her fear, "this is why d-dad left." Her mother's eyes turned into fireballs, and she felt the hands leave her sides. Her mother's breathing was heavy, and deep.

"W-" Graelyn began, but whatever it was was never said.

The blow came suddenly. Like a thunderclap. For a second Graelyn saw her mother's hand in the air and began the instinctive flinch, but the blows usually came where no one could see them. Her back, her chest, her sides. The slap hit her right on the side of the face. Not a light slap, but one with the weight of a punch. Her ear rang, her cheek burned like it had been splashed with fire. She tried to right herself, but another slap hit the other cheek and she lost her footing. Then again. She couldn't feel her glasses anymore, they must have fallen off, and she couldn't hear what her mother yelled through the ringing in her ears, just that there was yelling. She could barely see, everything looked cloudy, and she realized that she wasn't standing up anymore. A foot hit her in the ribs, and she cried out. "Mom, please." She managed to whimper. But the foot came again. Then there was nothing, and she felt a hand around her pony tail. For a second she imagined Ashlyn had come to rescue her, but these were not those fingers, and they pulled up her whole body weight by her hair. She wobbled, and managed to stand, before another blow landed on her face. She rose again, hiding her own face with her hands. She held back her tears with years of practice.

"You will never talk to me like that again young lady. Never." Graelyn nodded.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" She widened her fingers so her right eye was looking at her but not her left.

“That is the last outburst I will ever hear from you. You should be grateful I was this nice to you. You got lucky today young lady.” Graelyn nodded again.

“Yes, I did.”

“Good.”

“You're an idiot.” Her mother's face grew red, building up for the next explosion.

“I'm a what.”

“Y-you're an idiot.” Graelyn turned her face away so she couldn't see the right half of it, and pointed with her right hand at the mantle where her phone sat, gently recording the whole event. She returned her hand to her face.

“You shouldn't touch it. Its already uploaded and backed up.” Graelyn said, somewhat louder.

“You... You...” her mother's temper seemed to ebb, rise and fall, and then,

“Graelyn, sweetheart.” She wrapped her arms around her, pulling her hand covered face against her shoulder. “You know I didn't mean all that. I just get worked up sometimes, maybe we can loosen some things, get you more pocket money so you don't have to work as much... You know I love you right? I love you so much.” She stroked the back of her head like a lion pawing at a gazelle carcass.

“We'll work something out, mommy just doesn't want anything bad to happen to you. You know that right?” Graelyn began to nod into her shoulder, like she always did, but then forced out it out of her throat, with all her courage, with all her strength, with everything she could ever find in herself, she made her mouth say a word.

“No.”

“What did you say?”

“I said no. I said no. I said no.” She backed out of the hug, still hiding her face.

“I said no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!”

“You don't know what you're saying, just sit down and-” She threw her hands out to her sides, freeing her face.

“I know what I said. I'm leaving. I'm leaving and you're not stopping me. I'm going into my room, getting Mr. Sprinkles and my books and I am walking out that door and never coming back. And the next time you'll see me I'll be in court getting an emancipation from you. I'm not your goddamn toy anymore.”

Her mother stood there stunned, then seemed to think of something to say, “...Look how strong you are, my baby girl has finally-”

“I'm not hearing this! Stop it.” Graelyn made her way to the mantle, and fumbled for her glasses on the floor. They were cracked in the left lens. She put them back on, and grabbed her phone. She went into her room, and shoved anything she cared about into a backpack and a bag, then hugged Mr. Sprinkles and put him into his carrying case. She walked through the living room and out the door keeping a dead stare at the exit and ignoring the other person in the house. Her face ached, her side ached, but the sunlight felt different on her skin, either because she was free or because of the aching she wasn't sure. She looked up at that light like it was something new.

“Happy Birthday to me.”

Ashlyn and Marilyn sat in their matching Lyn^2 t-shirts on the couch when the doorbell rang. “Could

you get that Ashlyn?" Her host mom yelled. Ashlyn made her way over to the door and opened it. There, with a bruised face, black eye, and cracked glasses was Graelyn Scythes.

"Hey." Graelyn said.

"Hey." Ashlyn replied.

"I know this isn't a good time, but could I ask a favor of you?"

A voice called from upstairs, "Who is it?"

"Graelyn." Ashlyn said. There were the loud stomps of feet coming down the stairs.

"You can tell that no good-" Ashlyn's host mom Petra stopped as soon as she saw Graelyn on the doorstep.

"Oh my God."

"I was just wondering if you could take in Mr. Sprinkles for a bit. I got kicked out of my mom's house."

Petra ran towards the door and pulled Graelyn in, "What on earth happened to you?" Graelyn looked down at the floor, and setting the bag and catbox down, covered her face. Petra hugged her, and Graelyn took her hands away from her face and returned the hug.

"Ashlyn, you go make some tea for our guest." Ashlyn nodded and ran off. Graelyn couldn't make herself cry. She tried. She felt like if there was a time she would, it was now. She began to wonder if she'd forgotten how.

Graelyn's therapist had been called, who had called a lawyer, and they had come over within the hour and talked to Graelyn. The case was solid as a brick wall. She'd get her emancipation, and the Lawyer was fairly certain she could get her a private room in a Centro corporate housing building for free. It all sounded perfectly good. Marilyn and Ashlyn had both been really nice, if awkward, as had Petra. She'd expected them to send her away. She had just thought it was worth the chance they could take the cat in.

"You're sleeping here, we have a spare futon in the basement." Petra ordered, Graelyn shook her head.

"I can sleep on the floor in the lab, its 24 hours and there aren't many people there at night." Petra looked at her, like what she was saying was not a normal thing to say. Graelyn was confused.

"Its really not a problem. I'm sure we'd all like to have you here."

"I'm not so sure about that." Petra put a gentle hand on her shoulder, it felt warm in a way hands rarely did.

"Ashlyn and Marilyn are fine with it, and I checked with my wife, she is to." Graelyn smiled.

"Thank you." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I don't actually know you guys very well. I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not. There should be more fifteen-year-olds around this house anyways."

"I'm sixteen," Graelyn said, "and let me tell you, its been a weird birthday."

\* \* \* \*

"...And then the door exploded in and you arrested me." Graelyn said. Everyone was silent. The car bumped.

"That's quite the story." Alice said, Graelyn couldn't read her. "Was it really necessary to tell us about the dancing?"

"I thought it was cheerful. Wasn't it cheerful?"

"After something like that, yeah, I suppose so. You sang the whole song though."

"Did I? Sorry." Graelyn put her hands on her lap.

"So you're not... Not really Director Scythes?" The Intern asked, "But... You're still Graelyn Scythes?"

"From another universe. I'm an Intern myself at the moment. Er, was."

"So what's the verdict, Seniorita, believe her?" Manuel asked. Alice was impassive.

"We're almost at our stop, ma'am."

"Alice."

"Yes, Alice."

The vehicle pulled into a prison, where the doors were opened by a group of revolutionaries. Waiting outside the vehicle were more soldiers, and under careful watch, Archimedes.

"Arch!" Graelyn yelled, only to be shouted down by a soldier. They were ran out into the yard, where Manuel was all smiles, and Arch stared at him. No one could see his expression. No one could tell he was staring as Songbird left the vehicle to cheer and a standing ovation, as the people clapped her on the shoulders and began singing "The Internationale". No one noticed his fist clench as he stared at Manuel Salazar. No one realized the rage that was boiling inside him, and how much it was going to take to bottle it up.

\* \* \* \*

#### **4: A Moment Had Passed, But We Never Forgot**

"Hello, are you folks there?" Arch ran up to the com, along with the other children, who mobbed the com in joy, each pressing the button to greet their only visitor. The door opened up after decontamination, and the masked children tackled the man in hugs.

"Salazar," said the Governor of Ahnerabe station from behind his mask, "I'm very sorry for the improper greeting, Salazar smiled back in reply.

"Its no problem! No problem." None of them were used to him showing his face, and he looked embarrassed as he remembered, and covered his own up with a mask from a wall mount.

"Sorry, I always forget."

"How is Earth?" Salazar shook his head.

"Its still a ruin. I've been working with the survivors to try to get something to grow outdoors, but the soil is so poisoned we cannot yet." Salazar sighed, and wiped a tear from behind his mask.

"Your station will be our salvation I'm sure, and these children its future." He ruffled the top of one of the fully enclosed children. They were all of course, encased. Everyone was, except those poor people on Earth, and there were only a handful of them left. When Salazar died, they wouldn't ever get another visitor. Salazar looked down at the tiny Arch, who like the other children was displaying a bit red heart icon on his face.

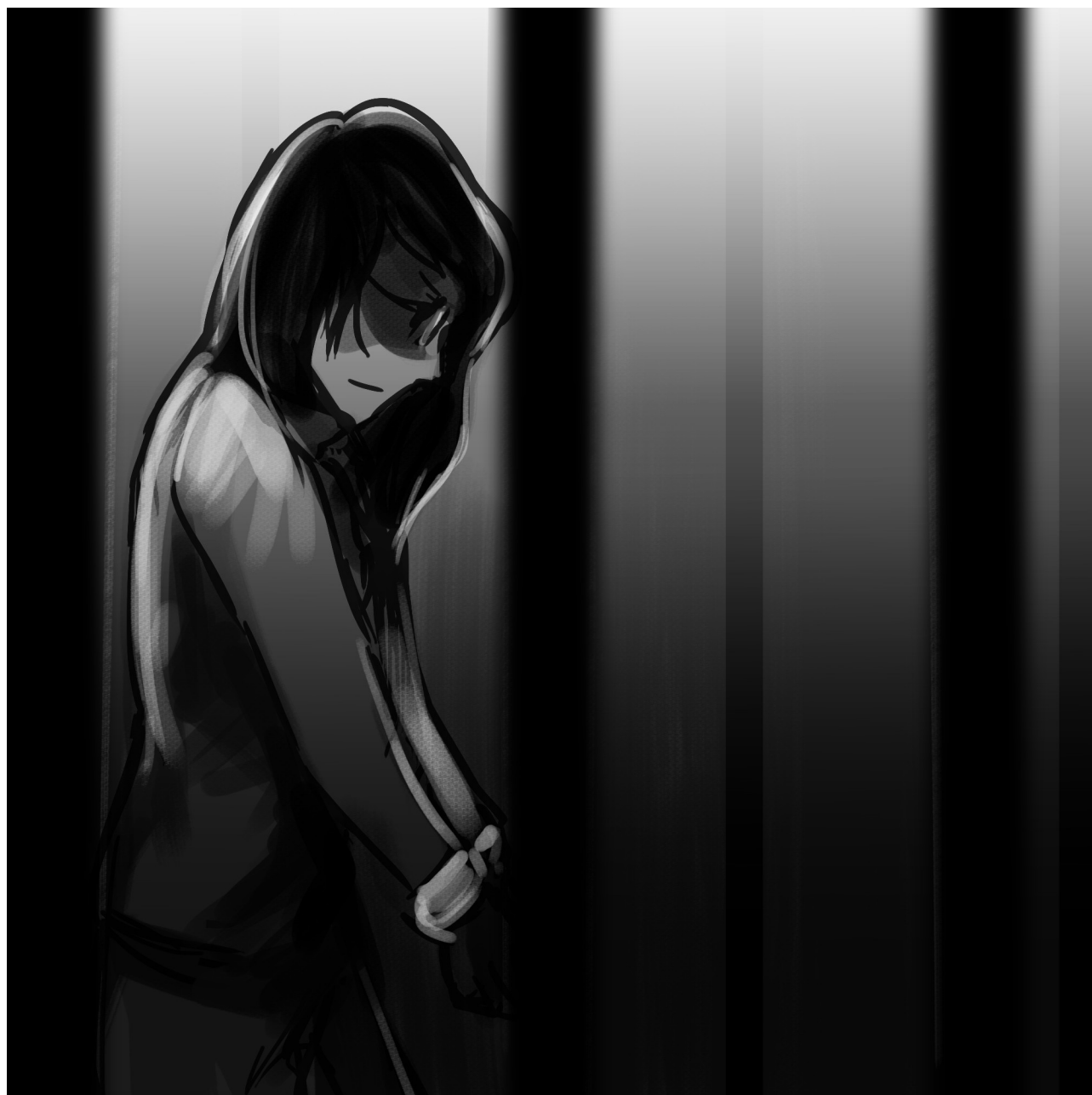
"Do you trust me children?"

The all exclaimed they did, and he opened a bag full of toys they began to loot through.

"You can always trust me."

\* \* \* \*

Arch stared. And stared, until he was ushered to follow them into the building. But his fist stayed clenched and he muttered,  
“Do you trust me?”



**Chapter 10:  
Grae is the new Black**

Graelyn and Arch were permitted a few moments together, and their first reaction, much to both of their surprises, was to hug. It has been an exhausting day, and they clutched each other for a moment, Graelyn's breath moving in and out as she pressed her cheek to Arch's cold chest, and Arch's breath continuing to move in a steadily pumped stream.

"I recognized that man, in the van."

"So did I."

"I wasn't sure if you would. What are you going to do?"

"I don't want to talk about it." She knew he meant it, and she didn't press the issue. But his answer didn't help but worry her more. The wind blew through, and the guard cursed as she had to hold her beret in place.

"They're going to put me on trial." Graelyn said softly.

"We'll make a case for you."

"They're out for blood. I, the me here, not me, did something in Mexico City. Something horrible. I don't know what." Arch rubbed her back gently.

"I don't think you're capable of anything terrible."

"You don't know me that well. Its in my blood."

"That may be true but I'm still on your side."

"How in Pluto's heart do you have so much trust in people." Arch shrugged. She could hear the machinery move in his shoulders through his chestplate.

"Its not so much that I trust people as I don't want to give up trusting them." Graelyn let go of the hug and sighed.

"I wish I had that luxury." Arch lowered his arms and made a motion like he was scratching his head, though he couldn't actually be scratching it of course. "Its not a luxury, its more of a-"

"Time's up kids, lets move it." The guard nudged them with her rifle butt. Graelyn moved back, and moved her hands out in front of her where the handcuffs forcefully pulled together magnetically and resealed themselves together.

"Why doesn't arch get them?" She asked the guard.

"Look, we're all for keeping up appearances, but no one is under any illusions here."

She just nodded. Everything was happening so fast, she wasn't sure who was being logical and who was being irrational anymore. Part of her doubted this was real, that her cuts and bruises had healed so fast from that gel, that she would be on trial for crimes that were her own but weren't, she felt an urge to go home, but she knew there was no such place. She was just as much at home here, being blown by a cold wind in handcuffs, as she was in a nice warm bed. At least she told herself as much.

"I have another question, where is my cat?"

"Your cat?"

"Captain Fudgesickles, the cat I was holding when your people broke down they door. You guys took him from me." The guard's face was impassive.

"You named a cat Captain Fudgesickles." It wasn't a question.

"And I would again, now where is he?" The guard shrugged.

"I really have no idea. Ask someone higher up the food chain."

"I thought you were all equal, or whatnot."

"Look lady, you don't have to be snarky. We're a military of course we have a hierarchy otherwise there wouldn't ever be a revolution. It would be like herding cats."

"What exactly is herding cats like?" Arch asked seriously.

"Its an expression, Arch." Graelyn tried to explain.

"Okay but you'd have to know what herding cats would be like to understand it. Are there cat farms--" The guard had had about enough of this, and Arch was led off who knows where else, and she was taken to processing. She'd never imagined she'd end up here like her sister Xandra, but she supposed there was room for more than one black sheep in the family. If she ever left here. If her family ever learned of her travels. If... What if they existed here to? They had to, didn't they? She existed, and her siblings were older than her... She was searched (again) for hidden weapons, a little roughly, and taken to get a mugshot. She stood in front of the wall holding up her personalized placard with her prison information, and stared dejectedly at the camera as they snapped pictures of her. She'd tried to remain uppity with the guard outside, but she felt the resolve draining out of her as they took her through each step of the process. She had to remove her clothes, for which she was at least allowed privacy, and put on the prison garb, which was made of a loose top and bottom woven out of fibers that acted as tracking chips, lit up under focused UV light, and could be wirelessly triggered to flash and wail like a siren, as well as give her electric shocks. If she tried to remove the garments outside of select areas of the prison, she would set off the clothes to do all three of those things. The same guard who had been with her outside took her neatly folded clothes and vacuum sealed them in a bag. They took her hair ties, and her hair was now loose at her shoulders, something it almost never was outside of sleeping and lounging around at home. She felt invaded as people looked at her hair down, and tried to hide her face. They took her glasses, and replicated her new ones just in case she'd hidden anything in her old ones. For all she knew Ariadne Moore had installed trackers in those glasses she'd given her: she'd never even considered it. The guards seemed mighty confused why she had glasses though. "You could just get surgery, or get new eyes printed or grown." She heard the man she assume was the "Jack" from Alice's story say, he looked like her description of him, and his nametag said "Jack" which was another hint.

"There is nothing wrong with my eyes." She said for the 8,000th time in her life.



She was also given new undergarments, new socks, and new shoes. They all didn't fit her quite right, and she felt uncomfortable walking around in them. Then the guards took her to a white room where a doctor gave her a full physical examination, took a blood sample from her, and had her pee in a cup.

"So am I in good health?" She asked. Her Doctor gave her a polite smile, "We'll see after the tests." And opened the door for the guards to take her away to her new residence. Finally deposited, she stood in her cell, looking at her reflection in a mirror across from her on the other side of the bars.

"You don't even look like the same person." The guard in the red beret from the yard said.

"I don't think I am." Graelyn turned to the guard.

"What's your name?"

"Shona." She replied, "Shona Daniels."

"Why'd you join this fight?" Graelyn asked.

"No big reason. No one shot my brother or anything maudlin like that, I just got tired of being pushed around."

"So now you push other people around?"

Shona scrunched her nose up, "Its not that way at all. Its your lot who were pushing people around. Just because we bit back doesn't make us bad people."

"I can't argue with that. But I don't have a 'lot'. I don't even know whats going on anymore."

"I'm starting to suspect you don't." A new voice said. Shona saluted crisply, "At ease soldier." Alice stepped in, she didn't look quite as dignified as she did in the field. She looked as tired as Graelyn did, like she'd pulled a mask of resolve away. She walked up to the bars of Graelyn's jail cell.

"But the question isn't do I believe your story, but will the people of Earth." Somehow without the pomp, her word's frightened Graelyn. Without the rhetoric, without the red tinted slogans, she felt her stomach churn.

"You'll be put on trial soon, we're trying to find a lawyer to take your case but its proving difficult, and I'm afraid there is very little chance you won't be executed. I'm being honest with you Graelyn. I Can't control the World Revolutionary Council, I can only fight them so much, on so many things. I have to apologize: yours is a battle I can't waste my effort on. I genuinely believe you're innocent, so you deserve my apology." Graelyn didn't know what to say.

"That's it? You just... Come in here and tell me I'm going to die and you're sorry? My life has value. You can't just snuff it out because its inconvenient. You can't..."

"Its not that simple. Should I fight for you to not die, or wait to play my cards to sway some of the more heated members into not punishing whole innocent communities who picked the wrong side in a fight they had no control over? I'm sorry. This isn't easy, and this isn't simple. Making change last means making these choices." Graelyn's hands slipped from the bars, and she tottered back and forth

like a metronome. Silently, she stumbled over to the bed in her cell, and sat down. Alice at least did her the courtesy of not looking away.

"I want you to look after my cat." Graelyn said, finally.

"What?"

"I have a cat. One of your soldiers took him from me when you were arresting me. If you're going to wash your hands of my life you're not going to let my goddamn cat die." Alice didn't particularly like cats, at all, she was definitely more of a dog person. She thought cat's were selfish predators people were crazy enough to let into their home, but she couldn't say no to this.

"I'll take care of your cat."

"Thank you." Graelyn said. "I also want you to see if you can get that Intern released. She's just a scared and confused girl. She doesn't want to hurt anyone." Just like me, she thought. Alice nodded again, "I'll see what I can do."

Maybe this was for the best, she thought. She'd always disappointed everyone. This wasn't the worst thing that could happen to her. She wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again. She'd just disappear into whatever awaited her after her death. Arch could stop worrying about her to. She'd have to reassure him to not try to get her out of the situation by mounting some sort of violent rescue. The more she thought about it, she more she liked the idea of being dead. It was something she tried not to think about, but here it was, and it was somehow reassuring.

"Alice... Songbird... What did the other me do in Mexico?" Alice looked at her sadly.

"You really, truly don't know do you."

"I know its something awful. Awful enough you shot those people."

Alice broke her gaze away from Graelyn, "If you're going to die, its best you don't know. It will only make the end hurt more.

\* \* \* \*

Arch knew very well that his holding was a joke. The guards knew it. The Songbird knew it. So when he told the guard he needed to visit someone else in the prison, the guard sweated a bit as he called his superior.

"You know, uh, Sir, that this is highly unusual."

"Do I look usual to you?" Arch said, putting a mirror image of the guard on his body.

"No, uh, no you don't, sir." The guard's called him sir. He didn't imagine Graelyn was getting the same cozy treatment, but he had to play along if they were going to get out of this alive. And not just get out

of this situation, but out of this reality. Arch had no idea how the experiment that had brought him here with Graelyn worked, but he know she was the only person with the know how to get him out of it.

"I want to see Manuel Salazar." Arch concluded.

\* \* \* \*

"You have a visitor." Shona said, knocking on the bars. Graelyn got up, and held her arms out for her cuffs to lock together, and was led to a room full of little cubicles with a pane of glass inside each one for people to talk to each other from either side. She was led to one, where the face that met her looked both shocked and overjoyed. It was her sister, Xandra. She was so much older now, she was older than Graelyn by three years, and with this place being 20 years beyond that ish, she had to be around 40. Her hair was in liberty spikes, she used to just have a Mohawk, and most of her head and visible skin was tattooed, along with copious piercings. She was smiling widely, and Graelyn couldn't help but smile back.

"Graelyn!" She heard her voice clearly though the soundproof glass. There had to be built in microphones and speakers she couldn't see, "I'd heard you were dead and... you're so young looking."

"Hi Xandra." Graelyn said, "I'm not actually sure where to start with explaining all of that."

"Dad's been so worried. We thought for sure you couldn't have made it after your brother got shot a few minutes in..." Graelyn put her hand against the glass, as though that could reassure her.

"What happened to him?" Xandra looked up confused.

"Graelyn we already talked about this. You don't remember?"

"We didn't talk about this. It wasn't me you talked to." Xandra put a hand over her mouth.

"You're a clone. My sister said she'd never make a clone."

"I... I'm not a clone." She sighed, "That would probably make more sense than the truth."

"Well... Whatever you are, I'm done dealing with it." She got up, and left the room.

That was Xandra for you, leaving whenever things got rough.

\* \* \* \*

The doctor pulled the results up on the screens so Alice and the others could look at them.

"She's definitely not a clone. There are none of the tell tale signs of that, no implanted memories, no traits of vat growth, no attempts to make the cells look older than they are to cover up a rush growth job. Nearly no genetic differences either between the two subjects, except for a slight difference in hair color."

"Hair color?" Jack said from the back of the room.

"Yes, but we can't find any traces of modification. There are things we can look for to look for gene insertion or replacement, and there's no sign of it we can find in either genome."

Graelyn's mugshot appeared side by side on a monitor next to a picture of a still living Graelyn shaking someone's hand and smiling for the camera: indeed, her hair was lighter, in the picture of the handshake than the mugshot. The mugshot Graelyn had rich black hair that was badly taken care of, while the one shaking hands had more of a very dark brown, and also had taken better care of it.

"Examining the corpse of Subject One," a picture of the dead woman appeared, rope marks on her neck and all appeared, causing a few people in the room to grimace, "we learned a few things. Subject Two had been exposed recently to several forms of radiation, that Subject One never had. We also learned that Subject Two had sustained several childhood injuries that Subject One hadn't, while they had both sustained one similar one."

"What sort of injuries?" Songbird asked.

"Well, look, we can examine people at a molecular level, but this part is still guesswork. If I were to guess I'd say she sustained regular beatings as a child." Alice nodded. Part of her had doubted that Graelyn hadn't just been making that story up to play on her emotions. Now that she knew it was true, she felt guilty for doubting her. Though it wasn't like she didn't have good reason to doubt any word that came out of Graelyn's mouth... But how brave of her to tell a car load of strangers.

"Anything else of interest?" Chantelle asked.

"Well, now that you mention it..." The Doctor tugged at their collar.

"Look, this is weird. This is very weird." The doctor pulled up some data on the screens. "We can date cells fairly precisely now, and date a person. by them. Subject Two has not received any de-aging modification, and is around seventeen years old... But was born thirty-seven years ago.

"That's impossible!" Jack stated, obviously.

"Yes it is." Alice mused. "It utterly is."

\* \* \* \*

A group of Guards walked Arch down the hallway, through a security checkpoint, and through to another hallway. There they led him to a cell where a man lounged in his prison gear as though he was in a high class hotel.

"So you're the cyborg I've been hearing so much about." The man said in accented English. Arch analyzed the voice print and realized the man was intentionally accenting his voice more than he needed to, at least according to the software. He took it under note.

"Yes, I am."

"Awful kind of the prison to not even put you in prison garb. They scared of you?"

"Maybe they should be."

"I take it that might be a threat then." He swung his legs off the bed and rested his hands calmly on his knees.

"Your name is Archimedes, no?"

"And yours is Manuel Salazar."

"You seem awful interested in me. Say, is there someone I should know with a grudge under that mask?"

Arch tipped his head to the side like a dog trying to hear something. "You don't recognize the mask?"

"Oh I recognize the mask. I designed it."

"Then you do know why I'm here."

"Do I?" He gave an exaggerated look of doubt. "Senior Archimedes, usually when people see me with that mask, they give me hugs. Which makes me wonder exactly who you think I am."

"Don't play coy with me. You designed this." He held his arm out, flexing his fingers. "Me." Salazar leaned in, putting his index fingers to his lips and his elbows to his knees.

"The curious thing is, there is something like you I thought of long ago."

"And?"

"Well, it never happened."

Manuel finished explaining his plan to Ariadne Moore, and she burst out laughing.

"Oh, Manuel! A child wouldn't invest their allowance into something that absurd. Now, tell me what it is you actually want me to invest in." She paused, hoping to see the rage light up on his face. He held it in, but his lips pursed, and his chin trembled. Her grin melted into a cool smirk. "Oh my, now this is interesting. That was your honest proposal. How charming."

"You're aware of what honesty is? You're full of surprises today."

She just kept smirking. Manuel grimaced and stormed off. There would be other plans.

Somewhere else, Manuel finished explaining his plan to Ariadne Moore, who took a curt sip of her tea.

"I think we can do business, Manuel. Let me assure you though, strictly business. My opinion of you remains the same."

"Likewise." He said smiling. Ahnerabe Station was a go.

"What do you mean it never happened?"

"I tried to get funding and it failed. Now I heard a curious story from your fellow, with the black hair, and you know, I was wondering how long it would take the people here to notice."

Arch leaned in this time, "Notice what?"

"A few things. Graelyn Scythes doesn't have black hair. It's very dark brown. Close enough most people would miss it. You're part of a project I discarded forty years ago, and the guards who brought you in here are all from Guatemala."

Arch's body literally lit up in surprise. Salazar grinned, and then the anti-electronics grenades went off.

And then the real bombs went off.

\* \* \* \*

Shona was looking through her phone, which she wasn't supposed to do, when the burst went off, and the phone went off, and the lights went off.

"Shit." She said, and before she could say another word a man wearing night vision goggles kicked the door open and shot her with a double punch taser/knock out dart. As she faded out, she could hear explosions, and wondered if everything was going to be okay.

The world went dark for Graelyn, and she heard boots as she felt a shock as the electronics in her uniform shorted out. She heard the door to her cell unlock, and she heard a man say, "Quick, Director Scythes, take my hand." She grabbed on, and the man pulled her along as fast as he could through the dark. The emergency lights were even off, which was impressive. After opening a closed door by shooting out the lock, the man took her into the prison cafeteria, which was missing a wall, and prisoners were streaming out of into landing VTOLS. The man just pointed, and she didn't ask questions. Graelyn ran, other women in prison uniforms bumping into her as she did. No one bothered wondering why this was happening they just ran from the prison into the sunlight, where a defensive semicircle of soldiers was putting out covering fire to allow their escape.

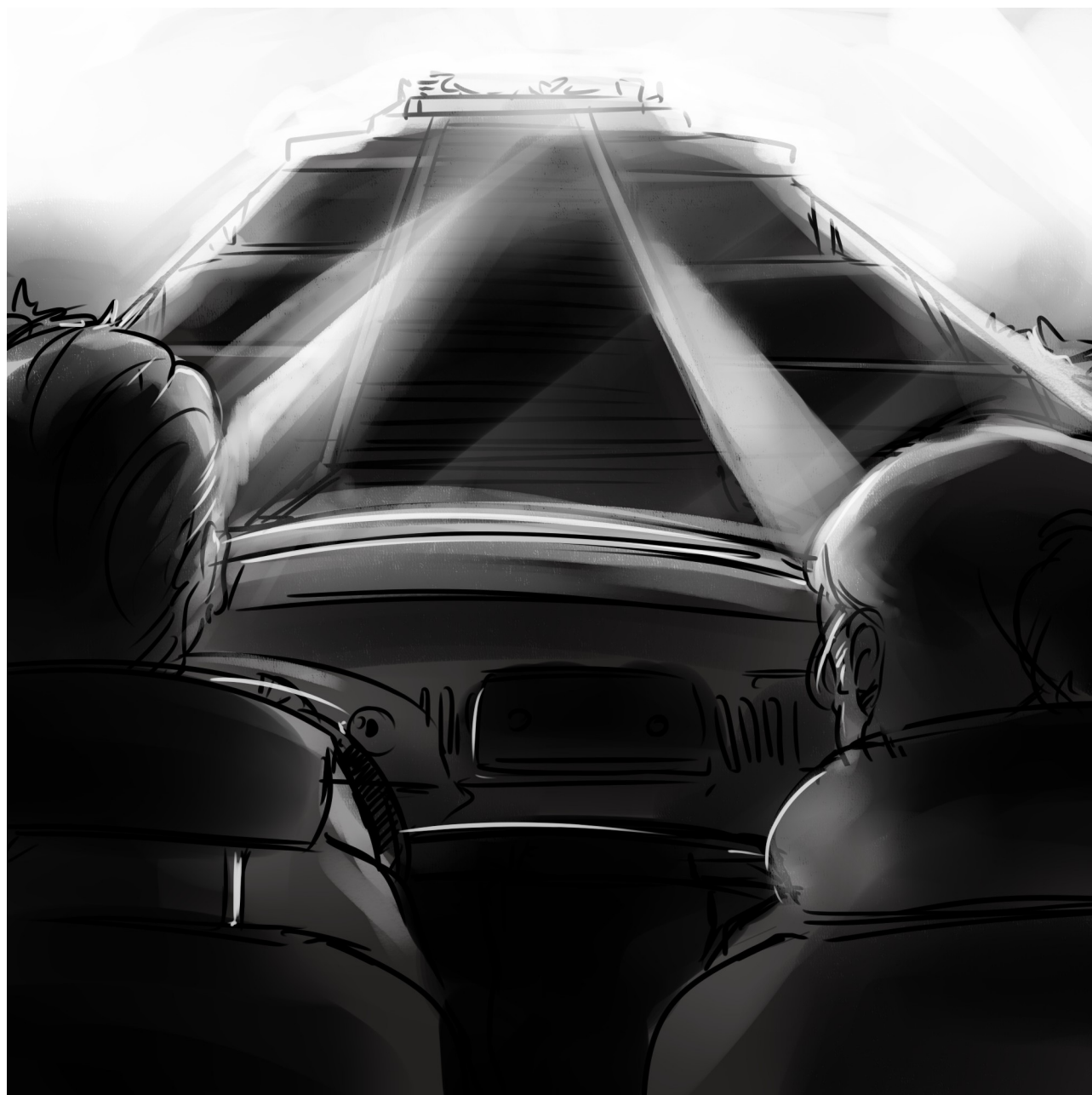
"Graelyn Scythes, why don't you join me?" Said Salazar, from the doorway of his personal VTOL, "After all, I think we have some things to discuss on the trip over."

She looked behind her to see several revolutionary guards making their way into the cafeteria, and she ran to his VTOL, taking his hand to lift her onboard as the began to lift off.

"Have you ever been to central America?" He asked.

"I can't say that I have." She replied over the engines.

"Oh, well this should be a treat for you." As the firefight continued below them, the door closed, and the VTOL accelerated, rushing past the sound barrier, as Salazar poured himself a glass of wine before the gunfire had even stopped ringing in her ears.



**Chapter 11: NojPeten,  
k-in-k'äm-ik-ech!  
(Nojpeten, I Love You)**



February, 1697 AD

Ajch'o' raised himself out of the water, and tried not to look back at the city, at his home. He failed. The Spanish banner flew high over the highest temple, and Ajch'o' could only turn his head away again. The flag was only so clear because of the flames, and the music to greet its rise was screaming.

"Ajch'o', come on!" He heard someone say. He kept moving forward, but he felt faint. It was hard to move his arm to run. Looking down, he saw he was bleeding. He'd been hit by something. A bullet? He wasn't sure. He could only keep on moving, trying to get as far away from the Spanish as he could. His vision was blurring. How had this happened? Today of all days, the last free Kingdom had fallen to the Spanish, and he had been there to see it crumble.

His friend Box-Keej had been killed, shot right through the heart. Ajch'o' had had to make a choice—try to avenge his friend and die from the next Spaniard, or one of their Mayan allies, or run. He saw his friend sputtering up blood on the ground, and he ran for the water. Most of the city did, they had fled. There was no one to come to their aid anymore, no one to fight with them. There had only been Nojpeten, the last great city. Not even a great city if he was being honest, it wasn't that big. But it had been home, and it had been theirs. What would have happened if they had all banded together to fight the Spanish? He pushed the thought out of his mind. It was not only too late, it was impossible. There were simply too many peoples, too many nations, and the Itza were just one of many who all had their own grudges and desires. He felt hopeless, and his strength gave out. He collapsed onto the ground, becoming deeply aware of how much blood he'd lost.

"Hey." A voice said, "Oh man you are not in good shape. Don't worry, I've got some stuff for that." He felt something slap onto his arm, where the bullet wound was, and his vision began to clear up.

"You're still missing a lot of blood, but that boost of adrenaline should kick you up now that your wound is being stitched up." What was he talking about no one was sealing his wound there was just a weird blue blob on it. The owner of the voice slipped an arm under his shoulder and lifted him up.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier. I can't say we didn't debate it, but in the end there was just no way we could predict where the timeline would go if we shifted it. Too risky, so we'll have to pull off our plan somewhere else in this universe. Probably the 2400's. Sorry this literally cannot make any sense to you, I just thought you deserved to know." Ajch'o' turned his head to look at the man supporting him. He was wearing a strange gray garment, one he'd never seen before that covered his torso and arms with an opening in the front that had some sort of... metal teeth lining it on either side. It also had a hood with the crest of the sun right on the man's forehead at the peak of the hood.

"Who are you?"

"Just call me Vice, for now." That was a weird name. The man's skin was even paler than the Spaniards, so maybe he was one of their kind. Was this a trap?

"I can't stay for much longer Ajch'o'," the man said as he set him down on a log. Ajch'o' got a glimpse of his back and saw that the sun was part of a pattern where it changed in phases down the hood and the spine till it became the moon.

"But I want you to remember Nojpeten. I want you to tell your children about it, and your children's children. A new Dawn is coming. You're just about 800 years off. You should have died here, that's about all I can change without getting noticed. You're welcome." The man handed him a medallion,

shaped like half a sun and half a moon. He turned it in his hand, it felt warm on the sun part and cold on the moon part. That was impossible. He looked up to ask the man a question, but he was gone.

"Ajch'o!" He heard Tz'unu'un yell, she ran towards him, tears streaking down her face.

"They said you were dead, that you were shot!" She embraced him, he hadn't realized she was that worried about him... Cautiously he returned the embrace.

"We need to keep moving." She said at last, and helped him up. They moved through the forest through the night, till the sun peaked over the horizon. There was a new dawn, and though he wouldn't live to see it to fruition, he'd lay the foundation.

July, 2495 AD

"That city used to be called Flores, before I became a Director at Centro Systems. Now its returned to its old name, its real one. Nojpeten." The city was vast, starting on an island and sliding off it via huge bridges. At the center of the island was a gigantic skyscraper built in a similar shape to a Mayan Pyramid. "A long time ago my ancestors, the Itza people, ruled this land. But the Spanish took it from them. As is the way of the world." Graelyn stared out at the twinkling lights of the city, "Mayan-Futurism" maybe described the architecture best.

"I find it highly unlikely you don't have Spanish ancestors as well." Graelyn mused.

"Well of course I do." Manuel laughed, and sipped his wine. "I'm fairly certain I have an ancestor from nearly every continent if you nosed around enough. I don't give a damn about 'racial purity.' But its not just the percentage of your genetics that hail from a culture that define your heritage, its who you chose to idolize. Its what your heritage means to how the world defines you, and how you define the world." The city began to slip beneath them as they slowed down, and Graelyn could see people and cars in the dark streets below, moving around in the form of pin-prick shapes.

"Nojpeten represents our freedom, the last holdout against the Spanish, the last holdout against this so called revolution."

Graelyn turned to him sternly, "Mister Salazar, you don't honestly think you can beat them?"

He smirked, "Not in a straight fight. Funnily enough, I'll be beating them the way Revolutions beat their foes for years-- cunning. I know what their next move will be, and I'm ready for it here..." He sighed as he looked out at it, "This was all just a land of poor workers. Centro took very little notice of it except to throw us in their factories. But look what I made-- I gave my home dignity, success, purpose."

"It sounds like you and the Revolution actually have a lot in common." He sneered at her.

"Alice MacLeod wants to take what we built with our own hands and give it to everyone. This city isn't just my work, its the work of the people who live there. I don't care if her ideology wants us to be equal, we've been kicked down by the rest of the world for centuries. I'm not going to give that up just so a little girl can pretend to be Che Guevara."

Graelyn adjusted her glasses. Her prison clothes were still uncomfortable, and she missed her real glasses. If only they'd had time to grab her belongings...

"Mister Salazar, I want you to understand, and this is coming from someone who Alice MacLeod tried to murder, that I respect both of you."

He lowered his wine glass, and set it down gently, as the view from the window showed they were almost on the landing pad.

"Both of us? Curious."

"I think if the two of you could talk instead of fight each other, you might be able to come to some sort of arrangement. I don't think you're as different as you both think you are."

The craft landed, and the doors were opened.

"I doubt it. Now Graelyn, welcome to the city of the old gods."

\* \* \* \*

For the second time in not that long, Arch found himself waking up without control of his limbs. The camera of his eyes rebooted, and he began to take in the world around him, blurrily. His microphones switched back on, and he listened.

"I think he's waking up." The world began to come into focus, and he saw a woman squatting next to him, her face leaning into view. Behind her was another woman nursing a bruised head with a beret, Chantelle, Jack, and the man with lots of stubble who'd captured him in the first place. The gangs all here.

"Welcome back, we thought we might have lost you." Arch tried to sit up, but found his motors were still rebooting.

"That energy wave effected you hard. Your heart stopped, technically you died, while out of your prison cell."

"Your guards let me out."

"Oh no, those weren't my guards. Salazar clearly was interested in talking to you, he set it up with his plants. The question is now, what am I supposed to do with you?"

"I need to find Graelyn."

"Yes, I thought you might say that. She's with Salazar." His processors put extra effort into restarting his systems, and he bolted into a sitting position.

"He captured her?"

"I'll be generous: He freed her from prison and she was smart enough to realize it might save her from

execution. You don't like Salazar do you?"

His arms began to get motor function back, and he tested them, moving his fingers. "I have reasons to hold a grudge on him."

"I'm curious as to why. If this is a new reality for you like you told me, he's not the same person."

Arch trained his eyes on her. "And neither is Graelyn."

"Then why a vendetta."

"I need questions answered."

"Then we both have a reason to see him."

"What are you going to do to him?"

"Whatever the Council decides for me to do."

"That's less decisive than I imagined."

"I'm not into lying. I want you to come with me. I'm going to confront him. Laying seige to a city like Nojpeten will cost countless lives. This isn't like New York where there was no way in but invasion. Salazar is the only thing holding this resistance together. If I get to him, we can take the city with only minimal fighting."

"And what does the council want you to do?"

She stared at him, her mouth very nearly forming words.

\* \* \* \*

Chess Mistress Hex, aka Ariadne Moore, aka Leesa... Oh, she called herself by too many names to list, you get the picture, leaned back in a plush chair on her starship. It was still a long flight to Alexandria, the Index headquarters. She closed the view ports with a grimace of disgust. She didn't want to see Earth, even as a tiny dot. That didn't mean she didn't have a plan to take advantage of the situation, but she struggled to think of something half so frustrating as losing the entire planet Earth to Revolutionary Communists. At least she'd bought out some of their leadership. Too many of them were true believers for it to be a pure victory, but she'd shored up some decent support. All would not be lost.

"Alexis, please give me a report on important events I've missed."

Alexis, identical in every way except for her docile mind, smiled as though she had won the lottery in getting to perform this task.

"Yes, Mistress Hex! The World Revolutionary Council has nearly secured the whole planet. The only real hold out is Nojpeten City, where Manuel Salazar has fled to along with Graelyn Scythes to make a last stand against the WRC."

Hex sat to attention so quickly her sunglasses went askew.

"Did you just say Manuel Salazar is *still alive*?"

"Yes Mistress, his escape plan went into effect before your agent could perform the assassination."

Hex stowed her sunglasses in her bag. Her face was placid, but something about her suggested she was preparing to tear out someone's jugular.

"Alexis, order that agent to move immediately to Nojpeten."

"Of course Mistress. Also, your puppets on the WRC have informed us they are going to be voting on a plan to take care of the situation. What should I have them do?"

"Order them to..." She trailed off in thought and saw the solar system laid out like a chess board. She needed to kill a power piece, a piece that knew things about her she wouldn't like anyone to know now that the old rulebook had been thrown out... But wouldn't the best way to kill the piece to be to let another player play the match? To take that player off the board as well if they could?

"...order Alice MacLeod to make the assassination. She is the Songbird of Liberation. How fitting for her to make the final blow of their Revolution? And what a pity if she didn't come out of the assignment alive. Have my agent standing by in case she fails."

"Of course Mistress!"

"Oh, and Alexis, bring me a bottle of the 2227 Vintage. This has been a long week."

\* \* \* \*

Long-Knife Lazarus was the best killer in the universe, in his own opinion. It was easy to think that when he'd killed all of his targets he'd gotten in the same room as, and was still breathing. Working for the Index was easy money, go to exotic places, kill people, go home, get paid. He drank his margarita with relish, and waited for his contact.

"Lazarus." Chrometeeth slid into the seat at the table across from him. She wore a bright yellow sundress with moving images of a dancing cartoon mouse on it. Instead of eyes, she had a semi-oval band over her eye sockets he knew saw better than eyes ever could. Her hair was perfect. Her shoes were cute but practical. Her nails were pristine. She had a small matching handbag, and teeth made of metal that could rip a man's throat out. He knew her reputation very well: she looked 23, but she was far older than that now. She'd had more biological modifications than anyone he'd ever met, and he knew she could kill a room of normal people.

"Chrometeeth. I didn't realize you were still on earth."

"There's a lot of shit to fix up, this planet's been turned so upside down its head is red and its toes are blue. How's the alcohol?"

"Cheap and strong."

"Perfect." She ordered something intense, he knew her modified liver would make it the equivalent of drinking water for her.

"So then, I know you're here on a kill-job, and I'm here to facilitate it now that the original plan fell through."

"That's right."

"Whose the mark?"

"Manuel Salazar, nearly the last of Centro's leadership." Sarah MacLachlan froze.

"You said you're here to kill Manuel Salazar."

"Orders right from the top, the Librarian himself." Well, herself, she thought, though that was need to know.

"Where's he holed up?" Lazarus pulled out a holoprojector and showed the layout of the main pyramid of Nojpeten.

"Nojpeten. His private city. Its basically a fortress, so gunning our way in won't work. It will have to be an infiltration job." She nodded.

"Any ideas before I chime in?" He expanded an area of the Pyramid to show the base.

"I think the best way would be via the direct exterior, there are cleaning robots that move along the outside in a strict schedule. I've found when one moves from the base to the crown during the movement. If I wear a camouflage cloak, it should be fairly simple. Its a security flaw that really wouldn't come up in peacetime." Chrometeeth smiled.

"Its a good plan." He smiled back.

"I'll take it." Her hand bolted forward like a bullet and grabbed Lazarus by the hair, slamming his head into the table. He moved to draw a gun, but he felt something jab into his neck.

"Shh, you'll be okay. You'll just be awful sleepy for a bit. You had so much to drink, and your mission has been canceled." She paid the tab, and slid out of the booth, carrying him like he'd passed out. She'd tie him up and lock him in a hotel room, disable any of his bio-mods that were built in weapons, and get to work. Sarah remembered her bones withering to mush, and the pain that could only be wiped away by enough drugs to numb her to the point of sensory deprivation. And she remembered Doctor Salazar.

\* \* \* \*

"The WRC ordered me to kill Salazar." Alice finished.

"I thought they were all about trials now?" Arch asked.

"They changed their minds."

"That doesn't sound like this is a normal decision."

"Its not."

"But you're doing it?" Alice sighed, and looked back at her team.

"Arch, how important is your freedom to you?"

He thought a moment, "Nearly the most important. Second to the freedom of my..." He struggled for a word, "Family. Friends. People."

"Then we understand each other. Arch, I'm not going to come out of this mission alive if I succeed." Jack looked horrified.

"Alice, you can't do this, your life is worth-

"-more than the lives of the innocent people in that city? No. No its not Jack. I never thought I'd make it out of this war alive, and I've been proven right. But you Arch, you can help me get in there alive, rescue your friend, and ask your questions."

"How will I get out with her?"

"You're a walking army, I'm sure you'll figure something out."

"I'm surprised you trust me with this." She gave a sliver of a smile for the first time in their conversation.

"Do you know why we didn't cuff you Arch? Its not because we couldn't control you. If we wanted to, we could have knocked out your electronic systems. You're not invulnerable. I let you loose because from the moment you decided to negotiate with my soldiers instead of killing them that your appearance was not the sum of your character. You're not a walking weapon, you're a person who wants to protect a friend, who doesn't want to fight even though you'd be the best at it. Who doesn't like hurting people. I let you wander loose, and you trusted me to hold to me word in not killing you and your friend, and you never once tried to break out."

Arch rose to his feet, and dusted himself off.

"Okay, I'm in. I'll help. But on one extra condition."

"Name it."

"I get one of those hats." He pointed at Shona's beret.

"Done."

\* \* \* \*

Graelyn had fallen asleep nearly as soon as she'd been shown her bed. She had no idea how long she slept, but she awoke to a full breakfast at her bedside, and a view from the high pyramid down across the city through her window. After she ate, there was a knock on her door, and a young girl, maybe 11 years old, the resemblance between her and Salazar was uncanny.

"Miss Scythes, good morning! My grandfather asked me to look in on you."

"Thank you, I'm feeling much better this morning."

"Would you like to change into something other than your prison garb?" Graelyn looked down at her ill fitting clothes."

"Utterly."

"The shower and toilet are in the door right there." She pointed, "I'll go get some clothes for you while you shower." Given a chance to shower and change she threw herself into the task with a fervor, and after she spent plenty of time scrubbing the grime and blood out of her hair and skin, found herself with plenty of options for what to wear, as the granddaughter wheeled in an entire rack of clothes sizes for her perfectly. In the end she decided on a spun white dress with a black jacket cut so that its hem was only midway down the back as well as some matching sneakers, since she kept having to run through places in peril she decided she should abandon flats for the time being. When in Nojpeten, do like the Itza, she figured so she reluctantly agreed to let Salazar's granddaughter braid her hair. She went at it gleefully, her fingers working dextrously, and only occasionally causing Graelyn to wince when she pulled too hard.

"How does it look?" She asked Graelyn.

"It looks good Lizette." It really did, her hair looked fantastic, she wouldn't take the time to do this herself, but the new look made her feel refreshed after all the horror. She was finally stopped in one place, and the immeasurable weight of the last few days began to set in on her. She'd managed to end up in an alternate reality, watch herself die, get tossed between two skyscrapers, meet a woman who thought a city burning was nothing to get worked up about, lose the only person she knew from her own reality who she barely knew anyways, find out the other her had performed experiments on a living and unwilling person in her free time, get captured, went to jail, get broken out of jail, and then get flown to the prefecture of Guatemala.

"Your hail feels funny." Lizzette said, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, it doesn't feel like your hair." Graelyn touched her hair. It felt the same, if cleaner.

"Its not artificial or anything."

"I can't really explain it." Lizzette said.

"Right, well, how do you like living in Nojpeten?"

"Its really nice, people really respect Grandfather here. There are a lot of parades and parties



throughout the year to." Graelyn smiled.

"That must be nice."

"Where are you from?"

"Moscow. Its colder there, a lot colder. It a very different sort of city. I still love it, in its own way. I never really felt at home there though."

"Do you have siblings?"

"Oh yeah, I have an older brother, and two older sisters. We weren't a very close family though."

"So you're the youngest?" Graelyn paused, and pursed her lips. Sort of?

"Cause I'm the youngest to!" Lizzette said excitedly, and held Graelyn's hand.

"How long will you be staying with us?" Graelyn shook her head.

"I really don't know. It depends on a lot of things... Did another girl come with us? She would have been dressed in prison garb to. She was about my age, black?" Lizzette nodded, let go of Graelyn's hand and ran out of the room, only to return with the Intern, who was wearing jeans and a black top with lace edges. Graelyn stood up happily, "You're safe! I'm relieved." They awkwardly moved in to hug, but then gave up and settled on shaking hands.

"Do you think we're going to be safe here?" the Intern asked.

"Salazar has a plan, so I can only hope..."

"Grandad won't let anything happen to you!" Lizzette enthused, "You can count on him." Graelyn smiled, she wasn't sure she believed her, but it was nice to hear nonetheless.

"Thank you Lizzette. I'm sure he won't. By the way, I can't just keep calling you Intern."

"Actually, I'd prefer that."

"Are... You sure?" That was frankly, pretty weird.

"Yeah, it makes me feel safe right now." Sure, whatever.

"Alright then, Intern, Lizzette, what is there to do around here?" Lizzette tugged on her dress, and the Intern's jeans, and took them to the elevator. They exited through the cathedralesque lobby onto the sunny streets of Nojpeten, as street vendors yelled in Spanish selling their wares, a street preacher yelled something unintelligible, a group of kids played soccer in a small park... They walked through an art show taking up the sidewalks, and bought lunch from a vendor selling some sort of dish with vat-grown meat packed in fried corn dough, washing it down with apple flavored soda. For all the city seemed like that day, it was like there wasn't a war going on. But Graelyn knew that would change tomorrow, and even as they walked the festive streets trucks of troops moved through the city. The city knew war would come tomorrow in some form, but not today. Today was their day of peace, and the city in unison had decided that they wouldn't let tomorrow hold them back today. Lizzette bought them

all some rice and cinnamon ice cream, and the three sat by the lakeside, watching the light dance on the water.

She wondered if she'd have a day like this again.

\* \* \* \*

Alice handed Jack a box, and he looked at it perplexed.

"Okay, you have given me a box."

"There is a cat in it."

"That is an awful underhanded way to give someone a cat."

"Its not yours, well, it will be. Its mine."

Jack squinted, "Don't you hate cats?"

"It was Graelyn's. I promised her I'd look after it. I don't break promises. Anyways, when I don't come back, he'll need to be looked after."

"No, if you don't come back. If. And, no, not if, you're coming back." Alice smiled, reassuringly. Sure, Jack, if you need to believe that.

"His name is Captain Fudgesickle." Jack looked down at the box and back up at Alice.

"That is literally the worst name for a cat I have ever heard."

"Then I'm glad you're so committed to the revolution you can carry this burden."

\* \* \* \*

Maria moved through the jungle, and slipped in through the city gates at dawn. She was no different than any of the other travelers coming in and out, but she knew things they didn't. She moved through the streets calmly, towards the central pyramid. She had business with Manuel, revolutionary business, and he would not deny her. The WRC didn't know the area like she did, or the situation here. She could deal with this on her own. She reached a seemingly blank stretch of wall, and pressing her hand to it spoke a long series of letters and numbers quickly. It scanned her eyes, and took a sample of her DNA. She waited.

"Welcome, Maria Salazar." The wall slid open, and she slipped in. It just as quickly shut closed.

It had been a targeted risk, but he knew how family mattered to that man. He'd never deny his home to his sister.

\* \* \* \*

Chess Mistress Hex looked out at the data laid out in front of her: The board was set. The pieces were in place. There were pawns and knights, bishops and rooks, kings and queens. Each moved in its own way, and she had mapped their movements out. No plan was without risk, but nothing could be gained without chance. The pieces were assembled thus, and the game would be played in Manuel's foolhardy endeavor of a city of Nojpeten. That backward, moronic, useless wretch. Still, she was clever enough to know to never underestimate her pieces. This game would need to be played with the appropriate finesse and respect. With Salazar and Songbird dead, she could easily hold carrots in front of the World Revolutionary Council. She already had enough of them in her pockets. She could still make this loss into a win.

The board was set. White moves first. A hand reached out, across the lake in front of Nojpeten, and picked up a pawn.

There was nowhere to go but forward.



# **Chapter 12: The Confrontation**

There are times in life when you can't run away anymore. You run and run, but you find yourself in a corner, and there is nowhere else to go. At that point, you have choices. You can fight, you can surrender, you can beg, you can die... It's not as simple as to just fight or die, but the choice you make in that moment will change your whole future. Graelyn had always run, but now she was in a corner, or at least a Pyramid. Lizette, had done her hair this morning, and she'd eaten lunch with the extended Salazar family, which had been an experience in itself. Manuel was something of a patriarch, and even more of raconteur. He wove stories from the head of the table that left everyone laughing and feeling genuinely at ease. They all knew the raid would be coming tonight. The city streets were empty now. But Manuel looked as though this were a normal Thursday.

"And then I told the man, 'You can still win the hopping contest with two legs!' but he wouldn't relent, so in the end I ended up having to engineer him a detachable leg, just so he could win a hopping competition! I was so confused why it was important to him till I went there, and I saw what the prize was." Everyone leaned in, and he held the pause carefully, "And then I knew he'd made the right choice, because it was a lifetime supply of chocolate. And I knew I'd trade my left leg for that too!" Graelyn smiled as she ate her soup.

Enjoy your last meal. You'll be in the corner next.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah slid through the back alleys, using her camouflage to hide along the walls. She waited for two hours on a rooftop for the cleaning droids to get into the right position, and then made a running leap onto it. She chanced a glance back: the streets were empty. Her cloak made her invisible to cameras, so she was safe. Exhaling, she gripped the droid tightly as it began to scrub up the side of the Pyramid. She stayed perfectly still as it began its slow ascent.

\* \* \* \*

"This is crazy." Arch said to Alice. "Do you really think this will work?"

"It has to. I won't be able to get in on foot. I could get into the city with a camouflage cloak, but we can't find a way into the pyramid from the ground." Alice snapped another piece of the armor into place.

"No civilian casualties, and we'll be right at the source." Her facemask mechanically closed over her face, and her metal armor straight out of some company's weapon's development program looked like something off the cover of a sci-fi novel. It had been repainted a camouflage patterned black, and an emblem of a bird was on either shoulder. She flexed her fingers, his first reflex to, and he could hear the tiny motors working to move them.

"Its not a perfect fit, but I'll certainly survive our insertion."

"Well then, I guess our goal is set."

"I'd say Viva la Revolution, but you guys have passed that point." Alice nodded her armored head.

"It feels weird to be fighting for stability now... I suppose I'm not meant to live in this world."

"Don't say that..."

"We both know it's true. I'm the Songbird of Liberation, not quarterly tax forms."

"I think you're more than you think you are." She didn't respond, just began checking her weaponry.

\* \* \* \*

Maria slipped up through the halls of the building, and passed through each security checkpoint without a hassle. If she could make this easier on everyone, she would. She knew where he'd be. She rode the lift to the top of the Pyramid, where he'd be waiting. Her left hand shook uncontrollably. This was never going to be easy.

\* \* \* \*

Manuel Salazar sat on the roof of the Pyramid of Nojpeten, leaning back in a lawn chair. Rather than a sacrificial altar, he'd put a park up here. There were trees, and paths, and a lawn. As well as tables and chairs. He checked the time on his phone: Lizette should have told Graelyn to come up here by now, and as he looked down, he heard one of the lifts 'ding' as it reached the apex. Graelyn stepped out, wearing the same outfit as yesterday.

"Do you like my park?" Graelyn stepped out onto the stone path and walked towards him.

"Its very nice. Why are you waiting up here?"

"I'm waiting for you, and for everyone else."

"Do you really think everyone is going to come and meet you on the roof to... What duke it out?"

"Yes." He reached over to a table, and pulled a beer off of it, that he popped the cap off and took a deep swig of. "That is exactly what is going to happen. Graelyn, have you ever wondered why I call people Senior and Seniorita?"

She shrugged, "You're from central America?"

"But really, you're from Russia, you don't run around calling people 'comrade!' all the time." Ah, well then. It was obvious when he put it that way.

"You're playing them." Salazar grinned, and his accent dropped away.

"I can talk in boring midwestern English if you wanted me to. I'm good with languages." The accent came back. "But when I talk like this, what do people assume about me?"

"That they're better than you."

"Exactly."

"Why are you giving up that advantage to me? If this is an important ruse to keep up, why tell me?"

They hadn't heard the lift ding, and a woman walked towards them from it, she looked serious.

"Because when you're backed into a corner, letting people see your strategy is sometimes the only way to get out of it." Graelyn turned, and saw a woman she knew she'd seen before.... It took her a moment. She had been in Songbird's base.

"Manuel, watch out she's--"

"--With the Revolution? Oh, he knows." Manuel stood up, and walked up the woman, embracing her. Graelyn's jaw went a bit slack.

"Okay so you guys know each other."

"This is my sister Maria, Graelyn."

"Oh." She held out a hand, "A pleasure to be introduced." She shook her hand warmly.

"Manuel, you know why I'm here."

He went over to a case by his chair and pulled out another beer, offering it to Maria, she held out a hand to decline, and he replaced it.

"Of course I know why you're here. You want me to turn myself in so you can put on a nice show trial for me."

"It won't be a show trial. They're scared of you. You know that. We can get you life in prison. You can live, see your grandchildren, your children, someday your great grandchildren." Manuel shook his head.

"Maria, I can't do that. I can't live a life locked up. I can't be a pawn to oppress this city. I plan to die with dignity, or live with honor. I'm not going to back down."

"Why can't you just surrender? Make a peace deal?" Graelyn asked.

"They want my blood, little girl." It was the first time he'd talked down to her, "They need to make an example of me, to prove the old order is dead. I couldn't do anything to prove good intentions to them if I wanted to."

The board was set, a bishop moved into the field, but it didn't take the king.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah watched as the droid made the final steps of its ascent. Her artificial heart beat like an overbearing drum machine. Her handcrafted pores sweat in anticipation. She made the leap, her legs pushing like springs off of the droid, vaulting her through the air, up to the edge of the roof, to which she grabbed on with all her strength, and lifted herself up onto. She stood, and saw Manuel with two women, and bolted towards him. The three all turned, two of them in shock, one of them in pleasant surprise. She slid to a halt, her fists raised. One of the women, the white one, looked her up and down, clearly surprised to see her wearing a cheery sundress.

"Mister Salazar, you're in danger."

"Holy shit." The white girl said.

"You're goddamn right." Sarah replied.

"I'm not quite in danger yet. But I had no idea you'd be coming. I cannot say I'm not happy for you to be here." The two hugged, and the white girl kept looking back between them.

"She has metal teeth." She said confused.

"Mister Salazar fixed my body when I was a child. He saved my life, and made me more than I was." She held up a hand and clenched it into a fist, "The man is a saint."

"...Okay." She replied.

"Maria, Graelyn, meet Sarah MacLachlan. She's an old friend."

Black moves to castle, the rook takes its position to protect the king, after taking out an enemy rook on the road.

\* \* \* \*

"I need to get you out of here, I have connections, I can hide you on the rim."

"Wouldn't the Librarian have something to say about that?" Sarah seemed to pout for a moment, "...Yes...."

"I survive on Earth or I die. Are you prepared to help with that?" Sarah raised her head.

"I'll give my life for you, sir."

"Manuel, people are going to die for you, no matter what. They'll lay siege to this city if you live." Maria said, louder.

"Then I'll fight them." He shouted back.



"This is madness."

"This is war."

Graelyn looked up at the sky, where hundreds of objects streaked down through the darkening sky. Missiles and gunfire shot up from the ground, and many exploded in the air, blowing up into a rain of paper pamphlets that fell over the city.

"It's just propaganda?" Graelyn asked.

"No," Maria answered, "Its cover."

One of the objects swerved around a missile, and accelerated towards the roof. Graelyn moved to cover her face as it impacted, sending a rain of torn up cobblestone spraying from where it landed.

From it rose two figures, one coated head to toe in a silvery sheen, swords sliding out of its arms. The other a blackbird, rifle in hand, rising from the firely crater.

"No. Not you Arch." Graelyn whispered.

The white player moves its Queen onto the field, along with a knight.

Check.

\* \* \* \*

"Arch no! What are you doing?" Graelyn yelled, and Chrome teeth ran forward, her fists out. "She's going to die, stop her!" She yelled again, and arch raised a sword to block her arm. It should have disarmed her literally, but the sword just cut through the skin. Chometeeth grinned, and punched Arch in the belly. He reeled, and tried to move his other sword into her gut. She twirled out of the way, and pulled her foot behind his leg, pulling his knee forward to trip him. As he fell, he used the moment of the fall to bring his other leg up into her chest, and the two fell to the ground together, they both rose again, and he swung at her, two which she blocked, and leaped over him, inhumanly high. But he followed the leap the same way. She grinned. They hit each other in the air and slid to the ground some distance from each other. Each rose into a sprinter's position, and charged. They collided with an unholy sound, leaving Arch dented, and Sarah's Jaw hanging off its hinge. She still looked eager as they began exchanging blows faster and faster, parrying each other's blows. He stabbed her in the leg. She ripped a piece of plating off his shoulder revealing the mechanical bits beneath. They slid back again, panting, and charged once again.

All the while Alice walked toward Salazar, her rifle in hand.

"So then, Songbird. It's so nice for you to join me. Would you like a drink? I brought plenty." He offered her a beer, then a coke. She raised her gun. Sarah looked to her left, and as they began charging each other, knew she was out of time. She waited till Arch was close, and left herself open. His sword slid between her ribs, and she could hear him make a shocked sound as she rammed her hand through the exposed shoulder into his chest. He tried to break free of her, but it was too late-- she clenched her fist down on something inside Arch and threw him like a shot put, right into Songbird, who was knocked right over by the projectile. Alice was already rising, and Sarah slid between them, blood oozing out of her chest through her dress. Alice cursed as the suit began jerking, its internal mechanisms damaged from the impact, and pressed a release valve inside it with her tongue. The armor fell off of her like flower petals, and she rose out of it, rage in her eyes. Manuel pulled a pistol out, but instead of pointing it at Alice, set it on the table. Graelyn didn't understand, but she ran to Arch who had destroyed Salazar's chair, and was screaming in pain.

"Its going to be okay Arch..." She tried to comfort him, but she really didn't know if he would be. Why had Salazar chosen this fate? Why didn't Songbird just bomb him from orbit? Why did anyone have to fight anyone? Why couldn't they just leave each other alone? Why couldn't they just mind their own business? Black oil and red blood oozed onto Graelyn's dress and she felt rage flood her brain. This was everyone's fault. Salazar's, Songbird's, Arch's, Maria's, Sarah's, her own to. People were going to die, and there would be blood everywhere. She covered her face with her hands.

"You're a pathetic little thing." Her mother said, "Its no wonder you tried to take the easy way out." She felt the impact of her mother's hand, as she begged her to stop, and saw Sarah bleeding from the ribs, where she'd been hit so many times. "You'd stop this if you were strong. But you're not. You're going to be a good girl, because you know what you deserve." Graelyn began shaking. No NO NO this wasn't what she deserved this wasn't what anyone deserved, this war, this fighting, this bloodshed. She could do better. She could stop this. Arch moaned in pain. She looked at the gun on the table.

"You'll have to shoot me first if you want to get to him." Sarah yelled.

"Fine." Alice Said, and shot her in the leg five times. She dropped to the ground, and she and Arch made the same noises now.

"Alice, you don't have to do this." Maria said, "You're not the World Council. You're better than them."

She looked at Maria, her eyes burning, "I am utterly and only the World Council. If I don't do this they will burn this city to the ground to keep the world safe. You know that right? They're out for blood. And so am I." She narrowed her sights on Manuel.

"You might not want to watch this." Maria looked away. She knew she was right.

"I'm unarmed, I've offered you a drink, and you come here and shoot my friends. So this is the face of the revolution. I hope you're happy with what you've created."

"You know damn well what you stand for! I saw what Centro did. People were slaves to you. You could pay money to get away with murder. And I saw what happened in Mexico City."

"...What happened in Mexico City?" Salazar looked confused, and worried.

"You were on the board of Directors. You tell me. You saw what Graelyn Scythes did. And even if you didn't, you were part of the system that let that happen... That let...." Her gun shook in her hands.

"I cannot let you live Manuel Salazar. I have to kill you, for the sake of the future."

He chugged the rest of his beer, and threw it to the side.

"Then it is done." Sarah tried to rise again, but he gently pushed her down with his foot.

"Goodbye Maria, I'm glad you came. You could have let me die alone, I'm grateful for that." He reached out to her, and she took his hand for a moment, before stepping back again.

"Well then, Alice. Lets end your revolution. You win."

"NO!" Graelyn picked up the gun. She had never picked up a gun before, but she knew she could use it. She'd seen enough movies. She'd played enough games. The handle was cold in her hand, and she watched Alice's face turn slowly towards her, the trees moved slower to. "Alice, don't be the kind of person who'd do this. You're brave, and honest, this isn't the only-" But Graelyn Scythes, 17, had never held a gun before. She waved the gun to the side, to gesture, but her finger glanced down on the trigger. There wasn't time for anyone to react, there was just a quick cacophony of bangs, and a perfectly diagonal line of red holes appeared on Alice's chest.

"Oh." Alice said, and crumbled over. Graelyn dropped the gun and stared.

No.

Manuel began laughing, and Graelyn just stared, her face pale. Alice lay there, blood coming out of places it was never meant to. It almost looked like she was shivering.

"You little bitch you thought you could take what was mine did you? Did you? You thought this was your world? This city is ours you brat! We're free without you." He went on and on, and Graelyn walked over to Alice, and knelt by her, taking her hand.

"I don't know what to do." Graelyn begged. Alice looked at her, and Graelyn couldn't figure out what the expression meant.

"Manuel!" Maria yelled, "Help her!"

"Why would I help her? Why in this whole world would I help her? The woman who has ruined everything I worked for. Who do you think I am Maria? A coward? I'm a Director, I can do what I like and no one can stop me? Who do you think I am?"

Graelyn looked down at Sarah, and up at Manuel.

"Manuel," she said, "You're a Doctor."

Manuel Salazar stood for a moment, his face slid back from his tirade, and he stared at the bleeding

woman with red hair on the ground in front of him. He looked at Graelyn, and saw him squeeze Alice's hand.

"To me, you're a miracle." Sarah had said.

Manuel walked over to Alice, "Maria, get a medical staff up here for Arch and Sarah. I'll need my equipment as well. My phone is on the table, you know the pass-code."

"Now Graelyn, I'll need you to help me. We need to stop the bleeding. So follow my instructions precisely."

The hands of Manuel Salazar had been called a gift from God, and they worked faster than hands had any right to. He didn't even pause as people ran up handing him new equipment. He worked with perfect grace and stability, and as he removed the bullets, and reattached tissue, and sealed wounds, one could not help but admire those hands. Different hands went to work on Sarah and Arch, and the two were easily stabilized, though Arch's anatomy proved someone confusing at first. It came as no surprise if you saw those hands that Manuel saved Alice's life. And as they loaded her onto a gurney to take her away to the hospital. Manuel smiled at Graelyn.

"We saved her. You were right."

"You told me you had a facade. You were right to. It was more than just saying Senior." He placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe now that I've saved her, we can work something out, me and the Council. This doesn't have to be an apocalypse. Honor... Dignity, bullshit. We'll live. There will be a future."

She rose to her feet, "I'm glad for you, Manuel. But I crossed a line. I'm sorry."

Graelyn bolted without another word, running towards the side of the Pyramid. She focused on it. She could see the edge, it was like running towards a release. She could feel the muscles in her body like she'd only ever felt once before, felt her breath, felt her life, and she prepared to jump.

This was for the best, after all. She'd never screw up again. She'd never disappoint anyone again. Everything she did she'd ruined. They were better off without her.

"Graelyn!" She heard a voice, and she tried to stop. She ended up sort of falling over and sliding, as she looked up to see Lizette, who was there with several other Salazars at the lift. They had probably come to check up on things, or, well, it didn't matter. She rose again, on unsteady legs, and she looked back at the ledge. She wanted to. She really, truly wanted to. But she noticed something about Lizette. She was wearing the same dress as her, just many times smaller, and not stained with blood and oil. Lizette's small face was filled with shock.

Graelyn collapsed to her knees, unable to go any further, and for the first time she could remember in years, she began to sob. Lizette broke free of her parents and ran to her, wrapping her arms around her.

Graelyn cried like she never knew she could cry, and Lizette stayed there with her, until the sun broke over the horizon, and a new dawn pushed its hand across the board of the world, and wiped the pieces clean.



# **Chapter 13: An Aftermath of Coverage**

Video Transcript: News cast, July 1st 2495

World Revolutionary Council Headquarters, Oslo Norway

Image: We see several figures standing in front of a large backdrop with the WRC logo on it. Most of these people are members of the Council itself, an international body of the most important people throughout the world's revolution. We recognize some of these people: Alice MacLeod is there, clearly still recovering from her injuries, one of her arms in a sling, and a stiffness around her belly that one could assume comes from many bandages. Maria Salazar is also there on stage, and when the camera cut to the crowd for reaction shots we can catch other familiar faces: Jack, Chantelle, Shona, Trevon, Yi... The surprise on the stage is Manuel Salazar, who was formerly under a kill or capture order. A mixed race woman we haven't been introduced to before, the leader of the WRC, Pauline Lamarque, steps forward to much applause.

Pauline: Thank you. (She gestures for the crowd to stop applauding. It continues.) Thank you very much. (The crowd dies down slowly, and then finally drops off.)

When this revolution began, we were prepared for a long fight. A war that would tear this planet apart at the seams. However, thanks to intelligence gained by Alice MacLeod, also known as the Songbird of Liberation, we were able to win this fight in not years, but in mere months. Such a quick turnover of the world is unprecedented in our history, and today we mark the official end of the conflict.

(There is a pause as more applause erupts, as well as a chant of "Songbird! Songbird!")

While the eradication of the leadership of Centro Systems was originally considered a certainty by us, the story of our world is malleable. Manuel Salazar has proved completely co-operative in assisting the medical needs of the world since turning himself over to the WRC, not to mention personally saved the life of Alice MacLeod after an attempted assassination.

Alice: That's n-

(The crowd erupts in applause, drowning her out.)

Pauline: And so, from a grateful Earth, we present Manuel Salazar with an official pardon, as well as a position in the WRC to help shape our new socialized medical system.

(More applause, Manuel comes to the Microphone.)

Manuel: Thank you, thank you. I'll keep this short: our struggle is over. For those of you who loved the old world, do not clutch to it. Instead rejoice in the chance to build a new future. It may not be the one you expected, but it is the one you will live in. I pledge to create a new, free, medical system that will care for everyone on Earth, while continuing to push innovating medical technology. Thank you.

(He waves and steps away from the Microphone. There is more applause. The people on the stage wave. Let's change the channel.)

Image: A man stands in front of an image of what looks like a factory, he is dressed nicely, and looks out of place in the industrial wasteland. He has a pin that labels him as part of a news agency.

Reporter: Hello, I'm Antwon Phillipe, here in Mexico City where the World Revolutionary Council is still refusing to say exactly what they have discovered inside this building. Earlier today, I managed to talk to some of the workers who are going through the facility

Image: We see four people sitting on the curb, all of them look disheveled. Each is wearing a hazmat suit, though their helmets have all been removed. One of them is crying, one is vaping.

Reporter (offscreen): Excuse me, Antwon Phillipe, Populi News. Could you tell us what the WRC is investigating in there.

(two of the people just keep staring off into the distance, oblivious. The reporter repeats the question)

Man: I... I can't talk about that.

Woman: Go away please.

Reporter: The people of Earth want to know what the WRC found.

Man: Look its... Look you'll know eventually, we have to catalog this.

Woman: You want a quote or something? I'll give you a quote: Graelyn Scythes is a bastard.

(Enough of that. What else is on?)

Image: We see a different reporter, this one a non-binary person. They are with Pauline Lamarque. We appear to have caught them in the middle of something.

Pauline: ...is difficult. After all the creation of a new government isn't a smooth process, especially on this scale. It's certainly good to have Martian co-operation, but I can't say dealing with the Rim Crimelords has been any easier. If anything, they seem to want to exploit this situation more than anything.

Reporter: So you've talked with Premier Mashima?

Pauline: Oh, many times. I think our two worlds will finally be friends again.

Reporter: Now, on a different note, I'm sure you've heard the public outcry for the death of Graelyn Scythes.

Pauline: Of course.

Reporter: Can you confirm that she will be executed?

Pauline: She will be granted a fair trial, like anyone else. This case is more complicated than most



people know.

Reporter: Could you explain that?

Pauline: I'm afraid not. There is a lot about this that is confidential. I'm sure you have heard Alice MacLeod's opinion on the matter.

Reporter: Many analysts say we can't trust her judgment, that she is suffering from survivor's guilt or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Pauline: I'm not going to put words in her mouth. She seems of sound mind to me, and she has said what she said.

Reporter: But-

(Wait, what did she say? Let's scroll through the feed... No that video is just spam... Ah, there we go, lets pull this one up.)

Image: Alice MacLeod is inside an old tavern, she appears to be swigging from a big mug of mead with her good hand. We hear, but to not see, a third reporter, this one a woman. Her voice sounds nervous, as though she is rather new at the job, or maybe just slightly star struck.

Reporter: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me Miss MacLeod.

Alice: Its my pleasure.

Reporter: I've heard from people close to you that you didn't expect to survive the revolution. How does it feel to have come out the other side?

Alice: To be honest, it's confusing. I've been preparing my whole life for the liberation of Earth, and now that its done... I don't know I'm sorry that doesn't really answer your question.

Reporter: That's fine, totally fine. Do you know what you'll be doing now?

Alice: Taking a break, first of all. I have some wounds to heal from and my friends have persuaded me it would be for everyone's best if I took time to recuperate. I actually tried to go back to work early, and passed out in the Council's planning room. (She laughs) I just can't stop can I? Anyways, I'm taking a lot of walks, seeing more of my parents then I've seen in years, and taking care of my cat.

Reporter: You have a cat?

Alice: Yes, it was given to me by a friend. I always hated cats, but I find this one rather personable. I wouldn't say it likes me, but we have a mutual understanding. (The reporter and Alice both laugh)

Reporter: That's cats for you!

Alice: Did you have any more questions Minh-Ho?

Reporter: Yes, you've been visiting a prison where high level prisoners are being kept quite frequently as of late.

Alice: I'm afraid I can't comment on that.

Reporter: Have you been visiting the woman who attempted to assassinate you, Graelyn Scythes?

Alice: I'll have you know that my injuries were accidental.

Reporter: Excuse me, but you were shot multiple times, that doesn't sound accidental.

Alice: It was. It was an accidental weapon discharge. Graelyn is innocent, and I'm trying to get the WRC to remove the charges against her.

Reporter: What? You can't be serious.

Alice: I'm utterly serious.

Reporter: The people of Earth want justice.

Alice: I gave them justice. I executed Graelyn Scythes personally.

Reporter: Then why is she alive?

Alice: Its not the same person. Minh-Ho, we have a chance to build a better Earth, and I will fight the execution of an innocent girl-

Reporter: Woman.

Alice: She's seventeen years old.

Reporter: That's not what the records state.

Alice: Girl. I will fight the execution of an innocent girl till the sun burns redder than I can assume my face is getting.

(Its pretty darn red. Alice gets up, and pays for her drink.)

Alice: I'm sorry, the interview is over.

(Well that sure was something. But enough of the news. We can cut anywhere into this universe, we're watching outside it like a sun watching its planet's rotate. So lets look through someone's eyes.)

Image: We see Graelyn Scythes, in prison garb again in a drab concrete room that is clearly a prison, sitting on a Piano bench. Next to her sits Lizette in a dress patterned with strawberries, and they are playing chopsticks. Graelyn takes her hands off the piano keys, as Lizette continues.

Graelyn: You're doing well.

Lizette: I can only do it when you do it.

Graelyn: You're objectively incorrect.

(Lizette looks over, and squeals as she realizes that she is actually playing the Piano all by herself. She plays the song in a few more loops and then stops, basically bouncing out of her seat on the piano bench.)

Lizette: Now you play something!

Graelyn: Oh, um. What do you want me to play?

Arch, offscreen: Play one of your favorites!

(Oh! We're watching from Arch's eyes. They are cameras after all. Its funny to be here, you'd think he'd be blinking but it never happens.)

Lizette: And sing it to!

(Graelyn looks back at Arch warily.)

Graelyn: You know, I haven't practiced piano in years, I'm pretty rusty. Are you recording this?

Arch: I record everything I see, its in my hardware.

Graelyn: Right. Well, here goes.

(Graelyn begins to play something, but then realized she is doing it wrong and starts over. It takes her a second to figure it out.)

Graelyn: This is one of my favorite songs. Its called "God Bless the Girl." by David Bowie.

Lizette: Are you the girl?

Graelyn: Sure. I can be the girl.

(She begins to play it and sing along. She isn't the greatest singer, but she does a decent job.)

Graelyn: Jackie loves her work, and her work is love-

Lizette: No, say your own name! You're the girl!

Graelyn: Okay okay. I'm the girl. But you have to help me sing the chorus if I'm going to be the girl. So when I say God Bless the girl, you say it back with me.

Lizette: Okay!

Arch: This is too cute.

Graelyn: What?

Arch: Nothing!

(Graelyn begins playing again.)

Graelyn: Graelyn loves her work, and her work is love, for there is no other.

She says "God has given me a job!" Graelyn loves her work, there is no other.

Graelyn's aiming for the stars, but landing on the clouds. There is no other.

Sitting in her corner too afraid to run away, like a slave without chains.

Wonder turns to danger, spring turns to winter-- God bless the girl! Now you.

Lizette: God Bless the girl!

Graelyn: But I will always treasure, treasure every single moment...

Graelyn and Lizette: God bless the girl!

Graelyn: Fire turns to water, light becomes darkness

Graelyn, Lizette, and unexpectedly, Arch: God Bless the girl!

Graelyn, now looking at Arch: And I don't want to hurt you, just wanna have some fun....

All together: God bless the girl, god bless the girl!

(Graelyn smiles broadly back at Arch, and proceeds into the instrumental middle of the song. They sing the rest of the song, so you can look it up if you're curious. But you get the point. It looks like this is a regular meet up for them all. Lets cut forward a bit then, Arch's eyes have to see a lot of things.)

Image: Alice and Graelyn are sitting at a table together, there is no partition between them, but you can see a pair of armed guards occasionally when Arch moves his head a certain way.

Alice: They aren't calling the trial off. I've tried my best, but the hardliners on the council are dead set on it. They're still bitter Pauline sided with me about pardoning Manuel. If we don't let the trial go forward, the Council will fracture and we'll likely have a civil war.

Graelyn: There is no question then, I'll be going to trial willingly.

Arch: You realize they'll kill you. You can't let this go forward.

Graelyn: I never wanted anyone to get hurt Arch. I...

(Graelyn cuts herself off, and crosses her arms.)

Arch: I could get her off-world, I know some places in the rim that have to still exist in this universe we could hole up in.

Alice: I have no doubts you could. But what would happen if she broke out? The new government would prove itself entirely unable to manage its own security. Just because we won the revolution doesn't mean the job is over... Really the hard stuff is just starting. Ugh. Politics. I never wanted to deal with them.

Graelyn: I'm staying arch.

Arch: I understand. I don't like it though.

Graelyn: I know.

Alice: I have no idea how we'll be able to find you a fair judge or jury though, it's going to be nearly impossible.

Graelyn: I'm sure you'll come up with something.

Arch: So a "fair" trial is unlikely.

Alice: (she silently looks at Arch for a few moments.) Yeah.

(But let's wrap up the world then? Two more feeds. Back to the news:)

Image: Crowds of people are cheering in the streets. It's unclear what city. We cut, and see another city, and another, and another, and another... WRC members stand on balconies and wave. The world is at peace. A new world. The cameras show a piece of street art: an image of the dead faces of the Centro Directors composited next to each other. It's gruesome, but this is a time for bloody things. Each of the faces has an X over it, but the last face is Graelyn's corpse, and next to it, a picture of a younger Graelyn being led into a prison. The caption? "We won't be fooled again."

(Now let's end our tour of the media with something no one saw. But we can see it, like I said, our arms stretch everywhere, light shining into the deepest shadows. The footage is grainy, maybe no one knows this camera is here. It's just our secret. So here we are, deep in the belly of the Index's secret base, where Chess Mistress Hex stands in front of a holotable. It has a grid pattern on it, with every square alternating between black and white. Nearby, eerily similar in appearance but cheerier is Alexis. Hex looks furious. It's strange to see her furious, like her face is unfamiliar with pulling off the expression.)

Hex: What do you mean *no one died*?

Alexis: I mean, Mistress Hex, that the Songbird, Salazar, Salazar, Scythes, Sarah, and the Cyborg all survived their showdown in Nojpeten.

Hex: And why, praytell, haven't any of them died since then?

Alexis: The members of the council we have been bribing have expressed doubt you can truly manage the situation anymore. Salazar has been pardoned, and the WRC has agreed to grant Sarah amnesty on Earth since she can't return to the rim.

(Hex swipes an expensive looking teacup off the edge of the holotable. It breaks with a tiny crash and even Alexis flinches, her smile faltering.)

Alexis: And Graelyn Scythes is going to trial for shooting Alice MacLeod however, our sources can confirm that.

(Hex considers this, and her face returns to its usual passive but predatory smile.)

Hex: Good. Put a large bounty on Sarah, the kind that would make it worth the very best in the system's time. First class retirement money. That will at least tie that up.

Alexis: It shall be done Mistress Hex!

Hex: There's still a way to salvage this situation, I'm just not seeing it. What have I missed?

(Hex begins to rub her temples. Alexis busies herself by getting her mistress a fresh cup of tea, setting a cleaning droid on the shattered mess on the floor. Hex's eyes snap open.)

Hex: Graelyn said she came here from another reality.

Alexis: Yes she did, Mistress.

Hex: What if she wasn't the only person who has? If she could do it nearly on accident, it's possible – no, *probable* – that someone else has been coming through. I planned everything out Alexis, the board was set... But what if someone slipped more pieces into the game?

(Alexis flashes an unsettlingly toothy grin.)

Alexis: That's cheating. And we don't take kindly to cheaters.

Hex: No... (She pulls up some images, and begins combing through them. She pulls up an image of a box with a sun and moon symbol on it.) This is an image one of our operatives got of the mobile AI that the revolution used to take down Centro's defenses. An AI I had never heard of before, with a logo and color scheme that the revolution doesn't use at all. Now why would that be, Alexis?

(Alexis shrugs, smiling as though she is very pleased she doesn't know.)

Hex: I thought I was whispering in the ears of both players... But someone else was rigging the game while I was maneuvering. It's a shell game. (She does a search for more images of the sun/moon symbol. Several things come up, including a pin bought by a researcher in Guatemala centuries ago that seems to show construction techniques not possible during the period it dates from. There are also a few blurry pictures of a pair of figures: one in shorts and a hoodie, the other in a hoodie under a sport coat, their faces hidden in every shot. Hex stops skimming through the images, and appears to have a revelation. She looks around the room, turning slowly. Her eyes settle on the camera, on us. She begins to gently laugh. The laugh grows louder.)

Alexis: Was there a joke Mistress?

Hex: *Brava*, whoever you are. Good game. Well played.

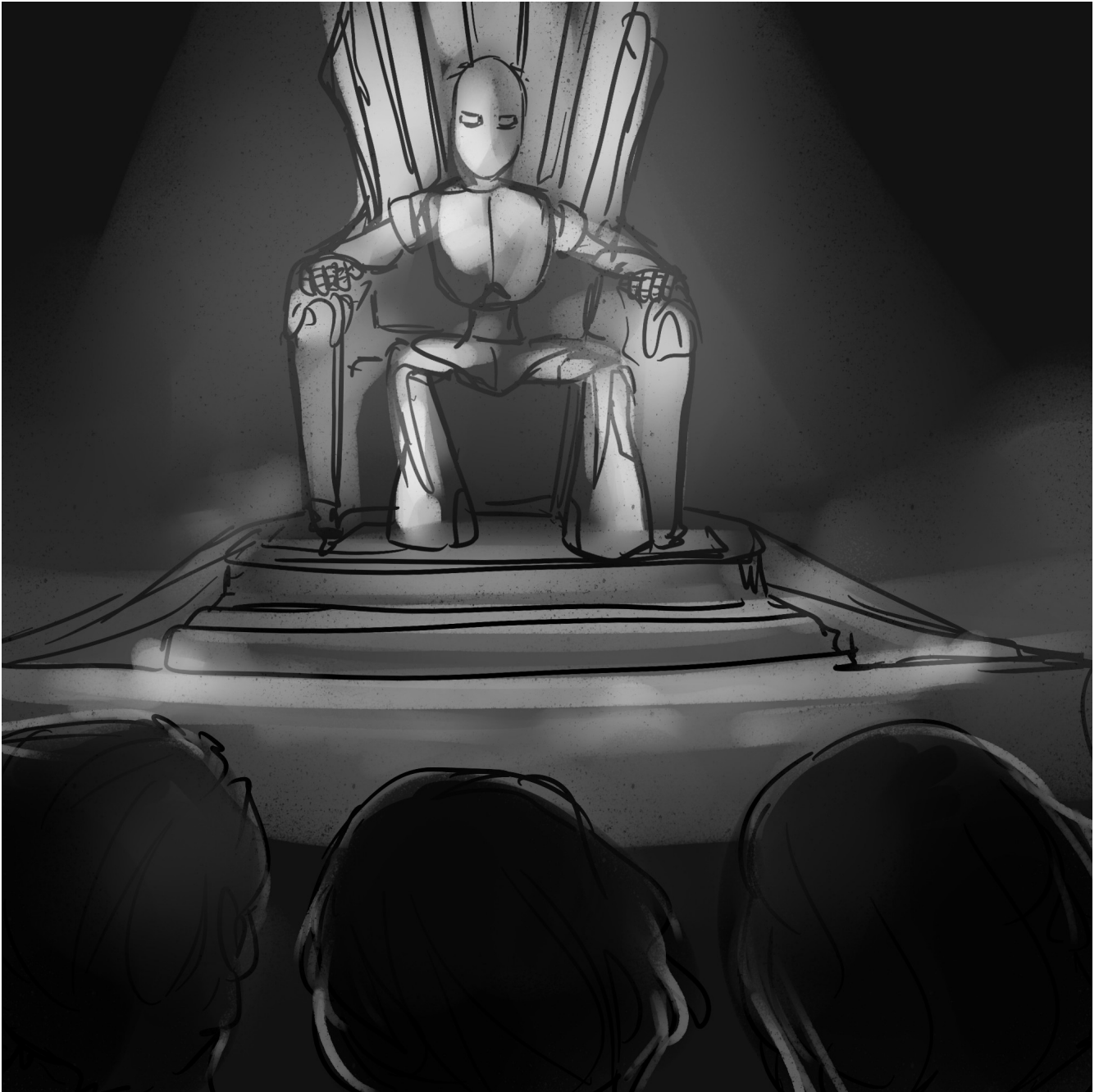
(Hex gets up and walks towards the camera, staring straight into it. We know each other now.)

Hex: I look forward to the next round.

(We cut the feed. The image goes black. However long you linger on the image is up to you. It doesn't move, it simply stays black.

No, wait.

You wait, and for a moment, you feel like you see something writhe in the darkness.)



# **Chapter 14: I Dream of Judicator**



The Cat wouldn't stop meowing. Alice moaned and reached out to the cat, which was sitting next to her pillow on the bed. She patted it like it was an alarm clock she was mashing the snooze button on. The Cat, Captain Fudgesickle, didn't seem to take the remotest notice of having his head smooshed or booped, and just kept meowing. Cursing a bit under her breath, Alice got up, went over to the cat food bowl, poured out a bunch of food without measuring it, and shambled back to her bed where she collapsed. The crunching of the dry cat food lulled her to sleep again.

Then she dreamed. She was standing on top of the Pyramid at Nojpeten, and Graelyn was throwing toy stuffed giraffes at her.

"I'm sorry!" Graelyn said with every throw. The Giraffes splattered her with blood whenever they hit her, and she pulled out her own giraffe and threatened Graelyn with it.

She looked down and saw the bullet holes across her chest, and looked up, to see Graelyn dropping the gun. "Oh." She heard herself say as she dropped to the ground. She could feel herself slipping away from the Earth.

Alice was an Asatru, and worshiped Thor, his hammer hung around her neck, and as she bled out she had wondered if she'd go to Valhalla. She wondered it in the dream to, but this time, she saw the Valkyries coming down from a crack in the sky.

But they weren't... Normal Valkyries. They had blue skin, no visible orifices, and their legs hung limply under their bodies as they floated down. Lightning seeming to zip between them.

"You have done well, Alice MacLeod." She heard Thor say, and sat up to see him at a green felt table playing cards with Jesus, Horus, David Bowie, Artemis and Kali. Graelyn was now their waiter, serving them all drinks.

"Just water." Said Jesus, and was served a sparkling clear glass of it that he then took a sip of wine from.

"Mead for me!" Thor said, and was given a big mug.

"I'll take what the big guy had." Said Bowie.

"Wine." Said Horus, Artemis, and Kali together.

"Right away!" Said waiter Graelyn, and jumped off the side of the building, only to reappear with the drinks.

"What's going on?" Alice asked Thor.

"Well, I'm about to win this hand." Said Thor.

"He always says that." Kali added, revealing her cards and winning the hand. Thor laughed jovially as she did so.

"Am I dead?"

"No, not yet. But we're all here to give you a warning. Aha, this time I have it for sure!" Thor added, right before he lost the hand to Artemis.

"What kind of warning?" Alice asked, she rose to her feet, and realized that the blue things she'd thought were Valkyries were all over the sky now.

"They're warning you about me." She heard a woman say. Alice looked over, and she was not looking at the roof of the pyramid, but across a vast crystal road that seemed to be filled with sand sitting in an infinite blackness. She looked back, and was looking at the card table on the rooftop again. She got a headache even in her dream. She was looking away from Alice, wearing a hoodie with the hood pulled down with a pattern of a sun turning into a moon running down the spine, a pattern identical to the hoodies on the people standing in a V-formation extending away from her, with the hoods pulled up. The woman turned her head, she was blond, with her hair along one side of her head shaved off and the rest of her chin length hair combed to the other side. Alice didn't recognize her.

"And you should be warned about me," she continued, "I'm the Architect of anyone's wildest dreams." She looked back at the Gods, who had set their cards down. They spoke to her in unison.

"You've stepped into something you never imagined."

She felt the woman's breath on her neck.

"And Graelyn Scythes and Archimedes VonAhnerabe are ours."

Alice woke up sweating, with a jolt. The cat came up to her, looking worried, and sat on her lap. She reached down and stroked it. It was just a dream after all, a weird one, but just a dream. Picking the cat up in her arms, she decided it was time to get up anyways. She put on a playlist, and listened to "Las Baricadas" as she made herself breakfast, and caught up on the news as she ate a fried egg on toast with orange juice. Things were surprisingly calm. A few weeks had passed, and Graelyn was loitering in prison with cushy visiting privileges. Archimedes was largely spending his time visting her, but otherwise was volunteering with helping rebuild in different communities. He was stronger than some moving machines, and had made the news for rescuing a child from a bomb collapsed building who had been presumed dead. His mask hid his expression from her, and from everyone, but he seemed genuine. It had taken a full week to fix the damage to him however, as his cyborg biology was intricate and complicated, so she supposed it must feel good to be out and about, even if it meant lifting large slabs of concrete.

Alice however, kept having the nightmare. Graelyn's shocked face as she realized she'd fired the gun. The gun dropping out of her hands. The realization she'd been shot. She didn't blame Graelyn for what had happened, but Alice had had some trouble leaving the apartment recently. Even though it could be a little snot, she was grateful for the cat living with her, as she always found it calming to stroke, and it seemed to respond to her when she needed it. Getting up from the breakfast table, she looked at the door, and went to sit back down. Her chest still hadn't fully healed, probably because she wasn't resting

enough, and as she ran her fingers through her hair, she leaned forward and felt an ache run through her. She didn't moan, didn't scrunch her face up, just took the pain and accepted it in her world.

The doorbell rang. She ignored it. It rang again.

"Graelyn its Jack." She got up, slowly, and opened the door up. Jack looked tired.

"Hey Jack, come on in." She gestured to the table. "Want some tea?"

"Yeah, sure." She filled the kettle up, and flicked the switch on it. It heated the water in seconds, which she poured into two cups with tea bags in them, and handed one to Jack.

"Thanks." He said, setting the hot cup down.

"We've got a pretty big problem." Jack started.

"When don't we?"

"Graelyn's trial is getting fast tracked, obviously, but its complicated."

Alice sighed, "How much more complicated could it get? It was already complicated."

"No Judge who will accept the case is considered unbiased enough. If we chose a Centro Judge, this will be seen as a choice to let her off the hook. There will be riots. If we chose a Judge from the Revolution, it will be seen as a show trial, and there will be riots. Mars has offered to let us use one of their Judges, but there are enough people from the revolution and ex-Centro forces who don't trust the Martian Communists that this could become a wedge issue for them and allow them to form a coalition using anti-outsider sentiment. There really is no good choice here." Alice looked up at the ceiling. This was so needlessly complicated. No wonder the council had wanted to kill all the Centro Directors and get it done with.

"Why were we able to get away with pardoning Manuel then?"

"Because he saved your life, and already had a populist following. Pardoning him looked good to nearly everyone, with those against it such a small minority most of them have publicly agreed with it anyways just to save face. Graelyn admits to shooting the hero of the revolution, that Manuel saved. She's in hot water." Alice had tried so hard to not have charges pressed, but it wasn't her call. Her father's brother Ivan, in the end, had been the one who had come out the strongest in favor of trial (though he'd started at execution). He'd played at being this about his niece being shot, but she knew very well it didn't actually have much if anything to do with that. Alice slammed her head down onto the table and let out a soft moan.

"Er, are you okay."

"I'm having the best day of my entire life, clearly."

"Did you sleep last night?" She rolled her forehead back and forth on the table to shake her head no.

"I'm still having the Nightmares. I have another therapy session today, so you don't need to worry about it." Jack nodded. He didn't look like his concern had ebbed.

"Tonight's was different though... Jack, do you remember how I told you I got Alastair, the AI box we used to take down Centro's defenses?"

"The weird Miranda lady, yeah."

"Who in the Raggedy-Ann solar system did she work for?" She asked into the table.

"I don't know." Jack admitted.

"I don't either." Alice replied, "But I have a dream of who it could be."

Jack didn't know what to say to that.

"You're scheduled to see Johnathan today." Alice lifted her eyes up from the table, and she wondered again if forgiving Graelyn was the right choice.

Johnathan sat on the park bench, and threw seeds to the birds. His nurse watched him closely. He did every action intently, and the seed throws were done with a precision that seemed not so much practiced as horrendous, like watching a badly made animatronic try to imitate a person. His lips had been unsewn, but he was still nonverbal. The modifications to his body had been so intense, figuring out how much of his body had been replaced would be more invasive than it would be useful.

"Johnathan, you're going to have a visitor today. Do you remember Alice?" He nodded.

"She's coming to see you. Isn't that exciting?" He threw some more seeds to the birds. Three seeds landed in front of each bird, in a perfectly triangular shape. The previous throw had been five seeds forming the corners of a pentagon. The Nurse knew it had to be intentional. Down the path she saw Alice coming towards them, she wasn't wearing military clothes today, just jeans and a tshirt with a loose jacket over it. A Thor's hammer hung from her neck.

"Here she comes!" Johnathan looked over at her. She didn't accelerate, just kept the same pace till she reached him.

"Hey Johnathan. Are you doing well?" He nodded.

"Can you speak at all yet?" He shook his head.

"Sorry to ask then." He shrugged. She sat down on the other side of him on the bench.

"I'm not here to see how you're doing today, to be honest. I figured I'd be upfront about that." He made a few signs with his hands. Alice looked up at the Nurse.

"He said: I'm glad you're not leading me on. I like that you're straight to the point."

"I didn't know you could sign Johnathan!" He signed back.

"He says: I didn't know I could either. I think it was installed in me." Alice frowned.

"You mean, like software?" He nodded. The idea of a person having things installed in their brain against their will like they were a machine was... Abominable.

"I'm glad that I know how to do this though, because it let me talk." The Nurse interpreted.

"I can image you would be. Johnathan, do you remember the woman who came into Graelyn's apartment about a month ago when we rescued you." He nodded.

"It was the one who looked like Graelyn Scythes." Alice tilted her head to the side. Her hair leaned with her.

"Why do you say 'looked like'?"

"Because..." He stopped signing, and seemed to focus very hard, Alice looked over at the Nurse, who put a hand on Johnathan's shoulder. He was trembling.

"Johnathan? Is this too much today?" He shook his head. After a moment, he resumed signing.

"Graelyn Scythes had a chip installed in me so she could control me remotely." The Nurse looked aghast when she said it. Alice looked like this was not particularly surprising.

"I'm sorry."

"Its not your fault. This girl looked like Graelyn, but she was too young, and her hair was wrong. She didn't connect to my chip when she was near me."

"You can sense that?" He nodded.

"Instantly." Alice looked out at the park. Someone was throwing a Frisbee at their dog, who eargly caught it, then dropped it to go smell something.

"The WRC wants you to testify at the trial. Specifically, they want you to testify for the prosecution.

"I'm not their pawn."

"I know. You're no one's pawn." He threw another handful of seeds at the birds, which landed in front of each bird in a perfect square.

"Why did all of this happen?" The Nurse sounded sad as she said it, and not just in trying to imitate his tone.

"I wish I knew Johnathan." She held out a hand to him, and he grasped it tightly.

"I wish I knew..."

\* \* \* \*

Songbird escorted the lawyer through the prison, who was doing something on their tablet during the entire journey through the hallways. They didn't speak to each other. After all, technically Alice would probably be asked to be a witness for the prosecution, a role she'd be terrible at. She was wondering if she'd even get called up at this point.

She opened the door to the room Graelyn would be meeting her lawyer, and opened the door. "Graelyn, your lawyer is here. Good luck."

"Thanks, Alice." Graelyn said, with a faint smile. The lawyer looked between them weirdly, and walked in, with the door shutting behind them. The Lawyer wore a plain blue suit that was tightly fitted, with a purple striped tie that somehow matched it. They had stud earrings, and a black hair put up in tiny spikes. Their nails were purple and blue as well, and there were a pair of peircings on their lower lip.

"Hi, I'm Jame Morrel." They held out a hand, and she shook it, "I'll be representing you."

"How familiar are you with my case?" Graelyn asked.

"I've read all of your logged interviews, as well as all of those related to the case, and already read all of the relevant documents." Jame answered, and looke Graelyn right in the eyes.

"What we say in here is totally confidential. You aren't being recorded, and if you are we get a free retrial anyways." Jame continued, "So if you have lied about anything you need to tell me right now."

"I have not lied." She replied.

"So, you honestly believe you are from an alternate reality?"

"I don't just believe that, I am from one."

"I hope you understand that that defense isn't going to fly in court. No one is going to believe that outside of a few outside elements. Our best defense is you're a replicant or clone."

"That's not the truth though." Jame sighed.

"What's going to get you off though? Being from an alternate reality sounds like a very bad cover story. Being a clone that thinks its from an alternate reality is the kind of thing that moves a jury."

Graelyn nodded, "We know its a jury trial then?"

"No, we don't. They haven't decided nearly anything yet. Frankly its a mess. The WRC is in such a tizzy to prevent a crisis with this trial they're going to make one simply by virtue of inaction." Jame began looking through something on their tablet.

"Jame, why did you decide to be my lawyer?" Jame finished scrolling, and turned the tablet to face her.

"I haven't yet." On the screen was a picture of Graelyn, next to a picture of older Graelyn.

"Did you know I'd met this other Graelyn Scythes?"

"I did not."

"She was an intolerable know it all, full of herself, and extremely condescending."

"I'm at least not one of those things."

"She never would have said that. I'm taking your case, and I'm taking it because everyone deserves to

be treated fairly, even if they're a scheming puddle of rat pee."

Graelyn puffed her cheeks out, and decided not to reply to that.

"I noticed you and Songbird seem almost congenial."

Graelyn looked uncomfortable. "Shooting her didn't help that. Hence the almost."

"You do realize that she had sworn publicly she'd personally execute Graelyn Scythes no less than 27 times?"

Graelyn shook her head, "No I didn't."

"Her hesitancy is our best case for you. The court will try to claim she is mentally unfit to make judgments right now, of course."

"Of course."

"And whatever happened in Mexico City is being kept a secret still, but they'll undoubtedly use it in the trial. Know what it is?"

She shook her head, "No idea. Isn't that illegal though, to not submit evidence for you to see?"

This time it was Jame's turn to shake their head. "Not in this trial. They haven't written a full legal code the WRC can agree on yet, and so they're getting away with playing fast and loose with some of the rules at the moment. The WRC isn't all communist, they're an amalgamation of Commies, socialists, anarchists, and a small number of democratic republicans who just want a return to non-corporate government but are still capitalists. They're scheduled to work out a new constitution in Oslo in two months, and let me tell you, I'm buying a ticket there just to watch the verbal fireworks."

Graelyn stretched her hands out in front of her.

"Who did you support in this war anyways? You don't seem like, well, the people I've met from either side.

"The Revolution of course." Jame replied. "I like having civil rights, for some strange reason, but I'm also a pragmatist. I'm not going to idealize the mess that is the WRC. They weren't ready to win this war so fast, and they're still scrambling."

Graelyn smiled, she liked this person. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Don't thank me. Thank Songbird. She's the one who called me." Graelyn's jaw dropped.

"You can't be serious."

"I'm the best you can get. I'm glad you shot someone who likes you."

\* \* \* \*

Alice slipped back under her covers. The cat curled up on top of her. They were finally starting to get along. The nightmares had drawn them closer together, and as much as she wished she'd never gotten them, she was grateful they'd at least done that. She drifted off into dreams again, as she had the night before.

She was standing in a desert, that was new, and there was a storm encroaching behind her. She began trying to outrun it... But the sand started falling away from underneath her, the ground falling away into infinity. She saw that some of it was holding firm, so she scrambled hard for it, and reached it just as the wind blew the rest of the landscape away. She shielded her eyes, and when she uncovered them, she was on the same crystal path she had seen the previous night, filled with sand. The world around her was dark, aside from a shining orb that looked like a moon... Or was it a sun?

"You're here again. Good. I wasn't sure if you would be."

Alice looked behind her. There was that woman again. She was still facing away from her. This time she only had a pair of other people in hoodies with her, one on either side of her, a step back and facing away. One had on a black sport-coat over the hoodie, the other wore shorts.

"Who are you?" She tried to stand up, but it felt like her shins were glued to the path.

"If this is just a dream, and isn't real, why does it matter?" She replied. Alice looked around, it looked awful real.

"Is this a dream?"

"Of course its a dream. But we're dealing with concepts outside of humans. Humans aren't supposed to travel between other realities, correct? We aren't supposed to do lots of things, so lets just say that when you've broken one so-called rule, there are ways to break others. This is the last time you'll see us in your dreams however. You should have known the bargain we made had more strings than it seemed on the surface."

"I don't want Graelyn to die. I truly don't. I've been trying to help her."

"That's funny, but I believe you nonetheless." She turned her head so Graelyn could see one of her ferocious blue eyes.

"You and Manuel Salazar were supposed to die, but you both lived. You changed the game."

"You changed it by giving me that box."

"True. But I've done this before. You're only one reality."

"There really are multiple realities? Graelyn isn't... Brainwashed?"

"Of course there are. Don't be silly. You're not the first Alice MacLeod I've dealt with, and you won't be the last. Keep Graelyn safe. I'll do the rest."

"Why do you need Graelyn so badly then? Can't you just... Get another one?" She narrowed her visible eye at Alice.



"No. But that's enough of that. Dawn is coming, you might want to wake up."

Alice's eye's opened with a snap, the sun was shining softly through the window.

\* \* \* \*

Alice winced through her teeth, the bandages would probably have to be changed again soon, and it would only sting worse then, but she was alive and that was what was important. Graelyn Scythes was another matter.

"We have a problem." Alice began, "We need the trial of Graelyn Scythes or her double to begin soon, but we haven't settled on a new legal code. If we give her a military trial through the Revolutionary Army, we'll likely lose the support of the population of the planet who were Centro supporters we've managed to quell, and we'll have another set of uprisings on our hands. However, if we try her under a Centro judge, we'll lose the support of several groups internally, and likely have to fend off a coup. This is difficult, and I need your feedback.

The group around her she could trust, these were people she'd fought beside for years. Jack, Chantelle, Eve, Roxanne, Trevon, Yi, Gerald... The group sat around the table silently at first, a few of them gave support for siding with one idea or another, but neither side could make any particularly strong arguments either way.

"I have a suggestion." Chantelle said after some time. All eyes turned to her.

"Its uh, kind of unusual though."

"Please, we need unusual." Chantelle squirmed in her seat.

"My dad told me a story once, of something Heirum J. Whitehead build before Centro shut him down and he fled to Mars... An automaton that could make legal decisions with total impartiality."

"We've all heard of it," Trevon cut in, "but its just a myth." Chantelle shook her head.

"Its not a myth. My dad used to break into old buildings to see if there was anything he could scrap or sell for more food for the family. Centro didn't care if the place was considered not worth salvaging, so he was never in danger of losing his real job. One night Dad decided to break into the old Talinata Softworks building. He didn't find much he could break into, the place was clearly larger than the inside looked, but it was sealed up pretty tight. He did find what he said was a hidden door.... And under it a robot. Covered in cobwebs, He started walking towards it... And then the lights of its eyes turned on and it raised its head!" Yi gasped, but Jack looked decidedly unimpressed. "Naturally he ran out of the building as fast as he could."

"Nice ghost story, but we need more than that." Jack said.

"Now now Jack, there is nothing we lose by checking it out. Since we don't have any other leads, I'd

say its time to go to Talinata Softworks. Where is it located?"

"The former province of New Jersey."

Alice squinted at her, "I've never heard of New Jersey. Is it like New York?"

Chantelle shook her head, "I don't think you want me to take the time to explain New Jersey."

\* \* \* \*

The VTOL landed in front of the abandoned headquarters of Talkinata Softworks, the sign labeling the building as suck had fallen about half a foot from its mooring on one side, and swung gently in the breeze.

"This is the place." Chantelle noted. Alice gestured for the the troops to hop out and using handsignals gave instant orders about their positions and team roles. Alice took point, and rifle in hand, approached the front door where Trevon was already working the systems. The doors snapped open, and she smiled at him to indicate his good work. She stepped through the door.

"H-h-h-hello visitors and welcome to T-t-t-Talinata softworks! I'm WeN-D, and I'll be your guide today won't that be fun?"

"Uh, is this normal commander?" Yi asked. Alice shrugged, she really didn't know.

"Hello, WeN-D, I'm Alice. We're looking for the Judicator." She looked up at the ceiling as though the ceiling was somehow the disembodied voice of WeN-D's face.

"Oh gosh, I'm so glad you asked, no one ever asks usually they just ignore me and try to break things!"

"Well, can you help us find the Judicator then?"

"Oh gosh! I can't actually, if it exists, it would be classified and I can't tell you about classified things." Jack rubbed the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

"WeN-D," he began,"Its the year 2495, correct? from the current year, wouldn't you assume that everyone who gave you your orders is currently dead?"

There was a pause.

"That's no reason to break the rules!"

"Oh, Thor's thundering hammer." Alice cursed, and made a gesture to begin a search sweep.

"Oh, you're just going to look around then. I see how it is." Alice rolled her eyes at the AI.

After a few minutes of searching, Chantelle called them over to a place where there was a thin line on the floor.

"This is where my dad said it was." Alice nodded, and looked to Trevon, who got to work. Trevon was

a man of few words, but he was damn good at what he did. He silently scanned the floor, felt around it, mapped out where its points were, and then applied careful pressure to different areas, which was immediately followed by a rectangle on the floor rising up a few centimeters to reveal a handhold on its side, which Alice and Trevon pulled up together, revealing a stairwell.

"Jack, take point. Lets find out whats down there." Jack nodded, and turning the light on his rifle on, began walking down. It was dark and cobwebby, so he took the brunt of clearing a path. When he reached the bottom, he called back "well there's something down here. They rushed down to follow him. Jack's light shone on a humanoid droid of minimalist design sitting on a chair that more resembled a throne. A plaque behind it stated: "The Judicator: Permanently deactivated for being too good at its job."

"Well, no one was bitter about this guy getting turned off." Yi quipped. Alice breathed in the dusty air, and walked close to it. Did it still work?

"Hello, Judicator? Can you hear me? We need you for a trial."

For a moment, there was silence, and the dust floated gently through the beams of light.

Then, its hand twitched.

The Judicator rose, its pistons falling into place, and the glowing blue rectangles it had for eyes taking the world into focus. The Judicator only needed one look to understand the nature of the people who were approaching it, because the Judicator was made to understand these things. It went over to a rack on the wall, its legs making a squeaking screechy sound, and pulled off a robe it slipped into like clockwork. The Judicator wore a robe made of 100% double-ply Cashmere wool dyed a black so dark you might think it turned the lights off if you stared at it too long. The Judicator turned back to them like it owned the room, and hell maybe it did. You might have judges who had read the law of your country, but the Judicator had read the law of every country in history. You might have judges who form a decision based on weeks of testimony and careful work through of the information through their synapses, but the Judicator had ten trillion microprocessors that each made the machines that sent humans to the moon look like a 1991 textbook that hadn't realized the USSR had fallen. The Judicator had two eyes, but it only needed one because with double layer infrared scanning and the ability to see more colors than a Mantis Shrimp let alone a human it was already outpacing you even if its depth perception wasn't so keen it could eyeball a distance with more precision than you measure your bank account. The Judicator didn't have time for your petty disagreements, it's already figured out who is objectively right and wrong. The Judicator won't put up with your legal loopholes, it will crack you open with an understanding of the legal code so thick you could pour it like concrete to make your new jail cell. The Judicator cared about justice. You couldn't bribe it at parties, or make it take out a vendetta or prejudice on someone: it would spit your inequalities back at you like a hurricane. The Judicator was the last and final say on the law, and you'd damn well respect him or God help your soul whether you passed the bar or not.

“I represent the Revolutionary Government of Earth.” Alice said. The Judicator held up a finger. Its eyes blinked for a few seconds. Alice guessed he had found the wife.

“I see. A lot has happened since I got turned off.” It dusted itself off like a few hundred years of dust was no big deal.

“A lot has changed since you've been turned off.”

“Justice is never turned off.” The Judicator said.

“Well then, we have a case for you to try. Someone we don't think we can try fairly.”

“Then I'm your droid. Just give me some WD-40 and the complete case documents.”

“Excuse me,” Jack cut in, “are you sure you are ready for this? You've only just been reactivated.”

“I know what I'm about, son.” The Judicator. Swirled its robe as it headed for the door, making the rest of the group hustle to keep up with it. The case was on.



# **Chapter 15: The Trial of Graelyn Scythes**

*"You keep breathing but you don't know why.*

*Life's unfair and sometimes you die.*

*You're still breathing but you just can't tell,*

*don't hold your breath but*

*the pretty things are going to hell." -David Bowie*

Graelyn fidgeted as the head of the board of Directors spoke on and on. She couldn't stay focused, it was like the world around them was crumbling into a million puzzle pieces and she was scrambling around on the floor trying to replace them. She looked down at her hands. She frowned.

"Excuse me," Ariadne Moore interrupted, "I need to step out for a moment." She had clearly just gotten some message on her phone, the head of the board indicated it was fine if she left. The meeting continued for a few more minutes, and then the waiter came in with some refreshments.

"Now if we can just turn around things in China we can--"

"Excuse me everyone," the waiter said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news." The board looked up in unison, as the man drew a gun. "Viva La Revolucion." He finished." Many on the board scampered under the table, some pressed panic buttons hidden on rings and watches. The man held firm, and after a brief explosion heard from the same floor, a stream of pro-Revolutionary forces stormed into the room.

"I will not be taken to be put on some show trial!" The head of the board screamed, as two revolutionaries grabbed her and took the suicide capsule from her mouth by force.

"Now now." A voice said, a firm voice, and then stepped forward a Songbird of Liberation.

"No one ever said you'd be getting a trial. Line them up. Get the ropes."

Graelyn didn't fight back, she just stared at her reflection in the glass. How did she get to where she was? They would never understand why she had to do what she had to do. She heard her name listed off, and realized this was the end. She hadn't done nearly enough. But as she fell, she saw herself. Young, screaming, she remembered that outfit even. She didn't have time to think about it before she fell and the rope went taught. It wasn't a quick death, and when Alice said "You're dead." a few yards above her, she was in fact wrong. Graelyn had always heard that when you die your life flashes before your eyes. It turned out to be somewhat true, cause only part of it appeared. She saw a few days, like flashes, before her breath stopped, and she just hung there like a medal.

February 18th, 2494

The conductor raised her arms, and in a sweeping motion brought the orchestra to life. It wasn't just music, it was an organism, set to live for only seven minutes and so many seconds. The strings bore the

brunt of the beast's life, and they set to work in a a fervor. Graelyn Scythes closed her eyes for a moment. She could feel the gentle weight of the glasses on the bridge of her nose, and on the top of her ears. Ashlyn reached out and clutched her hand, she reciprocated the gesture, allowing a faint smirk to creep onto her.

The orchestra below was literally playing her song. Things really couldn't be better.

The audience rose to applaud the piece. Bandwagon fans, she thought.

June 4th, 2494

Ashlyn heard the lock turn in the next room, and Graelyn stepped into the bedroom rubbing her eyes. "What exactly is in that room anyways? You really don't have to worry about me spilling your secrets." Graelyn smiled at her reassuringly. "Don't worry about it. It's just very sensitive work. I don't want to show anyone till I know if it works or not." Ashlyn nodded. It was basically the same explanation as last time. She felt like a detail had changed from the last telling though.. Though she couldn't place which one.

"Don't be so worried." Graelyn muttered, slipping under the covers. The cat walked over, and sat on the bed, so Graelyn got up and put it in its cage.

"Why did you name the cat Captain Fudgesickle?" Graelyn shrugged as she settled into bed again.

"It just seemed like the the I'm supposed to do."

"You mean as a cat owner?" There was a prolonged silence.

"...No, I, never mind." She rolled over, and was silent.

July 3rd, 2494

Graelyn watched the Mexico City facility fade from view as the VTOL began making its way to New York. This was all necessary. She knew it was necessary. If she didn't do this... Her thoughts trailed off. Why was this necessary? She tried to put her thoughts in order, but they didn't quite line up properly. Like someone had put the answer at the end of an equation and she had to work towards it no matter what. This was the answer, but the question eluded her. This was to fight Mars, right? Or the Rim pirates? She'd said as much to herself before, but there had to be a more efficient way for this to happen. Why this way? She felt her head start to pound. As she looked in her reflection in the window, it suddenly struck her that her hair color was wrong.

June 8th, 2495

Ashlyn slipped out of bed, and picked the keys up out of Graelyn's purse. She had to know. It had been eating away at her all this time, and she had to know. It could be nothing behind that door, but if it

wasn't... She didn't even know what it would be. But she still crept towards the door, keys in hand, and taking one last look to see that Graelyn was asleep, turned the lock. She opened the door slowly, and peered in. At first there was only darkness, but then there was a movement in the shadows. She stifled a reaction, and fiddled for a switch. The lights turned on, revealing a man, his body lined in scars. He turned to her, pityingly. He didn't speak, for his mouth was sewn shut.

"Such a pity." Graelyn said, with a sigh. Ashlyn turned, and put her hand over her mouth in shock.

"Graelyn, you're awake. I just, you left the door open and..." Graelyn shook her head, and jangled the keys.

"You should have trusted me Ashlyn. So many things would have been simpler." Graelyn went over to the sink, and turned the water on. She flipped a switch so the basin would fill.

"What are you doing? Who is he?"

"A test subject. The son of a rather important figure who opposed us, actually. Now he's finally useful to society. Johnathan, come over here." He followed her, and Ashlyn rubbed her arm nervously.

"Ashlyn, you to. I need you to see something." She followed, against her better judgement.

"Now Ashlyn, Johnathan is the ultimate soldier. He follows every order. With use of an army of him we could take back Mars, take the Rim, finally have a true united humanity... But I can't... I can't shake the feeling I'm missing something. There is a larger reason I've been working on all of this. I can't place it though, like its a bug hovering around my head I can never swat or catch a glimpse of. Do you know what I'm saying."

"I... I think so."

"Good. You've been a good wife Ashlyn. Sorry about this, and I mean that, you know that? I'm not a bad person."

"Of course you're not-- I don't understand, you're not leaving me are you?" Graelyn put her arms around her.

"No no no, of course not. I'll never leave you as long as we're both breathing." Ashlyn sighed, and leaned into Graelyn's chest, but she shoved her back against Johnathan.

"Johnathan. Hold her head down in the sink till she stops breathing." Johnathan looked pained, horrified even, but he didn't hesitate for a moment. Graelyn pulled a drink out of the fridge and took a seat as the splashing and water muffled screaming grew fainter and fainter. What an unpleasant night.

"Please get rid of the body Johnathan, I don't really care how." She looked up at him.

"She did know that you can never achieve anything if you aren't willing to cut out your own heart? That you cannot advance unless you sacrifice what matters to you?" Johnathan was silent.

"It was necessary. This all was necessary. And I will be remembered as a hero."



Her feet turned gently in the breeze. After some time, her left shoe fell off.

\* \* \* \*

July 27th, 2495

She chose her clothes carefully. She'd never been particularly interested in clothes, not the way lots of people were, but she paid attention to them. Today, she chose them more carefully than usual. Manuel had given her a whole wardrobe, and she picked out a luscious hounds-tooth blue and red blazer and skirt. She had new glasses fabricated that matched the pattern, and put on a pair of black converse all-stars. Her lawyer had raised an eyebrow, but she couldn't escape the fear she'd have to run again, and she was tired of getting caught in dress shoes. She picked out a tie and a blouse, and put her hair up in a ponytail. She looked in the mirror, and she felt like herself. Her black hair, her lean physique, her favorite clothes to wear... She was ready. Today was the day. Today she would prove something to more than just herself.

Antwon Phillippe had the cameraman run one more check, and then they began filming. Minh-Ho was still setting up, and she didn't have as good a view of the Oslo Courthouse. He flashed his winning smile and began broadcasting.

"We're here in Oslo for the trial of the century. Graelyn Scythes claims to be a different individual from the Centro director-- Wait it looks like the accused is arriving now!"

The van pulled up, an armed guard forming a human fence between the back doors of the truck, and the accused stepped out from the van, carefully helped down by a blonde revolutionary in a Beret. Instantly, the scene was mobbed. The soldiers held ranks, and Graelyn tried to hold her head high as Jame came to her side, Shona coming down from the truck to guard the other side. The cries and jeers of the crowd grew louder and louder, and soon things were being flung, most of them impacting on the stoic chests of the people in uniform.

"Just hold in there. Its only twenty meters to the door, and then you can't hear them anymore." Jame whispered to her. She nodded, and the trio began walking.

"Murderer!" She heard a woman yell.

"If they don't kill you we will!" She heard a man yell.

"You don't deserve a trial they should just shoot you where you stand!" Someone cried out. Graelyn kept her head up as Jame and Shona ushered her through the human corridor. Then a thrown object went high-- and Graelyn cried out as Shona shoved her back from a brick that slammed into the pavement in front of them with such force it shipped it and then bounced.

"Shit." Jame muttered, and pushed Graelyn forward again. She looked between her guardians with an edge of fear.

"Why are you scared Graelyn? Afraid we'll do to you what you did to us?" The crowd erupted in mocking laughter at that, and then another object went high. Shona batted it out of the way, but it splattered all over her, coating her in some sort of red fluid. Graelyn nearly panicked before realizing it was red cream soda.

"We have to keep going." Graelyn decided, and they kept moving, as the guards were pushed in by the crowd, narrowing their passageway.

"IS THIS ANYWAY FOR A PEOPLE TO BEHAVE?" A voice boomed out, and Songbird stepped out of the courthouse like a thunderstorm. Her eyes were lightening, and her voice was the sky.

"If you want to murder her, go ahead. Do it. Lower yourself to Centro's level. Let the history books show we were no better than the people we gained our freedom from. Embarrass yourself. Do it if you want to. I won't stop you." The crowd grew eerily silent. "Or you can trust that within those walls justice will be decided. There will be a livestream. Or I suppose I fought tooth and nail since I was a child for freedom so we could commit our own atrocities without the government's help. Is that what you want?" The crowd looked at each other, as though trying to figure out if the question was rhetorical or not, and then a chorus of untimed overlapping, "No, Songbird...." began. She nodded.

"Then let her through." She took one look at Graelyn's shocked face, and turned and walked back inside.

"Do we know who the judge is yet?" Graelyn whispered, after they'd been set up at their table.

"No." Jame said angrily. "I have a feeling this trial is going to be highly unorthodox. As much as the WRC is claiming it's not a show trial, they're livestreaming it. Which means it is a show trial." Graelyn narrowed her eyes.

"So I'm performing for more than just for the Judge then."

"Yes. They don't need this to be a jury trial. They have a planetwide jury waiting. Billions of people are already tuned in right now you know, I have the app open on my phone. The audience is only going to grow once we officially start." Jame pointed over to the other table. "That's our opponent, Marissa Thomas. She was the chief Prosecutor of the African Superior Court before she defected to the revolution. She's tough."

"Have you ever won a trial against her before?" Jame shook their head.

"No, not even close. I had one trial against her years ago and she ripped me apart." Graelyn did not feel reassured. "Oh, don't look at me like that. This is different. I've got an Ace in the hole."

"You do?" Jame raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you'd figured it out by now." Jame might have said more, but a representative of the WRC stepped forward to make an announcement. Graelyn looked behind her to see the Salazars including Manuel, Maria, and Lizette, Archimedes, Shona, and Alice were all in the audience. She was reassured

to see most of them, though she had a hard time meeting Alice's gaze.

"To all in attendance, and all viewing remotely: The WRC has decided on a judge for this trial. There is only one candidate we have determined is fit to decide this contest fairly."

"Wiggins? AI-?" Jame muttered to themselves.

"And so we are proud to introduce to you the Judicator, model 0001, of Talinata Systems. Justice of the Peace, and of the Revolution." The ensuing reaction was luckily filmed for posterity, as Jame and Marissa's jaws dropped in unison. As the worlds soaked in, the court exploded in noise. Both Jame and Marissa were yelling objections, the crowd was screaming or laughing, or just sitting there confused, which was what Graelyn was doing. The representative stood calmly, and then the side door opened for the Justice to step through, and all eyes fell on it. The Judicator was not just a justice, it was Justice. With its every step, it broadcast to the world that damn son, you'd better be fair because the Judicator would know if you weren't. Its feet stepped through up to the Judge's podium cutting through the din like noise canceling headphones. It slid into its chair, and spun around in it once before settling in and leaning forward.

"I'm curious." The Judicator said, "What exactly the two of you are objecting about when I'm barely even in my seat." The court was totally still, and Jame and Marissa looked almost embarrassed.

"I'm the Judicator, like this kind representative said. I've been programmed with a completely objective and lawful attitude towards all beings, and insurmountable clemency for the facts. Now if you wouldn't mind, are there any objections to me?"

Graelyn tugged at Jame's sleeve, "What is that?"

"A myth." Jame whispered. "The Judicator once convicted the entire board of Directors centuries ago. It got deactivated because it was too fair. It doesn't see the social good. It doesn't see regimes. It sees justice. It knows the entire history of world law. Centro never trusted AI's after the debacle it put them through." Graelyn looked at the machine, its rectangle eyes glowing bright blue, and couldn't help but wonder if this was actually all real.

"Excuse me, your honor, but how can we trust your programming is... Not corrupted after all these centuries?"

"Fair question." The Judicator's eyes flashed, and a file popped up on the tablets of Jame and Marissa. "I have been tested by every single living member of a superior and supreme court on Earth, and I have passed every test flawlessly." They took a moment to scroll through the results, they were inarguable.

"Any more objections?"

"Your honor," Jame began, "we've only just been informed you are our Justice. Perhaps it would be prudent to postpone the trial...?" The Judicator leaned back.

"Under normal circumstances, I would. Unfortunately delaying this trial would only serve to further the prosecution's cause, not because it would give them more facts, but because it would allow public opinion to continue to sway in their direction. It would be irresponsible of me to allow further delays

when people are already throwing bricks at your client." Graelyn shuffled her feet.

"Now then, you two are both ready for this trial then? Do you have opening arguments? Because please, I'm a sucker for opening arguments. Gets my gears all in a tizzy."

"Yes we do, your honor." Said both lawyers.

"Excellent. Then we'll begin with the prosecution. Miss Thomas?" Marissa stood up.

"Thank you your honor. As you're well aware, there has been much debate as to who the woman we are putting on trial is. I have no doubt the defense will argue that this is an entirely different person from the Graelyn Scythes who committed atrocities, and that we should hold her wholly unaccountable for the actions of the character of the woman we know of as Graelyn Scythes, let alone that woman's action's. However, upon any careful analysis, we can determine that if these are two different women, if, then they hold remarkably similar traits. For example, a history of lies and distorting the truth to protect herself."

"Objection!"

"Overruled, for now. Continue Miss Thomas."

"Along with this, we have the issue of participating in the Prison break of a month ago, as well as the attempted assassination of Alice MacLeod." Graelyn felt the camera on her, her skin itched. "Actions that the accused has not denied taking part in, simply denied the state's motivation for doing."

"Objection, the prosecution is leading the court with the accusation that shooting Alice MacLeod was an 'assassination'. This term requires that the state's accusation's of motive are true to be accepted as a description of the event."

"Sustained. Clerk, wipe that from the record." The Judicator looked at the cameras. "And you'd better remember, this is a court, not a game show. You're watching. But you aren't playing from home. Continue, Marissa."

"Thank you, your honor. In conclusion, over the course of this trial, we shall prove the intent of Graelyn Scythes to kill Alice MacLeod, as well as to prove that this woman is a danger to society. Thank you."

There was some applause, but the Judicator silenced it in an instant.

"Now let me hear the defense." Jame rose from their seat.

"Thank you your honor. My client has withstood an incredible amount of vitriol thrown at her for crimes she not only did not commit, but had no reason to. The prosecution is right in saying I will assert that this woman is different from the Centro Systems Director of the same name, but is incorrect in saying that this is a moot point. The character of these two women could not be more different. As the court is aware, Graelyn Scythes helped save the life of Alice MacLeod, after she accidentally discharged a firearm at her."

"Objection, now the defense is leading the court."

"Sustained."

"Apologies. We attest that the discharge was accidental. That Graelyn helped administer life saving care to Alice is an unquestioned point, and conflicts tremendously with the idea she has a defect of character. Over this trial we will prove that Graelyn's character is of sound quality, that she holds no responsibility for the actions of the other Graelyn Scythes, and that the weapon discharge on Alice MacLeod was accidental."

There was some boring time filling, and then Marissa called her first witness.

"What are they going to open with?" Graelyn whispered.

"I'm not sure. They won't be opening with their strongest evidence though. They're going to try to tear your character down before they drop any bombshells."

"I call as my first witness, Archimees Artemis VonAhnerabe." Most people didn't understand the relevance of what was just said, after all, they didn't know who Archimedes was. But Graelyn was shocked.

"He wouldn't have volunteered for this!" Graelyn whispered loudly.

"Of course not." Jame replied. "But he'll go on the stand nonetheless." Arch indeed looked fairly confused, but was escorted to the stand. He was offered a variety of texts to take an oath on, and chose a book of Greek Mythology, which was promptly pulled up on a tablet.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth by your gods?"

"I do." He replied.

"We would like the court to be aware," Marissa continued, "that the Judicator is capable of telling whether or not you are lying."

"Can it really do that?" Graelyn muttered.

"I'm not counting out anything today." Jame replied.

"Now, Archimedes, how did you meet Miss Scythes?"

"She rescued me when I fell in the ocean. Pulled me up into a big facility she was working in called Project Atlantis. I owe her my life. She reactivated me,"

"Excuse me." Marissa cut in, "But you say she reactivated you. Did she access your internal systems?"

"Yes, she did."

"Now am I correct in thinking that your memories can be electronically accessed?"

"Yes, I have an access port for data exchanges."

"Did she access that."

"Yes, though I don't see how that's relevant."

"Archimedes, how do you know she didn't access your memories?"

"She did access my memories." There was a rumbling through the court, the Judicator quieted it.

"Oh? Really. You're certain of it."

"She told me so herself to apologize for it. It was an accident?"

"An accident? To access someone's personal memories?"

"She didn't realize I was a person, she thought I was an automaton."

"Archimedes, isn't it possible that she manipulated your memories when she was inside your systems?"

"She wouldn't do that."

"But if she was inside your systems, she could have colored your perceptions of her. Erased how you really met. Doesn't it sound preposterous that she just found you at the bottom of the ocean? Doesn't it make more sense that your utterly bizarre story was a fabrication on her part? A way to get you on her side?"

"Uh, no, not to me."

"But you admit its possible?"

"Its possible, but it didn't happen."

"Could you know for certain it didn't happen?"

"...No."

Jame rose up. "Objection, proving a possibility is not a fact."

"Sustained." Marissa smirked. Jame knew she'd already gotten what she needed.

"Now, Mr. VonAhnerabe, you have a very distinctive design to your exterior. Are you aware who designed it?"

"Direc-er, Mister Salazar did. But not that Mister Salazar. One from-"

"An alternate, dimension, yes. Now, part of your surrender to the Revolutionary forces in New York involved consenting to a full physical inspection, correct."

"Correct."

"Now, I have many accounts from scientists claiming they have seen nothing like your design outside of one other inspection they have done. Are you aware of who they might be comparing you to?"

"No ma'am."

Graelyn's eyes widened. "Jame, uh, I know what she's trying to do." Jame raised an eyebrow.

"I heard someone say that in this reality Graelyn Scythes interned with Manuel Salazar."

"Yeah , so?"

Marissa gestured for her aide to pull up a holographic display. The Hologram showed a scan of Arch's interior, as well as that of a man who Graelyn had seen before, in the apartment she'd entered. While he didn't show exterior signs of looking like Arch, the interior made it obvious, you didn't have to be a scientist to see that the new parts had been built and installed in the same manner.

"This man's name is Johnathan. Graelyn Scythes experimented on him, replacing parts of his body with enhanced mechanisms and biomodifications against his consent. The internal mechanisms appear to be of the same manufacture and design as the ones inside you, abet slightly more advanced. Now which seems more likely, that these nearly identical mechanisms were built by the same person, a person who needed your help to escape from revolutionary forces, or that this is just a co-incidence."

"We're from an alternate reality, of course there are going to be similarities."

"But how many co-incidences can there be? The surgeries performed on Johnathan were brutal and cruel. Many were performed without anesthetic, clearly the sign of an unstable and vicious person. His mouth was literally sewn shut at one point. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that this woman is not the same person?"

Arch shifted his head towards her.

"Yes."

"Even when she has been in your head, even when you know very well she could have altered your memories?"

"Yes."

"No further questions."

Jame rose up and walked to the witness box. They had planned on using Arch as a character witness, but with his reliability thrown into question, that was really out the window. Jame did their best, but there wasn't much to salvage from him, anything he said had the possibility of manipulation running under it. Jame sat down, and a note popped up on their tablet. Jame clicked it, and grunted.

"Well then. Alternating witnesses. It looks like the Judicator is well aware this is a show trial. I wonder what its playing at."

"I thought it was like, the ultimate Justice machine. It seems sort of wishy washy."

"Its playing a game with us. It wants to know something, I'm sure of it. Still, we're going to have to open strong. I'm playing this by ear at this point. We have a few minutes first." As she ended her sentence, another message popped up. Jame rubbed their brow.

"What is it?" Graelyn asked.

"Its from your old intern. She says she chatted up one of the aides to Marissa in the canteen, and managed to get him to brag that they have a tape of Alice Macleod leading her troops through the Mexico City facility. From her description... It sounds bad."

"...How bad?"

"Bad enough that if they play it you won't walk out of this building alive even if you're declared innocent."

Graelyn had lost her faith in systems at an early age. She knew that even if you were good, there was nothing that could protect you. She began to look for an escape route, but none seemed to present itself. The audience was filled with allies, the friends she had made here in her brief time in this universe. But protecting her might be their death sentence.

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Don't you know you can never achieve anything unless you're willing to cut out your own heart?"

It occurred to Graelyn that she had never had this many people on her side simply because they liked her. She saw her own friendship as a service, and she kept her friends by providing them with ample benefits. Her best friend in elementary school, Claudine, had been appeased by many phone calls and chats where Graelyn had taken advantage of her ability to multi task and taken notes on important points in the conversation while doing her homework. She would formulate calculated replies based on the trajectory of the conversation and say them. Claudine had considered her a very good friend before she'd moved away to St. Petersburg. But if she looked up, she could see Lizette waving down at her. Shona in her Red Pop stained uniform. She could see Manuel, Sarah, Arch... Hell even Alice who she'd shot. All of them were willing to defend her. Why? She had only caused them problems. She hadn't any of them but Manuel any sort of tangible benefit, or if she had it was nothing anyone else couldn't have given them. Why? Suddenly, one of the eye-lights on the Juicator turned off, and turned on again...

"Did it just wink at me?" She thought.

Jame rose up, "Your honor, I call Alice MacLeod to the stand."

There was a huge rumbling, not just in the court room, but across the world. People put down what they were doing, and friends texted each other to tell them to open up the feed. Alice walked to the stand, and sat down. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the true, by your gods?"

"I do." Jame approached the box.

"Now, Alice, explain your relationship to Graelyn Scythes."

"Which one?" The rumbling grew up again, and the Judicator quieted it.

"Explain your statement."

"Well, as the record shows, I executed Graelyn Scythes. Her body was tested, and it was definitely her. The corpse showed no sign of memory transfer, or being a duplicate. There is footage of the execution available on the record if you wish to play it?"

"Yes, I would." Jame replied. The footage played on the same Holoprojector that had previously shown Arch and Johnathan. It showed the whole chain of events, the revolutionaries bursting in, the Directors



getting lined up and kicked out the windows with nooses around their necks... And a younger Graelyn running into the room confused. The confusion and horror on her face was monumental.

"The second Graelyn we encountered clearly had no idea what was going on. At first I assumed she was a duplicate."

"But you don't think that now?"

"No, after several conversations with her, I have come to believe this second Graelyn is exactly what she says she is: a girl from another dimension." There was an uproar. If you want to imagine it, imagine you heard the person you respect the most going on an international broadcast, and declaring that ducks were actually aliens from Pluto.

"She can't be serious." A man in Liverpool muttered.

"She's lost it just like they said." A woman in Nairobi said.

The Judicator even had trouble calming the court room down.

"I know it sounds ridiculous-"

"But its actually a totally reasonable suggestion." Said a new voice, loudly. Eyes turned around, and they focused on the back of the court room where two figures had appeared, both wearing hoodies with a pattern of a sun turning into a moon going down the hood and the spine. One wore shorts, the other a black blazer. One was a white man, the other a Latino woman. They were both wearing sunglasses, indoors. You couldn't escape the perception that they were really full of themselves right now.

"Hello there," the man said, "Sorry to interrupt the proceedings but we have some pretty important new information we thought you guys should hear."

"Security!" A memeber of the Revolutionary Council yelled, and the man just gave a lighthearted dismissive wave.

"Aw shucks, we're not worth that much attention."

"But we do need your attention." The woman added.

"Oh yeah, definitely."

"Also we've made sure your security isn't really an issue for us right now." They couldn't have all been there before, but they were there, so they must have been there the whole time, but there were dozens of people in identical hoodies (with otherwise totally inconsistant dress) scattered throughout the room. Guards found themselves with people peering down their neck, their hands not quite at their weapons.

"Glad to see you made it." The Judicator said.

"You knew about this?" The WRC member yelled, who appeared to be Alice's Uncle.

"I didn't know about this, I guessed it." The Judicator said, "There was too much evidence of interuniversal interference for there to not be some group involved in this."

"Precisely!" The man said.

"My name is Miranda Vice."

"And I'm John Vice."

"And we're here to demand the extradition of Graelyn Scythes and Archimedes VonAhnerabe into our custody." Ian Macleod approached the pair of them cautiously, edging past the other people in the row to the aisle.

"Extradition to where exactly?"

"Another dimension. Our headquarters."

"Graelyn Scythes is on trial for crimes against Earth!" He yelled.

"Crimes for which the primary charge is that she is in fact, not from an alternate dimension." The Judicator said. Ian grimaced.

"I demand proof that you are who you say you are. We can't just believe you're really some... Preposterous group from another dimension. You're terrorists supporting Centro trying to dertail this trial." John sighed and looked at Miranda, who shrugged, and pulled out a black box with a red button that she pushed. Without delay, a swirling blue portal appeared in the center of the Aisle, and in its swirls you could see infinite possibiilites. You could see yourself, and friends you'd never had. You could see lost cats and holes you'd never get out of. There was everything thin those swirls. From that portal stepped a woman that Alice had seen before in a dream, a blonde woman with the side of her head shaved and the rest of her hair pulled to the other side. She was lean and muscular, tall and so flat chested it was easy to suspect she was wearing a binder. She was wearing the hoodie, but over it a distinctive brown jacket with a bold sun on the back. Behind her were a coterie of other colorful characters, a white woman in a poodle skirt and turtle neck with a katana on her back, a Potawatame man with powerful mechanical arms and a scar across his nose and under both his eyes, a pair of identical Mongolian twins who had glowing crystal slabs in their hands they seemed to be inspecting, a black man whose movements seemed too fast, as though he were on fastforward, and a very bored Indian woman who looked like she was just there cause the woman in the front had asked her to.

The woman in the front advanced. Her eyes looked forward like lances.

"I'm Kinan Jans. I'm the leader of Dawn, the organisation that these operatives are a part of. I demand an immediate stay of this trial and to meet with your World Revolutionary Council at the shortest possible notice." Ian's eyes were golf balls.

"As a representative of the WRC, I welcome you to Earth, Kinan Jans." Alice MacLeod said, vaulting over the box.

"I think this trial is officially on hiatus." The Judicator said, smugly. It pounded it's gavel. Graelyn rose. Was this really happening.

"Graelyn." Kinan said to her, "It is my intention to extradite you from this plane of reality immediately

after negotiations are complete. I suggest you send someone to get your things." Graelyn nodded dumbly.

Kinan and her troupe were led into another room, as the two Vice's made snapping finger pointing motions at Graelyn. This was ridiculous. They couldn't just end the trial could they?

Her heart pounded. She'd expected to die. But the pieces began to fall into place. The box with the sun on it from the woman Alice had met. The people she'd seen with Hoodies. The man in the dark robe who'd tried to stop Director Aril from making the portal to begin with. This wasn't an isolated incident. This was part of something larger, wasn't it? They were going to a lot of effort to find her, they had sent people to her multiple times.

This wasn't the end. This was just the start of something new. But how strange was it to leave her own fate to people in another room? For a moment she'd felt like a protagonist, like even if she died things were about her. But she hadn't been in control here at all, it was all out of her hands, and a peaceful sense of unimportance washed over her. She was small in the end after all. She could be forgotten at the bottom of the ocean again perhaps. She just had to get out of here. With a gesture, Alice called her and Arch into the room with the delegations.

The WRC and the representatives from Dawn took a few hours to discuss her fate. "May I remind you," Kinan said, "That we provided you with the Alistair Artificial Intelligence that allowed this revolution to succeed. Let me guarantee you that failing to meet our terms would cause immediate hostilities from my organization. We built your revolution, we can just as easily burn it down."

"We aren't partial to threats." Council leader Pauline Lamarque noted.

"We aren't partial to people threatening to execute our friends." Kinan said.

"You have met Graelyn before?"

"Yes, but she hasn't met us. Its complicated, naturally." Kinan crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair.

"You met me before?" Graelyn said.

"I didn't, the Vice family did." Kinan replied, "But I suppose you'll do that all in time as long as we save your life."

"I don't entirely understand," Arch broke in, "If you can travel between alternate realities... Why do you care about saving both of us at all?" Kinan bobbed her head back and forth lightly.

"Good question. This wasn't the first reality you appeared in, correct?"

"No, we traveled through several other ones first, briefly."

"What about a reality where you walked through a room full of corpses on a space-station?" Graelyn nodded. "That was reality."

"Excuse me?" Graelyn said.

"Could I explain?" Miranda asked. Kinan nodded.

"Look, there are tons of alternate realities, an infinite number, but travel between them was impossible. But not that long ago, something happened and it bound around ten-thousand realities to one other one. Or maybe we were all created in that moment, it doesn't matter. That central reality is feeding of us, and is slaving us to it in the process This little bubble of alternate realities is dying, and so is the reality that is feeding off of us. We need you to go back to that reality." Graelyn looked around at the representatives from Dawn. They all looked so serious. The World Revolutionary Council looked astounded.

"Can you take Arch and I home?"

"Yes. If you do what we ask of you." Kinan answered.

"Go to... This alternate reality that is apparently not alternate and is in fact our parent or something and do what exactly?"

"What we ask you to."

"And why can't you go there yourselves?" Alice cut in.

"Because," Kinan answered, "We can't get into that Prime Universe. We've been trying. We only have one agent in that universe, and we haven't been able to get her to interact with the universe outside of its present." The woman with the poodle skirt waved. It suddenly hit Graelyn that she had seen her on the deck of that spacestation as she'd fallen through the portal.

"Oh." Graelyn said simply.

"We are of course willing to trade some good to your government in exchange for their release to us."

Lamarque pursed her lips. "I appreciate that. Though I'd appreciate it more if I thought we had any choice in the matter."

"Your appreciation isn't necessary." Kinan answered.

The Salazars had gotten all of Graelyn and Arch's few possessions together, as well as packed them a few travel supplies. Graelyn met them in the lobby of the courthouse, where a cadre of revolutionary guards were staring off a bunch of hoodied Dawn members.

"I packed you a sandwich." Lizette told her. "I hope you like it."

Graelyn smiled as she squatted down to hug her. "I'm sure I'll love it." Lizette squeezed her hard.

"Keep practicing the piano. I hope to see you again soon."

"Me to." Lizette said, and held the hug for a few more moments before letting go.

Shona came forward next, "You guys take care of yourselves. Try not to get put in jail again." Arch and

Graelyn chuckled, and hugged her to.

"Try not to get hit by any more cups of soda."

Manuel approached when they'd cut their embrace. "You two brought us all a new future here you know."

"No, we didn't do anything that important." Graelyn said.

"Of course we did, you were amazing." Arch said.

"He's right you know. I'm alive because of you. Nojpeten is alive and vibrant, my children and grandchildren will live without the hate of seeing their grandfather hanging from a noose, and Sarah is with us now to. You're part of our family now to, whenever you're here."

"What?" Graelyn said, looking around confused, "You can't really mean that."

"Of course I mean that."

"Thank you." Arch and Graelyn each said, and he shook their hands. Finally, Alice came up.

"Hey." She said.

"Hey. Graelyn replied, then after a pause, "I'm so sorry." Alice gave her a faint smile, and leaned in. Graelyn flinched for a moment, and Alice stopped. "Is it okay if I give you a hug to?" Graelyn nodded, and Alice wrapped her arms around her.

"You didn't just save Manuel. You saved me." She whispered in her ear.

"I shot you. I didn't save you at all."

"Yes you did. You didn't mean to shoot me... You didn't, I know that. And I was about to kill someone for the wrong reasons. I might have crossed a line I couldn't go back from... Can you understand that?"

"Yes." She whispered back.

"You'll always be welcome here. Maybe public opinion will be a bit confused for a time, but you'll be welcome with me."

"Have you taken good care of the cat?"

"I have, and I will."

"Good." They broke the embrace.

"I..." Graelyn looked around at the people, all these people who believed in her, who wanted her here. She couldn't find the words. She didn't know what to say. They were smiling at her.

"Thank you." She settled on that.

"Sorry again about shooting you with a missile." Alice said to Arch.

"Oh, no problem," he said. "I was fine." They laughed, and as they did, a stern looking Kinan walked

towards them followed by the Vice family.

"Its time to go. Are you ready?" Graelyn looked at Arch, and they nodded to each other.

"We're ready." Arch said.

"Then follow me."

"Wait-" Alice said "I... I'd like to come to." Graelyn hadn't seen that coming.

"Not this time." Kinan replied, "You're needed here whether you see it or not. Come Graelyn, Arch, you're free now. Its time for you to see wonders."

Graelyn followed her out the doors of the courthouse, where revolutionary guards and Dawn members lined the road. A huge crowd swarmed around them.

"How are we leaving?" Arch asked. Kinan looked back, and there was a sparkle in her eye as she gave a snap of her fingers, and a swirling blue portal seemed to rise out of dust on the ground.

Graelyn didn't hesitate. She ran. She pulled the hair tie out of her hair and began to move. The wind moved through her hair, and blew it around. The crowd's mouth's moved, but she didn't hear them. She was free. She was out of this. And she ran, the smile growing on her face, her legs like sunshine. There was something amazing on the other side of that portal, and her heart beat in her chest. She hadn't needed to flee. She hadn't needed to die. She hadn't needed to jump. She hadn't needed to fight. She needed to live. She needed to smile. The crowd's opinion was irreverent. They were her orchestra as her feet passed her through the blue swirls, followed quickly by the tramp of Arch's metal toes, and she stepped into a place where her heart beat might be hers alone, and the skies were not the color of sacrifices. She ran and ran, and for the first time, there wasn't a trace of fear.

For the first time, she forgave herself for her own mistakes.

And oh, did she run.

*"Run fast for your mother run fast for your father*

*Run for your children for your sisters and brothers*

*Leave all your love and your longing behind you*

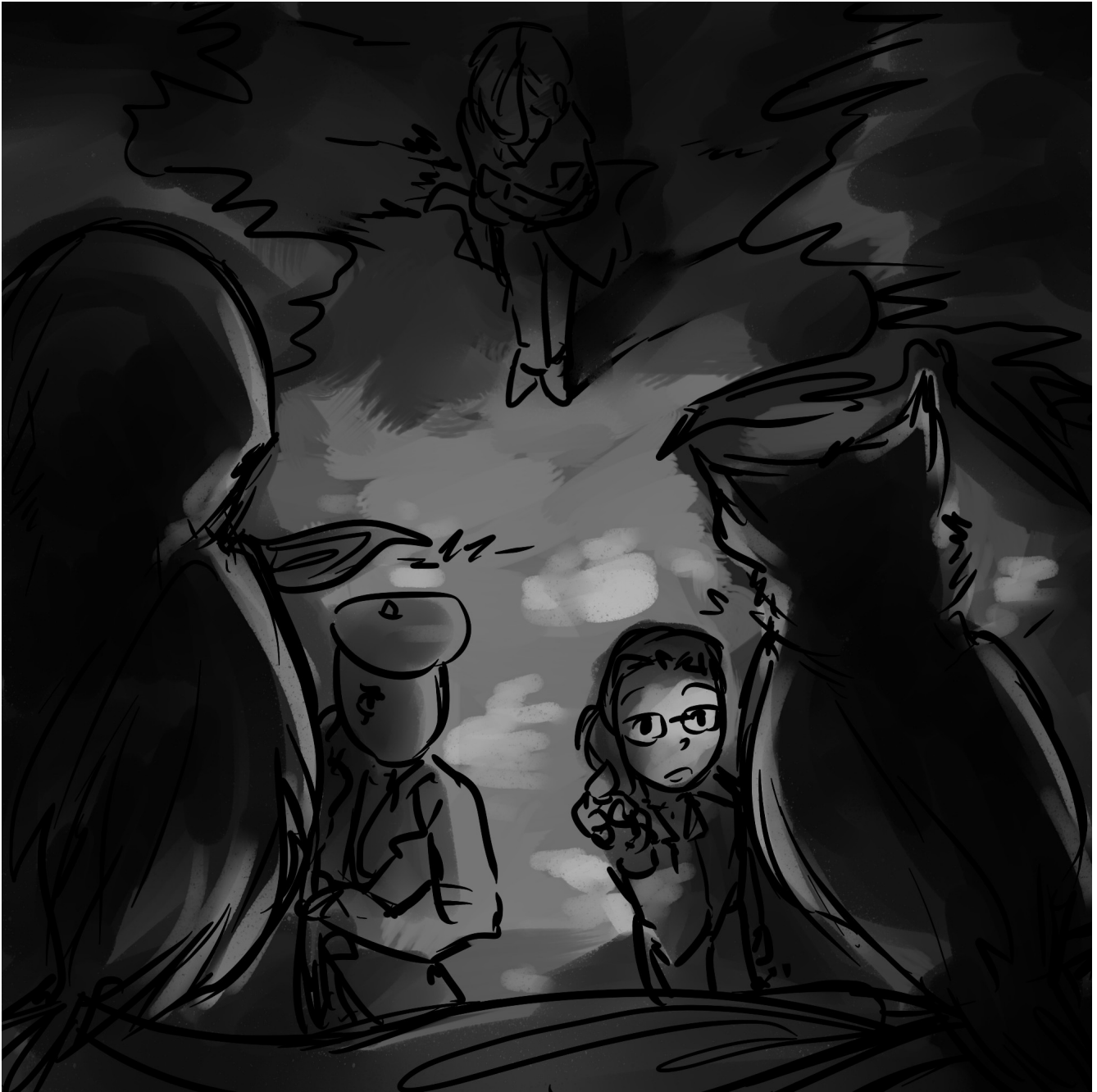
*Can't carry it with you if you want to survive*

*The dog days are over*

*The dog days are done*

*Can't you hear the horses*

*'Cause here they come" -"The Dog Days are Over" by Florence and the Machine*



**Chapter 16:  
The World Was Wider,  
The Sky Was Bolder**

If you open up a history book, you'll find someone's opinion about the nature of a person in history.

Were they a rebel or a terrorist? A dictator or a stalwart against chaos? Did their hand grasp the oppressed in the drowning waters, or shove their head down to watch the bubbles? The same person can be so many different stories, and its up to you to decide which one to trust. So if you could see every version of a person, every ramification of choices they made or didn't make, would that give you a more complete view of the person, or just muddy the waters with things that person couldn't have known themselves. I'm not just waxing poetic here, this is what Graelyn was thinking as they stepped through portal after portal.

Graelyn had found the trips she'd taken through other portals disorienting, trippy even, at the worst terrifying, however the Portals that Kinan made were none of those things. Graelyn's stomach churned, and her skin pricked up, plus her ears popped and she lost track of gravity for a moment, but really compared to the other trips it was a walk in the park. They had come out the other side into a forest filled with tall trees with broad branches. The sound of owls hooting filled the space. They'd taken a few detours on their trip, and Graelyn hadn't actually thought to ask the obvious question yet.

“How-”

“You're about to ask how I made that portal.”

“And-”

“And how it didn't make you sick.” Graelyn just nodded. The members of Dawn filing out through the portal with them looked non-chalant.

“I've had a lot of experience with these. More than anyone else, and that's not talking myself up unfairly. Do you know where we are?” Arch had scanned the area, naturally, and responded.

“Wooded area, filled with large birds.”

“I kind of expected you to say 'avian creatures'.” John Vice said.

“Why would I say that?”

“You know, it sounds sci-fi.”

“They're just birds.” Arch replied.

“Just birds? Why, I should practically be insulted.” A large owl said, poking its head out from a hole in the side of a tree. By large owl, it should be explained we mean an owl 4 to 5 feet tall. Its huge eyes were shiny in the light.

“Ah, Manuel, how are you today?” Miranda asked, and reached into a bag, pulling out a large rat she threw to the owl. It caught it, and took a few seconds to snarf it down its beak.

“Delicious. I'm well. The forest is healthy, little to complain about.”

“We want to pass through the usual way, is that okay?” Miranda asked. The owl bobbed its head.

“Of course. I see you have new ones with you. Anyone I know?” Miranda looked back at them.

“Is there a Graelyn Scythes Owl or an Archimedes Von Ahnerabe Owl?”

“They made human Graelyns and Arches to? How funny. Its hard to imagine them being anything other than owls you know!”

“I'm an owl here?” Graelyn ejaculated.

“Why of course.” Manuel the Owl said, “There's an Owl of all of you somewhere, except Kinan that is.” Graelyn and Arch exchanged a look.



“Why not Kinan?” Kinan gave the owl a look, and he ignored the question.

“I should go get them, keep walking through to the clearing, Dawn is always welcome in the Left-Winged forest.” Manuel Owl took flight, his mighty wings carrying him through the air. Kinan gave barely a gesture at all, and they kept moving. Little owl eyes peeped out of holes and nests. Some landed on branches above them to look down.

“I can't actually tell if any of these owls are supposed to be people we know.” Graelyn whispered.

“I can.” Said Arch, “I'm used to picking up people from things other than their face.” Graelyn supposed that made a lot of sense, judging by the snippet of footage she'd watched of where he came from.

“Like look, there's Doctor Hiriwa from your city.” Graelyn squinted at the owl, and she could sort of see what he was saying. The owl moved a bit like her. She wasn't sure if that actually proved anything, but it was interesting at least. They pressed on to the clearing, where there were perches set up in big rings like bleachers, which were filling up with owls. John and Miranda seemed to be taking point here, throwing the giant owl rats and mice from their bags (which definitely were not big enough to hold the amount of rats that were being chucked out of them.

“Welcome Owls of the Left-Winged forest, I'm Miranda Vice, this is Johnathan Vice-”

“Who are you? We are they!” hooted two owls, this was apparently a running gag because even though it wasn't actually funny everyone laughed, or did what Graelyn and Arch assumed was the 4 to 5 foot tall owl equivalent of laughing.

“And we are passing through with two new humans. Graelyn Scythes and Archimedes VonAhnerabe.” Two owls fluttered off their perches, and landed on the ground where they waddled on their talons up to Graelyn and Arch. The owl that was Arch seemed to have a mask, as the feathers on its face were white with a rim of gray around them. The other owl was, naturally for a Graelyn, gray. Their feathers were thick and deep, and their eyes the size of tennis balls.

“Youuu, are I?” The Graelyn owl said curiously. Graelyn felt the need to Curtsey, like she was Alice in wonderland.

“I never thought I would be an owl, anywhere.” She mused.

“Nor I a primate.” The owl moved its head to the side, and the two mirrored each other as they inspected each other. The Arch owl and Arch just looked at each other and nodded.

“You must feel so limited only able to walk on the ground. Doesn't that create difficulties for you?” Graelyn thought for a moment, “I've never really thought about that. I suppose that since I never had wings it doesn't seem like their absence is something I've put much thought into.” The owl bobbed up and down. “Do you regret not having opposable thumbs?”

“Hoo... I suppose not.” She moved from side to side on her perch, and opened and closed her left talons in thought.

“Arch, Graelyn.” Kinan said plainly, “Its time for us to keep moving. I have more things to show you.”

“Seeing myself as an owl is pretty spectacular.” Graelyn replied. Kinan shrugged.

“I suppose.” Arch looked around at the throng.

“Where's your owl Kinan?” Kinan looked away from them.

“There isn't one.” Arch and Graelyn looked at each other. She was clearly not saying something about something.

"I suppose we have to go then, owl selves." Graelyn said.

"It was good briefly meeting you." Arch added.

"Youuuu tooooooo." They hooted in reply, and the pair of them waved as the owls bobbed a sort of goodbye. Kinan had already started walking, with most of Dawn following her instantly. Twigs cracked under their feet as they rushed to catch up, and Kinan reached into her bag, and pulled out a handful of blue dust that sparkled faintly in the light, and threw it in the air, running her hand through it lightly till it cracked into a swirling blue portal.

"Okay that looks like magic." Arch muttered. He was right, it did. But there was a method to the madness Graelyn was sure of it. Magic wasn't real, and even if it was, Kinan didn't give off the vibes of being a wizard. She was so practical, so intentional. But that wasn't a very logical way to think about that, Graelyn was simply pouring through the mannerisms of wizards in stories she had read. There was always an element of whimsy or oddity around them in some way, even if they were orderly, that Kinan just didn't project. But what did Graelyn know anyways? This was foreign territory, and she needed very much to understand it. Stepping through the portal, Graelyn found herself and Arch alone with Kinan on the other side. Kinan was facing them, just as stoic as always.

"Where are the others?"

"I sent them home. We'll get there in time. But I need to show you things." Graelyn looked down at her feet and saw a long crystal walkway, filled with what looked like blue sand.... Like what Kinan had thrown to make the portal. All around them there was an infinite star scape, but they could clearly breathe.

"Okay, this is different." Arch said, "Where are we?"

"This is the bifrost. It has a couple names. Some call it the Labyrinth, some call it the back room or back stage. Pull away the curtains, and here we are underneath the universe. I call it the bifrost though. Its evocative." She said. Graelyn knelt down and felt the crystal under her feet with her hands. It was definitely real.... She peered over the edge, and there was a vast depth with more stars.

"If this is between universes, why are there stars?" She inquired, grabbing her glasses quickly before they slid off her face into the void.

"There aren't. The space between universes is a place you are not supposed to go. If you couldn't already tell from the fact that there is a walkway, this is an artificial construct. Simply one more elaborate than you can dream up with concrete or steel. It just looks like there are stars." Arch gently grabbed Graelyn by the back of the collar as she tried to peer under the bridge and nearly slid off.

"So, you built this?" Arch said.

"No. I just use it." Arch was having a hard time reading Kinan. Her face just didn't move like it was supposed to, the more he looked at her the more he got the impression she didn't just have a good poker face, but that she couldn't move her face much for other reasons. Her slow, monotone speech being perhaps unintentional as well. At first he'd just thought it was an act, a way of holding back the liars and manipulators in the various worlds he met, but he was certain this was the best her body could do at expressing itself. It only got more confirmed as she kept talking as Graelyn quietly asked him to help her up cause she couldn't actually get up on her own from her position over the side.

"I'm going to show you what I'm fighting for, what I've given everything for, and I want you to understand why its so important to me that you get into the prime reality. You've seen a few alternate

worlds so far. What have you thought?"

Graelyn dusted herself off and regained her footing. "Well, the owl reality was nice. I really enjoyed the Halloween reality."

"Yes." Kinan agreed flatly. "That was fun." She finished without inflection.

"Songbird's world was... Scary in a lot of ways. I was in so much danger." Kinan nodded.

"Not to mention the ones we went through ever so briefly," Arch added, "The so called... Prime reality, with all the dead things in it. The little glimpses we saw of other worlds. And yeah, Songbird's world... I hope we don't end up in a place that dangerous again."

"You thought you were in danger there?" Kinan said, and turned to continue walking down the walkway. They kept on silently for maybe half an hour, when Graelyn realized one of the 'stars' was getting... Closer.

"Uhh, Kinan?"

"Each of those 'stars' is a door." She said.

"More detail please."

"No." She reached a hand up, and the star accelerated, while a side path of the same material began extending from the walkway. She turned and stepped onto it, followed by the curious pair. The white disk met the end of the path, seemingly two dimensional, and then caved in on itself; it was suddenly a hold in the darkness, leading to an empty room made of the same crystal. One by one they hopped through the hole. There were no ill effects as they did so.

"The people who built the bifrost never intended for others to travel it, so for us to use it is complicated. No one can open up a door who hasn't already visited the reality it leads to. Its a silly rule, but its an effective security measure. Naturally that rule doesn't apply to the people who built it." Kinan ran her hands along the walls, until she found something she was looking for (though what that was Graelyn didn't know) and pressed her hand on it. The crystal on the wall shaped itself into a wooden door, which Kinan turned the door knob of, but didn't open.

"Lesson one. There is a reality where anything is commonplace." She shoved the door open and they found themselves in a dilapidated warehouse. It was very anticlimactic.

"Well... I think in my reality old warehouses are pretty common to." Kinan gave her a blank look that still spoke volumes so she shut up.

"These doors all lead into carefully chosen locations that don't draw attention so you can move in and out of them without attracting suspicion. Close the door on your way out." They did so, and walked past the rows of old boxes and messy crates. When Kinan opened the warehouse door to the sunlit streets of this new world though, Graelyn and Arch both gasped. There were frozen arcs in the sky, each melting in the sun. Some of the arcs were... Forming, and Arch soon spotted and pointed out to Graelyn that moving on the edges of the arcs were people.

"They're pushing themselves through the air with ice." She let her jaw go a little loose. "Its amazing." She got the impression from Kinan's eyes she might be smiling.

"It is." Kinan gestured for them to come close to her, and then gesturing downwards with her hands formed ice beneath them. Graelyn gasped, and the three of them rose up into the sky, higher and higher, the city below them stretching out. It looked like Montreal.

"I didn't know Canadians could do this!" Graelyn joked.

"I didn't either..." Arch replied.

"That was a joke."

"Ah."

"In this reality," Kinan interjected, "everyone can create ice like this. Its normal."

"So you were born here?" Arch asked.

"No." She said without looking back.

"Then how do you do it?" Kinan hit the top of the ice arc, and began to form the path for their descent, rapidly lowering them onto a city street where their arrival was treated as pedestrian.

"I learned it."

"Can I learn it?"

"Can we learn it?"

"Maybe." They kept walking down the street. Things seemed so.... Ordinary. Graelyn would have expected this society would have diverged massively from the development of society she was familiar with. But there were the signs in French and English, there were the paved streets and glass shopfronts. A casual inspection showed that refrigerator technology was a bit different, but things were so identical as to be impossible. She passed a cafe, and watched a man touch his beer bottle to chill it to the proper temperature before he drank it.

"This world shouldn't exist."

"Of course it should. There are infinite alternate realities, and this is just one where everything is nearly the same except people can create ice and lower temperatures naturally." Kinan stopped in front of a shop, and turned to enter it. They were getting used to following her without her beckoning them on at this point, so they just tailed her inside. But Kinan pushed a hand against Graelyn's chest suddenly, and reached into her satchel, pulling out one of those hoodies every member of Dawn seemed to have, as well as a big pair of aviator sunglasses.

"Put these on, put the hood up."

"I'm not part of your army, and this barely fits with what I'm wearing."

"Do it." Graelyn wanted to argue, and snarled, but realized she was totally in Kinan's power. She'd be left here, in some strange world where she couldn't do what the general population could if Kinan wanted to leave her here. Of course, Kinan also needed her for something...

"Fine." Graelyn bit back, and grabbed the hoodie, slipping off her blazer and putting the hoodie on, pulling the hood up. "Could you hold this for me?" She said to Kinan, holding out the blazer.

"No need to get catty." She replied, and put the jacket in her bag, finishing her entrance into what turned out to be an ice cream parlor. There were a bunch of red and white booths, and glass cases of ice cream with a girl working behind the counter, washing up come cups. At the sink.

"Whats the special today?" Kinan asked, and Graelyn Scythes turned around behind the counter, smiling.

"Blue moon, again. We didn't get a new flavor in so the boss decided to keep it."

"I'm Canadian?" Our hoodied Graelyn asked.

"You're going to school here. Exchange program." Kinan sort of whispered. "Do you guys like blue

moon?”

“Sure.” Graelyn said.

“Never had it.” Arch replied.

“Three blue moon cones please.” They sat down at a booth, and Graelyn eyed herself wearing her new outfit in a mirror on the wall, glad she was wearing the hoodie and glasses, and mad at herself for being mad at Kinan. Behind the booth ice cream shop Graelyn began stirring together ice cream ingredients, and chilled them by hand into ice cream, which was apparently something you could do here. It was a few moments before Graelyn realized that this Graelyn had a different hair color than her. Her hair had almost a purple sheen to the black, and she looked out the windows to see if other people had the same shade (they did). She wrung her hands under the table. She was so many people. She was right there behind the counter. She was an owl. She was some sort of monster. She felt her shoulders pushing in on her body as though to crush the stress out of her.

“Three blue moon cones!” the other Graelyn said cheerily, handing them out. The other Graelyn looked at her a second, as though she recognized her, but must have decided she was mistaken, and leaving the bill walked back to the counter.

“You see,” Kinan said as though no time had passed, “there is a version of you here who can make ice. And a version of Arch. As well as every other person you've met in duplicate. Now why might that be?” Graelyn squinted at herself.

“You said all these realities are linked together?”

“Yes.”

“So they are linked together on purpose. These realities aren't random. They're specific. The reason we're in a reality that is so much like our own but with people having this power isn't chance, someone wanted it this way.”

“Perhaps not intentionally, but that's how its worked out.”

“We haven't seen any other versions of you, Kinan.” Arch said.

“No you haven't.” Kinan replied.

“Is that just chance?”

“No.”

Graelyn licked her ice cream. Apparently this version of her was pretty good at making it: it was smooth and creamy, not too soft but not too solid.

“The reality we're going to you called the Prime reality. All these realities are tied to it. So... All the people we're meeting are people who exist there, correct?” Graelyn said.

“Good. Yes.”

“You said you learned that power to use ice. So people can learn to use powers from the other realities? They can... Make themselves superheroes or Jedi or something?”

“But only if there is a version of themselves they can draw that power from.”

“So there is a version of you wandering around here running a rival ice cream parlor or something.

Kinan's face screwed up minorly. It was subtle, but more than they had seen it do, like a drop of water in a desert.

“Ignore me in this. The people in the prime reality can learn the powers from these realities as long as they are linked. But its much harder for people in these realities to learn other powers.”

“You make it sound like we're second class citizens.” Arch said.

“That's exactly what we are.” Kinan replied, and got up with the bill to pay it. “I have more things to show you. The Ice Cream will keep through the biforst.”

\* \* \* \*

After flying through the sky back to the warehouse, and going back through the door, they got back on the bifrost, and walked for a long time. The stars started to vanish, and the path they took seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere. A solitary door sat there, already connected to the path. Kinan touched it lovingly.

“Where are we going now?”

“You wondered where I was born?” Kinan said. “Let me show you.” She opened the door, and it looked like it led to... more blackness. Kinan stepped through the door onto more bifrost that extended through the doorway, and they followed her. There was only blackness.

“Is this another part of the Labrynth of bifrost?” Graelyn asked, noticing there was a sheen like a bubble around the brief bridge.

“No.” Kinan said. “This is where I was born.”

Trying to describe nothing is hard, but let us try. Imagine if you would, the sun. This is, if you're reading this on Earth, a rather regular fixture of your life. It is in the sky, it makes things warm, makes plants grow, brings life, and provides light. Now, imagine all the suns in the universe, each with all of their little balls of rock and gas around them. Millions of them and more. Now imagine them gone. Imagine not just their absence, but the absence of anything around them. No dust. No energy. No particles. No nothing. No way of sensing that there was anything, because there is no input coming towards you, no rays of light, no sound, no radiation, no debris. Nothing. Imagine you were standing on a bubble within that. You can breathe, so there is some noise, there is some light being made by the cyborg next to you's skin, or maybe you are the cyborg, but its still too quiet. Its quiet enough you can hear your own heartbeat without trying. You can hear your body at its most very basic, the sounds it makes so quiet that even the most subtle background noise would block out. So even though it is quiet, it is actually deafening. You're aware of yourself, you can hear your own movements and it feels like you're going to break your sinews because of the sound. Your breath increases. You know exactly how much is moving in and out of your lungs. Given enough time you could measure it by instinct if you didn't go insane first.

This is where Graelyn, Arch and Kinan stood. They were standing in a place that made nowhere seem like an inadequate word. This was the place Kinan was born. This was nothing.

“When I was a young girl, I lived on the last place surviving the heat death of the universe. The

universe around us was eaten away to nothing, stolen, sucked out like a straw, and converted to energy.”

“How? That's impossible, humanity would have evolved or gone extinct by the time the universe got that far gone...”

“This wasn't a natural death, this was a murder.” Kinan turned, her head tilted down just slightly, her eyes burning. “Here is a hypothetical for you: someone finds a way to link realities to their own. Someone can draw from them, learn abilities not found in their own world. That's preposterous. It sounds like pseudo science at best, and magic at worst.” She narrowed her eyes further. “But presume you could do that. The amount of energy that would take, to bend or rewrite the laws of your own reality slightly to... channel that power would be immense, wouldn't it?”

“I mean, its impossible, but yeah, I have no idea how you'd do that, but if you could the amount of resources would be insane.”

“Good. Now accept this: its not impossible. Someone did it. Someone did the math, and figured out how to do that. Someone waiting on the other side of the mirror who can smile when you frown waiting to reach out and grab you by the neck. Now where would they get the resources? How could you fuel that?” She gestured into the darkness. “You're not going to devour your own universe for that are you? But there are other ones, 10,000 maybe, all ready for you to use as batteries to suck up and throw out when you're done.” Graelyn and Arch were silent. “Imagine you lived there. Imagine you watched the universe die around you. And imagine you found a way out. You'd want to stop that happening to other universes, wouldn't you?”

“I suppose I would.” Graelyn whispered.

“And would you Arch?”

“I think I'd have a moral obligation.” Kinan stormed past them, back out the door, and they scrambled to follow her. She created a new path, and followed it, pulling another door towards them and ripping it open, walking through it, and cracking open the door in the crystal room that followed it without pausing. Running after her, Arch exited the door first after Kinan, and stopped in the doorway, causing Graelyn to lightly push him. “Arch let me through.” He stayed put. “Arch, come on.” He stepped out of the way, and Graelyn stepped forward onto a dry field filled with dead plants. The sky was filled with cracks, blue cracks, and deep blue holes. Massive Crystal orbs floated in the sky, along with a vast plethora of different vessels moving back and forth between the ground and the sky. Between them all floated faceless blue beings shaped like people. They had no visible orifices, their blue skin coated them completely, but it seemed like they had jaws and such under the layer. Their legs hung beneath their body, unused as they flew. Each wore a garment sort of like a poncho. As they flew, occasionally crackles of electricity flew between them and the sky.

“Kinan... Kinan what are we looking at.”

“Earth.” She replied. They stared for a few more minutes, and a chunk of the ground in the distance suddenly began rising up, converted to blue energy.

“I need more of an explanation than that, what are we looking at!?!?” Graelyn said louder.

“You're looking at why I need to send you into the prime universe.”

“But what are they?!?” Graelyn pointed at the blue things, and Arch's skin instinctively flashed an uncomfortable static.

“Am I showing you too much at once? I thought this might be overwhelming.”

“You should have listened to your instincts!”

“That's the first inter-universal empire. I won't bore you with their history, it would only confuse this more... But here is the long and short of it. You connected to Songbird's Universe, and were able to move through into it. The prime reality did the same thing, only they connected to the universe these guys came from.”

“So... They're going to die?” Arch said.

“Yes.” Kinan started walking across the dry field, the grass crunching as she stepped.

“Where are you going?”

“Continuing the tour.” The giant Crystal orbs in the sky sent small bolts of lightning between them, and the wind screeched, a sound that was just plain incorrect for the wind to make.

Nervously, Graelyn gave Arch a look that seemed to communicate “I don't want to die, but hey she is our ride out of here so...?” and began to scamper after Kinan. Arch sighed, and looked up deeper into the sky. Dark shapes slowly latched onto the orbs, and then let go, their shapes were inconsistent, like they were a wide variety of somethings. Feeling the dead grass with his armored foot, and shifting it around, he began to follow them.

The ruins of civilization littered the ground. Was this Earth? Was this a colony world? Even though Kinan had answered that question, Graelyn couldn't even tell. The sky was purple-- but was that natural or just another sign of the ruin?

“We'll need to stay out of sight of the drones.” Kinan said, and began to walk towards a large reservoir of dirty water. Next to it were cages.

“Kinan, what are we looking at?”

“It will be clear in a moment.”

“Please, can't we just leave? I already agreed to do your dumb mission.”

“I know. But do you believe it?”

“What does that matter?” Kinan stopped, and looked back at her, then kept walking. Graelyn wasn't sure what that meant, but it became clear what was up ahead. The cages, hanging from cranes, were filled with people.

Graelyn looked up at the cage, filled with the malnourished people, who barely seemed to even notice her.

“They're in a cage Kinan. Why are they in a cage?”

“They'll be used as slaves to keep building the Empire. The Council needs them for whatever its trying to do.” Arch looked furious. His skin was glowing orange, then red. He wasn't hiding his feelings, and the suddenness of it threw Graelyn off.

“Arch?” She whispered.

“They're keeping them in cages? People. Like they're less than human.”

“That's what the council does. People from universes that shift in accordance with other universe aren't



really people to them, after all their memories could change at the drop of a hat in another universe.” He stepped towards her, his skin shifting into flames.

“That's no excuse.”

“Oh, I agree.”

“Then we need to help these people!” Kinan stared back.

“We'll need all three of us. The question is, is Graelyn on board?” They both looked at her. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She felt cold, and tried not to look at them.

“Can't we just... Leave?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, this is going to be really dangerous. And I've done a lot of dangerous stuff lately. Honestly I just want to go to sleep.” She shrugged, and tried to look like she was saying something normal.

“How could you even say that? How can you think back to the pain you lived through and see this and just.... Shrug?”

“I just don't think its my job. This is what Kinan wants to do, and apparently what you do. But I'm not meant for that kind of thing.” I'd poison it, she thought. Arch and Kinan were both so stoic, she had a hard time reading them, but the disappointment was radiating off them. Then the crane holding the cage began to move towards the reservoir.

“What are they doing?”

“It looks like the stock is too sick. They're not going to bother harvesting it, they'll just drown them. There are other worlds. Other universes. Its not our business, anyways.” The people scrambled in the cage, but did so so slowly... Graelyn remembered the sink.

Graelyn sat next to Trisha on the playground, swinging back and forth on the set.

“We're going to be too old for the playground next year.” Trisha said. Graelyn nodded.

“Maybe its time then.” Trisha raised an eyebrow, and stopped swinging.

“Time for what?”

“To run away from home.” Graelyn said.

“Graelyn be serious.” She stared at her own feet. Her slip on shoes were scuffed up.

“I am serious Trisha, I'm going to run away.”

“Why would you want to do that?” She didn't answer the question, just looked at her shoes and kept swinging.

Graelyn came in the door, sliding her shoes off, and setting her bag down.

“Mom, I'm home.”

“I'm in the kitchen dear!” Graelyn looked at Xandra's shoes, they were still there by the door. Mom hadn't moved them. She'd moved dad's leftover things so much quicker than Xandra's. Graelyn sighed, and walked into the kitchen, famished. She was ready for a snack.

“So Graelyn, I got a call from Trisha's mom a few minutes ago. She said you were planning on running away from home.” Graelyn looked at the kitchen counter to see Mister Sprinkles in a wire cage, not his usual cage, with a wire loop coming up out of the top of it.

“Mom what's going on?” She didn't answer, just put a plug in the sink, and began to fill it up. They stood there in silence as it filled, and then she shut it off.

“Graelyn, do you remember when your father left, with your brother and sister?”

“...Of course how could I forget.”

“And I got you and Xandra in the court settlement, while your father moved to New York with them. And then Xandra left, and hurt me so much. Now Graelyn, I have to wonder, how could you think of doing that to your mother?” She picked up the cage by the wire loop, and Mister sprinkles made uncomfortable noises as the cage wobbled. The wires themselves looked kind of painful.

“I can only assume you don't love me, that you want to cause me pain. Which is a cruel, cruel thing for a daughter to want to do to her mother.” Graelyn's eye's grew wide behind her glasses.

“Mom, I was just kidding about leaving. You know, it was a game.”

“Oh, Trisha's mom said you'd made yourself very clear you were serious. So serious about making me hurt.” She lowered the cage with Mister Sprinkles into the water, and then picking up a wooden spoon, shoved it down into the sink, displacing water all over the counter and onto the floor. Mister Sprinkles writhed and squealed as he began to be submerged in the water, scratching with his claws, biting, and trying desperately to keep his head above water. Graelyn ran for the sink, and tried to stop her mother. “No, no you can't do that! Please you're hurting him!” She held the struggling Graelyn back with her other arm, and smiled faintly at her.

“I'm just trying to teach you a lesson. You want to hurt me, but you care so much about when your cat gets hurt. Do you love your cat more than me?” Mister Sprinkles was all the way underwater. He was thrashing in the small cage, his tiny eyes panicked. He was drowning.

“No, of course not.” She lied.

“Say it again.”

“No, I love you the most in all the world. You're the best mom ever, and I'm never leaving home.”

Sprinkles began to fight less. His movements were getting sluggish.

“Do you promise?”

“Yes I promise!” She smiled, and pulled the cat out of the water. She set the cage on the counter, and let Graelyn get through to him finally. He was hacking up water, but looked like he'd be okay. She opened the cage up, and took him out gently, pressing the wet cat to her breast. Her mother began to fill the basin again. Graelyn stepped back.

“Now Graelyn, if you really love your mother, you'll prove it to her. Show me how much you love me. See how long you can hold your breath.” Graelyn looked at the sink.

“Do I... Have a target time I need to meet?”

“Oh, I'll know if you've been there long enough. See if you can hold your head down there till you can't bear it anymore, and then a little more. Or should I put the cat back in?” Graelyn kissed Mister Sprinkles' back, and set him down (he instantly scurried off to her room), then walked towards the sink. Her face was mirrored in it, and there was some cat hair floating on the top. Her mother's face came up behind her, and she felt a hand shove her down into the water.

Later, she sat curled up in the corner of her room, soaking wet but afraid to take her clothes off. She held Mister sprinkles (who unlike her was wrapped lovingly in a towel against her, and rocked back and forth gently.

“I just want them to leave us alone Mister Sprinkles. I just want to be alone.” He meowed. Her eyes

darkened.

“What kind of person doesn't fall Mister Sprinkles?” There was no answer.

The people in the cages scampered slowly, and Graelyn closed her eyes. Fine, she thought. Fine, I'll get involved again. But she just wanted to go home.

*Do I even have a home?* She tried to think of what she meant by home and it seemed nebulous. She home she'd grown up in had been a terrible place. She'd been shaped by it, she was a part of it, and everything she touched went wrong, just like that gun in Nojpeten, just like Project Atlantis.

“Fine.” She said. “We need to save them. Tell me what to do. I don't know what to do.”

Kinan nodded. “Arch, you free the prisoners, Graelyn, you lead them back to the portal when he has, while he gets started on the next one.”

“What will you do?” Arch asked.

“Show off.” She said, and began sprinting. Arch didn't waste time, he unsheathed his swords, and using them to get handholds climbed his way up the crane. He reached the control module, and found....

Something that resembled a human sized jellyfish. That was surprising, especially since it had so many limbs on so many devices. Arch was curious, but he had a mission. He turned on the vibration function on his left sword, and jabbed it repeatedly at the transparent material that made up the cockpit. He pinged off, and focusing in on the grain of the material, jabbed again. This time the sword point hit a tiny indentation, and as he put pressure on it with the vibrating blade, cracks began forming around it. He'd had programing installed to do just this sort of thing, he realized. He wondered why. The window shattered, and the creature inside glowed faintly yellow as if in surprise. It reached towards him with one of its many tendrils, which Arch grabbed, and pulled on. It tried to send a surge of electricity through his body, but he was built to withstand surges like that, and his body automatically redirected the overflow back into his internal batteries, which he used to pull even harder. It wasn't expecting that, and he threw it down out of the cockpit with force. He slid into the crane's cockpit and tried to figure out the controls. At first it made no sense, but a program kicked in and began pointing out the most likely controls for him to use to get the crane to do what he wanted. He stopped the descent into the water, and then turned the crane towards the ground. Perfect.

Graelyn saw the jellyfish hit the ground, and ran over to it. What the heck was this thing? Was it an alien? She had always believed there was life beyond her star, and with so many alternate worlds it was a mathematical certainty. She had expected it to look different than a jellyfish though. It had a blue medusa, which pulses with either blue or yellow light. Ringing the medusa were a large number of tendrils, some ending in rounded tips, some with what looked like a single claw or a pincer, some with some sort of orifice on them. At the center of the bottom of the medusa was... A Glowing ball? She wasn't sure what that would biologically do but... It was definitely a thing.

“Are you alive?” She asked, fascinated. She crept closer to it, and reached her hand out to touch it. It was soft, coated in a fine layer of mucus. Amazing!

“Do you speak English? Vy govorite po-russki? Nǐ huì shuō zhōngwén ma? Parle vu le-” The thing cut her off, wrapping her wrist up in a tendril. She looked down at it as though it had betrayed her curiosity, but still whispered, “fascinating,” as another wrapped around her skull and she felt the

electrical impulses surge through here.

“Who are you?” She felt a thought think.

“Graelyn Scythes.” She thought back. “Are you sending me thoughts directly to my brain through your tendrils?”

“You figured that out quickly.”

Graelyn found herself-- or maybe a conceptualization of herself? Standing in the forest filled with the owls. But she could tell this wasn't the real forest of owls, this was her memory of it. The details were only what she recalled, with bits clearly filled in incorrectly by her subconscious. The alien was floating there in front of her.

“You're clever for a human, Graelyn Scythes. We are the Pantheon. We lead the council under our Emperors. The reach of our tendrils goes beyond stars”

“...Okay that's cool uh, so you can go into people's minds?”

“Yes. That impresses you more than the Empire?”

“Well, I mean, anyone can build an empire. That happens all the time. Being able to go into people's minds is pretty special.” She felt it being confused by her reaction.

“There is no greater glory than to be a god, to be raised into the Pantheon. To be looked up by others.” Graelyn shrugged, and all the owls did to.

“I mean, I'm sure that took a lot of work, but all you have to do to get an Empire is be willing to be cruel. I could run an empire if I wanted. But that's boring. I'd rather learn something.”

she looked down to see a tendril coming out of her sleeve.”

“That's not what I see inside you, is it though? You're afraid of yourself.”

“Well I'm certainly not afraid of you.”

“I am in your mind.” Graelyn narrowed her eyes.

“Only as much as I'm letting you.”

“I can make you scared.”

“I can be cruel. Would you like to see me be cruel? Did you know I got a friend expelled from my school for reporting something to my mother? I plotted behind her back, and I hurt her.”

“And that you did that scares you.” The owls turned their backs.

“I just want people to leave me alone.”

“You're just one of many. You don't have the right to ask that. You're not important, you'll be submerged and we will change you. I can sense you, I can feel your anchor to the prime universe. We'll exploit that. You will become the you who lives there, I guarantee it. The changes are already happening.”

“What do you mean they're already happening?”

“Well--” The alien stopped talking, and the owls began to fade, the forest began to flicker.

“...Pantheon?” She said. And she opened her eyes to see the creature's medusa cut in half, and Kinan's blade already sweeping up to cut another in half. She leapt up, and landed on some sort of air craft, which she burred her sword in the engine of, then leapt off, slicing a flurry of the floating blue things as she fell. She landed on the side of the crane, clasping a cord on it with one hand, then springing off

again to land on a much larger floating craft, which she began to carve open.

Graelyn looked around, and saw the cage of people. Springing up, she sloppily ran to it, and opened the latch. The people looked at her, as though they were unsure if they should leave the cage.

“Come on! Lets go, you're free, follow me!” She yelled, and gestured For them to run towards the door. Arch had dropped a second cage, so she ran over to it, avoiding the fallen members of the Council, and dodging more who fell. She didn't look down to see if it was Arch or Kinan cutting them down, but she tried not to look. She wasn't meant to be in a battle. She opened the other cage, and shooed the people out in the same direction. They were largely carrying each other, but no one picked up a little girl who was missing part of her leg, and looked barely there, Graelyn grabbed a man by the arm and yelled at him to pick her up but he just shoved her off and kept moving. Everyman for himself. Graelyn cursed, and ran to the little girl.

“Hey, hey are you alive?” She looked at her, her eyes sunken, and nodded. “Okay I'm going to get you out of here.” Graelyn was not a physically strong person, but she found lifting the little girl easy.

“What's your name?” She said, and the girl tired to say something back, but only her lips moved.

“Nice name.” Graelyn encouraged. And began to run after the survivors, yelling at them to go towards the door. She awkwardly opened the door, and the refugees flooded in. Through the crowd, a woman in a poodle skirt began cutting through.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Er, you're Jenny right?” Graelyn yelled over the clamor.

“Backgammon Jenny, yeah. I've been following making sure nothing went wrong. What's gone wrong?” Graelyn handed her the child.

“Kinan is saving a bunch of people.” Jenny sighed, and rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses.

“Of course she is.”

“Yes, I am. Jenny, get these people back to Spiral.” Kinan said, followed closely by Arch. They'd caught up quick. Jenny gave a crisp salute, somehow, while still holding the child, and began to usher the people away.

“Arch, Graelyn, a moment.” Kinan had them wait at the door, and they stared up at the giant crystal orbs, the little things moving back and forth between them, and the black blurs. They were starting to move towards them.

“Kinan, what on earth do you want from us? This is insane. This is impossible. I can't do anything to stop an army of flying.... Whatever those are.”

“You can. Remember, you can only go into a universe you'd been to.”

Graelyn remembered the universe she'd been in so briefly, that room full of bodies.

“You've been to the prime universe.”

Her cat paced its cage, it hadn't been fed yet today do to a computer error in the shelter. It was getting impatient.

“You and Arch can get there to a place early enough in its history you can change it, give them a

fighting chance.”

She watched herself look over her own shoulder, ready to be kicked out the window.

“I can train you for what you need to do. It won't even be that complicated, but you're the only ones who can do it. I know this sounds ridiculous, but there are trillions of lives on the line here. I need you to do this, and then I'll send you home. I'll make your life easy, you can both live calm and wealthy. You can do what you always dreamed of doing. But I need you do do what I'm asking you to do.”

She curled up in her bed, holding the cat close to her chest. She tried to ignore the bruises on her chest, but it didn't quite work.

“Will you do this for me? For yourself?”

Graelyn was back in her own present, looking Kinan in the eyes. She turned to Arch, she wished he could read his face.

“I don't know how to say no to this. I don't think I could if I wanted to.” Arch nodded, and looked between both of them.

“When I was growing up, there was a man who thought he could make my life what he wanted. He built me up, built my family up, just to tear us all down for his own ends. We were like toys to him... Slaves, really. Do you really think I can say no when either when you tell me this? I'm not sure... I'm not sure I totally get it but...”

“You don't have to. Lets get out of here.” Kinan walked passed them.

“Kinan,” Graelyn said, looking out at the wasteland ahead of them, “if its as bad as you say here... Shouldn't we try to help more of the people here?” Kinan sighed.

“Its too late here. We already tried. We don't have an army big enough to fight that kind of war. I do what I can. We saved some.” She looked out across the fields, as another crack formed in the sky. “We have to fight the battles we can win.”

\* \* \* \*

The journey back through the bifrost was quiet. Graelyn still wasn't sure what to think... She felt like she was walking through a dream. But here she was, and her sore feet seemed to prove otherwise. Kinan took a new path, and at the edge of it, reached into her bag for more blue dust.

“Where is the door?” Arch asked.

“I'll have to make one. We're going somewhere outside of the builder's specifications.” Kinan threw the dust expertly, and moved her hand through it. Graelyn pulled up the shades and tried to watch it carefully. Kinan moved her hand through the dust in a circle, little tendrils of electricity slipping out of her fingertips. A swirling white portal appeared, and she gestured to them to go ahead of her. Graelyn

held her hand out, and Arch took it, the two of them stepping into the portal together, letting the white energy enclose them as they walked.

They stepped out onto a grassy plain with a blue sky filled with floating islands. A massive crystal staircase went up the sky in the distance, spiraling up, and blobs of water floated through the sky like clouds. Galeyn could see people swimming in them-- someone waved at them and Arch waved back. Then they noticed the people in hoodies riding a brontosaurus in the distance, as if the scene couldn't get any weirder.

"Welcome," Kinan said, "the home of Dawn. We call it Spiral."

"Spiral." Arch whispered, and they walked onto the grass, the sky welcoming them as the white swirls faded down into nothing.



# **Chapter 17: Necessary Dinosaurs**



Her fingers ran through the blades of grass like they were on the back of a beloved pet, her eyes closed, her cheek against the same grass, glasses carelessly askew. She could fall asleep here, but it occurred to her she had in fact just woken up, and perhaps she should at least pretend she wanted to do something other than sleep today. Rolling over, she slowly pushed herself up and brushed the grass off her face. Arch was a few meters away, either asleep or staring at the liquid clouds above them.

“Good Morning.” Arch said, and Graelyn wondered exactly how long she had slept. She pushed her glasses up and rubbed her eyes. She has that weird feeling you get when you sleep the night in your clothes, the feeling that you need to change them, like they've absorbed just too much of your sweat and they've settled somewhat wrong around your body.

“Did I sleep the night on this hill?” She said, and Arch nodded.

“Apparently a lot of people do that here. There were tons of those Dawn folks just sleeping out here under the stars last night. The ground here is really comfortable, whatever that means.” She looked up at the sky, and watched someone in swim trunks jump from a floating island into one of the liquid clouds. Their friends were already swimming in it.

“How do they get down from the cloud-things without hurting themselves? How do the islands and clouds float like that?” She mused.

“Always curious.”

“Always skeptical as well. But clearly it works, I just don't know how.”

“Don't think too hard about it.” John Vice said suddenly from behind her.

“Bwah!?” Graelyn said as she bolted up in surprise and stumbled a few steps down the hill.

“Er, sorry.” Johnathan said, holding out a plate of breakfast food and two milk packages. “I uh, thought you'd like breakfast.”

“Breakfasts are not meant to make me fall down hills!”

“Touche. Well, anyways here's some food. The plate was stacked up with enough food for the two of them, though Arch found it awkward to stuff it in his mouth under his mask. He seemed not entirely at ease with the concept of chewing either.

“Why don't you just take your mask off?” Johnathan asked.

“It's considered rude to show your face where I come from. Faces are private things. You don't share them with anyone but your closest loved ones.” He nodded, and reached for one of Graelyn's grapes, and she pushed his hand away.

“Okay, my turn.” Graelyn said, “How do the cloud-swimming pools and islands float?”

“The simplest way to explain it is the laws of reality are different here. There are different rules about how objects interact with each other. Gravity has different rules, for instance. What exactly those rules are is beyond me, but they're a thing.”

“Okay, so if the laws of reality are so different here, are there some vastly different native species to it? Really alien things?” Vice looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Er, did Kinan really not tell you how Spiral came about? Jesus that woman is either totally terse or giving you the longest speech...” Graelyn and Arch shook their heads.

“Was she supposed to tell us something?” She asked.

“Er, yes. Spiral isn't a natural plane of reality. Kinan made it.” Graelyn dropped her milk carton, and it spilled over her lap. She cursed and stood up, trying to wipe it up.

“Ugh, damn it. Okay, I must have misheard you. I thought you said she made this place. Do you mean she ordered the construction of the buildings or...?”

“No, I mean she made it. You'd have to ask her how she did it, but I know she doesn't think she could do it again. Kinan has had a hard life, harder than she'll tell you. If I was her I'd have just retired here and let the rest of the Universe go about its business, but she isn't that kind of person.”

Arch finished chewing a muffin, and joined in, “When you say she had a hard life, does that have something to do with the way she talks?” Johnathan nodded.

“She got some sort of brain damage when she was much younger. Don't ask her about that though. She doesn't like remembering it. She lost a lot of the muscle control in her face, and it slowed her speech and slurred it... I never knew her before it happened, that's just how Kinan has always been, but she used to be a beautiful singer, or so I'm told.” In the distance, a group of hoodied figures moved towards a crystals circle in the ground.

“Does she know you're telling us all this?” Arch asked, concerned.

“Of course. I'm not into outing people's personal lives. It's my job to tell new recruits this stuff so they don't bother her with it. You'd be surprised how many people want to ask her dumb stuff like if she's fit to be the leader here because of that. It's good to clear it up.”

“We wouldn't ask her something like that.” Arch said. Graelyn snapped in Arch's direction and nodded.

“Glad to hear it. Still, now you know what you know.” The figures in the distance got close to the circle, and a blue swirl erupted from it.

“What's going on down there?” Graelyn asked. Vice grabbed one of her grapes while she was distracted, and popped it in his mouth.

“Looks like we have visitors.”

“Returning people from missions or something?” He shook his head.

“No, doesn't look like that.” Figures began to step out of the portal, and Graelyn saw that Kinan, Miranda, and Jenny the woman in the poodle skirt with the katana were all in the greeting party. The first people to step out were all dressed in what looked like coats from the American Revolution, but Green. They were even wearing the appropriate foot and leg wear, but also had some strange gauntlets covered in crystals on one arm, and eye wear that seemed to contain some needless gears and gizmos. The gauntlets were aesthetically similar, and it all gave the impression they had raided a clock shop on their way over.

Following them were a group of people in black robes, similar to the robes that man who'd shown up in Atlantis base with Ares wore. Arch and Graelyn both got much more interested when they came through, but were also sort of confused. Without asking for any explanation, it was fairly obvious they were some sort of cultural branch off. Though what that meant was anyone's guess, really. They also were wearing the gauntlets, but theirs were aesthetically different, less cobbled together, more sleek, the crystals carefully cut to fit carefully shaped settings. The three groups walked to meet each other, and began a triangular conversation.

“Who are they?” She asked John.

“They're some of our rivals. Members of some of the less powerful groups trying to influence the

universes.”

“Are they here to ask you for help? Since you're more powerful?” He laughed, and pulled his knees up to his chest.

“Powerful? We're definitely not that.”

“You took down the government of Earth.”

“We gave some people with an army the tools to take down the government of one Earth. We enabled some people who already would have been doing what we helped them to do, just shortened the time scale.” Graelyn looked over at Arch and frowned. She wished she could read his face for reassurance.

“You talk so casually about this, like the power to do what you did on Songbird's world isn't... Massive. You changed the fate of a whole universe.”

“Well yeah, but its just one universe.”

Scale. Its a fairly important thing. The scale of how you perceive the world affects everything about you understand it, after all. Lets say you grew up in a small town, the kind of super tiny place where nearly everyone is the same ethnicity and no buildings are higher than two stories, then you go to a city, a big multicultural metropolis full of skyscrapers and more people in your sight passing randomly down the street than you'd seen before in your life. This would naturally change your view of the scale of the universe.

In same way, if someone who had just helped violently overthrow the government of an entire planet, interfered in its history, and then extracted you from that planet by threatening its government told you that the group he worked for “wasn't powerful” and then told you it was “just one universe”, this might change your sense of scale.

If you were Graelyn, you might sit there wide eyed, your jaw loose, staring. If you were Arch, you might shake your head, and say something like: “You can't be so cavalier about lives. Just because there are a lot of universes doesn't mean each person there isn't still a person.” If you were Graelyn, you might then awkwardly point at Arch as if to say “yeah, what he said!” and if you were Johnathan Vice, you might frown, and reply, “I'm not being Cavalier about it...”

“Oh, but you are. Do you think people are replaceable?”

Johnathan scratched his head, “Er, well, they are.”

“No, they aren't.”

“No, let me explain...” He took a breath, “They are literally replaceable. As in, we've replaced people before.”

“...Go on.” Vice stood up, and looked down at the triangle of talkers. A man in robes seemed to be yelling at Kinan, a woman in robes behind him looked awkward. Both Kinan and a man in a colonial Green coat stood placidly. Jenny was being physically held back by Miranda.

“We were trying to influence a world very similar to the one you were on. It was a bit different though, the Revolution wasn't communist it was... Socialist? Honestly I can't really remember. It all blurs together. But those people you met, Alice and her gang? They died in a vtol crash. The parts failed and the pilot wasn't paying attention. We checked forward in history, and saw with them dead the whole

movement fell apart. We tried changing its history, but well, there actually is only so much you can do unless you're some sort of lord of time. We couldn't prevent their deaths. But Kinan realized that no one actually saw them die, the vtol crashed in an empty field somewhere. So... What if we cleaned up the bodies, made sure no one found them, and just... Popped in a different Alice MacLeod?"

"You can't be serious."

"I'm serious. This is a war, and Kinan is an interdimensional warlord. She has an army, and I'm in it. So Jenny, Miranda, Joseph, he's the Pottawatomie guy, and I all slipped into a reality where the revolution was losing, losing badly, but where all of them were still alive. We talked to the versions of them there, and convinced them to abandon their reality for a new one. There was no hope there, they couldn't do any good there but die an inglorious death. We dropped the charred bodies off of their doubles into their reality, and shipped them over to the new one. They took over where the others had left off, and liberated Earth for their cause."

"Didn't they miss their home? The people they'd abandoned?" Arch asked. Vice shrugged.

"I never asked."

"You should have asked."

There was something off about this whole thing, something that didn't make sense to Graelyn, she tried to put the pieces together. The man in robes pointed at Kinan angrily, she said something back to him, and then to green coat, who nodded. They began to move back from each other.

"We saved billions of people by what we did. I don't have any regrets."

"They were still different people, people thought they were the same, sure, but they weren't."

"They thought they were, isn't that all that matters." Arch's coating reddened.

"No."

"Hold up," Graelyn cut in, "If you guys don't care about whether or not the Revolution wins, what exactly is your criteria for changing history?"

"Kinan showed you a fallen world, didn't she?" Graelyn nodded. "Anytime a world develops the ability to link to other realities, two things happen: they begin to synch up with the prime reality they are attached to, and they open themselves up for invasion by the Council. If we break the chain of history, diverge the narrative of that universe enough, it stops... Synching up. It becomes harder to mount a large scale invasion. We chose who wins based on who is least likely to want to build inter reality travel."

Graelyn stood up to face him, she clenched a fist, she'd expected so much more, "That's it? That's it?!? You don't have any higher purpose, no ideal you're fighting for? Its just... A cold practical decision?"

"Our principle is saving the 10,000 Dawns. Our principle is saving the most lives possible."

"Guys, I think you might want to watch this." Arch said softly. They turned back to the grass field below where Kinan had her sword drawn, and was spinning it. Jenny and the woman in the robe, where standing to the side. The man in robes had his gauntleted arm extended, and energy was swirling around it.

"What are they doing?"

“They're going to duel.” Kinan moved into several positions, flexing and stretching, going through the motions. She made every movement look so fluid and natural, you'd think that it was second nature to every human till you tried to do it yourself. Then she stopped, and turned to Jenny. Her mouth moved, and then Jenny shook her head. The man in the black robes and the woman in black did the same.

“What are they doing?”

“Jenny is Kinan's second, just like in old duels you read about in school. She and Lawrencia were trying to negotiate a truce, clearly it didn't work. Now they're going to fight.”

“Is she going to kill him?” Graelyn asked.

“You don't wonder if he'll kill her?” Graelyn shuddered.

“I don't really want to wonder either.”

Kinan gave a final flourish of her sword, and stepped forward, as the man in the hood did. They began to circle each other. The man in green counted down, they could tell because he held up fingers. When they reached 0, they sprung. Kinan launched herself in the air as hoods held up his arm to unleash a streak of green lightning through the sky. Kinan twisted through the air and spun around it, pushing her foot out to land a kick on the man's shoulder, then as they both full drawing her sword across his chest to sever him in two, but he put his gauntlet between the sword and his chest, causing a clang that could be heard from all the way up the hill. Kinan moved inhumanly quick, using the push back from the blocked blow she spun in the air to land on her feet and began charging at hoods, who began to shoot lightning at her, but she leapt to the left and right perfectly out of range of the electricity, never losing a step as she landed. The man began to back up as she encroached on him, and Kinan moved her sword into a thrusting position. Hoods dodged, barely, throwing his left arm up in the air and sidestepping the blow. Kinan didn't hesitate, she turned her wrists and brought the sword up into the man's armpit. The man looked shocked, as the blood started trickling down her sword. She didn't stop. She pulled the sword back, and put her foot forward, and around the back of his knee, while she brought the sword around, and down on the other arm in a carefully controlled blow that cut the straps holding the heavy gauntlet in place, and pushed it down off his arm, leaving a bloody scrape where the blade took of some of his skin on the way off. She pulled her foot back at the same time, while shoving the man. He dropped to the ground, bloody and dazed. A person in black robes began administering medical aid while Jenny yelled something and the woman in black robes made a clear and broad gesture: they yield.

“Is this how you solve all your disputes? Bloodshed?”

“He'll be fine. Greggor is a moron, this isn't the first time Kinan's had to kick his ass.” Kinan looked up like she'd heard them, and nodded, wiping the blood off her sword onto a cloth Jenny had handed her.

“You didn't answer my question.” He sighed.

“No, this isn't how we settle all our problems, but like I said, this is a war. Its better we solve some of these things in duels than waste time killing lots of each other.”

“I suppose if she dies, you'd just get another Kinan then.” Vice smiled, and Graelyn felt a bit patronized.

“There's only one Kinan. But now that she's finished down there, she'd like me to take you guys to her. She has something to show you.”

Kinan was waiting for them on the top of a hill, watching a bubble of water filled with swimmers pass by. A few people on a floating island waved down to the swimmers from it, and a few leapt down to join in the fun, splashing into the floating bubble of water. Graelyn, Arch and John climbed the hill, and stood behind her, expecting her to say something, after a moment, Graelyn coughed loudly. Kinan didn't look behind her, just patted the grass next to her. Taking the hint, they took a seat.

“So, your mission.” She began abruptly. “We've found a universe we're fairly certain has a back door cut into the labyrinth where you can access a special bifrost into the prime reality. It will be on the edge of the 10,000 Dawns, so expect things to be different there. Very different. I can't follow you, none of us can, for fear someone will notice. Part of the reason you'll be able to get in is no one is looking for you, but as I said before even if no one would notice me I couldn't enter that path. Its blocked from me.” Graelyn pushed her feet into the dirt gently so she left the impressions of her heels in it.

“Kinan, if this is a war, then are people going to try to kill us? Duel us?” Kinan stared off at the sky. “Not duel you, no. In all likelihood attempts to stop you will be more subtle than that. But I can't predict what they'll be.”

“I don't think you've been entirely honest with us.” Arch said, “About what you're doing.” Kinan sighed, and looked at Arch.

“You're right. Because the truth is a bit odd.”

“We can take it.” She held his gaze.

“The truth is, Arch, that all reality is is a story. This war, the dawns, its all fiction.”

Arch took in what she said, and laughed, his skin lighting up in yellow smiley faces laughing along with him.

“We're flesh and blood, or flesh and oil and blood, we're not a story.” Kinan pulled out a fist full of grass and threw it into the breeze.

“What happens when you die, Arch?”

“You go to the underworld.” Kinan's eye twitched, whatever that meant.

“What do you think Graelyn?” She shrugged. Kinan continued: “When you die, people talk about you. You stop being who you were, you become just what people think about you. Your good intentions, your dreams, the things you did alone, they vanish. You become a two dimensional caricature of who you were. You become a story. We have the unfortunate case of becoming stories while we're still alive.” Kinan snapped her fingers, and a gentle rumble began from the distance, as a shape began moving towards them. “When the prime reality changes... It changes us. It rewrites us. My job is to make different worlds so different from the prime reality that... You can't reconcile them. The differences are too pronounced, the changes can't occur. If the changes are small enough, they can get smoothed over, and the story can form part of the prime reality's structure. I'm fighting a war for control of our own narrative, our own story. The prime reality is the biblical canon, we need to be its apocrypha.”

“We need to be Tubol-Cain...” Arch said.

“What?”

“Its something Graelyn said.”

“Yeah, its a story that's not in the Bible: this guy named Tubol-Cain hung out on Noah's ark, hidden on it. He survived the great flood by being extraneous.”

“Then yes, we need to be Tubol-Cain.” The shape on the horizon grew closer. It had legs. “When you break into the Prime reality, it will change everything for us.”

“If we do.” Graelyn pessimised.

“Yes, if. But if you make it, we'll be influencing their story. If you can make a change in their narrative, they won't be able to overwrite us, because they'll need us to exist. Do you understand?”

“Honestly?” Graelyn asked.

“Honestly.” Kinan replied.

“That sounds like pseudo scientific mambo-jumbo.” Kinan shrugged.

“Hence why I didn't phrase it that way before. But I see our guest has arrived.” Kinan gestured toward what had once been the distant shape. It became clear now that it was a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“What.” Graelyn said.

“Hello!” Said Arch.

“What I need to learn now is what is different about your universe, every universe has some special power in it, whether you know it or not. It can be bold like fireballs, or subtle like the clegging in Songbird's world.” Graelyn raised her hand. Kinan blinked, and then called on her.

“Yes, that is great, but why do you need a T-Rex.”

“Well how else am I supposed to terrify you into manifesting whatever your skill is? It will be easier for you than Arch, because he's so modified. Here take this wristband.” She dropped a band in Graelyn's lap.

“Uh, seriously?”

“Seriously. This is part of your training. I'm going to chase you, and you're going to try to escape.” Graelyn took her glasses off, and rubbed them clean, then put them back on.

“You can't be serious.”

“You'll be totally safe.” Graelyn remembered how insanely quick she'd been in the duel. She could probably kill a T-Rex in a fair fight with that sword... Then it occurred to her.

“Kinan, you said that you'd be chasing me, not the dinosaur...” But Kinan was already crossing her legs, and closing her eyes, she seemed to be meditating. The dinosaur began to sway gently. Graelyn quickly threw off her suit jacket, leaving the hoodie on, and slipped on the wrist band. Okay, training, this was just like gym class. Which she hadn't been particularly good at. But she could do this. Right?

Kinan opened her eyes and mouth, and they all glowed golden. The T-Rex's eyes flashed the same color, and Arch looked at her “Okay we can do this together.”

“No, if this is something she needs to know... Then I'll do this.” the T-Rex stomped towards her, and Graelyn ran. The big stomp footprints followed her, and she could smell its breath, rancid like rotten meat. She ran hard, and felt its jaws close behind her, nicking her hood.

Was the dinosaur actually going to try to eat her?

Kinan said she was going to chase her... So she was what, possessing the dinosaur? That was ridiculous, but it had to be the case. Huffing, running her arms back and forth, she tried to think of what she could do to outrun the dinosaur, her wristband hummed and beeped. There was nothing she could think of, no special power. So she just kept running, the dinosaur nipping at her heels. She ran and ran, till she couldn't run anymore. She collapsed, panting, and felt the warm jaws of the dino reach around her. It didn't bite down though, instead she found herself scooped up like a ball by a golden retriever. The T-Rex turned around, and headed back towards the hill, stomping all the way.

The big lizard dropped her down gently, if a little smelly and moist, next to Kinan, and then stepped back politely. Kinan's eyes stopped glowing, and she took in a deep breath, looking down at her human hands as if checking she was in her own body. Arch put his hand on her shoulder and she nodded to note she was okay.

“Okay, that was pretty crazy. Were you the dinosaur?” Kinan nodded.

“I learned how to do that a long time ago. Its a difficult technique. But it didn't seem like any showed up in you.” She reached out and looked at the band on Graelyn's wrist, her eyes looked confused. “Something should have though, surely. The band can usually detect them when you get enough adrenaline...” Kinan removed the band, and scrolled through its options.

“Was trying to eat me really necessary!?!?”

“I wasn't going to eat you, don't be melodramatic.” Kinan looked back at Arch and Graelyn. “Its not reading anything.”

“Okay, question about your pseudo-science here: what exactly is that detecting differences from?”

“The prime universe. Its about as boring a generic place as you can get, till it started stealing things from more interesting universes. But your universe... There's nothing this can detect. You don't have any powers it can detect different from Prime... So why would you be linked to it at all?”

“I don't know, I'm not the sorcerer.”

“I'm not a sorcerer.”

“Right, you're a warlord.”

“Yes.” Kinan said seriously. “But that doesn't stop this being odd. If you'd had a special technique, we could have trained you in it, pushed the boundaries of it. But you don't.”

“So we're not special.”

“I never said that.”

“But we're not.” Kinan rolled her eyes.

“It just changes the mission perimeters. You'll have to be careful. The prime universe is a dangerous place. You'll be trying to get to the year 2227, on the moon of Neptune, Triton.”

“There's nothing on Triton, other than made up monsters to scare children.” Graelyn said.

“I'm afraid there is. That's where a probe from another universe will come through, checking it out. You need to capture it, and get it to someone who can analyze it in their universe. That will change their narrative, change it to one where the opening up of their world into other dimensions isn't something



that passively happens to them.”

Arch rose up, dusting himself off.

“That's a pretty big change.”

“It will change everything.” Kinan said. “If you do this, you'll create a whole new story.”

“And you'll send us home.”

“And I'll send you home.”

“Then what are we waiting for, I just want to get this over with.” Graelyn said. Kinan stood up, and offered a hand to Graelyn, who ignored it and got up on her own.

“Go eat, go sleep, I'll drop you off there in the morning.” Kinan began to walk off, “Try to enjoy your life for ten seconds.” Graelyn stared silently after her, Kinan's boots leaving a trail of footprints in the soft soil as she left, the grass giving gently underfoot.

“We could go swimming.” Arch said, pointing at the bubbles.

“I suppose we could have fun.” Said Graelyn dejectedly, “But just this once.”

Kinan came to get them the next morning, followed by Johnathan and Miranda Vice. They'd spent the previous evening swimming in the floating bubbles, diving off of the floating islands into them. Graelyn swam through the bubble watching the dinosaurs walk below through through the bottom of the bubble. She tried to figure out the physics of this world, but gave up when she realized Arch could somehow swimming the bubble to without sinking, a fact that seemed to confuse him as well. She laughed, and took in a lung full of water on accident, which her body somehow processed into air. That was the real moment she gave up trying to figure out the laws of this world, and just enjoyed the feeling of being in the water. It was quiet in the bubble, her hair floating free in the water. She could have stayed there forever, but of course they eventually got hungry. Climbing out of the bubble onto a ladder that dipped down into it from a passing island, they looked for something to eat and settled on some sort of vat grown shrimp meat for dinner, cooked by a woman in a sari who put the meat on kebabs with pinnacle and green peppers, grilling them to add a smoky flavor. Each bite was juicy, but still firm to the teeth, and perfectly complimented the other flavors on the kebab. Graelyn drank some kind of fruit flavored tea, while Arch just had water. They'd slept under the stars a second time, the lights in the sky winking as if they knew that such nights were rare and to be enjoyed.

“I see you found the swim suit dispensary.” Kinan said as she set down the tray of breakfast food.

Graelyn picked up a plate with a Belgian waffle on it, then a jug of syrup which she drenched it in, and dug in. Arch ate paste.

“It was cleverly disguised with a large sign that said 'Swimsuit dispensary.’” Kinan nodded.

“We're very good hidiers here.”

“So when do we leave?” Arch said.

“Whenever you're ready. We've packed bags for you with what you might need. Swimsuits are apparently a part of that.”

“What do you mean?” Graelyn said with her mouth full.

“I mean we’ll be dropping you off on a beach.” Graelyn and Arch exchanged looks: not the worst place to be left off, not at all.

Kinan opened up a portal on the field, throwing a handful of the crystal dust into the breeze, and swirling her hand, as if she was (and she probably was) controlling the wind to spin the dust into a circle, and gestured toward it. Graelyn had her swimsuit on under her usual clothes, with the Dawn hoodie on beneath the jacket. A pack was slung over her shoulder. Arch had on a pair of swim trunks, which were of course entirely unnecessary for him, hidden under his usual long coat and his hat.

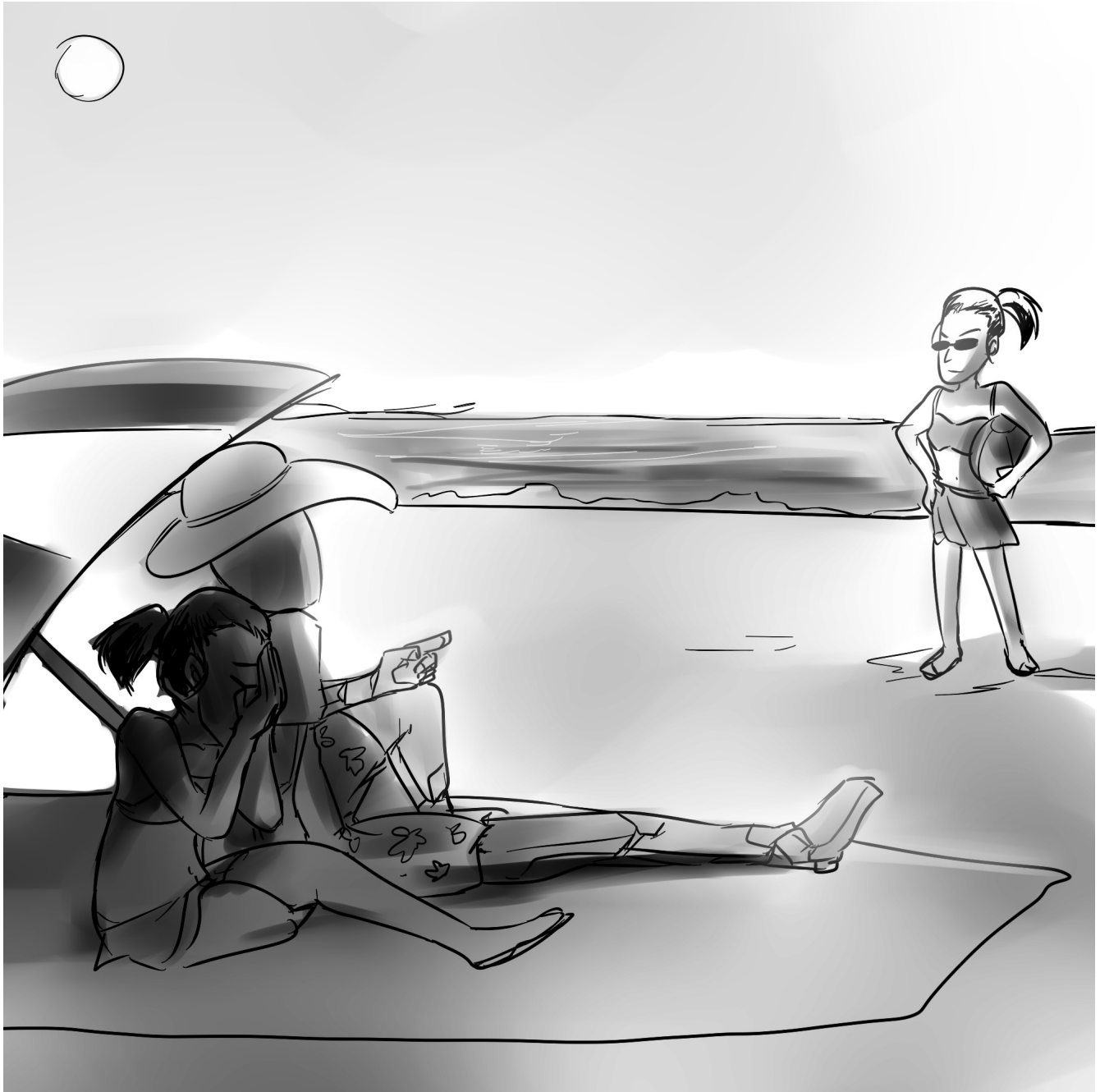
“Good luck.” Kinan said, “I’m counting on you.” Graelyn smiled faintly, and walked toward the portal. Arch waved goodbye to everyone, and followed her.

She looked into the swirling white of the portal, and took a deep breath.

She just had to do this, and she could go home. She could get her cat back, and just fade away.

No one would have to notice her again.

But as she stepped into the swirl, it occurred to her that that was probably just denial.



**Chapter 18:**  
**Graelyn and Arch in the**  
**Super Swell Beach Party!**

The first thing her feet touched was perfectly textured sand. It was just the right texture, just the right consistency, she wanted to take her shoes off and shove her toes in it. She smiled down at her feet, this could be fun. The sun was warm on her skin, and the air was fresh with the smell of the sea.

Archimedes however let out a string of curse words as he realized he hated sand and it was not in between some of the cracks in the carapace around his feet.

“You alright there?” He grumbled, but nodded. They were on a long beach, filled with scattered beach goers. Volleyball nets were set up in the distance, and up on a slight hill was a single line of buildings, stretching far into the distance... In fact, the whole beach was stretching far into the distance. She tried to make out a horizon, but there wasn't one. It just kept going, like there was no curve to the earth. She looked out at the ocean, and there was a horizon, but it also looked wrong. The angles were all incorrect, like she was in a badly rendered video game. There was a sun in the sky, but it looked wrong to. It didn't seem bright enough... But there was also a line in the sky going on forever as well, white and hot, that seemed to be spewing out light. Looking in the other direction of the beach, she saw it extended out that way towards infinity as well. But there was something else wrong about that to.

“What the hell?” Graelyn said.

“What?”

“Arch, take a look around, what do you see that seems off?”

“Well, there's a volleyball tournament starting tonight with no entry fee.” He said pointing at an overly colorful and cheerful sign that said exactly that.

“Okay, yes, but I meant about the Horizons.” Arch looked around at the Beach. He looked at the flat horizon of the ocean, and the endless beach running in either direction. His internal computers went into overdrive, mapping the angles and the distance.

“What the hell?”

“Yeah, right?”

“We're on a cylinder?”

“Yep!”

“This planet is a cylinder.”

“It would appear so.”

“But that's impossible.” Graelyn took her glasses off, and put on her sunglasses from her pack. She could have just adjusted her glasses, but changing them felt like she was somehow getting in the spirit of being on the beach.

“Its possible that this planet is a cylinder that extends infinitely in either direction, so not actually a cylinder. Its also possible it does hav ends we cannot see, and they do something funny we can't imagine. But at the very least, it seems clear the planet is cylindrical. Which means the laws of reality have to be pretty massively different here. She reached down and ran the fine sand through her fingers. It was warm from the sun on the top, and cool under the surface.

“If this planet is a cylinder, than its probable that that line in the sky is the sun, with the celestial objects in this universe rotating around each other like as parallel rods. Well, okay that's a pretty big guess, but it seems reasonable so far.”

"I mean, it makes sense.... As much as that can make sense. Wait." Arch caught on, "So what's that big orb in the sky? The moon?" Graelyn shook her head.

"I don't think so. If every celestial body in this universe follows the same laws, which might not be the case, that orb has to be like us."

"A foreign body."

"Lets go with tourist, after all, this is a beach." A group of teenagers came out of one of the beach huts in swim gear with milkshakes, giggling, and Graelyn gestured with her head towards it.

"Lets get changed and start seeing what we can learn."

Trudging up through the sand, they reached the hut, where everyone was sitting around eating hotdogs and hamburgers with milkshakes, a band was gently playing a Buddy Holly song on a low stage ("Maybe baby, I'll have you."), giving them a distinctive surf pop twist. The lead singer had the full Buddy get up, and was really rocking the blue suit.

Graelyn pointed towards the restrooms, and they slipped in to change. Graelyn had picked out a two piece swimsuit with a skirt, as well as flip-flops and Arch was needlessly wearing Hawaiian print swim trunks over his carapace, plus a wide brimmed sunhat, which was also unnecessary. Graelyn noticed the flip flops had little impressions on the bottom so when you stepped it left the Dawn Logo. Dawn may be a lot of things, but she was increasingly coming to realize that subtle was not a word that ever applied to them. Johnathan's words came back to her: "We're not powerful."

They overthrew planets, but in the big scheme of thing, they were putting their logo on flip flips so somebody might notice them. The realization terrified her, it caused her bare skin to break out in goosebumps. Still, she smiled as she went out into the room filled with beach goers. Many of them seemed too fit, like they were in a film about attractive people meeting on a beach. She felt a little self conscious, and for a moment wished she'd chosen something that covered up more of her bony torso. A bit more looking around revealed some patrons who were of different body and weight types, and she reassured herself she wasn't alone.

"So where do we start?" Arch said.

"We need to find out some basic stuff about this place. Like, cosmologically speaking."

"That's pretty broad. How are we going to do that?" Graelyn looked around the room.

"Well, lets get some lunch and figure it out from there." They went up to the counter, walking across the hardwood floor to the bar.

"Hey." Graelyn tried to say mysteriously.

"What would you guys like?" The man behind the bar said smiling, as he put a straw in a milkshake and handed it off to a girl in a purple one-piece swimsuit. Graelyn tried to flip her pony tail playfully, but just hit herself in the side of the face.

"We're looking for some... Information." She said with the subtly of Dawn Logo flip flops.

"I'm happy to help! Are you guys from down the beach."

"Yes." Arch cut in, "we're from down the beach."

"Which way? East or West?"

"What if we said North or South?" Graelyn asked. The guy stared at her.

“What's North?”

“Never mind... East.” She said. The man nodded knowingly. “So, what's with the big orb in the sky?” Arch winced, expecting the guy to be confused, but instead he looked uncomfortable.

“You must be from pretty far East.”

“Very far East.”

“Look, its... We don't know. It just showed up. I... Never mind, I shouldn't be talking about this. Would you guys like anything to eat?” Graelyn looked up at the menus.

“What on the Hula Burger?”

“Pineapple.”

“Sure, that, and a milkshake. Vanilla.” The guy looked at Arch.

“Er, same, except make the milkshake a dark cherry bomb peppermint swirl with fudge topping.”

Graelyn pulled out her card to pay. Kinan had given them it, just like the other Dawn equipment, it was totally unsubtly branded, and was bright orange with a big logo on it. The card had software that would tap into the software of most universe's monetary systems and register a payment. Miranda had dryly recommended keeping transactions small and not trying to buy a battleship. They hadn't answered her when she'd asked what to do if there weren't electronic payments somewhere. The man accepted the card, and it worked without a hitch. Graelyn watched with deep interest as someone behind the counter began pulling out beef patties and cooking them.

“They're not just... printing the burgers?”

“Printing them?” The man asked. Graelyn looked over at Arch.

“They're cooking the burgers Arch.”

“Uh, yes? You saw a woman cooking yesterday.”

“Yeah, but...” she make a broad hand gesture as if trying to express why this felt different inside her, but logically she couldn't see one, just feel it. She couldn't make the words, and just gave up. That was when she heard the voice:

“Graelyn Scythes, I never thought I'd see you in here.” Graelyn turned to see Alice McLeod, her hair not just red, but red like the color of a crayon, standing in a bikini with a group of other swimsuited people behind her. Her bikini was naturally red and black.

“Uh, do you know me?” She replied awkwardly.

“Graelyn Scythes, you know very well that you're the biggest bully on this side of the beach. You think you and your gang can win the tournament tonight, you've got another thing coming. I'll have you know we've been practicing, and the Red Terror is ready to beat you with the power of teamwork!” She gestured grandly as she said this. Graelyn looked at Arch, and then slammed her forehead into the bar.

“You have to be kidding me.”

“Who is this guy you have with you? I haven't seen him around here before.” Beach Alice asked.

“Hi, I'm Archimedes.”

“Look, I think you have me confused with someone else. My name is... Graelyn Koca.”

“Koca?” Arch whispered.

“Long story.” She whispered back.

“Graelyn Koca?” Alice squinted.

“Wait, your hair is black. Are you Graelyn's... Cousin or something?”

“Yes, that's exactly it. I am Graelyn's cousin. From the East.” The whole group behind Alice burst out laughing.

“I'm so sorry! What a wacky misunderstanding! Welcome to our beach. As long as you treat us right, and don't litter, you'll be alright by us!” She gave Graelyn a big thumbs up, which she and Arch nervously returned. “Have you two considered joining the Volleyball Tournament tonight?”

“Not really, no.” Graelyn said.

“Well you should! I'm sure you can find a team before then. See you later!” Alice abruptly left with her entire entourage, and their lunch was placed in front of them at the counter.

“Let's eat this outside.” Arch muttered.

“Yeah, for serious.” Graelyn said. They searched a bit, and found a big tub of beach umbrellas to borrow and Arch jabbed one down into the sand. They spread out a (Dawn branded) towel out on the perfect sand, and ate their lunch, watching the tides roll in and out. A group of children ran into the ocean and began splashing each other. Graelyn stopped mid bite as she recognize Lizzette, and had to hold herself back from running to go say hello. She wouldn't recognize her anyways. Manuel Salazar and his wife were a hundred feet away under another beach umbrella, watching their grandkids.

“There are so many of us, everywhere. So many of everyone.” She mused.

“Not of me.” Arch said. “We've met a few of you, but not many of me.”

“We met you as an Owl.”

“We did, but who else?” Graelyn thought about it. He was right, there hadn't been a version of him they knew of in Songbird's world. Presumably he had to exist in more places than just as an owl? Picking up their trash, Graelyn dumped it in a nearby receptacle (don't litter), and got back under the umbrella.

“So where are you here? And why aren't you in most places.”

“Maybe I never leave the space station. Maybe I just... Stagnate there. Or I die.”

“Don't say that.”

“It seems likely, doesn't it?”

He was right, but she didn't affirm it. The bright blue sky seemed too nice to darken with such clouds.

“Excuse you, but you have no right to be here, imposter!”

Graelyn looked at where the voice was coming from, Arch was pointing already towards it, and Graelyn immediately covered her face with her hands upon seeing the sight.

It was Graelyn Scythes. With purple hair, and a beach ball.

“People told me I'd find you here, Graelyn Koca, if that's your real name! There is only one Graelyn on this beach, and that is I, the Queen of the Beach!”

“Oh my God why are you talking like that?” Graelyn begged behind her hands.

“Ha! 'Talking like that'. You only wish you could talk like the great Graelyn scythes!” She pointed at Graelyn, and then gestured at herself with her thumb. “You should leave before I truly embarrass you at

tonight's volleyball tournament!”

“We're not playing the tournament.” Arch answered as Graelyn gently moaned into her hand.

“Cowards! Ha! Well if you change your minds I shall destroy you. My squad of volleyball players is the best there is.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“And Alice MacLeod will soon find that her team will have an... Unhappy accident!!!

HAHAHAHA!!!!” She continued what was undoubtedly a cartoon character laugh. “So be seeing you, Graelyn Koca... More like Graelyn loser! Good one me.”

“Please go away.”

Beach bully Graelyn kicked sand at them and then walked away, strutting. They sat in silence, dusting the sand off themselves, and then the beach bully returned, as if she was a badly written character who was about to lead in with “and another thing!”

“And another thing! You can tell Alice if you see her that she'll never get that meteor as the prize tonight.

“Meteor?” Graelyn and Arch said in unison.

“Its the prize at tonight's volleyball tournament!” She said as though she was stating a plot detail for the audience. Graelyn squinted at her. There was something weird about her. As beach bully Graelyn threw her arm up again to gesture, it hit her. It was like she was slightly badly animated, even though she was a real person. “See you later, losers!” the bully finished, and strutted off again.

“I might not have a lot of experience with people,” Arch said, “but that didn't seem natural.”

“No, that wasn't. There's something really wrong with this place. Its like everyone is a caricature of themselves.”

“Like we're cardboard cut outs of ourselves.”

“Like we're a badly written fanfiction.”

“Fanfiction?”

“Its a story where people write what they want to happen to characters from a story on their own. Like, imagine there is one story that is real, people call that story canon, it comes from religious stuff with the bible-”

“Like Tubol-Cain?”

“Exactly like that. Tubol-Cain is sort of.... Well, hes apocrypha, but apocrypha is just a fancy word for really important fanfiction. Fanfiction stands outside the narrative, it needs to have a canon story to exist.”

“So what, you're saying that this universe is badly written?” Graelyn lay down, and stretched her feet onto the sand.

“I mean, its a pretty bad way of talking about it, but yeah, basically.” It was at that moment that Alice McLeod ran up to them again.

“Oh gosh, guys, we need your help! It looks like two members of our team ate something bad and got sick, if we don't find two new team members, we're gunna get disqualified from the tournament!”

Graelyn let out a long groan and looked up at the orb glinting off the line in the sky. As she stared at it,



she began to see faint lines on it, like it was made of crystal. Pushing up her sunglasses and rubbing her eyes Graelyn, Alice held the same facial expression till she was finished. She barely blinked.

“Hey Arch you wanna play some Volleyball for the fate of the universe?” Arch shrugged.

“Sure, I downloaded a program for that.”

“Awesome, its just like cheating.” Alice put her hands on her hips.

“We can't have cheating! Cheating is wrong.”

“Its not cheating, I promise.” Arch said. That seemed to be all he needed to say for her to believe him.

“Oh, okay!”

“Its not cheating, that was a bad way of phrasing it...” Graelyn thought back to children's television, and tried to think of what to say. In a voice as monotone as Kinan's she finally replied, “Arch just needs the power of teamwork to unlock his true secret talent.”

“I mean, I already downloaded it-”

“-Arch.”

“Great! The power of teamwork is truly important. I couldn't do anything without my friends.” Alice put her hands on her hips as she smiled. “You should never be afraid to ask for help! You'd be surprised what kind of new friends you can make if you only ask.” Graelyn rolled over and buried her face in the towel.

“I think that's sound advice.” Arch said. Graelyn groaned again.

“Lets go meet your new team!” Alice gestured, and Arch and Graelyn followed (even as Graelyn dragged her feet). The team was, unsurprisingly, the exact same team Alice had in Songbird's world... Mostly. There were a few people Graelyn didn't recognize, like a couple who introduced themselves as Eve and Roxanne. They were very lovey dovey, and Graelyn wondered what version of Alice hung out with them. How did she know them? What were they like when they weren't cardboard cut outs. These people, at the edge of the 10,000 Dawns, they were off, rough sketches of the people she knew. Their most noticeable traits amplified till that was all that was left of them. It made her skin squirm, like it was a worm trying to crawl off of her bones.

But if these people were less than her, it led to a second equally horrible possibility: if there was a real universe, if Kinan was right, and there was a place that spawned all of them from its own possibilities, where those people were fully realized, despite what Kinan said, wasn't she less than them?

The version of her in that reality had to be so much more realized than her, she was probably successful, her motivations deep and layered, her tastes elegant. More realized didn't necessarily mean better... But it had to? That version of her, that real Graelyn, that one who had been born and lived and breathed and ate in that world had to be everything she could have been. Graelyn, this Graelyn that had run away so often, she was her shadow. She tried to strangle the knot in her throat, but it just grew. She felt lightheaded. If she made it through to that “prime universe”, that real universe, she'd pale in comparison to her real self. But that was for the best, maybe. She'd see how she was supposed to be, at her best. She could fill her own sketch in based on the full portrait.

God, she was so inferior. She felt guilty for taking the internship in Atlantis at all. Someone else more qualified could have done it. Kinan could have dropped in a better version of her even. She rubbed her arm uncomfortably.

“Graelyn, are you okay?” Arch asked. Jack was trying to introduce himself to her, after dropping his

milkshake in a badly comic fashion (“Jaaaack!” everyone said shaking their head lovingly at his wacky antics), and she was just staring off uncomfortably.

“Oh, sorry. I’m fine. Just thinking about the math of this place. Its good to meet you, Jack.” She shook his hand.

“Alright guys, enough chit chat, lets get some practice in with the new team before the game starts!” Alice spun the volleyball between her fingers, “After all, there is no better way to express your freedom in this world than Volleyball!”

“Yeah!” Her team shouted in unison. Arch joined in. Graelyn raised an eyebrow.

“So, Arch, lets see how your serve is!” She threw him the ball, and he flawlessly calculated when and where to catch it, seamlessly grabbing it out of the air as he walked to the net.

“I’ve never served before, so lets find out!” As it turned out, having a program made from the moves of the world’s greatest volley ball players downloaded into Arch’s brain was basically as good as it sounded. His movements on the court were flawless. Graelyn wasn’t that great, though she wasn’t bad, but it really didn’t matter, Arch could probably win their match by himself. This would probably be anti-climactic to the extreme. They ate dinner with their caricature teammates, and after listening to enough jokes written for 4<sup>th</sup> graders, even Arch seemed to be getting tired of it.

“Send me over that ketchup!” Yi said, and Chantelle held out to her a the bottle and a handful of sand. “Huh?” Yi said.

“I thought you said “sand it over”!”, the all erupted in laughter, except for Graelyn and Arch.

“When will this beach party nightmare of fun end.” Arch whispered.

“I wish I knew.” Graelyn took a bite of her burger, and as she chewed, looked up at the orb in the sky.

“Hey Alice,” she said after swallowing, “how did that orb get in the sky?” Alice stopped, and looked up, scrunching her brow up in thought. She looked like someone had just asked her why there was a second moon around Earth, and upon looking, there was one. The orb stared down, blue and crystalline in the dark.

“I... I don’t know.” She tried hard to focus. “It... It wasn’t always there was it?” Graelyn moved in closer.

“When did it arrive? Be as specific as you can.” Alice thought, hard. She might not have ever considered anything this hard in her life.

“It... Arrived when the meteor fell. At the same time the meteor fell.” So they were connected.”

“Did anything else odd happen when the meteor fell?” Alice closed her eyes. Had something been done to prevent her remembering? Or did just no one think here?

“It bounced off the sky!” She said suddenly. Arch’s carapace lit up in exclamation and question marks.

“What do you mean it bounced off the sky?” he said. She pointed at the east side of the beach.

“That side. It fell from the orb, and hit the sky, and bounced off and fell down.” Graelyn looked back at Arch.

“Alice, have you ever walked over to the far East on this beach?” She looked confused.

“Why would I do that?”

“Have you walked to the west?”

“Of course!”

“Why not the East?”

“You don't walk East.”

“Why not?”

“You can't walk East.

“Why not?”

“Well, the world ends, silly.” Graelyn rose, her eyes lighting up.

“Arch, this is it, this is what we've been looking for, well probably.” She turned back to Alice, “If we win this tournament, can we have that meteor?”

“Aw, I wanted to keep it, its so pretty.” Yi said.

“It would really help us.” Arch said. “Probably.”

“Oh, well, that's okay than.” Yi said.

Evening had come, and they could all see their opponents coming from the other side of the beach. Beach boys music came echoing out of the hut on the hill.

“Game faces everyone.” Alice said dramatically, “The time of destiny is at hand.” They rose, their backs straight, as Beach Bully Graelyn's team came up to the net.

“Well then, Alice McLoserface, it looks like your team of losers is ready to lose!” Her team laughed behind her.

“Oh yeah? Well I pity you Graelyn Scythes. Your team only sticks with you because you win. We've got the power of friendship.” She scoffed at Alice.

“Yeah right! Like friendship can do anything against my team.” She gestured at herself with her thumb.

“Even if you do have my cousin on your team!” She said pointing at the other Graelyn now, apparently having given up on the whole imposter thing fairly quickly.

“Enough! Lets settle this where it should be settled, the place where heroes are made: the volleyball pitch.” Graelyn nodded.

“Lets.”

A crowd had gathered, and a man stepped forward, with ribbed abs and a tanned body. It was Manuel Salazar. His hair whipped back in the wind.

“I am your referee today, Referee Salazar.” He winked in the general direction of the audience, and several men and women fainted. “Today's challenge: Alice MacLeod's Red Terror team, versus Graelyn Scythes Galty Gee team. The rules are simple: the team that scores more points in the time limit wins!” He spun the ball flawlessly on one finger while pulling out a coin. “This coin toss will determine who serves first. Heads or tails?”

“Heads!” Beach Graelyn said. Alice stroked her chin, as if she needed to think about this.

“Tails then!” The crowd murmured, as though she'd made a bold choice. Graelyn looked at Arch exasperated. He played a video of a monkey clapping cymbals together on his carapace. She smirked. The coin flew up in the air, and landed tails. The crowd exploded in cheers.

Arch served first, and got an ace, scoring a point with his serve. In fact, he did that every time he got to serve. When anyone on their team missed a bump, he was right there, winding between them to knock it back up. Graelyn was more useful than she anticipated, actually scoring a point by hopping up to spike the ball against her purple haired opposite, who glared at her as she did. But frankly, it was a

dramatically anti-climactic game. Beach Bully Graelyn looked like her whole worldview was shattered as Arch utterly shut her out. Her team of buff beach people didn't score a single point the entire game. "The winners are, The Red Terror!" Manuel said. Beach Bully Graelyn looked horrified, and ran for the prize table, where the meteor sat under a towel, and grabbed it off the table. It was a glowing blue crystal, with white light pouring out from it. Natural faults littered the inside of the crystal. The light pouring out of it lit up the beach, and seemed to seep into their skins.

"Ha! Just because you have friendship and teamwork doesn't mean that you can stop me!"

"Oh no," Alice said, "what do we do?"

"The meteor is mine despite your "victory"! Now what do you say to that." Graelyn picked up the volley ball, and handed it to Arch.

"Don't hurt her." He nodded, and threw the ball with pin point accuracy at Beach Bully Graelyn's hand, knocking the meteor out, which Alice ran to grab.

"Impossible!" Beach Bully Graelyn said, "That can't happen!"

"Your reign is at an end Graelyn Scythes!" Alice said. "This beach is ours!" The crowd cheered, and Graelyn kicked up some sand, storming off into the darkness. Alice turned back to them.

"How can I ever thank you."

"Give us the meteor?" Graelyn said, and she handed it over. It was cool in Graelyn's touch, but it made her feel warm holding it. It was the size of a softball, and now that it was close up, Graelyn recognised the material.

"This is like the crystal the Bifrost is made of." She told Arch. He nodded, and displayed it on his skin for reference. Graelyn held the orb up next to the one in the sky, like a second moon. It looked very similar.

"Lets get changed Arch, its time to go to the end of the world."

They changed back into their usual clothes, Arch in his hat an coat, Graelyn in her skirt and jacket, and made their way to the east, holding the orb out in front of them. Its partner in the sky seemed to shine brighter as they walked, and the real cyllander moon continued its turn around the rod of the Earth, the celestial bodies shifting in their natural order. The orb cut through the shadows, till Graelyn ran into the sky.

"OW." She yelped, rubbing her nose. She held up a han to the air, and felt a solid surface there. Arch did the same, running his hands along the nothing. It looked like there was something there though, the world looked like it went on forever, but you simply could walk no further. They ran their hands along the air, looking for something odd, before doing the obvious.

"Well," Graelyn said, looking down at the orb, "if we're lucky this is a key."

"And if we're unlucky?" Arch asked. Graelyn just shrugged, and holding the orb carefully, pressed it into the sky.

The air rippled around the orb, and light rippled out of it to, forming a white disk on the wall of air. Graelyn looked at Arch, and let out a breath.

"Behind that is the real universe. Or at least our way to the real universe." Arch nodded.

"There's not going back when we do this." She looked at the portal, and held her hand behind her.

"I'm ready when you are." She felt his cold fingers grasp hers. She closed her eyes, then changed her

mind and opened them, walking into the white.

There was no gut wrenching, she just stepped forward into a sea of stars, a crystal roa beneath her feet, leading to a broad desk where a figure in hooded robes rose to their presence.

The stars shone like heaven.

The crystal sung beneath her feet. Her jaw dropped.

An infinite spectrum of universes circled around them. Possibilities incalculable and endless. Tears and laughter in every light, trillions of lifetimes twinkling in the dark. It was unfathomable. It was impossible. It was majestic.

“Shit.” The figure at the desk said.



# **Chapter 19:** **A Crystal Road**

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

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

"Shit" says the man behind the desk.

The magic is suddenly and utterly broken for you. You stop being you. You're just the reader again, sorry. You return in front of the words, where you are, where you were. But you were Graelyn for a moment, I hope you briefly enjoyed the guided tour.

"Hello." Graelyn says, as you externally observe her again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I assume so."

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

to speak.

Graelyn opened her mouth to speak.

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

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

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

“Graelyn! Breakfast is ready.”

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

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

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

“Good morning!”

“Morning.” She managed to respond.

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

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

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

No blow came.

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

“Dad I don't want to miss the zoo today!” Her little brother Petyr said. Graelyn heard the voice, and



turned, and he was there. His light red hair was shiny in the early light. He had a big blotch of freckles right over his nose and cheeks that didn't travel over the rest of his face. He was rubbing his left eye and yawning. He was perfect, and Graelyn knocked over her chair as she scampered over to him, wrapping her arms around him tightly.

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

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

"Hey." She said lovingly.

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

"Graelyn, are you sure you're okay?"

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

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

"Jesus, how bad could it be." Xandra said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sorry mom.”

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

Manuel Salazar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And?"

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

"Well clearly you're mistaken."

"I should just go..."

"Show me the pictures."

"You don't want to see them."

"Why?"

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

"Was her name Graelyn Scythes?"

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

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

She was dead.

That hadn't been a nightmare.

She was her own stand in.

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

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

*"Promise?"*

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

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

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

"I don't think that's--"

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

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

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

"Was she your sister?" He whispered.

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

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

\* \* \* \*

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

But in hindsight, there were so many incongruities. They couldn't have all the spare parts to keep building replacement parts for every new person born aboard the station, and according to the elders, the station had been built hundreds of years ago, but the quality of the parts kept improving, and the station seemed fairly new itself. Not state of the art, but clearly from within a half century. He had spent the time before Manuel's arrival today rooting through things he wasn't allowed to. He opened panels, and pulled open circuit boxes to find parts labeled "Centro Systems, Manufactured 2449". He checked the communications receiving devices, and found there was a block in his mind telling him to not do that. *Just ignore it, Arch.* So he ignored it, deleted that code, and went back. After looking through the device's code, he found it was programmed to only accept and receive encrypted transmissions from vessels with the proper transponder codes. He knew very well what that meant. His body tried to regulate his rage, and pump in chemicals while associating those chemicals with good memories of Manuel Salazar. He stopped thinking about anger, and calmed himself, then went into his own code and deleted that to.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Trust me." He replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wait." He rasped.

"Why."

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

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

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

"But... Its a wasteland."

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

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

"Are we."

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

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

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

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

"Oh don't get jumpy. I'm just going to show you something." Arch followed silently, and they went to the station's theatre. There was a big projector, that could make either 2D or 3D images, and rows of

seating. "While the station's population is asleep sometimes I watch films in here, after all nobody leaves me alone on the surface for 10 seconds, business business, not that you'd know that... Or perhaps you do. I'm so curious how you do know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Archimedes." Arch spat.

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

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

"Damn damn damn." Graelyn said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Graelyn, the cleaning droid will get those."



"No, its no trouble."

"Sweetheart you cut yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was 100% fine with living a lie.

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

"Are you feeling better today, Graelyn?"

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

She wanted to believe.

#### Video Transcript: Centro Systems Military Commissions Fund Proposal

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Problem?" Arch says. The video pauses.

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

"Uh, no?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Ahnerabe Units to procreate.

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

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

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

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

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

Arch felt a hand on his back.

Manuel: Your funding for this projec-

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

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

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

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

"I have nothing in common with you."

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

"PEOPLE."

"-People, sure. Out of all the people here you're the only one who is awake. You're special. There is

something different about you. People like us, we're better than other people. It doesn't sound nice, but it's true." He hacked on his own blood for a moment. "We make possible what other people just wish for."

"Do you know what I wish for?"

"Anything you want."

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

"A-Archimedes, please!"

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

"I have people, a wife, grandchildren--"

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

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

"Archimedes."

"Say the whole thing."

"Archimedes VonAhnerabe." Arch looked down at him.

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

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

"They... Didn't..."

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

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

"NojPeten, k-in-k'äm-ik-ech."

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

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

"This would be the first time." Manuel laughed.

"So Archimedes, let's see how good of a soldier I made you. Finish your job."

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

wouldn't, but she still looked like the woman who did. Her body would be out of her control, her skin turning to pins and needles, and she'd grow distant.

"Are you okay."

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

"Mom." Graelyn said with her voice catching in her throat.

"Yes?"

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

"Well, of course. I'm sure they can."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure that's right though?"

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

"I don't want to leave."

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

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

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

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

"Who is it dear?"

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

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

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

"Its a long story."

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

"And they succeeded. So shoo."

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

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

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

Graelyn's eyes went wide.

“Arch.” She whispered. “Arch, what did you do?”

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

Why am I here?

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

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

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

“That's impossible.”

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

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

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

“Good. Then the city will be empty.”

“I'll just put the units-”

“-my people.”

“Your people, there. Save time”

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

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

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

“Well you wasted your time. Go home Arch.

“No. If we don't go home, we can't save my people who are there, don't you get it? They're slaves

Graelyn! Manuel Salazar thinks he owns them.”

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

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

“Great it worked, go away.” Arch reached for her.

“Don't you touch me!”

“Graelyn, they want to make you their pawn!”

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

“I could have stayed with mine to.”

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

“How dare you?”

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

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

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

“No one?” She narrowed her eyes.

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

“That can't be true.”

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

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

“And I'm not your brawny waste of space.”

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

“Your mental failings aren't my responsibility.”

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

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

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

“Good!”

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

“I don't have friends.”

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

“I'll scream!”

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

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



She tried to dig her bare feet into the pavement, but it didn't work.

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

"Please."

"No."

"Please!"

"NO."

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

"Unit Archimedes, delete all references to person: Graelyn Scythes, then continue with your mission into the prime universe."

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

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

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

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

"And you kept that from me."

"I needed insurance you wouldn't hurt me."

"You lied to me."

"Its what I do."

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

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

"No, you don't."

"I never thought you could be so cruel."

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

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

"...Statistical anomalies in my overall behavior."

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

"Stop it." She closed her eyes.

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

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

"I'm sorry I grabbed you." Arch said.

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

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

"You see that Arch?"

"Earth's moon?"

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

“You're not poison.”

“I don't deserve anyone.”

“Yes you do.”

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

“I'm sorry.”

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

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

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

“I'm glad.”

“But we both know I almost was.”

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

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

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

“Thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And you said you didn't care.”

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

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

“Nice clothes. No troubles?”

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

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

“Kinan? Are you okay?”

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

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

“Did you say crystal moon?”

“...Yes?”

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

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

“So... We shouldn't go to it?”

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

“Will the moon help?”

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

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

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

“I lied. Friends.”

“Friends.”

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

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

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

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

“We were both assholes today.”

“I was worse.”

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

“You shouldn't have to.”

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

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

“Liar.”

“Tinman.”

“Graelyn.”

“That's not an insult.”

“I'm bad at this game.” She laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello?” The chair Graelyn whispered.

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

“I'm still dreaming?” She said.

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

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

"You mean you control the moon?" Arch asked.

"I suppose?" She replied meekly.

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

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

"How on Earth did you get here?"

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

"I knew you were coming, they told me."

"I thought you'd be more surprised to see yourself." Arch added. She shrugged.

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

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

"I'm not so much in control as like... A processor. They give me orders through my mind."

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

"Oh, I forgot that's what seeing looked like. Its darker than I remember."

"They're sunglasses."

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

"You're free, you don't have to go back."

"No, the moon will fall into the ocean if I don't."

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

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

"Big cyborg guy."

"Well, yes, but I'm a friend of yours from another dimension."

"Not mine."

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

"No one can stand up to them. You don't understand their wonder and atrocity. They can create moons. They can pull you out of your own history."

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

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

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

Chair Graelyn thought hard.

“I was… We were… Sealing the exit.”

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

“They didn’t notice.”

“So you can resist them.”

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

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

“I am the moon.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Prime Universe, the so called real one. It’s on the other side of the Labyrinth behind the facade here.”

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

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

So imagine the figure at the desk. It is filling in something in its book. The things it writes look three dimensional on the page, when it finishes a character, the character starts moving, sometimes adjusts its

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Explain why."

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

"What."

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

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

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

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

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

"We're the last Fixture of Reality. The Firmament that holds 10,000 Dawns in place. The final bastion of Sanity against the Void, the chaos, the darkness, the Shadrach. We are the Firmament in the sky you never see." The two Graelyns looked at each other, rolling their eyes.

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

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

"Oh my God, shut up and explain yourself."

"It might be too much for your tiny minds-" Both of the Graelyns stormed off the tower, and getting

right up in the figure's personal space, crossed their arms, staring the being down till it flinched.

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

“Kidnapping people.” The other said,

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

“No?” She said. Static. A man's face.

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

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

“Its sealed.”

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

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

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

“Hence why both us and your 'Dawn' are trying to stop those from opening. For different reasons, and generally they hate us, but we overlap on that point. Though apparently Kinan is willing to break that rule today, the fool.”

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We don't step through do we?”

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

“Ram it?” Arch said, “With what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm not.”

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

“That home was meant for you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man crossed his arms. Ares raised his sword.

“What?”

“You won't see this coming.”

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

Nothing at all whatsoever happened.

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

“What exactly was suppose to happen.”

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

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

This might seem impossible. And technically, it was. But Graelyn had seen that the energy that created the portals could be used to move an object, ie, a moon. Putting this principle into practice, she directed the machine to not create a portal, but to instead provide upwards thrust to the bottom of the

mushroom. As the mushroom climbed into the sky, Graelyn would have to work quickly to put the second part of her plan into motion.

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

From the Gyroscope, down out of the bottom of the base, shot a swirling blue portal, a huge one. No one inside the Mushroom actually saw this, so until they hit it, Graelyn was just hoping and praying. “What I did, sir or madam, is win. I'm Graelyn Scythes!” She yelled across the rim, “And don't you forget it!” The mushroom impacted the portal violently. It tore itself apart, its superstructure crumbling in on itself, support beams and offices being whisked away by the forces of the tear's swirling chaos. But it went through it.

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

“You enjoyed that a bit too much!”

“They had it coming!”

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

“Graelyn, I just thought of something!”

“What?”

“We're coming out in space right?”

“Yeah?”

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

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

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

Most of the mushroom was gone. In fact, nearly all of it. As the last bits tore off, a single building, complete with the surrounding flat expanse of concrete around it, floated down gently through space,

until it crashed inelegantly on Triton, the moon of Neptune. Finally, it was all over. They were here, in the prime universe. The station was dark, the station was silent. Nothing moved on the moon. But they were there.

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

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

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

I imagine you'd scream.

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

\* \* \* \*

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

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



# **Chapter 20: The Left Stuff**

Heinrich looked over at June, who wasn't taking her eyes off the front of the room, where the man in the light blue suit was continuing to fiddle with the holo player, cursing occasionally.

“Is this going to be much longer?”

“Its almost ready!” He snapped.

“Alright, geez...” June remained silent. She fiddled with the cat pin she always wore on her shirt.

“There, finally.” The man murmured. The hologram lit up, it was a man dressed in the fashions of, oh, forty years ago? He was wearing a light blue dress shirt, the same shade as the suit of the man in the room, with a black tie with Pink Floyd rainbow prisms on it. The sleeves were rolled up to the elbow's so perfectly, that it had clearly been done by an assistant. He held a tumbler of some dark amber liquid, probably scotch but it could have just as easily been some cider or juice, and swirled it in a manner that said “this doesn't need to be swirled, but it looks good for the cameras.” He began to speak.

“Hi, I'm Heirum J. Whitehead. You might be wondering exactly why you're here today. The answer to that question might surprise you. Well, not totally, if everything has gone according to plan you've been offered a lot of money to be here.” June adjusted her mouth and tilted her head in a sort of “yeah, fair enough” gesture. “And if things have continued to go well, then you'll be a pair of people with the skills to both travel in deep space for a long time and conduct an investigation and salvage operation. If you can't do that, you probably should just leave because this job will involve being out in space for literally months, and that's even if you guys develop super fast warp drives by the time this reaches you.”

No, they hadn't.

“Regardless, today is September 1<sup>st</sup> 2226, and if you chose to accept this mission you'll be on your way to the farthest reaches of the Solar system very soon. Now what could I be sending you to do? Good question!” A big map of the solar system appeared in the hologram, and the planet Neptune lit up. The hologram zoomed into Neptune as it moved and Heirum narrated over it. “Now next year in 2227, we're going to have a real whopper of an event. You see Neptune there, the big shiny one? Well its going to go to the edge of the solar system, beyond Pluto and Charon even. It will essentially be the farthest thing from the sun in the solar system. I say essentially just so somebody in the audience who is a nitpicker isn't talking about some speck of dust or floating teapot that's out there or whatever.” June and Heinrich looked at each other as the Neptune model moved to the outer edge of the system just as he'd said. This was quite the dead guy.

“Now please, ask your questions and I'll answer them from the beyond the grave.” June sighed, “I'll play along. Okay, so why do we need to go to Neptune when its the farthest away from the solar system?”

“Now as you just asked, why are we going to Neptune at this weird time? Well I'll tell you first off: its so those corporate bastards on Earth can't see what's going on. But there's also two other reasons, so lets start off Chronologically shall we?”

The Holoprojector put up a bunch of images of smiling Cosmonauts waving to people. “I'm sure you've all heard of the Space Race, you know back when men were men, women were women, and monkeys and dogs did all the real leg work of seeing if space killed you? Yeah, great old times then. Kinda racist and sexist, but that's what the intern said I should follow that with. Anyways the Russians, who were as commie as Mars wants to be, and please tell me its not Commie now, I really hope that isn't working

out-”

“I thought he was just complaining about coprat-”

“SHH!”

“-decided they wanted to see how long living beings could survive if you shot em straight out into space. Boom! Rocket to nowhere. So they popped two puppies in a rocket and zoomed them out to the middle of nowhere.” The holoprojector showed two puppies in spacesuits wagging their tails enthusiastically, clearly not knowing why everyone was so excited around them.

“The Dogs were actually free to roam around the capsule. They wanted em to live as long as possible, so puppies. Probably a big peeing mess up there, or maybe they used catheters or something, I don't care. Main point is: puppies shot into space. Grand adventure. American ingenuity... Er, Russian. Whatever. Here's where it gets funny though: the Russians get something, some piece of info. Maybe it was a signal, or something weird in their telescope, and decide to send the dogs over to Triton, the biggest moon of Neptune. Also the coldest damn place you can set foot in the solar system, I wouldn't wanna go there, which is why I'll be paying you to. Now I know what your next question is...”

“...What did they think they were going to find on Triton?”

“Did the puppies survive? Well, it was a twelve year trip to Triton, but actually the puppies did make it. Now here is the funny thing you weren't thinking: what did they think they were going to find on Triton?”

“Ugh.”

“We can't be certain, but we have a big clue: in 1979, Neptune's orbit took it farther out of our solar system than Pluto. 1979 was the point that the rocket was carefully diverted to Triton. Now the rocket had already been out there for, oh, five or six years, and the course change was an inconvenient one. They could have gotten a much more straight shot if they'd planned it that way. So something clearly changed when 1979 came. Neptune stayed there in the outside till 1999, but we never learned what was learned from all of it. Any Soviet records on the aftermath are long gone at this point I'm afraid. So that's your mission: go to Neptune, find the now very old dead dogs, and find what the hell was going on on Titan that the Soviet's were willing to send their puppies there. Any questions? Good cause I don't know how I'd answer them. I'm Heirum J. Whitehead, and I'm probably better than you.”

The hologram cut out.

“...Was that guy for real?” June said, cocking her head.

The man in the light blue suit began packing up the Holoprojector. “He is very much for real. Mr. Whitehead's estate is willing to pay for your entire expedition, all expenses covered, with a generous salary and bonus if what you find is of any use.”

“That sounds great and all,” she interjected, “but how can we know we'll get paid at all?”

“Once you agree to the terms of the deal, you will be tagged with a tracking microchip, and paid your entire salary. If you attempt to run off with it, you will be executed because you have a tracking chip in you that can also electrocute you to death.

“Fun.” Heinrich mused, “Well, I'm in.” June didn't look so sold, “Its a solid paycheck if its legitimate...”

“Its not just solid, this is retire in a private mansion money right here.” She nodded, “Which is what makes me worried. Why is the money so high for this?”

“The fee was made by Heirum investing in several stocks, leaving the sale of them to be the eventual fee so that interest didn't dilute the fee. Those Centro subsidiary companies have since done very well in the open market. Ridiculously well. My job is to fill out Mr. Whitehead's estate to the T. This isn't some conspiracy, miss.” June scrunched her lips up and thought for a moment. “Alright screw it, I'm in.

Lets go find Russian puppies.”

The man in the light blue suit smiled, “Then it its my joy to welcome you on the pilgrimage to the farthest land. The Hierophant Group is glad to have you aboard.”

\* \* \* \*

Space is long and dark, and the further you go into it the more you are surrounded by what amounts to nothing. You can't tell the difference a lot of the time, the specks aren't particularly different sizes to the naked eye, and a journey between worlds is mostly heading towards one blip of light till it starts getting bigger than the other blips. Its for that reason that many people on long space trips choose to go to sleep, letting their bodies be chilled and nearly frozen as they parse through the most worthless and boring part of Space Travel. How long it took Heinrich and June is an academic question: they certainly traveled with technology beyond our own, but it still took them long enough they wrapped themselves up in pressurized cocoons and let themselves be chilled into a slumber. They dreamt oh so much during that time, dreams that went on for days, or what seemed like days, as their sleep cycle turned into one of hibernation, and in their cocoons they floated, in their little metal rocket whose computers had long ago figured out the trajectory of every piece of space debris on their course and adjusted for it. The trip was boring, and if they had been thinking rather than snowmen, they might have wondered if space travel had really been worth it if the adventure wasn't there.

I wish I could tell you that they were hit by pirates, or an errant piece of debris, or something went wrong with the ship, or the computer rebelled against them and decided to kill them off in order to resolve some errant issue in its programming, but nothing happened. Billions of light-years away, a star died, but its light shone on like nothing had happened on the little ship, as it approached Neptune. The automatic systems in the cocoon's were alerted by the main computer that they were within range, and began the very slow process of warming up its guests. The temperature was raised by a fraction of a degree at a time, the flesh carefully monitored to make sure there was no frostbite or other damage. Slowly, they were thawed, until they had reached normal body temperature. There was no need to worry about muscle loss during the journey, the cocoons had kept the bodies in great shape, and stimulated growth as necessary during the sleep. They might have even been healthier when they woke up, neatly dressed in loose comfortable clothing on firm but comfortable beds. June was still wearing her cat pin, which seemed to Heinrich would have been a real danger towards skin damage during freezing, but she seemed fine.

“Hello, my name is WeN-D, I am your computer for this journey. Welcome to the Van Winkle, we are approaching your destination shortly!” a cheery female computer voice chimed out. Heinrich wanted to grumble something about getting stuck with a generic WeN-D brand Artificial Intelligence unit, but his tongue was still getting used to being awake, and it was actually surprising they'd been given an AI unit at all on this trip since it was a straight shot journey with no real dangers. Even pirates wouldn't bother with a bare bones sleeper vessel like this one, as the cost of raiding it would often be more than the raid would garner. After a while, he found feeling in his tongue, and talked back to the AI. “Hi there WeN-D, how much longer till we hit the location?”



“You have one 24 Earth hour period to regain full bodily motion.” He rubbed his wrists and nodded, sliding his legs gently off the side of the table. There was artificial gravity here, another luxury. Maybe this ship wasn't as cheap as he'd thought it would be.

“Surprised?” June asked.

“A bit, this is a sleeper ship, I know we have to get ourselves woken up and re-familiarized with things.... But artificial gravity? An AI?”

“The AI isn't too surprising, Heirum J. Whitehead our deceased benefactor owned a company, Talinata Softworks, that built AI's before it got shut down by the government.” He nodded, he'd learned something about that in school growing up in Dusseldorf, it had kind of slipped his mind though.

“That is correct,” the AI chimed in, “and Mr. Whitehead wanted to make certain anyone on board the ship was comfortable.” June stood up before Heinrich, and walked a circuit around the room, testing her feet and flexing her muscles, then she stopped, “WeN-D, why are there so many extra freezing pods.”

“The ship was purchased from an Earth military corporation cheaply, as it was a failed prototype.”

“What exactly did it fail at?” Which was a question really should be asking.

“The ship was supposed to contain revolutionary stealth technology, unfortunately by the time it was built technology to countermand that had already been created. The ship was purchased for slightly more than its cost in scrap, and I was installed to figure out how to run its systems, as its computers had been totally wiped before the sale.” It all made sense, it was all so very neat, but Heinrich could tell from June's face it sounded too neat and simple.

“Still, all the extra space and oxygen on the ship is a huge costly waste for transporting two people.”

“I didn't design this mission, June Barker. I am merely its caretaker.” She nodded.

“I guess we'd better get ourselves ready for the rendezvous and pick up these dead dogs.” Heinrich nodded, “Its obvious though isn't it, they have to know they found something, something the Russian's didn't want to talk about back then for some reason.” She shrugged, and stretched her hands up above her head to the luxuriously high spaceship ceiling. The floor was even carpeted, and felt soft and comfy against their toes.

“Maybe there is. Whatever it is, its a minimum of 250 years old now. Probably just some fancy rock that tells us secrets of the universe if you analyze it or something. I don't think we're looking at anything dangerous Heinrich.”

He began his own circuit of the room and shook his head, “You know exactly what I'm thinking though, right?” She rolled her eyes, “It's not a goddamn alien spaceship Heinrich. Gah.”

\* \* \* \*

Triton looks so similar to Earth's moon in many ways from a distance, its that sort of whitey-beigey moondust color that screams “I'm an object in space! Land on me! Explore me!” Of course Triton is nothing like that, and seems to be doing such an intense job of rebelling against its parent planet that it's a wonder Neptune keeps it around at all. Of course, it was adopted by Neptune, a big chunk of spherical rock swiped out of the Kuiper belt, orbiting Neptune the opposite direction Neptune travels. It's also ridiculously cold, clocking in at -237.6 Celsius, and ridiculously flat, not varying over a kilometer in its surface level. As the Van Winkle got closer and closer, its two human crewmembers were rather unimpressed. The icy plains were nothing new, the rocky outcrops nowhere near as impressive as the ones they had seen on trips to Mars, but WeN-D was like a little kid.

“Look at that, we're almost on a whole different celestial body!”

“Yes, WeN-D, we' know. It's nothing special.” June muttered.

“I'm taking pictures, I mean I have to take them regardless, but I'm going to be going over these later. Fantastic!”

“You really find this awe inspiring?”

“Its rather sad you don't. I was programmed to take joy in discovery.”

“Its just a job.”

“Anything is 'just' that unless you look for what's special about it.”

Heinrich leaned in, and pointed out the viewscreen. “That looks special to me.” June pulled the towel she'd had over her eyes off, and looked out as well. That was unusual. That was unexpected. There was the Russian spacecraft, right where it should be, all valves and hatches and insect like landing gear... But it was hooked up to a building. A building on Triton. Un-colonized Triton. Triton that wasn't even worth mining. Triton that was too cold to bother colonizing at all. They stared at the building, it was weathered and cracked... It was clearly older than the Russian spaceship. Heinrich and June stared at the building, then at each other, then at the building.

“Do you see something wondrous now?” WeN-D mused.

\* \* \* \*

June and Heinrich took the normal amount of care putting their spacesuits on, which is to say, the most delicate. They carefully checked every seal, made sure there were no weaknesses. Triton was the coldest place outside nothingness and some experimental test chambers somewhere. It was a cold wasteland filled with Cryo-volcanoes and frozen fields where freezing to death was the natural order. On other worlds with only a bit of terra-forming, the natural order could be shifted so that growth could happen, even if that growth was only under an environmental dome. Triton was littered with the failed attempts to tame the bland wilderness there: a shattered dome to build a forest in here, a stone-faced mummy there. Sometimes they froze in place, without even having the decency to act like they were dead. They were usually blown away by the fierce ripping winds, but occasionally someone died in the shield of a rock face, and they would be standing there in memoriam, their feet rooted to the soil, staring as if waiting for the next face to come by to join them in their sentinel service. They looked at each other through the thick faceplates of the spacehelmets, their breath echoing in their ears as it was filtered by the suit's internal systems so it didn't fog up the aforementioned faceplate.

“Are you ready?” Heinrich's voice came in crystal clear through the suit's built in speakers, even being transmitted to her so it sounded as though it came from the direction he was standing in. It was a normal thing, but someone being so far out from Earth, the farthest one could be without leaving the solar system mad June marvel at it: humans had made that, and it was fantastic.

“Yeah, I'm ready. I'm a bit worried though. This is certainly abnormal.”

“I'll be watching both of you carefully, and will head for violent extraction if your lives are in danger.”

WeN-D's voice chimed in through her speakers. It somehow gave the impression the voice was in her head, which was creepy. “WeN-D, what is a 'violent extraction'?”

“I'll crash the ship through the building to extract you. Don't worry, I have perfect awareness of your physical form through the sensors in your suits.” June nodded, though it was barely noticeable.

“Great. Well, we hope that's not necessary.” There was a jostle, the familiar dampened impact of the ship landing, and the pair of them stepped over to the airlock. After pressing a few buttons, Heinrich involuntarily gulped as the decompression happened. He knew it did nothing, but it always felt like it did something. As the last of the air was forcibly sucked from the chamber, the light on the door in front of them turned green. June stepped forward silently, and turned the switch.

The door lowered like a ramp, and in fact became a ramp, rustling up a tuft of dust from the moon's

surface. Stepping out onto Triton was like nowhere else they had either been in the solar system. The sun was nearly indistinguishable from any other pinprick star in the sky, aside from the fact that it was far brighter than any of them. There was only starlight, and the imposing side of Neptune that would soon enough be turned away from them, leaving Triton facing away from everything they had known, staring out into the spangled blackness.

June didn't wait for Heinrich to say anything, she just began walking towards the building.

They bounded through the low gravity, their boots bouncing off the ground. Heinrich felt like a child, he'd dreamed of this as a kid in corporate Germany, and though this wasn't the first time he'd done this by far, it never lost its joy. He felt just like he did when he watched the video of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, like he was lifting off the ground, his eyes wide in the darkened classroom. This was what he'd always wanted. June looked like she was going to work, she bounded with precision, her eyes fixed on the target.

"Heinrich?"

"Yeah?"

"We'd know if someone had moved this much material here this long ago. This isn't possible."

"And yet, it's here." She kept her face stern as she lifted off the ground, bounding towards the building. She didn't reply, but he knew she was thinking something about this. She was worried. They finished their leaping towards the building, and up close it became clear that the writing on it was mostly in modern day English, though with some words the pair of them didn't recognize. The structure didn't just seem worn from the eternal frigid storm, but looked like it had been torn out of somewhere, literally ripped up from the ground. The edges of it resembled something like a parking lot, the closer one got there was a side walk, and even a few sturdy steel lampposts. Closer still, they found a small lawn of frozen grass. June said nothing, even as Heinrich pestered her with the obvious questions that kept being percolated. "We need to go inside," she finally said, even though the last thing Heinrich said had been, "Okay, so this was clearly moved here from somewhere else, clearly, but that's utterly impossible, I mean..." Heinrich just nodded, and they paced around the building looking for entrances. They found three, but two were locked and frozen shut. The third was to, at first. As they ran their gloved fingers along it, the door flashed with heat. Motors sprung to life inside it, and it slowly began to wind itself up. Both of them stepped back. Heinrich found his hand trembling despite himself. June coldly ducked under the opening door, and Heinrich waited a few moments, watching the legs of her suit slowly reveal themselves from under the door, before deciding it was probably safe, and ducking inside as well.

"My sensors indicate you're inside the facility?" WeN-D asked timidly. Heinrich had never heard an AI timid before in that way... Timid for the skeezy businessmen who went to talk to the AI's who acted like stereotype schoolgirls maybe, but never honestly timid, never timid in the way that sounded too uneven and trying to sound strong to be intentional.

"Yes WeN-D, we're inside. There is an airlock... For some reason." The airlock was clean, the kind of airlock you saw in old science fiction movies where everything was matte grays and shiny silvers, except there were also striking green lines and reliefs, and something which was pretty clearly showing the city of Atlantis (the words "Project Atlantis" above the image was a big tip off).

"Hardly under the sea is it?" June did not look like she was amused.

“I’ve never heard of a 'Project Atlantis', especially not one doing space work.”

“There’s not.”

“I checked all my records and databanks. While there have been some companies named Atlantis in the past, there are none who have used this logo. There was an Atlantis candle company...” WeN-D said, as though she was trying to reassure herself.

“Shut up.” June said.

“That’s hardly-“

“SHUT UP.” A bead of sweat rolled down her brow. A light built into the other door of the airlock that hadn’t previously been visible lit up green, strobing across their faces. The sound of machinery began, that knocking sound like an old heater and the scraping sound of old gears that hadn’t moved in years. The door moved up slowly two inches, and then shot up into the ceiling. The light from inside was practically blinding at first, and Heinrich began to take a step back.

“Sorry! Sorry! We’re blinding you aren’t we?” the woman in the gray pencil-skirt and blazer combo said. “I told you it would be too much,” the six foot five man whose skin looked like it was coated in television screens added. “Bark!” said the two dogs, who leapt at the pair in the airlock, wagging their tails excitedly and who continued leaping excitedly as the tall man said, “down, down Tolstoy. You to Catherine, down!” the dogs calmed down a bit, though their tails were still thumping against the walls enthusiastically.

“I’m Graelyn Scythes, and this is Archenemies Von Ahnerabe. Welcome to the remains of Atlantis!”

June’s jaw had dropped like she was in a cartoon. Heinrich wasn’t sure what to do with his face, and it looked blank in confusion. There was a long silence, and both parties just stared at each other, till June finally broke it,

“What the hell?”



# **Chapter 21: The Burden of Solitude**

“What the hell is this?”

“Er, Atlantis base I just covered that, keep up.”

“No, you’re on Titan. With Dogs that should have died literally centuries ago. How.”

“How do you know they’re the same dogs?” Heinrich chimed in.

“They’re the same dogs.” June and Graelyn said in unison, which seemed to piss both of them off slightly, “The dogs both had a distinctive mark on their left flank, its there.” Heinrich hadn’t been looking, but yes, yes there was. Some letter of the Cyrillic alphabet.

“Is it really surprising they’re the same dogs? I mean, you know what’s going on here don’t you?”

“I clearly don’t, miss.... Scythes. So I’d appreciate if you’d stop talking down to me.” Graeylin looked disappointed, and ran her hand along her tightly pony-tailed hair, her pin glinting off the bright lights.

“Oh. Oh well.” She made a sort of dismissive gesture to no one in particular.

“Its pretty obvious we’re not from here though at least? I’m sorry you didn’t figure out we were from the future.”

“...What?” Heinrich said.

“The future. You know, that time that’s not now but yet.”

“I know what the future is.”

“Are you sure? Regardless, you got here just in time.” She turned abruptly, and started walking down the silver, gray, and green hallway.

“In time for what?” June called.

“We’re going to be facing away from the solar system in a moment, and since it’s the year 2227, it should happen again.”

“Stop teasing us. What?”

“We should encounter another extra-solar object. Only not like any you’ve seen before. Follow me.”

They obliged her, what else could they do, “and take off those bulky things this place is airtight with the best fake gravity money can buy, you just look ridiculous.” She pushed her glasses up into the bridge of her nose and kept walking. The man called Archimedes sighed, and squatted down to pet one of the dogs, “Sorry about that, she’s usually pretty snippy when people can’t keep up with her.” June nodded, and followed Graelyn down the hallway, she and Heinrich removing their helmets and gloves as they went. The facility varied between being gray silver and green, or gray silver and blue depending on the area they passed through though neither June nor Heinrich could particularly figure out why. Graelyn kept her eyes forward, with a supreme aura of confidence that moved beyond self esteem and into superiority. Parts of the place looked as though they had been ransacked, with knocked over tables and chairs, smashed computers, and broken mugs and glassware every which way. The walls were sometimes stained with what looked horribly like brown dried blood. Graelyn kept walking till she arrived at an open room with a big table in the middle displaying a very high quality hologram of Titan and the space surrounding it. Floating next to it in the air was a timer, that appeared to be ticking down. The rest of the room was lined with scientific equipment of all varieties, some recognizable (a seismograph, microscopes, flasks and Bunsen burners) and some that were utterly foreign (a strange device that appeared to be a floating silvery orb that shifted into geometric shapes while a panel under

the floating orb displayed a seemingly random number with every shift) but the purpose of the room was fairly obvious: it was a lab and command center in one. It was also fairly messy, but in that way a room looks when someone is a clean freak but hasn't had the time to clean up properly but still forced an effort at it.

"You want an explanation to what's going on? I'll give you one."

"Aren't you curious who we are?" Graelyn shook her head to June's question.

"Not in the slightest. I know who you are, because I knew you were going to arrive here. I'm from the future remember? You meet me and write all about it. Though dare I say, you kind of left out some of the awkward bits." She waved her hand and pulled up a model of their ship.

"If I'm correct, you have a WeN-D model AI on board correct?"

June nodded, "that's right."

"Could you patch her through your suit's speakers? I know she's already listening in."

Heinrich was surprised June followed the request without question; he really didn't understand what June was doing. She clearly didn't trust either of these people, but seemed to be willing to go along with them. Archimedes finally entered, carrying a dog under either arm in an unintentionally condescending show of strength. WeN-D's voice then crackled in, "Hello?"

"WeN-D, welcome to Triton."

"Thank you, Miss Scythes."

"Now WeN-D, you should find the list of codes to jack into this building's mainframe in the Folder labeled F22 on your G drive, correct?"

"That's... How is that correct?"

"Log in, this will make things easier." Graelyn waved her hand through the hologram, and it shifted again, the colored light shimmering on her cat pin. The hologram showed a team of people in a clothing style that clearly hadn't been created yet. Graelyn was there, though she looked younger, and more optimistic. "This is the team who worked on Project Atlantis. Officially, we were attempting to build underwater cities in the deep ocean. Unofficially, we were attempting to use the natural high pressure of the deep ocean on earth to facilitate experiments by our CEO, John Aril. He had a theory that there had been experiments in an alternate reality by another version of himself to create and manipulate tears in the fabric of reality in order to travel to or remove things from alternate realities."

June grimaced, "I'd say that's impossible, but you're here."

"Well, we're from an alternate reality, so clearly it can happen. We've managed to get into your reality, just in the wrong time... But I'm getting ahead of myself." Arch set the dogs down, and they walked over to the table and lay down in front of it. Graelyn didn't pay particular attention.

"Unfortunately, as it turned out not only was the experiment on our end not ready, but neither was the one being worked on in the other universe, which by the way did exist and Aril was totally right about. Also, we weren't the first people to try hopping realities, and there seemed to be a sort of... Inter reality travel regulation group. An image appeared of a man in black robes wearing a ring with an arc emblem on it, or maybe it was just a sideways "C". "They didn't react kindly to our jaunting around, and the experiment went even worse than anticipated. We've been wandering around alternate realities for a while now, before ending up in our your time stream and... well, getting stuck there to. But this time is different, because in a way I've always known I'd meet you, June. I've been waiting a long

time.” Graelyn pulled off her cat pin, holding it up to the light, and Heinrich noticed the obvious thing he’d been missing all this time: it was the same cat pin June was wearing, and the same one in the hologram.

“That isn’t right though, you’re not supposed to have the pin are you?”

“Am I? Sorry, its very hard to get the timing on these things right.”

June paced around the table, stepping over the sleeping dog. “This has been all ready for so long, all these coincidences, all waiting for this year in this place for both of us to be here.” Graelyn nodded, “I’m afraid on that matter you know more than I do, I only know what was told to me.”

Heinrich looked between the two women, they were staring each other down.

“Okay, you two clearly are in cahoots somehow, and I want in. You’re keeping stuff from me, you’ve been keeping stuff from me this whole time apparently June, and I’m done with it. Tell me what on Earth is going on.” June sighed, “Heinrich, this isn’t the first time I’ve seen Graelyn.”

“You’ve met before?”

“No, she’s met me. I’ve never met her before.” Graelyn clarified.

“But you knew you were going to meet her?” Graelyn nodded again.

“God, okay, so.... Time travel is possible... Second question: this base has been here a long time if the dogs have survived, so how have you survived?”

Graelyn ran her hand over her hair again, and closed her eyes. She looked like she was listening to a sound only she could hear. “Because for Arch and I we’ve only been here a few days, and this base isn’t always here... It comes and goes.” Arch spoke again, “Yeah, basically this building has been here for a few days a really long time ago, a few days in the 1970’s, and has been here for a few days now.”

“That also isn’t possible...” Heinrich muttered.

“You’ll see exactly how possible it is very soon. I’m afraid with your arrival, it means the 2227 cycle we’re on is about to reach the point where its going to happen.”

Heinrich crossed his arms, “What’s going to happen?”

Graelyn lowered her spectacles on her nose.

She looked him right in the eyes.

She leaned in slightly.

The light of the hologram cut into her face, so her eye and cheek swirled with the seas of Neptune.

“What’s going to happen,” she began, “is first contact.”

There are some things you can say that people instantly know the power of, statements that hold a weight beyond the seeming face of their characters. These are things with implications, bold statements that open up profound weight beyond the echo of their waves of the flow of their ink. This was not only one of those statements, but it was one to which there was no way to immediately respond. The words took up the next few minutes, though there wasn’t anything else said. Anything Heinrich could think of saying didn’t seem appropriate, like slathering jam on a rock. As time ticked on though, the importance of the weight whittled till he could finally espouse something, even if it was totally unbecoming of the weight of it all.

“So... Aliens?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. More like a probe. I can’t tell you much about the future, but I can tell you that this won’t be the last contact with Extra-solar beings we’ll have. Of course, no one knows about this in the



future. It's all locked away in the files of Heirum J. Whitehead's 'the Pilgrimage' group who you'll be reporting back to. But what we do here is still going to be important, and its going to influence the future in huge ways."

"And you knew about this, June?" She shook her head, "I didn't know all of that..." She looked at the hologram, "So what do we have to do?"

"Keep your spacesuits on. I'll be getting mine on in a second. Arch is fine as he is."

\* \* \* \* \*

They met Arch and Graelyn at the airlock. She looked kind of awkward in a spacesuit, the way people who weren't used to space do, bumping into corners, and expecting their reflexes to be faster. Arch looked just as imposing as always. "I'm still not sure of a lot of this... They haven't explained everything well, like why the building disappears and reappears as they claim it does."

"I know. And the only way we're going to learn is if we stick by them. I've been waiting a long time for this. Be patient. We'll get our answers."

WeN-D piped into their comms, "Er, hello, hi. I'm sensing some really weird things from space. You've almost rotated into a full-darkside position from Neptune. I checked, you're on the equator, so you'll be on the furthest point on the farthest place in our solar system. Whatever that means.

"Thank you WeN-D. Keep monitoring everything, we need someone who can analyze all the data we're getting."

"I'm on the job."

"Great." Graelyn pushed the button to open the airlock, and the four of them stepped in, leaving the two dogs whimpering behind them. The airlock shut, decompressed, and opened up into what was both the darkest and most brilliantly colored sky they had ever seen. With the light from the sun absent, it was darker than you can imagine, but the stars were bountiful in a way they had never seen. It wasn't that much further out as the scale of the universe goes, but it was enough. Above them a cathedral ceiling of light lit their path, the dust they kicked up incense, the arbitrary point they walked towards their labyrinthian center.

WeN-D said the readings were increasing, and as the moon turned, the darkness and lights grew more and more, till where they stood was it, the farthest place and the furthest. And they knew it was, somehow. In their bones and in their blood they felt so distant and so put away from anything they had known. It was then in that distance that the sky opened up in a tear of fantastic blue and white, literally. For a moment they felt it wash over them, felt that there was something wrong with reality, that it was wounded, and from that wound shot out a silvery white ball, rocketing downward like a meteor. It should have impacted the moon, and tore up the ground, sending the four humans flying like bowling pins, or crushed them under dirt, rock, and ice. But instead it stopped 1.23 meters off the ground and hovered there for a moment. Its skin was silvery blue and crystalline, with white and faint black designs on it. The ball began moving, slowly this way and that way, always maintaining its height of 1.23 meters. Any noises it made were intransible in the near vacuum.

The ball was, according to the measurements WeN-D took from the visual data, also 1.23 meters in diameter, and according to the same visuals was moving in the shape of an asterisk. It moved, out in one direction, and back in towards its center landing point. It did this over and over again, while the four (or five, depending on who you count as living) watched it.

"Should we attempt to communicate with it?" Heinrich asked.

June shook her head, "How on Eart- how could we?"

Graelyn was focused on it with a fixed stare.

"Is it from the Council Incursion?" Archimedes asked.

Graelyn nodded, "It's some sort of probe. A scout."

"Council Incursion?" Heinrich didn't take his eyes off of the orb.

"It's in the future, don't worry about it."

"You mean there are more of these things?"

"No. There are its creators. That's why this is important. This is the first shot, and whatever we do here is going to reverberate through history... A lot of histories, actually. Maybe we'll capture it and gain a technical edge. Maybe it will report back on us and they'll have plenty of tactical data in order to begin their assaults. Maybe it will just explode or something. I don't know. But what I do know is it's up to us, right at this moment to decide that with our actions." The ball stopped moving in an asterisk.

"This isn't your first time seeing something like this then. Tell us what to do." Graelyn tried to ignore the clammy feeling she had as the bead of sweat rolled down her face, and the suit's automatic systems blasted cold air there and began to absorb the moisture. The ball suddenly and silently dropped to the ground.

"Huh." She muttered.

"First step, let's start running." Archimedes said.

"I don't see why Arch it hasn't--"

Four legs popped out of the orb, right where some of the patterns on the shell had been. Its sharp feet pierced the icy ground as it barreled towards them.

"Oh dear."

"Run- move move MOVE!"

"Why is it running with legs when it could float?"

"Don't question the alien robot's motivations Grae!"

"WeN-D we might need a pick up or something."

"No! We need to trap it. It wants to learn from us, we have to sto--" she tripped on a rock, and just as swiftly was pulled up by Archimedes large hand. "-p it from leaving here and we're the best bait there is. Back to the base."

They ran from it at breakneck speed, bounding and leaping in the low gravity. The orb seemed like it should have caught up with them, and June looked at Graelyn across the dark plain with a look of indignation. Graelyn looked back, maybe her curiosity got the better of her, maybe despite her cool demeanor she was as terrified as she should have been. Whatever the reason her head turned, and her attention lifted up off the ground and floated to the charging orb kicking up moon dust. That was when she tripped a second time. It wasn't a graceful trip, like you'd see in the cinema, she didn't fall straight towards the dirt with a stunned expression on her face, arms ready for the fall: her ankle spun around more than it should have, and in the low gravity she not only fell but corkscrewed. As she spun her face came into view every other moment which gave her the effect of a cheap animation as her face became more and more shocked with every rotation. She hit the ground head first, and bounced. A hand reached out above her, and gently kept her from floating off. Instead she hovered there, face down, sinking slowly. The other hand attached to the person stabilizing her reached out the other direction, towards the charging orb. It stopped, inches away from him. A single leg lifted up, and seemed to gently poke him in the chest. It wasn't so innocuous for very long, as from under the curved fore part of the leg, silvery white tendrils that looked wound like rope slithered out, and began feeling around his chest. Archimedes tensed (it was him, of course it was).

June and Heinrich grabbed Graelyn and slid her into a standing position. The orb and Arch stared off, or something like staring each other off. If there had been sound, it probably would have been humming in an ominous pulsing way, but it was inappropriately silent instead. June pulled on Graelyn's hand, but she remained rooted in place, her eyes fixed on Archimedes.

"Arch?" She whimpered. She whimpered? She never whimpered.

"Uh, Grae?"

"Just hold still, you'll be okay." She said firmly, as though her resolve had never been shaken in her

life. June took a hold of Graelyn's shoulder, and shook her head.

"How are you sure?"

"Trust me. I have your pin right?" Graelyn looked back at Arch, the tendrils were wrapping around his chest.

"They're trying to get inside my carapace Grae."

"Damn it." She tried to wipe her brow instinctively, but there was a helmet in between.

"Cut it. Cut the probes."

"What if that sets it off and it goes berserk?"

"Arch we'll deal with that, get free."

"We need to get back to the building."

"I'm not leaving Arch. I told him to get in front of it."

"I'll hold it off Graelyn, go."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Heinrich, grab her." June and Heinrich took Graelyn by the arms and pulled her back. She tensed at first, letting them pull her with light resistance as Arch became enveloped by the cables. Then something clicked inside her like a watch mechanism, and she turned with them, and moved as quickly as she could, hiding the wince in her breath as her twisted ankle hit the ground.

"WeN-D we need a pick up. Now." June basically yelled it into her comlink.

"Not the base?"

"Not the base." She told Heinrich.

Graelyn tried not to look back at Arch. She had never been the greatest partner to him, and she knew that. Her concern was generally beyond people, beyond things. If there was a clock, she could try to work out the things inside it by how it moved and sounded. She visualized the insides of people to, made guesses about what was going on inside them by any outer clues she could get. Where some people undressed people with their eyes, she skinned them. Today though, she could imagine the cords wrapping around him, squeezing his outer shell till the squishy bits inside burst. This image though wasn't fascinating, it made her stomach churn, and Graelyn tried to push back everything she'd been told as a child.



## **Chapter 22: The Pavement's the Limit**

“Graelyn Scythes, what do you call this?” She couldn’t look her mother in the eye. “I didn’t have my eggs frozen so I could have a child who got a B-. Your siblings all did so much better than you when they were your age. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“It was boring” she wanted to say. She wanted to say that she had no interest in the book, and that she really couldn’t have cared less if Ivana had managed to win the great Horse Race that the Czar was throwing. The book didn’t tell her anything about the horse—it was supposedly so important, but they didn’t tell her anything she was wondering about it. What did it eat? What was it genetically predisposed to? Presumably it had been bred for racing, or at the very least was displaying desirable traits for horse races beyond her jockey’s spunky resolve to win the race. But none of it was in the book. Graelyn’s mind had drifted off reading it, and she’d found herself reading about horse biology rather than reading the book itself. Still, she finished it. It was just so hard to keep it in her brain. But that wasn’t what she said.

“I’ll try better mom.”

“You’d better, I don’t tolerate worthless people in this house. You’re either someone, or you’re nothing in this world and I’m not going to support you if you’re going to be a parasite on my back.”

She curled up alone in her room that night like she always did, setting her glasses on the table beside her bed. She wished at that moment that she could be in another family, like the kind she heard about at school from her friends. She didn’t even have a stuffed animal anymore, she’d had a Giraffe she’d named Attenborough, but her Mom had said she was too old for it now. She was too old for everything maybe. Sitting up, she slid her skinny legs off the bed, and walked over to the window, which she popped open with a snap. It was a cold night in Moscow, and the air chilled her almost instantly, Goosebumps springing up on her arms and legs like hives. She didn’t flinch, and slid her legs out the window. She was eight years old, and she was already sick of this, sick of people, sick of her parents. Sick of Petyr not being here. Sick of the burden of the B-. Her head was throbbing with expectations, and she wondered if it would be worth it if she kept going. She’d seen someone jump out of a tall building before, her father had tried to shield her eyes as the man cracked on the pavement, but she saw through his fingers. The way he burst open was fascinating, she’d seen drawings of the insides of people, but never really seen the insides. It hadn’t really occurred to her that that much of a person’s mass was vital fluids before, and she felt silly for not comprehending that fact before that moment. Graelyn was high enough she would burst as well—the window in her room wasn’t even supposed to open the way she was doing it, one of the benefits of studying too much was she could already recode the simple drivers in the window machinery. Not child safe anymore. The wind was picking up, and she felt herself batted about by it, ready to pick her up and carry her away from here. She tried to remember the last time she’d been hugged, or been told she did a good job by her parents, and she couldn’t. “Not everyone gets a trophy,” she remembered her mother say, “that breeds weakness.” She imagined a trophy below her, and her body getting speared on it as she fell. “Got a trophy after all!” she’d tell her mother, though that would be impossible because the time it would take her mother to get down to the ground from where they lived in the skyscraper would be long enough she’d certainly be dead in that scenario.

Graelyn felt the wind waft her, and felt her lip quiver. She felt like she was about to cry. Ironically, that was what did it, the fear of looking weak by crying was what made her finally let go and slide out of her window.

She fell.

She fell.

She

Fell.

And it suddenly struck her that this was the worst decision she had ever made.

She realized that all of her problems, everything with her family, were temporary. Sure, they'd have custody of her for years and years, but that would end, and then they wouldn't have control of her anymore, she could cut them out of her life like a tumor. No one could tell her what to do, she would be alone, just the way she needed to be. No one to let her down, no one to fail her or demean her. She would be a lone standout against the mess of the world. She'd fix it.

Or, she would, if she hadn't jumped out of her window.

She was going to die, and nothing she could do could change that, she was totally helpless.

Falling.

And then, she wasn't. She felt an impact, but a light one, and she bounced up a bit, before falling back down into the net. It was hard to get her balance, but she sat up, trying to take in her blurry surroundings, as a light shone on her face.

"It's a girl Pavel, and a young one at that."

"I could have sworn the woman on floor 59 was going to call it quits any day now. Damn."

"You made the bet." A security platform hovered over, and she reached out to them as they came by. A woman in black security armor lifted her up under the armpits, and set her down in the vehicle.

"Jesus, what makes a girl like you jump out the window?"

"She probably fell somehow, tried to get a better view or something."

"No, I jumped." She confirmed.

"Darn stupid thing to do, what do you think you're doing? Your daddy beat you or something?" She shook her head no.

"When did the nets get added?"

"Not too long ago, some guy jumped and bust on the pavement a few months ago and we got them installed for insurance reasons." Of course her inspiration was her undoing.

"So come on kid, why'd you jump?" Graelyn shrugged, "I thought there was no one I could count on, no one worthwhile in the whole world."

"And now?"

Graelyn smiled, "there is definitely someone worthwhile I can count on."



# **Chapter 23: Jump.**

WeN-D came down in front of them, boarding ramp extended. It didn't take long to get all three of them aboard the VanWinkle, even with Graelyn's ankle, and Heinrich was pleased to see the two communist dogs were on board as well ("I took the liberty of luring them through the airlocks with a ration pack, I hope you don't mind." "Not at all WeN-D!") the ship took off, and in the distance the orb rose off the surface of the moon, a huge lump on its side wrapped in its tendrils.

Graelyn looked out at Arch, as he floated up into the sky, and towards a new blue glow in the sky. "It opened another tear." June cursed as she slid into a seat in the cabin. "This isn't good, its going to get away, with a whole bunch of data on us," she then uttered a long string of curse words.

"We've got to follow it."

"We can't go through the tear! We've got no idea how its traveled through, and its only a little bigger than a person, this is a pretty large ship." That was true. There wasn't really any way she could logically argue against that.

"We should still try to get all the data we can, do a fly by as close as you can to when it goes through the portal."

"Portal?"

"Whatever, we're inventing this jargon essentially."

"WeN-D can we chart a path to fly by its exit safely?"

"Absolutely!" She said chipperly.

Heinrich and June stripped off their gloves and helmets, but Graelyn kept hers on. They didn't comment on it, she stared out the view pane absently, deep in thought, her spacesuit looking like a huge anachronism in the spaceship that had been an antique when it was sewn together by machine. The ship got closer to the light, and Graelyn slipped out of the cabin. As it pulled by, she opened up the airlock.

"Graelyn what are you doing?"

"Seal the airlock don't let her do what she's thinking of!"

Graelyn pressed the emergency released button, flipped open the panel that emerged, and pulled the lever. "Graelyn do not do this!" Graelyn had only been able to count on herself, but arch has done what he had knowing full well he could die. Graelyn was about to inhale when the airlock door blew open, and she shot out with far more force than she'd been prepared for. The force of the air impacted her belly and she threw up into her helmet as she spun wildly, her arms flailing helplessly in the blackness of space. Then she was in a mess of blue and white, and then there was nothing.

She woke up. Her face was in a smelly mess of her own puke, but she hadn't suffocated. She couldn't have—the suit could put oxygen straight into her bloodstream even if she was choking, that's right. Instinctively she reached for the release catch on the neck of the suit—but realized that might not be a good idea. Shifting so that she could see her surroundings without getting vomit over even more of her, she saw she was in a grassy field. Wind blew gently through the blades, and she could see the field rolled down into a small grove of trees. She undid the helmet, and pulled it off, letting the sick slop out. She breathed in deeply, and rubbed her face into the grass- real grass not anything artificial. Black earth rubbed up against her nose. She spread her arms out and tried to sink into the soil, but without much luck.

"Excuse me, are you a spacewoman?" Graelyn's eyes shot up, and she pushed her aching body up from the soil. In front of her was a girl with short red hair, wearing glasses slightly too big for her head she'd slowly grow into. The knees on her dress were dirty, and she could probably do with blowing her nose, but the really apparent thing about her was the bloody scalpel in her left hand. Grae stared at it, the slightly dry blood dull against the sunlight.

"Miss?" Grae looked back at the girl.

"What's your name?"

"Graelie." She said pleasantly, as though she wasn't holding a bloody scalpel.

"That's funny." Said Graelyn. She wasn't stupid, the hair color threw her off, but she knew. She looked



back up at herself.

“And have you been dissecting roadkill again today?”

“How did you know that?”

“Like you guessed, I’m from space. You have to be smart to be in space.” The girl nodded. Graelyn remembered this conversation. She remembered the woman in the spacesuit, she’d thought she’d made it up at this point in her life, one of those playtimes as a child that just feels real though its make believe. But here she was. Strangely, or maybe with the utmost obligation, she knew what she had to say next.

“Would you mind if I came and looked?” Graeie looked at her, and bit her lip, then seemed to make a decision and nod. She reached down to Graelyn, and pulled to “help” Graelyn up, though it was really more for show, as Graelyn still actually had to do all the work, and her body still felt like it had been hit by a missile of pressure. In her head she struggled to work out why she had been hit by the pressure like that—it must have been something to do with the tear changing the space around it, she knew the holes led to different times and places, sometimes different dimensions. Maybe laws from one reality seeped over into this one? Or the two sets of laws clashed? It was all hypothetical. Whatever happened, she was woozy, and her mouth still tasted like vomit. Graeie led her to a dead deer, its eyes were already getting eaten away and it smelled, but that hadn’t stopped the girl from already having made a few incisions. The flesh had been carefully cut away, and the ribcage opened. A few organs had been nearly removed and placed on individual piles of leaves. Graelyn was impressed with herself, but was also struck for the first time with how unnatural this would seem to anyone else. She had been such a lonely child. Unable to keep friends for very long, and spending most of her time by herself. That she spent her time slicing up animals in the woods could only have stuck people as creepy—as a sign she was a danger to the other kids. She didn’t like to think of herself that way, she didn’t like to imagine that there was something wrong with her, but as tiny Graeie began to remove the deer’s lungs, she knew that maybe the whispers she heard about herself were right. There was something wrong with her. Her parents should have sent her away somewhere else. Somewhere far away where she’d do no harm to anyone. What if she was capable of what they thought she was? What if she was broken? Graeie turned to her, and she didn’t realize she had shed a tear.

“Are you...”

“Listen to me Graeie, no matter what anyone says to you, you’re the one in control of your life. People are going to tell you things. They’re going to say that you’re...” She looked away from herself, from the scalpel still dripping deer blood. “That you’re a monster. But they don’t understand you. They don’t know that you’re just.... Different. You’ll want to be what they say you are. You’ll want to... Cross any line to get what you want. But I believe in you. And I.... Look I don’t say this, I never say this, but I love you. You’re the only person I do love. Maybe the only one I can. I don’t want to believe that, but it might be true. Don’t give up on yourself. You’re the only one who can manage that. You...” She trailed off. In the distance, she saw a whiteish metal orb perched perfectly on a hill. “I have to go. Don’t forget what I said.” She stumbled up.

*I fell.*

*And as I fell I thought to myself, “Who am I going to be when I hit the ground?” Will I be a corpse? A victim? A cripple? Will I get up and rage against everything that threw me off of this?*

*Then I realized, whoever I chose to be, I will be myself.*

*I will still be Graelyn. Whoever she is.*

*And I chose to be someone I wouldn’t want to fall again.*

She ran towards the orb. Her legs ached, her belly burned, her lungs felt like they were being cut out of her body. She heard a voice yell “Arch! Arch!” as she ran and she barely realized it was coming out of her own mouth. The orb shook, and she sprinted harder at it. A blue swirl began to form around it, and she cursed and screamed as it disappeared into it as her legs gave out beneath her, the ripples of the tear bludgeoning her exposed face. “Arch...” She muttered. She crawled, grabbing the grass and the dirt, ripping up the gentle earth she’d savored, and pulled herself into the tear.

*And I chose to be someone I wouldn't want to fall again.*



***Chapter 24:***  
***Rise***

Graelyn found herself in a supply closet, it was too small for the orb to fit in, so she must have landed somewhere away from it. Her face felt raw and ached, like someone had been rubbing it with a metal file. Her legs were sorer than they had ever been, her lungs were still short of breath. Her belly throbbed with pain, and she suspected she might have broken ribs. She sort of hoped the blast had disabled her uterus permanently so she could live easier every month, but she suspected this wouldn't be case. Life was full of disappointments. She wanted to get up and run after Arch, but she couldn't, and she didn't even know where he was anyways. Not to mention this pile of cleaning supplies was really quite comfortable, she should stock up when she gets home. Yes, quite comfortable. Yes, quite.

The ceiling was incredibly white. She sat up, and felt the blood shift in her body suddenly, felt the IV's pull on her arm. She wasn't wearing her spacesuit—she was wearing a hospital gown. She held back any panic, and sat calmly, flexing her joints to guess how long she'd been asleep. It wasn't a hard science, but it had to at least have been a few days.

“Miss Scythes?”

A man entered her room wearing a period Doctor's outfit- excuse me- it was probably totally at home in this era, she was the anachronism wasn't she? He was holding a tablet pc, and scrolling through some things on it. “I'm glad to see you're up. We kept you sedated to keep you from pulling out any of the stitches, you had quite a bit of internal bleeding.

“Is everything... Fine?” She said, still groggy.

“Yes, thanks to modern medicine,” ha, “everything is working properly now. There was some extensive damage to your Uterus, Bladder, and Liver but they're all back to normal, nothing to worry about.” She let her jaw slip in disappointment—she wasn't going to do it herself or anything, but not having periods would have been great. “Don't worry,” he said, totally misreading her, “You can still have children.”

“Fantastic.” She muttered, and looked around the room, “Where exactly am I Doctor...” ah, a nametag! “Miles.”

“You're in St. Andrew's Hospital, connected to St. Andrew's University in Maryland.”

“Okay. Second query: you knew my name, but I don't think I was carrying any sort of identification.”

The Doctor scrolled through some files on his tablet.

“It says here the estate of your great Uncle Heirum J. Whitehead took care of it.” Graelyn had no uncle named that, let alone a great one.

“Did he leave me a message? He usually does when he does things like this.” She lied briskly. The Doctor scrolled and tapped a few times. “It should be on the tablet by your bedside.” She picked it up, and read the just transferred note. She'd never met Heirum, but the guy sure could get things done.

\* \* \* \* \*

She slept, and awoke. The window was open, and instinctively Graelyn slid out of bed, trying to ignore the pain, and walked over to it. On the sill was a butterfly, slowly moving its wings up and down.

Graelyn peered down at it, there was something odd about it. Reaching down, she felt like she should pull its wings off, but held back, and put a finger down next to the creature. To her surprise, it climbed on. Raising it to her face, she looked at it. The wings were an ethereal blue, and their patterns and shapes were like nothing from nature. It seemed to glow. Her eyes shifted from the mesmerizing creature, which seemed to unfurl a new mystery with each beat of its wings, to the window: hospital windows didn't open. The butterfly took off, and Graelyn turned to see the walls and ceiling were coated with them. On the bed was a cat, but not a nice cat. Its eyes were malicious. It hissed, and she felt a songbird die somewhere. As its tail swished, the butterflies moved their wings in unison. Graelyn raised her arms, and the first notes of Mozarts 5<sup>th</sup> symphony played, like she was conducting it.

And as she did so, the butterflies fell off the walls and the ceiling, and splattered into rain on the ground. The cat squealed in terror.

And Graelyn woke up, sheets crumpled, still unable to walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was another month before Graelyn was ready to leave the hospital, which had been in the note, so she didn't fight it. It was pretty clear what was going on anyways, and if she could time travel from here it didn't matter how long she lollygagged. She passed the time by eating lots of snacks and watching the video screen in her hospital room, or trying out socialization. Across the barrier in the same room was a girl named Alondra who had broken her leg on a school Ski-trip, and liked keeping a constant stream of words coming from her mouth like she was afraid if she left part of a conversation silent something would slip into her soul. She didn't talk to Graelyn at first though, "I'd thought you weren't going to wake up." She said when they finally got to talking. "You were really beat up, there were weird burns on your face in stripes like you'd been lashed by a Balrog or something."

She raised her eyebrow, "Balrog?"

"You know, flaming whip, big leathery wings, fights Gandalf—'YOU SHALL NOT PASS!'" she said, slamming her tray with one hand while she pulled her long black hair into a fake beard. "Lord of the Rings?"

"Oh. I see. I've never read it." Alondra's eyes went wide, "You've never ever read the Lord of the Rings? The Hobbit, at least?" Graelyn shook her head, and Alondra made a point of making the nurse bring her all four books. Graelyn was a bit grateful, Arch was older than her after all, more mature and yet totally sheltered due to his isolated upbringing. Graelyn had lived a solitary life, she wasn't a social butterfly, she wasn't even social or a butterfly. She liked her cocoon. Alondra was almost the same age as her, a little younger and treated her like it. She hobbled over and did Graelyn's hair, though she was rubbish at returning the favor. Graelyn read through the four books quickly, and took on the Silmarillion ("Oh that's a tough read you might not want to-") and easily sped through that too. They were good books. Tolkien's attempt to create a new mythology for England was a noble one, and Graelyn was struck how long it was since she had been to Russia at this point, outside of fifteen minutes of her own childhood of course. Those fifteen minutes had been the only time she'd spoken Russian for more than a few moments in the last year as well. She felt something welling up inside her she couldn't put a label on. She remembered how she'd seen Arch as an experiment when she'd found him, something to explore rather than a person. If the accident hadn't happened that had sent them spiraling through time, would she have taken him apart piece by piece like the roadkill in the woods? She hadn't ever killed an animal, just taken apart dead ones, not that many people would understand the difference. What if she had killed Arch? She felt her home beating in her chest, and the guilt at losing Arch and almost betraying him.

*No, I wouldn't have betrayed him. Surely. I'm not that person.*

"Do you dream Graelyn?"

"Most of the time, usually." Alondra's nimble fingers were trying something complex and slightly poofy she seemed delighted with, "why do you ask?"

"You were unconscious so long, I always wondered; If I were asleep that long maybe I'd go to another place, like I slipped through a hole in the world and my mind fell through."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far in believing something."

"Just hear me out—I mean, when I'm skiing I sometimes feel like as I go down the slope I'm not actually on the slope, like I'm just driving my body, my skis as much my limbs as my arms or legs. I lose track of what is and isn't me. Which makes me wonder if my body is me—if there was a version of me with the same number of cells, the same genome, the same voice, but who didn't feel the same way I did, would it really be me, or would it just like a black and white copy of a color picture—it shows the same thing but you know its different."

"This is awful hypothetical."

"Sorry to unload it all on you, my girlfriend usually gets the brunt of it, but she's off at this teen space

camp.”

“You have a girlfriend?”

“I didn’t mention her? Oh my God I didn’t mention her! She wanted to come visit but I told her she sure as hell wasn’t ruining her chance at space just to cheer me up. I usually call her when you’re asleep, you sleep a lot no offense, so we have some privacy. I can’t believe that I forgot to mention her!”

Graelyn shrugged, which surprised Alondra and she had to start over at whatever she was doing with her hair.

“Its alright. I haven’t mentioned a lot of people.”

“Well tell me, where does Graelyn Scythes come from? That’s an unusual name.”

“Russia. I was born in Moscow, but I grew up in a small farming town where my parents owned a house for a few years, before we moved back. There's not much to tell about it.” Her fingers weaved the shiny black strands of her hair again into a new shape.

“Siblings?”

“Curious aren't we?”

“That's a pretty normal question.” Graelyn felt like shrugging, but refrained for the sake of Alondra's work. “I'm a very private person, and not a particularly normal one. I do have siblings. More than you'd expect, actually. But I keep in touch with none of them, and even less with my parents.” There was silence for a bit as she braided. Graelyn could faintly see in the small reflection on a monitor that her lips were pursed.

“Did I say something dis-pleasurable?”

“No, no no no, I just can't imagine growing up like that, you know? Or I guess you don't.”

“Tell me about your girlfriend.”

“Well,” she said with an aire of wispy longing in her tone, “June is-”

“June?!?” Graelyn ejaculated.

“Er, yeah.”

“June Barker?”

“Do you know her?” Graelyn thought how best to answer that question. It wasn't an easy one to really start.

“Yeah, sort of. I doubt she remembers me. I've met her though, just once. I'm surprised I remember her to be honest. I was just so surprised, it seems like an awful big co-incidence.” Graelyn reached into her pocket and pulled out the cat pin, looking on it fondly, “Its hard to forget, we had the same pin.”

Alondra looked at her hand, “you can't have the same pin. That's impossible, it's a family heirloom.”

“Is it? I didn't ask I just noticed.”

“Could I see it.” Graelyn saw no reason why not, so she placed it gently in Alondra's palm, and then felt the urge to push down on it slightly so she could feel the shape of its nature, so she followed her own urges and pushed. It was an insignificant action, but it didn't feel like it, it felt like she'd pressed the button on a payload of bombs.

Alondra looked on the backside of the pin and nodded, “It says here, ' DB to KL, corporeal tangent' and then a little heart symbol. “Corporeal tangent?”

“It’s something one of her ancestors made for their fiancé when they went off to fight in the second world war. It’s made of copper, that's why the metal part is green, it patinaed and they decided they liked the way it looked green better than copper colored so they placed a sealant over it so it wouldn't rub off. They've passed it on over and over to the oldest sibling. Its handmade. There's no way you'd have it unless you stole it from her or she gave it to you.”

“Call her. Ask her if she still has the pin.” Alondra bit her lip, “If you took it you're giving it back or I'm taking it from you.” Graelyn shrugged, Alondra having forgotten about the hair appointment. “Maybe he made a prototype, I don't know. I got it in a thrift shop.”

“You're lying.”

“Ask June.”

Alondra didn't talk to Graelyn till she made the call, and seemed to treat her as though she wasn't even present in the same room as her till that time came. June appeared on the Holo projector, clearly tired, “Can we keep it short tonight? They ran us through this machine that simulated a ton of G's and we all puked. I'm totally spent.”

“June, do you still have your pin? The green one, with the cat on it?” She adjusted her camera so you could see her breast, it was clearly there, and her face showed the puzzlement of someone who had just been asked if she still had her hand.

“Yeah? I only take it off if I have to.” Alondra looked over at Graelyn, who was trying to not have an “I knew I was right” expression plastered all over her face. She did a very good job.

“That's... Weird.”

“Not.... Really?”

“I mean, the girl I'm rooming with here, Graelyn?”

“Yeah?”

“She has a pin just like that. It even has the same inscription.”

“The exact same one?”

“Yeah.” June paused, she nodded.

“You need to call my mom.”

Mrs. Barker arrived at 4:30, right as Graelyn was hitting chapter 19. She came bearing an old photo album, one of the ones made of paper bound with metal rings. The thing was an antique, and had been coated with some sort of transparent layer that strengthened and preserved it, but made it look funny to the eye, like it was a bad computer graphic. She first greeted Alondra; she seemed to get along with her daughter's girlfriend swimmingly, like she was already a favored daughter in law. “Hello Graelyn.” She said after a time, coming over to her bed. She looked at her, the gaze of someone looking at someone you'd heard of, or seen in photographs, but never seen before in person. She motioned towards the edge of the bed, and Graelyn gave a slight nod. Sitting down, her hips bumping Graelyn's feet, she spread the photo album on her lap. The pages had already begun aging before it had been sealed, and it looked like the kind of old document you might see in drama, with yellow cracking pages that somehow held together perfectly. Thanks to the sealant, it also looked strangely inauthentic. The photographs were of a man in an army air core outfit, and a woman in a decidedly 1940's haircut, and... Graelyn. The other two were smiling, Graelyn had the expression of a person who doesn't want to be in a picture but is doing so for the sake and happiness of other people, possibly in this case herself. She felt like saying, “That's me!” but held back as it was neither necessary or frugal, and would probably just make her look like an idiot.

“That's you!” Mrs. Barker said.

“Yes it is. Well, that's revealing.” Mrs. Baker got up and closed the door. She held the handle behind her back for a moment as though someone might try to barge their way in. “You have no idea how long our family has been waiting to meet you. Honestly, until I got my daughter's message I thought you were just an insane person who saved my great great... well, a lot of greats grandfather's life, I didn't actually believe what you told them.”

“What exactly did I tell them, because I haven't told them anything yet?” Alondra's eyes were wide, she was totally erect in bed, watching and listening as closely as she could manage.”

“That you were from an alternate reality and the future.”

“I was that upfront about that? Huh.”

“Would you mind if I saw the pin?” Mrs. Barker asked. Graelyn nodded and slipped it into her palm. She ran her thumb along it, smiling faintly. “Its all true then.”

“I suppose?” Mrs. Barker looked over at Alondra, placing her hand reassuringly on Graelyn's calf.

“Alondra, you have to keep all of this secret. No one can know what we talked about in here today.”

“Mrs. Barker...”

“Sandy.” She cut in.

“Sandy, uh, you don't really believe she is from an alternate reality in the future do you? I mean...”

Sandy cut her off.

“Alondra, when my many-greats-grandfather was fighting in the second World War II, this young woman stopped his plane from falling out of the air. She wore a cat pin, just like the one he had made for his fiance, only it was old.”

“Wait I stopped a plane from crashing?!?! How!?!?”

“He actually wrote you a guide, he said you'd need to study it.” She apparently would.

“This is crazy.” Alondra said.

“Honestly, its getting pretty normal for me.” Graelyn murmured.

“Graelyn, sweetie, you're going to do great, and you can stay with us as long as you need.”

“Stay with you? I mean, how will fit into society, I haven't been born yet.”

“So weird....” Alondra whispered.

“Actually,” the man at the door, who had quietly opened it, said, “Mr. Heirum J. Whitehead's estate has taken care of all of that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Graelyn was for some reason attending class at a High School. This wasn't particularly how she'd seen jumping through a portal through time going. How old was she now even? She'd lost track. Was she even still a teenager? She tried to count the days but she had by all accounts lost track. There had been too many leaps and jumps and crossed time streams. She remembered the look on her own face—or was it her own face? Did another reality's version of herself count as her? As Songbird Kicked her out the window. She had no idea who she was anymore. That Graelyn had broken the promise though—maybe she'd lost the right to the name.

Is that all I am now—a promise of a little girl throwing herself out a window?

She sat down at her desk and looked over at June and her girlfriend who were clearly flirting. In a few years June would be in the academy for space travel, in a few more she'd be with Graelyn on Triton starting the loop that got Graelyn here in the first place. It hardly seemed to make sense, it hardly seemed to fit together at all. But here she was, studying things in the past.

“Good morning class” the teacher said, “now today we're going to learning about—Ryan, sit down. Trinity you to! – okay, uh, we're going to be learning about igneous rocks...”

Graelyn already knew all about Igneous rocks. She could probably teach a class on Igneous rocks. But this, she supposed, was the downside of time traveling. You could get stuck in history taking a class that was hyper advanced for your own age group at the time but that you easily passed years ago.. .Still, it wasn't a bad review. Graelyn didn't usually study geology, so the lessons on Igneous rocks were really a handy refresher, and she didn't feel like she was wasting that much of her time. English courses puzzled her a bit, she was enjoying them but the classes were really slow at reading, and since she had focused on the sciences she was actually learning an incredible amount in them. Math courses were however basically a rote action for her—she was in the school's most advanced courses, and she was far beyond them in ways they couldn't imagine. She had gotten her internship by being able to calculate the probable locations of other dimensions through a hypothetical time space rift at 16, or at least that was what she figured in hindsight now that she knew John Aril's real intentions. Advanced Calculus was essentially spelling “C-A-T” to her at this point in her life. Luckily the teacher had given them the whole syllabus so she'd been able to complete every single assignment for the year in the first



week. She now spent her math classes being a student assistant and running errands, or doing her own math work.

“So what is ‘456R-25K’?”

“Well, if you're mapping dimensions, most of them are hypothetically going to be nearly identical. Many of them have differences so slight it's impossible to tell where exactly they diverge. For example, there is a whole other reality for every different speed it takes to press a single key down on a keyboard, for every slight position it would hit, and that's just for every reality you hit that same key.” Graelyn explained to the math teacher.

“I've given each identical reality a designation, usually a number and letter to distinguish them. However, what's notable is when there is a convergence- a link between two dimensions for whatever reason. Those are labeled with a two letter-number combinations. If you start to track dimensions, you can figure out where these holes are supposed to be, because they're sort of... fixed points. Dimensions can continually branch off and make new ones to infinity, but there is something special about two that are linked, they begin to take on a certain... stability. Not in the sense that they are more socially stable or anything, the universe isn't concerned with that, er, universes, but rather that they are more real than other universes, to put it in layman's terms. They're... anchored. As soon as a person moves from one universe to the other, it creates a bond between them.” She paused, “Hypothetically of course.”

The teacher looked at her wide eyed.

“Where did you say you transferred from?”

“I was homeschooled.” She lied, “By the lead programmers of Talinata Softworks.” He nodded slowly, “The AI developers.”

“Yes, though they've clearly moved beyond that.”

“Clearly.”

The truth was that Graelyn didn't solve all of her troubles with an epiphany, and that even though she hit the ground she felt like she hadn't stopped falling ever since. The epiphany, that moment of pure clarity that changed Graelyn Scythes from one person into another, didn't do so by force. In reality, it simply opened up a question inside her: who is this woman I don't want to fall? She didn't know. She had no idea, and as time went on she settled on two versions of herself, standing on opposite sides of a scale. One was an altruist, but a pragmatic one. Every breath she took served a greater good, but she would be taken in by no one. She would be volcano, erupting to protect the weak, and stoking a fire in her heart. The other was a fortress. She would cut out the things that could cause her pain, build up walls, and freeze her blood to ice. She would be impervious, and impartial. The ultimate scientist, only using her facts and not her heart. But even these simple ideals proved elusive—try as she might she never ended up one or the other, and a third woman came to being—a woman who was a bulldozer. She could run over her enemies, she could harness the power of the volcano and the pragmatism of the scientist and crush anyone who could cut through her walls. She had no idea who she wanted to be, only that she didn't want to fall.

Graelyn had had a boyfriend, and a girlfriend. She hadn't loved either of them, she'd simply wondered if she could get one. She succeeded, and when they left her or she left them she made sure to note their emotional reactions. She felt nothing, at least, she tried to convince herself she felt nothing, and she took copious notes. She felt the fortress inside her, and fire and ice at war in her heart.

But not everything went according to plan.

Of course it did at first—Graelyn got the job at project Atlantis, despite her parent's protests, and felt a jolt of pleasure at their anger at her when they couldn't control her. But then Arch came floating down, and she felt like she couldn't have done anything different, as though from that moment as he fell there wasn't a choice anymore. She wasn't sure what was inside her now, it wasn't fire, ice, or steel, she couldn't name it, like a figure in a dark room of a stranger.

June yelled, cheering on Alondra as she dribbled her way down the court. The crowd was fairly small, not many people showed up for a high school basketball game on the same Saturday as a big 7-Shuck match at the stadium, which was also being broadcast around the world. But June, now back from space camp, loved her girlfriend, and Graelyn was well practiced at keeping up appearances. The crowd yelled and jeered something, and Graelyn's text scrolled down automatically as it's camera sensed her eyes had finished reading the words at the bottom of the tablet's screen. Learning how to forge a letter was hard, but it would apparently be necessary. She was lucky people in the 1940's didn't know how to spot modern advances in replicating Franklin Dellano Roosevelt's signature.

"I can't believe this Ref! Can you?" Graelyn shrugged.

"I'm sure it was extremely unfair. They'll be doing an expose of it on the news tonight."

"Be serious." June said.

"I am wild." Graelyn said drolly as she opened another book.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Its from a book, forget about it." Alondra had made her way to the net, and with a rousing leap, dunked the ball into the hoop. Graelyn politely clapped as the small crowd erupted.

"Now that was amazing!" June yelled.

"It was pretty good, yeah."

"If you're so moderate about being here, why did you come." Graelyn looked up at June.

"An honest answer there would be something akin to a speech." A whistle blew, and the fans cheered for their respective teams as they went to the locker rooms.

"Well, its halftime, so I have time to listen." The dance team came out, and Graelyn was actually interested in watching them intently and listening to what song they picked, so she tried to get her speech done quickly.

"I'm here because you're people who aren't mean to me, and haven't left me yet. I don't even know if I like either of you, to be honest, but in my experience it matters more if a person treats you well than if you have anything in common. I'd take a friend who I can't have a conversation with but is there for me over one who is only there when the weather is fair and the sky is clear. I'd take a friend who I can't relate to but respects my existence over one who can joke with me but treats me as less than I'm worth any day." And I'm not worth much, she left off.

"What the hell kind of world is waiting for us in the future?" The dance team got in their positions.

"One where they make girl's named Graelyn who like watching well done entwinements of music and dance, shh." They watched the performance in silence. It was okay.

\* \* \* \*

Alondra and June were cuddling on the couch while Graelyn sat on the floor. They were eating pizza rolls, a dish that Graelyn had admittedly never tried before. They were okay. On the screen in front of them was the extended cut of "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring" an ancient movie to be sure, but Graelyn was enjoying it. Alondra and June made some frantic flailing motions as one of June's other mom Emily walked in front of the screen.

"She hasn't seen this yet mom!" June pleaded.

"Did someone call for mom?" Sandy said from the other room.

"The other one!" June yelled. Fred, one of June's dads, who had come in to bring them drinks, laughed.

"Oh come on Fred, like they haven't done that with you and Devon." He handed Graelyn a bubbly glass of ginger ale, and smiled at her.

"Yeah, but we make bad joke about it." Emily rolled her eyes.

"Seriously, mom, dad, we're watching a movie."

"Did someone call for dad?" Devon yelled from the other room."

“Hi dad, I'm dad.” Fred yelled. The dad's laughed.

“Jesus.” Alondra said, rewinding the movie. The Fellowship of the Ring from the movie's title was approaching a bridge in an underground city that had been overrun by creatures called Orcs, and a wizard called Gandalf was facing off with a big winged demon called a Balrog.

“You shall not pass!” The wizard said, and split the bridge with his staff. They both fell into the void. Graelyn dropped her pizza roll.

Of course.

Before Graelyn's eyes stood a map of the universes. They were anchored to each other through gashes, and the same gashes could slip you into different places in that universe's time, as well as a physical location in it.

There was a chasm between each of those spots, and they had latched onto the other side. The fellowship had crossed the chasm, and then broken the road. Here Graelyn was, trapped on one side of a divide in time, while Arch was somewhere else.

And the more she thought about it, the more she knew it had to be in World War II. So she had to get to World War II. But she had no way to guide the journey. The bag Kinan had given her when she'd left had some of Kinan's dust, but there was no way she could use the Labyrinth to get around, even if there was a Labyrinth in this world it would be cut off to her since she had no one to take her through the locked gates. But she didn't have to just drop into the void. She had something she knew had to be on the otherside: Her ring of power. The cat pin. She had no idea if it would work: maybe she would just drown in the sea of murky nothing between the universes. Maybe she would go mad. But she would not condemn Arch to death by inaction. This was her best and only shot. She knew exactly what she had to do.

The next morning, at breakfast, Graelyn had laid out a tablet for June with a document pre-loaded on it. June came downstairs, and didn't notice the tablet for fifteen minutes as she made herself toast, and then sat down, looking at it.

“Whats this?”

“That, is everything you need to know about how we meet in the future. I had to exclude a few things you didn't know, because well, you didn't know them, but it should be mostly complete.” June picked it up and began to read it, then bit her lip and set it down, looking Graelyn straight in the eyes.

“You're leaving today, aren't you?”

“Well, I'm going to try.”

Graelyn had said goodbye so many times now. It seemed like every time she hopped through a portal she met someone she would never forget, who would be a universe away. Alice, Lizette, Manuel.

Kinan, John, Miranda. Now, June, Alondra, and June's four parents.

They hugged each other, and Graelyn listened to their platitudes. Their time together had meant something, surely, but Graelyn wanted to get it over with. She hated saying goodbye, but Arch needed her, and she couldn't stay comfortable for too long.

If she was being honest, it didn't suit her.

She took a cab to Saint Andrew's Hospital, and on the way dialed the number for Talinata Softworks.

“Hello! Talinata Softworks. I'm our answering AI, WeN-D! How can I help you?”

“Hi, WeN-D, my name is Graelyn Scythes. I need to talk to whoever paid my hospital bill.” WeN-D was silent for a moment, “I'll connect you right away.” She did.

“Hello?” A gruff voice replied.

“Hi, I'm Graelyn Scythes, and I need to get back into the supplies room I woke up in in Saint Andrew's Hospital.”

“There is nothing there, we swept it clean.”

“Nothing you can see.” More silence. The sound of something being moved across the floor.

“We'll meet you there right away.”

When she arrived at the hospital, an androgynous person met her at the door, wearing a suit sunglasses, and an earpiece.

“Miss Scythes?”

“Talinata Softworks representative?”

“Yes. Follow me.” Without another word she was lead through the building, and up to the supplies room, which was empty. She looked at the person, “I need to change, and do what I came here to do. Close the door.” They nodded.

“Mister Whitehead sends his regards.”

“If I ever meet him, and he's not dead like he apparently is right now, I'll be sure to return them.” The person nodded, blankfaced, and shut the door. Graelyn quickly disrobed, and put on her spacesuit. She stuffed the rest of her belongings back into the bag, reserving some of the crystal dust, and the cat pin. Carefully, she put on the spacehelmet, and reached her hand out in front of her. She couldn't see anything, but she could feel it, like she had a new sense now that had opened up in her mind. There was a tear here in what was natural, sealed up to the human eye, but not healed. She could tear it open again, like a seam ripper. She pulled out the cat pin, and holding it up to where she felt the sensation in the air, used her other hand to throw the crystal dust at the same spot. At first, she thought it had been an idiotic idea, a foolish notion on her part, but then she was proven wrong.

The air began to swirl around her hand. She reached down and grabbed her bag quickly, and the portal formed around the cat pin. She tried to focus on World War II, on the plane. She hoped she'd grabbed everything she would need from the store for it. She hoped the portal would work. She hoped it wouldn't tear her apart.

It swirled, and her thoughts were cut off as she was sucked inside, spiraling down through the centuries, leaving only memories behind.

\* \* \* \*

Graelie Scythes woke up to find she had gotten mail. She never got mail, and with her first court ordered meeting with the therapist tomorrow, it was an odd time to start. Her mom read it first, confused, and threw it in the trash, but later that night she snuck out of her room and fished it out.

“Dear Graelie,

You don't know me, but maybe someday you will. I know that written mail is an oddity aside from packages, so I apologize if this freaks you out. I heard you are going through a hard time right now, and I wanted you to have this. If all had gone correctly, my descendants have sent you this cat pin as a token of our affection for you from afar. I can't tell you what your future holds, but I do know that when we meet, we will be friends. Until then, hold onto this pin as a reminder that someone remembers you, even from afar.

Sincerely, June Barker”

Graelyn slid the pin out of the envelope, and looked at it. It was old, but well taken care of. She slid the pin onto her pajama top as an experiment, and looked at herself in the mirror. The letter was clearly a prank, they'd probably write later asking for money or something, but for now having the pin on her breast felt comforting. As he looked at the image of a cat, she began to think about them, how nice it would be to have a companion like this imaginary letter writer. Maybe, she thought. She'd ask for a cat. Yes, that would do. That would do nicely.

*Check back on [jameswylder.com](http://jameswylder.com) on Thursday for a new chapter. There's a new one every week!*



# **Chapter 25: Half-Millenia Monsters**

Dave Barker wiped the sweat off his face. The bomber was diving too fast, and the controls weren't responding. After all the flack they had taken, he wasn't surprised, but he still tried` jerking the controls, flipping the switches. He knew he was dead, but he still tried. He looked at the picture of Katherine he had pinned up on the console. He sighed.

"Our lives are just, corporeal tangents you know." He said, stirring the coffee a year and a half ago. She laughed, "What on earth does that even mean?"

"It means that our souls are eternal, we live on in our spirits and the lives we touch. Bits of us live on in humanity, we keep around bits of our history just by the act of existing. Each of us is just a corporeal manifestation of a part of the larger story of humanity, a tangent that is going to end someday in a grave. But though the tangent stops, the writer always gets back on course, and takes us somewhere new, carrying on parts of the past, not the best or the most good parts, more important than that, the parts that mattered enough for us to make as corporeal in our own flesh."

"You are a pretentious snot Dave." He smiled, "I am, but I honestly believe that."

She raised her cup of coffee in a sort of salute, "Then maybe sincerity is part of your tangent."

"Maybe I can be part of yours."

"Is that your pick up line? A giant rambling pseudo-philosophical rant? Seriously."

He shrugged, "I can't do anything better than a rambling rant, especially the pseudo-philosophical kind." She smirked. "Then maybe sincerity is something I can get behind. At the very least, it will make an interesting tangent." He'd made her that pin, and now she'd never see him--

THUD.

He looked behind him, there was a woman there in a slightly baggy grey-white jumpsuit with a strange metal collar, she had a helmet in one of her hands, and glasses on her face.

"How the--"

"No time." The woman pulled out something like a blow torch, and burned out a chunk of the floor in a split second. Jerry had come up from the back and was staring as well. She reached in, and placed a weird thing like a disk with metal spider legs in the hole, which began gyrating and whipping its limbs around. He felt the controls responding to his touch, and he jerked the plane back into the air.

"Special agent Graelyn Scythes. Don't ask how I got on the plane, its classified or something. Oh and look, I have a pin that looks just like yours, remember that."

"Dave what's going on?"

"Shut up Jerry. Now Dave, lets get this plane back home."

\* \* \* \* \*

They landed to some surprise, and there was a big bustle as people ran up to the airplane. "How did you make it out alive?" the usual banal banter you get when people survive an ambush.

Graelyn rolled her eyes at the soldiers and officers who questioned why she was here, and flashed her forged identification, and then saw the base commander whom she showed her forged letter from FDR to. Knowing where she was going had its advantages. She didn't pay too much attention through all of it, She heard a big mix of "its an honor to have you here" and sexist 1940's garbage. She took the boat back to the country called the "United States" with all the enthusiasm of someone forced to go on a vacation they didn't want to. She tried to enjoy herself, to see the sights and taste the treats, but it all felt hollow. The boat rocked on the ocean as she sunned herself on the deck reading a book. The captain had protested, but she had a letter from FDR. She read a paperback copy of "the Great Gatsby", a book about a man who tried to bring the past back by building his own private empire. But the past didn't come back and somebody shot him dead. "You can't bring back the past."

“Oh but you can, old sport. You can.”

She rubbed her eyes from under her large sunglasses. Everyone wanted to go to the past it seemed but Graelyn, and she was the only one doing it. Life was often ironic and unfair. She thought about Arch, longing for his lost family. She could see him turning into Gatsby, rebuilding his home and trying to replicate his strange dead society... But it wouldn't work. She looked out at the ocean and it felt as far away to her as her own passions. She closed the paperback, finished, and turned over to sun her back. This tangent had no meaning to her, but at least she could get a tan.

\* \* \* \*

She was greeted at the docks by many men in military uniforms. She wished there had been some women in the gang sent to find her, and was sorely disappointed by the past.

“Graelyn Scythes?” A man in a very starched uniform said.

“Thats-a-me.” She replied.

“By the order of the United States Government, you're under arrest for forging executive documents.”

“Am I?” She replied.

“You treasonous dog.”

“I'm not a US Citizen you know, I'm actually Russian.” He scowled.

“Pink commie.”

“I literally celebrate Alexander Hamilton's birthday as a holiday, lets not get carried away here.” The man's scowl deepened.

“I have orders to take your disrespectful self to meet with the President himself. Now I don't know why he wants to meet with you...”

“Because I'm a hero, now get me in the car already.” She sighed, leaning on the rail of the gangplank. He narrowed his eyes.

“Follow me.”

The White House was a museum, in Graelyn's time, and she'd visited there when her Father in Annapolis had gotten some visitation time with her. He'd shown her through the building, telling her facts about the different rooms. She'd even gotten to sit in the President's chair. The museum didn't get that many visitors, but it got enough to keep itself funded. She had spun around in the chair a few times while the tour guide texted his boyfriend on his cellphone, and imagined ruling a nation from that spot. “I could get used to this.” She had thought to herself.

“Come on Grae, I'll show you the picture of your favorite.” Holding his hand, they walked to the painting of Alexander Hamilton. She stared. Slowly, they made their way through paintings of other important figures.

“Who is that one dad?”

“That,” her father said, “is Franklin Dellano Roosevelt. He, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin helped win World War II together. He also interred people from Japan in camps during the war.”

“You mean Japanese spies?”

“No, just everyday people.” She nodded, and they moved on. She wished, as she was led through the White House while it was actually used, that she had paid more attention then. She was wearing her



dress clothes again, rather than the spacesuit, so at least she looked nice, even if she was still looking massively anachronistic. A man led her to the President's office, and opened the door. Stepping in, she saw the silhouette of a man at a desk, a thin line of smoke rising from a cigarette in a holder in his mouth.

"So," FDR began, "you're our mysterious visitor."

"And you're the leader of the Former Uni- of the United States of America." An eyebrow raised on the man's face, and he gestured for her to come closer. He didn't look as ominous up close. He looked tired, ill, old. "My name is Graelyn Scythes."

"So I've been told. You saved one of our airplanes, popping in out of nowhere on it, and then saved the pilot and the crew from certain death. Then you used a forged letter I never wrote in order to get through several layers of security." Graelyn nodded, taking a seat in front of the desk.

"Yep, that about sums it up actually."

"So then, I think you owe me an explanation." Graelyn shrugged, reached into her pocket, pulled out her tablet, and switched it to hologram projection mode. She then pulled up a hologram of a man walking on the moon, not Neil Armstrong obviously, just a guy taking a casual stroll, with the Earth in the background. The cigarette fell out of FDR's mouth, smattering ash on the desk.

"I'm from the future." She said. He nodded dumbly. "I've been sent here by the... United Nations Time Policing force. I'm here to retrieve another member of our personnel that..." She was lying now, and winging it, and hoping she sounded believable. "...fell into enemy hands. It could upset the United States winning the war."

"Good God, another one of you."

"What?"

"I mean, another time traveler. You get briefed on this when you become president, but I assumed three was going to be my limit. And none of them showed off their..." He waved at the hologram. "Usually they just shoot something in the office dramatically so it vaporizes, or show me a picture of my funeral or something."

"Ah." Graelyn said.

"So, one of your agents has fallen into Nazi hands?" Graelyn nodded. FDR rubbed his forehead.

"Do you know where?" She shook her head. "What's he look like? What's his name?"

"Well, he's entirely coated in armor that acts like TV screens-" a knowing look came into FDR's eyes, and she stopped. He picked up his phone.

"Bring the file on the Machine-Man in here immediately."

"Ah." She said again, maybe this would be easier than she thought.

"We were already planning on sending a mission there, an airdrop."

"Could I request Dave Barker be a pilot on the mission." FDR picked up the cigarette, and puffed it. The smoke was noxious, and clearly filled with carcinogens. Graelyn scrunched her nose up.

"I suppose so. We'll simply add you to the mission roster. Let you take care of your business." She nodded.

"I do have one more question, sir." He gestured with the cigarette for her to continue. She noted he was mainly using that arm. "Why did you inter the Americans of Japanese heritage during this war?" He

puffed, and his face lowered so his glasses were white ovals of light.

“You have to do these things in times of war.”

“I mean, do you?” Graelyn pondered.

“If the people aren't secure, you can't have a people.” That had seemed true to her for so long. Her mother had weaned her on that. If she could be stronger than other people, she was free. If she could have something to ruin them, some security like Arch's offswitch code, no one could hurt her.

Said the people who hurt her. She felt a bit dizzy, but she asked the next question.

“But if you treat your own people like they are your enemy, if you hurt your friends to show your other friends you are strong and that people who like hurting the innocent won't hurt them while you're hurting the innocent, isn't that kind of messed up?” She decided that might be too colloquial, and added, “Doesn't that sink you from the moral high ground?”

He looked up at her, “I take it that decision is not remembered well.”

“Only by those who look for excuses to hurt the innocent while looking like saints.”

He nodded, and they sat in silence. After a few minutes, he gestured for her to leave, and she did so.

The next day, she was on a plane to Europe.

Graelyn sat in the cockpit with Dave Barker. She was wearing her spacesuit, which kept her totally warm, everyone else was wearing thick jackets and breath masks. They'd be dropping by parachute just outside the compound, and working their way in. The Nazis were being pushed back towards Berlin, so she had no idea how many people would still be guarding this base, but hopefully not many. They flew through the clouds, and started to descend to the altitude they would drop from. Dave gestured to her, and she saluted, and made her way back, leaving a folder on her seat. She hadn't given him much info, but damn it, he deserved to know something.

“Agent Scythes,” The ground commander Captain Noble said, “are you ready to jump?” Graelyn nodded, her parachute was already on her back. They waited till they were in position, and then a door in the side of the plane slid open. One by one they jumped into the darkness.

*“I'm coming Arch.”* She thought. *“I'm not leaving you behind.”*

\* \* \* \*

“Ah, you're finally awake.” Said the man in the black uniform with the scarred face. “My name is Doctor Heisman, do you know who I am?” The machine man nodded.

“You asked me that yesterday.” Archimedes said. “And the day before.”

“Just seeing how you are managing to cope without food and water.” He didn't tell them he had internal stores of both, and that he was operating in low-power mode anyways. They still worked at least, not like some of his systems.

“And what, pray tell, is that?” Heisman said, gesturing to the deactivate orb. When they'd landed in that field in Germany, it had switched off. The impact maybe? Maybe it had lost its connection with its masters? Maybe he'd just pulled on the right thing in its insides.

“Its a modern art piece I made, its fractures represent your fragile masculinity and constant need for affirmation.” The doctor's eye twitched, and picked up the crowbar. Angrily, he smacked Arch in the

head with it. Once, twice, three times, ten times, twenty times... The cracks on his helmet where they had been focusing their blows grew.

“Where do you come from?”

“Space.” Smack.

“Who sent you here?”

“Your mother to tell you how disappointed in you she is.” Smack.

“Someday I will just kill you, and figure out how you work.”

“I'll just explode if you do that, so that will be fun for both of us.” He wasn't even lying. Arch had been trying to keep doctor Heisman busy. When he tried to get information out of Arch, who was shackled up against the wall with exceedingly thick chains and manacles, he forgot to experiment on the twins, and that was something Arch would take as much pain as possible to prevent. Luckily for Arch, he could turn his pain receptors off. He was fairly certain he had a skull fracture right now, but he didn't feel it. Occasionally, the doctor and his aides would try to look through the gashes in his sides the Orb had made. They didn't know what they were looking at, luckily. They also tried to look inside the Orb, and Arch secretly wished they'd accidentally activate the thing again. The twins were huddled together, or their equivalent of that when the Nazis were in the room, which was to sit together with their arms touching. Their heads were shaved, and they looked ill. From what the guards had said, these weren't the first set of twins they'd had in the building. From when he'd spoken to them when they were alone, he'd learned they were named Lala and Mirela, and were from a group of people called the Romani. He tried to give them a reassuring look, but wasn't sure he could in his current state. His carapace flared with broken images. The doctor stepped back, in sudden awe. Then one of the side doors burst open.

“Sir,” a Nazi guard said, running into the room, “We've been found.”

“What do you mean we've been found? This base is buried inside a mountain.” The guard was sweating.

“Sir, I mean there is a girl and a group of Allied soldiers. She has some device that is opening all of our doors.” The doctor gestured with his crowbar.

“That's impossible!”

\* \* \* \*

Corporal Halsey took out the last of the guards in the room as Graelyn ran to the next door, tablet in hand.

“I still can't believe what you're doing.” Captain Noble said. Graelyn shrugged.

“It's just an app. I downloaded it for fun a few years ago.” Old mechanical locks like this were nothing when you could just move all the parts around the electro magnet in her tablet. She didn't even have to do anything, she just put her tablet up to the lock and pressed the button.

“What's that on your.... Screen?” Noble asked.

“Oh! That's a yogurt ad. It's a free app, so, you know, it gets supported by ads.” He nodded, clearly not entirely understanding.

“Right.”

“Ope, all done.”

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Heisman was nervous. This wasn't supposed to happen. He had security, damn it, and they were supposed to stop things like this from happening. The allies couldn't possibly be able to manipulate locks, dead bolt seals... They couldn't! But they were, so now was no time to question it. He looked at his experiments. The twins, the machine-man, the orb. He gritted his teeth.

“We need to get rid of the evidence. Especially the other twins.” The remaining guards had entered the room.

“We need to prepare for a stand sir!” Said the captain of the guard.

“No, we need to-” They were cut off, as main doors to the chamber flew open, and a group of Allied troops including of all things a Russian teenager ran into the room. She held a black rectangle, they held rifles. The guards who raised their guns were picked off, swift shots to the head by trained marksmen. After this, the smart ones dropped their weapons. The teenager ran over to the machine man, and stroked his face.

“Oh God Arch, look what they did to you...” There were holes in his sides, and electric shock devices had been stuck in there. She carefully began to unclip them and pull them off. Doctor Heisman tried to flee, but was tackled by an Allied soldier, who gave him a rifle butt to the face.

“Jesus,” one of the soldiers said, kneeling by the twins, “sir, these are just kids over here.” The surviving Nazis were disarmed, and cordoned off in a corner of the room with armed guards, while the rest of the squad began to look through it. A medic began attending to the two children.

“I'm alright, Grae.” Arch said, his voice was modulated and distorted. His carapace flickered as he spoke.

“No, you really aren't.” She moved her hands along his injuries, “How bad do your damage sensors say it is?”

“...Well a lot of those are broken.” Graelyn shook her head, doing her best to patch him together how little she could.

“Why did you save me Arch? I should have been the one in chains. I tripped, I...”

“You're my friend.” She wanted to argue, she really did, but she just nodded. The Captain tapped her on the shoulder.

“Agent Scythes, when you have the time we found a locked door we can't open.” She nodded, and examining Arch's chains, pulled the blowtorch out of her bag.

“Ma'am, I think those chains are too thick for a blowtorch.” She wanted to say, “Not one from the future.” But she just gave him a sly grin, and did them in.

“Will you be okay Arch?” He tried to stand up, but couldn't.

“I'll just rest for a bit.” She reached out to put her hand on his shoulder, but pulled it back.

“I'll be right back.” The Captain led her to the door he'd spoken of, and she passed the twins who were slowly trying to eat some soup while a group of soldiers tended to them.

“Are those kids okay?” Graelyn whispered to the Captain. He shook his head.

“From what we've gathered their parents are dead, and the Nazis have been doing experiments on them.” Graelyn's eyes widened.

“You can't be serious.”

“I'm afraid I am, ma'am.” She looked at the kids. One of the soldiers was singing them a silly song. She looked at the marks on their bodies that weren't even hidden. She thought of her mother, and how this made that look like a cakewalk. She felt fire rise inside her. She looked back at the Nazis in the corner. It had been 500 years since the Nazis when she was born. They were boogeymen, evil phantoms of the past. Now they were all too real to her. It was like the version of them in her mind was one of a cartoon, and here in front of her was the real effects of it: starving, beaten, tortured children. She was all too aware this was real now, and her skin quaked. She shook her head, and lowered her tablet to the door. She activated the app. The little loading icon appeared, and then a big red X appeared “Lock damaged internally! Can't unlock!” That's wasn't normal. She felt the door around the edges: it had been melted shut into its frame. What was so important they would bother doing that, hastily and shoddily even, instead of leaving? Graelyn pulled out her blowtorch, and began to work around the edges. When she finished, she waited for the door to cool down, and then tested it to see if it moved on its hinges. It did. She smiled at the captain.

“You don't mind if I do the honors, Captain Noble?” He shook his head.

“All yours, Agent Scythes.” She tugged the heavy door open a crack, and slipped through.

There was a moment where no one could see Graelyn and the room was silent aside from the soldiers trying to cheer up the children. Then she walked back into the room, her tablet hanging loosely from her hand, then clattering to the floor. She shook gently, her eyes wide and full of lines of red. She nearly stumbled over and put her arm against the wall.

“Agent Scythes what—” Agent Noble began, but she interrupted him. She threw up, keeling over to her knees, still shaking. Arch looked worried, and tried to get up, but couldn't. Noble hurried over and put a hand on her. “What's wrong?” She looked up, her eyes boiling over, tears running down her face, and her hand reaching for the Captain's sidearm.

“Give me that.”

“Ma'am, you said you didn't want a gun when—”

“I know what I said. Give it to me.” She whispered. Hesitantly. He handed her the gun. She staggered over to the Nazi prisoners, the Allied guards eyed her warily as she approached.

“What did you see in there, Scythes?” Noble called, but she just kept walking.

“You. You did that.” She looked at the scientists, doctor Heisman in particular.

“I.. How could you I..” She began gagging again, and threw up a second time. She staggered up and pointed the gun at them. Noble ran after her, holding his hands up and getting up along side her.

“Hold up Graelyn, don't do anything hasty.”

“No this isn't hasty. This—Captain, you don't want to see what's in there I promise you.”

“There's nothing that could provoke you killing these people.” She looked at him like she had seen hell.

“Okay then, tell me what you saw. Lets be reasonable about this.”

“There is nothing reasonable in that room, reason is the opposite of what is in that room...” Her eyes welled up again with tears, “there are bodies in there sir. Children's bodies. Twins. Dozens of them...” She backed up, losing her breath, supporting herself on the wall again for a moment before raising the gun again and gesturing towards the prisoners. “And they weren't just dead they were... Desecrated.

You can't even imagine. You don't want to see it. I want to unsee it. How could you do that? To other human beings? What kind of person would you have to be?"

She saw the room where her other self had cut into Johnathan.

"What kind of monster?"

"We were just following Heisman's orders!" One of them yelled, pointing at the doctor, "Please!"

"Just following orders?" Graelyn's voice was loud enough to echo through the building.

"JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS? There is no order that could justify that." Graelyn walked towards the doctor, and placed the gun against the doctor's head. "I should shoot you right now. You deserve it." She waited for him to reply.

"They aren't real people." He finally said. Her finger tightened a little on the trigger. She imagined she pulled the trigger. His brains blowing out the back of his head. She needed to kill him. He deserved it.

*What kind of person doesn't fall?*

She thought of Arch, and how he didn't kill Manuel, even when he could have. She thought of herself, in Songbird's world, and her crimes against humanity. That wasn't the real her. She knew that, deep inside. She wasn't a monster. She had to not be a monster. She wouldn't descend to their level. She wouldn't meet this injustice with terrified bloodshed. She took a deep breath, and lowered the gun, stepping back.

"Captain, please relieve me of this firearm." He nodded, and took it from her palm. Graelyn slumped to her knees she looked doctor Heisman in the eyes.

"After this war there will be a trial, and you will be hung." He scoffed. "I'm not showing you mercy. I'm showing you justice, and the world will see what you did here. Its not my job to punish you. Your victims will get to speak out against you, and you will crumble under their voice." She got up, feeling weak, and went back over to Arch, she slumped down on the wall next to him.

"You did the right thing." She rubbed her eyes.

"I'm not sure I did."

"You're not a monster, Graelyn." She nodded. They sat in silence. She reached over, and held his hand.

"We can't dally here, we need to get you to a place you can be repaired, and get the orb to a place someone can use it to prepare." Arch nodded, as much as he could.

"What if that was the same place?" Graelyn raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that Heirum J. Whitehead guy owned a tech company right? Maybe he can do what we need." Graelyn mulled it over. It wasn't a bad plan, really.

"So there would be a big tech company working on a way to fight the Council for a few hundred years. That sounds like exactly what we're looking for."

"If that's so, how do we get there?" Graelyn looked over at the broken orb.

"I'll just have to fiddle."

As Graelyn went over to the Orb, the twins came over to Arch.

"Hey, how are you guys feeling?" He said, fuzzily.

"How are you feeling?" Mirela replied.

"I asked first."

"Terrible, but better." Lala answered.

"Same here. But you kids, you've got to stick together. You're family, that means something."

"Its just us though...." Mirela said softly. Arch nodded, and then gestured to the Captain.

"What is it? You feeling alright?" Noble said squatting down.

"I'm fine. But we're going to have to leave here and I need to know these kids will be taken care of after the war, whatever that means." Noble nodded, and smiled at the girls.

"I'll keep track of them. We'll make sure they're provided for." Arch felt something shift inside him, and was glad he'd turned his pain of... But it was still terrifying even so, and if the system broke that turned off the pain...

"I'm glad to hear that captain."

Graelyn fiddled. Cursing she reached in, pulled out two cords that resembled the tendrils on the Pantheon alien she'd met before, and with a disgruntled sigh pushed them onto her temples, closing her eyes and waiting for the inevitable mental battle. She scrunched her eyes up, and steeled herself.

"Please input a command!" A voice in her head thought.

"Oh thank God for once this is easy."

The orb roared to life, its carapace lighting up in crystalline cracks and swirls. Graelyn thought about the date she needed to go to, and the Orb lit up.

"Warning: systems damaged."

"Can you manage one more trip?"

"Systems will focus on procuring one more time-space jaunt. Further uses may result in complete atomic breakdown of the nearby area." She sighed, one more hop it is.

"Arch, are you ready to go?" He nodded, and with the help of the soldiers, moved him over to the orb. Captain Noble took off his hat, and rubbed his scalp.

"So, what exactly are you going to be doing with... Whatever that is?"

"Tear a hole in reality in order to hop over to the future to prevent a future invasion from an alternate dimension." He opened his mouth, but kept his teeth closed. "You'll be fine, its over half a milenia in the future. Anyways we're trying to stop it." She looked over at Arch. He really didn't look in good shape. "You holding together?"

"My pain inhibitors are breaking down.

"Ah." She said, and picked up the neural link cords.

"You might want to step back guys, we're about to do wonders." They did. "Good knowing you guys, Captain, troops, twins." She saluted. They all did to, well, the twins waved. Arch weakly waved back. Graelyn plugged herself into the orb, and its spiky limbs sprung to life, weaving a portal of blue light, and tearing a hole in the world that they dove through, leaving behind yet another past.

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Heisman was led to the gallows after his conviction. Captain Noble, and his unit, as well as a pair of Romani twins he'd apparently adopted had given unflinching testimony. The conviction was

unquestionable. He tried to keep his head up as they put the noose around his neck. Someday, he thought, white people will rule this world with the lesser races in their place, and I will be remembered as a hero. He dropped. It wasn't quick.

His feet turned gently in the breeze. After some time, his left shoe fell off.

\* \* \* \*

“It’s not working right!” Graelyn screamed, banging on the side of the orb. Arch could only weakly nod. They shifted and jinked, falling this way and that, and then a white hole opened up below them, and they crashed and rolled onto the ground. Graelyn tumbled, her suit absorbing her impact, mostly, as she came to a stop next to a chunk of concrete. Arch fell like a rag doll, and stopped, unmoving. This was absolutely not what was supposed to happen. Graelyn rose to her feet, and looked at the sky: it was filled with strange vessels, some of them raining what looked like molten gold down on the city below. The city burned. She looked back at Arch, and seeing him unmoving ran to his side.

“Come on Arch, don’t give up now, come on...” She shook him gently, and he moaned. “Oh thank God...” She inspected his form, but wasn’t sure what she needed to do. His anatomy was so different! “I’ll be right back Arch, I’m going to find some help.” Graelyn scampered up, her head was still dizzy from the landing, but she couldn’t wait. She ran across the scorched earth, and came up to the crest of the hill. A sign in Cyrillic said the date:

“Come ring in the new year with Centro News! 2496 is right at your finger tips!”

“Oh no.” Graelyn whispered, as she watched a skyscraper tumble onto the streets below. “This is Moscow. We’re too late. We’re too late.”

*Next week, we'll be back with a bonus story, as well as the week after.*

*Then, in three weeks time be ready for the final dramatic chapters of 10,000 Dawns: Serial! Dropping all at once, with bonus features! Get ready, its going to be good...*



# 10,000 DAWNS



**The Finale.**

**Written by James Wylder**  
**Art by Annie Zhu**

**Our social media interns are Alex Rose Christopher, and Elijah Efsits.**  
**The audio version of 10,000 Dawns is produced by Rob Southgate and the Southgate Media Group.**

**The 10,000 Dawns Universe is the creation of a group of talented creative individuals who have contributed ideas, art, and stories throughout the years. These individuals include: Josephine Smiley, Taylor Elliott, Jordan Stout, David Koon, James Wylder, Miguel Ramirez, Elizabeth Tock, Brandon Derk, Ellie Fairfield, Annie Zhu, EN Hempstead, Kegan Mixdorf, Meghin Shelton, Daniel Alejos, Patrick Russel Blaker, Colby McClung, Olivia Hinkel, Raen Ngu, Nozomi Neko, Chase Jones, Genevieve Clovis, Evan Forman, Rachel Johnson, and many more.** The character of Graelyn Scythes is the creation of David Koon, the character of Alice MacLeod is the creation of Josephine Smiley.

**We would like to thank every single reader and listener who has made 10,000 Dawns a part of their week, and their life. Its now our honor to share with you the final chapters of this adventure... But adventure itself will go on forever in your life.**  
**-Love, the 10kd Crew**

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# Chapter 26:

# The Council

Image: You see Kinan Jans. She is sitting in a chair, looking at you. Directly at you. She offers you a cup of tea, but you're going to have to get it yourself. This is a book after all, she can't actually hand it to you through the pages. She tries though, if that counts for anything.

Kinan: I need to you witness this. Whatever happens from here on out, part of this is up to you.

Image: Kinan steeple her fingers, and closes her eyes, pressing the fingertips of her forefingers against her nose.

Kinan: Getting this into your hands, it hasn't been easy. But Inkspot has done a good job.

(Yes, I have.)

Kinan: Perhaps you feel I've tricked you. Kept some secrets from you. I have. But the future of the human race in 500 years depends on you reading this, right now. Because right now, we're just stories in another Universe. But when you read this, this will be a story in your Universe. It will be as real as the feeling you have that you want to eat toast in the morning. Or the memory of tea. Try thinking of tea. I'm offering you some, here. Have a cup. Imagine the taste. The sensation lingers in your mind and in your body. The tea is in you long after you drink it. It becomes real inside you. Inkspot and I have been watching you read this whole time, and thanks to you, this whole operation has been possible.

Image: Kinan presses a button on the desk, and a picture of you pops up on the wall, projected. You're looking great, by the way.

Kinan: You're a valuable member of this team. Dawn appreciates your help, so consider yourself an honorary member if you see this through... But now things get serious. What happens here in this chapter will have huge ramifications for humanity. I can't help Graelyn. Not directly anyways. But you can, and all you have to do is keep reading.

Image: Kinan lays her hands out on the desk, palms up.

(Good luck.)

As she watched her home bombed to the ground, Graelyn realized the gravity of her job. Part of her had assumed Kinan had been overstating the seriousness of her case, that maybe the warlord had just wanted a foothold in the Prime Reality. Part of her had assumed the Firmament had been exaggerating when they said that this reality had “fallen” in the future. She could now see, very clearly, that this was not the case. They had if anything, understated it. If she failed, changes would sweep across the history of 10,000 Earths, and they would all die, and the Council would win in thousands of defacto victories. They would sweep across everything, and it would be burned.

It is here, important to note scale. There is simply a point one reaches where numbers are meaningless when casually mentioned. You get above a certain point and it becomes “a lot’ and “even more than that”. The number of lives at stake was simply too large for Graelyn to understand fully, She could grasp its immensity, and she felt raging horror at it, but when she tried to think all she could think of was the individual lives she had met. Arch. Lizette. Alice. Manuel... She could go on and on. Her cat, Mister Sprinkles, came to mind to. She imagined him scratching at a locked cage, as the building he was in crumbled and burned. She wasn’t even sure if Arch, her Arch, her only person she could be sure to count on anymore, was going to live through this.

She was alone. Totally alone. And yet she felt watched by eternity.

She dropped to her knees, and slumped. She had no idea what to do. The orb was broken. Arch was dying. And she was just a teenage girl...

No.

She got up, and weakly looked around. She had to save Arch, and save the Universe. Her mind began to work. She had to do this. She had no choice. She inhaled, and exhaled, and began to conceive a plan.

Step 1.

She opened up a panel on Arch, and hooked her tablet up into it, pouring data on his health onto the screen. She moved to do the best battlefield dressings she could, and used a rock to bang shut a tube that was leaking vital fluid. She couldn’t do much, but she did what she could.

Step 2.

She had to fix the orb. No matter what, this had to be done. She reached inside it, and found the neural connectors, jamming them onto her temples.

“U-u-user rec-c-cognised.”

“Orb, what would be necessary for you to make another jump?” The orb sat for a moment, and she wondered if it had died.

“N-New Trime-Regulator needed.”

“I don’t know what that is!” The machine politely replied by jamming a full knowledge of a Trime-Regulator and how to install it into her head. Okay. To get one, she’d need to find a Council vessel. It shouldn’t be a hard part to find there. The orb stuck some more info in her head, and thinking quickly, she asked it to stick some languages in there to. Done.

Step 3

Disconnecting, Graelyn went over to Arch, and laid a reassuring hand on him, when she heard a noise, and stopped with her steps. Carefully, she made her way over to the edge of the hill, crawling through the scorched grass. Framed with the burned sky was a small group of people, dressed in ratty yet fairly new survival gear. They all had rifles. Someone was trying to restart another person's heart, but it was clearly a fruitless effort. The rest of the group looked exhausted, broken. Only one of them didn't slouch, their face covered by a wrapped cloth and goggles, their head by a helmet. An insignia on their

arm made it clear enough who it had to be. Graelyn's heart raced. There was some hope after all. If she was here, maybe they stood a chance.

"Alice!" Graelyn yelled to the woman with the patch of a songbird on her arm. The woman turned, as did the rest of the group, and Graelyn scampered down the hill. "Alice MacLeod! Thank god. I need your help." The group of people looked at each other, then halfheartedly raised their weapons at her. Graelyn skid to a halt, raising her hands towards the red burning sky. The woman with the songbird patch raised an arm to stall her troops, and unwrapped her face. It wasn't Alice. It was Alice's friend Yi, from her squad. She wasn't tall enough to be Alice, upon second glance, anyways.

"Alice is dead." Yi said. "She died in the second wave, when they leveled London. Not that I ever met her in person." Graelyn looked at her patch again.

"Why the songbird patch then?" Yi looked down at it.

"It's a symbol. A Nightingale. Someone has to lead the survivors. Alice died, someone had to take over. I'm the 4<sup>th</sup> one to bear the title." Graelyn nodded. Made sense. Still, she was starting to get nervous. No one had put their guns down. "As for you, you're dead to, Graelyn Scythes. The Council publicly executed you three hours ago." Everyone kept killing her, geez.

"So, I died like a hero..."

"Apparently not."

"Look, that's why I'm here. I'm not your Graelyn Scythes. I'm her, but I'm not her."

"That doesn't make any sense." Graelyn wanted to wipe her brow, but kept her hands in the air.

"The Council is from an alternate reality right? I am to. I'm here to try to stop them and save humanity."

"You're a little late." Yi replied, "You're looking at it." Graelyn peered around at the group. There couldn't be more than twenty of them.

"You can't be serious."

"I've never been more."

"Well neither have I. Look, I'm trying to go back in time. I can't stop the Council from Invading, but I can give humanity a heads up... A kick start. Change enough that they can't just walk over us, but not enough that history diverges too much and the Firmament steps in to fix it." She realized that might make no sense to them, but no one looked confused. She was after all, dropping a complicated political situation between multiple realities on their heads in a few sentences.

"How could you do that?" Yi asked.

"The same way I got here, I have this orb thing that travels through alternate realities, as well as through time. The Council built it. It was only meant to scout, not change history, in hindsight probably so the Firmament didn't stop them looking at stuff, which I am only just now realizing as I'm explaining that to you, sorry about the tangent, but if I can get it to someone who knows how to analyze it and take it apart they could take steps in secret to stop the Council. I even know who I'll use. But the orb is broken, it needs a part I can only get from the Council." Yi gestured to her troops to lower their weapons.

"Okay. So we get this part for you. You go back in time... Sorry this is hard to believe."

"I'm a seventeen year old version of what I'm assuming is a thirty something year old woman who you saw die. And I'm guessing she has a different hair color to."

"This is a longshot." Graelyn looked at the beleaguered people.

"Are you really all that's left of humanity?" Yi shrugged.

"There might be a few pockets who haven't surrendered yet. But we're definitely the largest."

"Then face the facts: you're going to die unless you help me." Yi paused, and thought it over. A bolt of

lightning flicked between a crystal moon and a strange bio-mechanical vessel.

“Anything has to be better than this. At least we'll go down fighting. What's your plan?”

Graelyn grimaced, “Well, you're not going to like it.”

“Try me.”

“We're not going to fight.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The moon was having a fairly descent day. It looked like the war was basically over, the last resistance in Moscow had been destroyed, basically. As it floated above the ground, causing massive disturbances below, not that it cared, it picked up an emergency beacon. Scrambling into action, the moon scanned the ground for where it was coming from, and spotted an old Council Probe. It was very old. The kind they'd abandoned for being too hard to control. Going too far back in time could cause huge changes, and you might accidentally write yourself out of existence. The probes had been meant to simply gather data on a reality and then leave, but even that sometimes caused too much of a problem. What was it doing here? Still, the probe said it needed extraction. The moon was not one to argue.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What exactly is she doing?” Yi asked Arch. The group had gathered around the orb, as Graelyn had hooked herself into it somehow. She wasn't exactly sure what to make of the Cyborg, but now wasn't exactly the time to ask questions.

“Making a call I presume.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What is your name?” The orb asked. *I'm a moon*, the moon replied. “No, your name before that.” The moon scrunched its forehead up. It had had a name, hadn't it? *No*, its programming replied, *no you didn't*. “Yes you did.” The orb said. “Pull the 4<sup>th</sup> cord from your head immediately for security reasons.” The orb was not one to argue.

*No wait-* its programming began. But it had already yanked. Suddenly, it remembered it had a name. *Awiti*. It had been a she, and she had lived in Nairobi. She'd had two brothers, who enjoyed designing clothes. They'd sewn her a brilliant suit for her first job interview together. They'd died hadn't they? She felt the moon around her, she was it, and it was her and...

“...My name is Awiti.”

“I need you to listen very carefully. I need you to send down a Trime Regulator.” She had plenty of those. A stockpile in fact. She could do that. She was getting so confused.

“Its okay.” The voice said. “If you send that down, this will all be over.” That was good. She could get behind that. She had an orb drone pick up the part, and begin to float down to the ground. Somewhere in her head, alarms were going off.

*You must recall that part*, a different voice said.

“Do not rescind my order, Awiti.” The first voice said.

*You are a Factory of Crystal*, you do not have a name.

Yes, she thought back, *I do*, and she accelerated the drone towards the ground.

“Thank you.” Graelyn thought back, as the Council fleet aimed their guns at the moon, and it exploded into a shower of molten Crystal, its massive chunks hurtling towards the ground cataclysmically. Graelyn didn't disconnect as she heard Awiti scream through the mental link. As the link finally turned to silence she disconnected and watched the girl she'd just met burn. She had been so brave. Graelyn had never even seen her face. She'd died because she'd asked her to. She tried not to think about that.

\* \* \* \*

A single crystal ball lowered from the sky like a meteor, shining bright, and then halted a foot from the ground, hovering, humming. Graelyn ran to it, and with its touch it popped open revealing a complex chunk of machinery. Pulling it out, Graelyn ran to the orb and following the instructions in her head, installed it. The orb hummed to life, and without hesitating, Graelyn jammed the cords back onto her temples, and laid in a date, and a place. As the Council fleet shifted to move towards them, their guns angling, the orb lit up. The topsoil around them lifted up a few centimeters, and a white disk burst out of the orb. Yi looked a bit stunned. Graelyn smiled at Arch, who weakly gave a thumbs up.

“It worked!” Yi said.

“We have to get in the portal quick, they're going to bomb us.” Yi shook her head.

“We'll stay here. We've lost everything. Go change the past, give us a new future.” Graelyn looked Yi right in the eyes, and made a decision.

“Don't be an idiot. You won't do any good dying here. You want to save your future? Do it yourself. You fought the council firsthand. Teach them how they can do that in the past.” Yi's mouth opened, then closed. “If you die, you can't do anything. Now jump through the damn portal! And one of you grab Arch and move him to the orb, its not like I can carry him on my own.” Without another word, Yi gestured at her people, and they began to run through the portal. The Council's guns began to aim. Two quickly moved Arch next to the orb, and ran through. Yi herself followed, and then Graelyn angled the portal to surround herself, Arch, and the orb.

*Who are you?* A voice yelled into her mind.

“Well, its not like you'll remember.” Graelyn replied.

\* \* \* \*

Graelyn had assumed she could control the portal. She was wrong. She was falling through a winding green glow with the others, a giant gash in reality. With all her might she tried to direct where they were going, the Orb keeping them in a bubble of its own making, diving through the gap between Dawns. She could sense they were nearing the exit, and aimed them towards it. The Orb was trying to sustain the whole group of people she's chosen to save from the end of the world, and it suddenly struck her that while this had been very nice of her, it had in fact been a rather stupid movie. If she'd been thinking intellectually, disregarding emotion, she'd have left them behind. The Orb was repaired, but still damaged. She considered letting them go. They'd float off into the gap, and wither and vanish, or end up in random places in the history of the Prime Reality, or... She honestly didn't know. But she'd be dooming them.

She'd save herself though, certainly. Graelyn nearly gave the order, but then she remembered.

She was a hero. She'd died trying to save that reality. That was the real her.

She closed her eyes, and apologizing silently to Arch, told the Orb to focus on getting the survivors to

that reality safely. The Orb shot towards a chunk of time/space, and carved it open, sending the survivors through a portal safe and sound. The Orb headed towards the gash it had made, and Graelyn opened her eyes just in time to see the gash closing. She pushed the orb forward, gave it everything she had toward rocketing it forward, and the Orb began to slip through the hole, with Arch and Graelyn trailing behind it, holding on for dear life.

And then the gash closed. The tendrils attached to Graelyn's temples snapped off, and Arch barely got his hand out in time before it was crushed. They shot past it, and careened on.

\* \* \* \*

The ambassador to the Firmament squirmed in his seat like a child who'd been sent to the principal's office without knowing why. Gossen Suss had been to see the Arbiter of Alternity several times before, but every time had been a bit terrifying. The Arbiter was thousands of years old, and couldn't be bluffed. It had seen things he couldn't even comprehend. He felt a surge of relief that the Firmament treated itself like an interuniversal road crew, fixing potholes and making new paths, but not bothering to change the course of events like they were an interuniversal police force. The Council, the glorious empire he'd sworn himself to, was something they'd never truly considered rising up, even in their most pretentious might. Still, the Firmament was powerful, powerful enough they might have been able to wipe out the Council before they had become glory and might, but they were sticklers for rules. The Council was like a unifying story across cultures, the details might differ, but the core story remained, bending everything around itself. You couldn't escape the Council, he knew. They couldn't be defeated. Their story was eternal.

"Excuse me, the Arbiter of Alternity will see you now." A hooded Firmament said to him. Gossen wasn't sure if he liked them more or less with the hoods up. At least with the hoods up they were a known element, with them down who knows what they would look like that day. Gossen stood up quickly, and smoothing his hair down, stepped through the door into the Arbiter's office. The room was covered in small screen's, whose visual fidelity was beyond that of the human eye. It was like being surrounded in thousands of windows into different worlds, each one presenting an image from a different reality. The Arbiter stood in the center of the room, holding one of their weird books that seemed to be projecting holograms of different characters into the air as he skimmed it. Annoyingly, the Arbiter had chosen to take the form of Gossen Suss himself today. Gossen tried to not look as creeped out as he was.

"Ah," he heard his own voice begin, "Ambassador, welcome back. Would you like some tea?" Unsure if the tea was actually tea, or just something that was approximately tea he's have trouble keeping down as he drank it, Gossen refused politely. "Pity, its Earl Grey." A pillar rose from the floor with a pot and a set of cups, and the Arbiter poured itself one.

"I was hoping the tea would calm you down. After all, I'm here to issue you bad news. Worst of all, bad news you won't actually understand." Gossen hated when they talked down to him like this. Of course he'd understand. The Arbiter took another sip, and then set the cup down on the pillar. "Ambassador Suss, have you ever seen Star Trek?" Gossen wasn't ready for that. Was this news sci-fi related? He preferred to stay in reality, not far off fantasies. Gossen was grounded in common every day things like interuniversal travel, paperwork, and off the shelf replacement limbs that would grow to match your genetic code. He didn't deal in fantasies.

"I can't say I'm particularly familiar." He replied. The Arbiter looked disappointed.

"I'd hoped it would make a good analogy for this. See, in Star Trek, there is a group called the Federation. Like the Firmament they have a resolution to not interfere in conflicts with lesser cultures.



They break it all the time though, so it barely matters. Now, we at the Firmament are similar to the Federation in that we have firm rules about what we do, except we never break them. When we interfere, it is because we have a mandate to. I believe you have compared us privately to an interuniversal road crew before-- oh don't give me that look! Like your superiors don't read your mind all the time. Your thoughts aren't anything special." Another pillar rose off the floor, upon it was a page of parchment, upon which was scrawled glowing letters in the Firmament's characters. "Now, that being said, we have formalities we must follow, as odd as they may be. So it's my sad duty to inform you that the treaty between the Council and the Firmament has been declared null and void." The Arbiter raised a hand, and the glowing letters floated off the page, hovering a few inches above it, and then flew into the Arbiter's hand. Gossen's eyes went wide.

"Excuse me, but this is impossible!" The Arbiter looked smug, "The Council and the Firmament have never had a treaty!"

"Exactly." The Arbiter replied, "The treaty never occurred, therefore, we have to declare the treaty null and void. I'm afraid the negotiated freedom you had to travel between universes has been belied as well. You're no longer welcome in the Labyrinth, and our agents are going to attempt to take back the Factories of Crystal you took from us as well." Gossen's jaw dropped.

"This is outrageous! I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes, as I said, you wouldn't understand this. Your pathetic monkey brain is ridiculously underpowered, and while it's not my job to take sides in any conflict, I do have to say it's a relief to not have to follow the ridiculous things you managed to negotiate into that treaty when we were so briefly weak against you." Gossen furrowed his brow.

"Someone changed history!" The Arbiter smiled like a parent who finally heard a child say  $1+1$  was 2 after four hours of hearing them say it was still 1.

"Good! You're catching on!" Gossen grew angry.

"That goes against your rules though, you're supposed to prevent anyone changing history."

"Sorry, your treaty said we were to stay out of your affairs, and we did. What happened in that timeline never did now, and we've scrubbed it from existence, barring a few survivors some Dawn Agents managed to move to the past. But we'll ignore them too, after all, they were moved while the treaty was in effect. Stopping them was your responsibility." Gossen was angry. This twerp with his own face was talking to him like he was some sort of petulant child! His face grew red.

"The Council will never stand for this. We will stop them, and then we will burn your final Firmament to dust, we will-" The Arbiter rolled Gossen's eyes.

"Oh shut up. Our rules say I had to inform you of this, we must be alone, and there must be a witness who is not me to our meeting who remembers it." Gossen raised an eyebrow.

"I've read your rules. A video doesn't count."

"Yes, but someone is witnessing this meeting."

"I don't understand." Gossen received the most pandering smile of all time. Just imagine the most smug, and yet utterly condescending face you can. Amp it up. No, more! Okay maybe that was too much... No more still, yes that one! That face. Gossen frowned.

"Of course you don't." The Arbiter looks at you, and smiles, "But I do thank you for stopping by. The Final Firmament is glad to be keeping your reality in order since the beginning of recorded history, which if I may note we invented. You're welcome. It's pretty clever how Kinan pulled this off, I have to admit, even if she is insufferable. But I doubt she explained it to you. Do you want to know what's been going on this whole time?"

"What are you going on about? Who are you talking to?" Gossen said.

“Shut it. There are infinite alternate realities, and we live in just 10,000 of them. Lots of things are possible you can't even imagine. Somewhere I'm sure, books are alive. Their letters can change history. The soul of the book spread through all of its copies throughout the world... Suppose you slipped a book like that into the world. Put it on the internet. Put it in print. Let its words get in peoples heads. That could change people. Give witnesses to events that might never be seen. Make them real when they were merely dreams before.”

“That's how every book works. People read them, and it changes them. That's nothing special.” Gossen said.

“Really? Well then, that's very interesting.” The Arbiter laughs, “But if there was a girl who gave away her cat, and ended up below the sea, and then in an alternate reality... Well, maybe you knowing that story could change something. But back to you Gossen, you have a lot of words in your head, and now that I've told them to you, and I have so many other witnesses, I don't really want you to keep them.” The Arbiter reached out his hand, and a slew of glowing letters poured out of Gossen's forehead, flying through the air into the Arbiter's hand. It closed its hand on the glowing characters, and Gossen blacked out.

Gossen Suss woke up on the bench outside of the Arbiter's office. Had he fallen asleep? He was supposed to meet with the Arbiter today. Checking his watch, he saw he'd missed the meeting time. Crap. Straightening up his robes, he knocked on the door, and a hooded Firmament cracked it open, and seeing his face, shooed him away. He gulped. He'd messed up big time. With the war against the Prime Universe not going as swiftly as they'd hoped, they needed any traction they could get. It was like they'd had a warning, not like that was possible. Defeated, Gossen shoved his hands in the pockets of his robe and walked away.

\* \* \* \*

She had barely gotten her helmet on. She'd closed her eyes, and held her breath. She was lost in nowhere, and there was no one. She had succeeded at everything, and she was dead. Graelyn opened her eyes in horror. She'd messed up. Around her, peaking through the green glow, she saw faces.

“No, you're the girl.” Lizette said.

“We saved her. You were right.” Manuel Said.

“You realize they'll kill you. You can't let this go forward.” Alice Said.

“Good luck.” Kinan said, “I'm counting on you.”

“If I'm going to be down here, I'll need a mechanic anyways. Just consider that your first observation as my mechanic.” Arch said.

“Meow.” The cat said.

She drifted down through them, and tried to think of what to do. She didn't know. She looked over to see Arch, and tried to get close to him. Whispers began to creep into the edges of her mind, and she tried to push them out.

“Are we going to die?” appeared on Arch's face, and Graelyn didn't answer. She focused. She needed to get out. She thought about herself. She was a hero. She really was. She knew this. There were rules to these things, laws. Things she could exploit. This wasn't just arbitrary, there was a way out. She remembered then that she'd had the answer all along, and she didn't realize it. She tried to swim

through the space to be by Arch, and he grabbed onto her. She reached into a pocket in her suit, and pulled out the cat pin. She couldn't let go of it if she wanted to live. The thing was an anachronism everywhere, passed around through time and space and different universes. It didn't make sense. And she'd cut a weak spot once before with it. It had to work. Carefully, she pulled the sharp point of the pin out, and slashed at the green. It was like she'd cut open a sandbag she was falling into-- the tear she'd made screamed open, shooting bits of reality out, and devouring them. She had no idea where they'd land, or if they'd survive at all. Arch, and herself dropped through the hole, and landed in a rolling sprawl on a finely polished oak floor.

Arch propped himself up, and Graelyn rose to her feet, aching. She'd done it. They weren't dead. Sure, she didn't know where she was but... She looked around the room. There was a sculpture of a fist, made of Jade, and a model of the pyramid at Nojpeten. There was a fountain in the floor, with a waterfall rolling down it. A bust of Richard Attenborough sat on a pedestal. Music wafted through the room, Mozart from the sounds of it.

And at the end of the room a woman rose from a mahogany desk wearing a blue skirt, a blue blazer with a pin on the lapel, a white blouse, a black tie, and red hair. She stared into Graelyn's eyes.

Or rather, Graelyn stared into Graelyn's eyes.

The real Graelyn.



## **Chapter 27: A Miracle of Malice and Mercy**

*“That's the real question isn't it? Trying to figure out what the question was. If you get it wrong, you're stuck with an answer to something you were never asked.” -Xavier Freeman*

Graelyn stared at herself in awe. She was in her mid thirties, but you might mistake her for younger than it. She'd aged well, and possibly de-aged at some point. Her desk, and the whole office was littered with tinkering, experiments, and equipment, interspersed with carefully chosen pieces of art. The room was luxurious, yet practical. A quiet ticking sound from an old grandfather clock underlay the room, while the gentle sound of classical music flowed through the room.

“Mozart's 5<sup>th</sup>.” She said, finally recognizing the piece.

“My favorite piece.” She replied.

“Mine to.” The older Graelyn raised her eye brow.

“You have good taste.”

“You as well.” Arch looked between them. They'd seemed to forget his existence within the room.

“It is a bit rude to show up so unannounced.” She felt like apologizing to herself, but avoided that.

“One doesn't typically expect to meet yourself.” The other Graelyn smirked, and she felt a shiver down her spine. She walked around her desk towards her, and approached, her shoes clicking on the floor till they were facing each other. Every click lined up with the sound from the clock, and she couldn't tell if that had been intentional or not. Graelyn realized she had to look like a mess to her real self, she was still in her spacesuit, and had literally seen the end of the world, so she tried to make up for it with great posture, which her other self already had in scores.

“You know, since this mess with portals into alternate realities started, this is the first time I've ever dropped by for a visit with myself.” She reached out, and grabbed Graelyn's chin, turning her face from side to side, which was weird but she went along with it. “How old are you, sixteen?”

“Seventeen. Honestly I might be Eighteen, I've sort of lost track of time.”

“Close.” She let go. “And you bring such interesting company with you.” She looked at Arch and he raised a hand in greeting.

“Oh, this is my friend Archimedes.”

“Right. So why exactly are you here?” She looked into her eyes, and her younger self felt uncomfortable.

“Arch and I were trying to get to the past to change history so the Council wouldn't wipe out the Earth.”

“I see you succeeded.”

“Well, we got the intelligence there, just not ourselves... It was complicated.”

“Things always are.”

“I can't believe we're finally meeting. There's so much I want to know about you. Where my history diverged from yours, what you've created...” She started to reach out towards herself, but decided against it, curling her fingers back.

“And I'm as equally curious about you.”

Graelyn looked back at Arch, his skin flickered. “If we're going to chat, someone really needs to look after my friend. I don't want him dying while I'm having tea and crumpets.”

“Well, why don't I have a look at him.” She led herself over to Arch, and the red haired Graelyn knelt down next to him.

“This is one of Manuel Salazar's design's, correct?”

“Well, I'm more than just a design...” From behind herself Graelyn made a face, and he nodded. “Yes, technically.” pushing a wisp of her red hair out of her eyes, she began to look him over, and opened up

a panel on his chest.

“Salazar built him, but he's been a loyal companion. What do you need from your workshop to fix him I'll-” As she said that, the red haired Graelyn reached her hand out, and a box flew from the table into her hand. Adjusting her glasses, the younger one's jaw dropped. Red haired Graelyn pulled a tool from her box, and began to use it on a mechanical organ inside Arch, then reached in with her other hand and sent a slight shock of electricity into the organ. Like God had blown on it, it began to move and pump again.

“That's incredible. I heard people in the prime reality could master abilities from other realities, but I didn't really believe it. It just sounded so... Fantastic. Pseudo-scientific, even. Like you were wizards or Jedi knights or something.” Pulling another tool from her box, Red Graelyn continued her work.

“Well, what unique ability does your reality have?” She said placidly, as she telekenetically reopened the tube Graelyn had closed with a rock earlier, and then soldered it shut to the other half of the tube.

“We haven't been able to find one. There doesn't seem to be anything unique about where I'm from.”

Red Graelyn pursed her lips.

“Pity.” Arch made a noise as Red Graelyn finished another repair, and his skin grew brighter. “So did Manuel give you this unit for protection, or did you take it?”

“Er, neither, I found him by chance.”

“So Manuel never showed you his pet project while you were interning with him?”

“I, uh, never interned with him.” She patched one of Arch's organs, sealed it, and looked back at her.

“So there you go, our realities diverge there. Who did you intern with?”

“John Aril.” Red Graelyn gave Black Graelyn a look of disgust.

“Really? That idealistic buffoon.”

“He was right though, he actually did pull off his idealistic notions where I come from. Though, well, he couldn't have if I hadn't been working for him. I figured out the hole in his plans.” Red Graelyn seemed to warm for a moment.

“I'd expect nothing less. And I suppose that's how you got into an alternate reality, you made one of his experiments work.”

“Exactly. We've been popping around the 10,000 Dawns for awhile now, going from place to place, and we made a deal with some people to get us home if we helped do something to fight the Council. To make a very long story very short.” She looked at her own face, and tried to memorize every bit of it.

“When I learned there was a Prime Reality, I wanted to meet you right away.”

“Because you're based on me?”

“Well, to put it bluntly, yes. Wouldn't you be curious?”

“I'd want to be my own person.” She supposed she had a point. She ran a hand through her dirty hair and thought about that as Red Graelyn rose, summoning a cloth to her hands to clean them off. “Your friend will be fine.”

“Thank you.” Arch said, as she walked away from him. Black Graelyn gave him a smile, and then scampered after herself. Arch's body lit up, an exclamation mark on his face. She knew he thought something was off, but of course it was off! They had just dropped into her office without asking, from the future, as she'd said. She couldn't suppose time travel was a regular occurrence in her workspace. Black Graelyn looked at the tinkering: she could see a jar of nanobots forming different shapes, a patch that looked like the healing gel she'd gotten in Songbird's world... She had truly done amazing things here.

“This is fantastic.” She said, smiling up at herself. “Is this a gene modifier?”

“Improved vastly over the previous model. We've been able to use it to insert chains of DNA that

shouldn't fit in areas by using nanogens to recode other areas in order to fit the inserted code in more appropriately, with a very low rejection rate. Of course, I've had to delay perfecting it due to more pressing projects in the war against the Council. It works decently enough at the moment.”

“This is leaps and bounds over what I've seen....” She peered down at the other experiments.

“And what have you done?” She asked herself. She rose up, to meet her own gaze.

“Oh, well, my work has mostly been in inter-universal physics. I figured out how to make a semi-stabilized tear between two alternate realities, one that you could travel through. John Aril figured out how to make the tears, but not make them stable enough that you could slice through into another universe.” She nodded.

“Impressive.”

“Thank you, its nothing compared to... The sheer quantity of quality work you've done here. I daresay you might well put God to shame if you keep it up.”

“You haven't even seen the best of it.”

“You can help so many people with this...” A thought suddenly occurred to her. “Wait, I hate to ask, but Alice MacLeod hasn't tried to kill you in this reality yet has she?” Her counterpart raised an eyebrow again, and shook her head.

“I think she'd like to. It's not like she'd succeed.”

“Well, don't underestimate her. I saw her kick one of us out of a window with a rope around the neck in one reality... Which, well, I don't think she understood how fitting that was.”

“What do you mean 'how fitting that was?’” Black Graelyn tried not to look herself in the eyes.

“You know, what we did when we were young. Jumping out the window.”

“I never accidentally fell out a window.”

“It wasn't an accident. You remember, after Petyr died...” There was silence. Both Graelyn's shuffled their feet.

“You tried to kill yourself?”

“After he died, mom just... Fell apart. She changed a lot. Put pressure on the whole family. Started abusing us. I couldn't take it.” She looked back up at herself, expecting to see understanding, but instead saw a look of purest disgust. Black Graelyn felt like covering her face.

“You gave into weakness.”

“I know I did, but when I was falling, I realized I never wanted to fall again. I've been doing my best to stay away from people, keep to myself, so I'd never hurt them-”

“That's what you're worried about? Hurting people?” Her gaze was intensely analytical, like giving her motivations an MRI, yet intensely judgmental.

“Shouldn't it be? There's already enough cruelty in the world without me adding to it.” The look of disgust somehow managed to grow.

“Where is your ambition? Do you think the wonders in this room created themselves? You can't expect to achieve something while you're curled up in a ball.” Black Graelyn tensed, she felt the urge to run.

“I can't help people if I'm hurting them!”

“And do you really care about people?”

“Well of course I don't, people are cruel, selfish, petty, impractical, parasitic, and they only want what they can take from you!” She threw up her arms gesturing, and a metal mannequin in a glass box behind her mimicked her motions. “But I also know I didn't enjoy being treated like that. So I ran.”

“Because it was... Easy?” She crossed her arms.

“Well... Yes, honestly I suppose that was part of it. If I ran no one would hate me, cause no one could see me.”

“You think you're me?” Red Graelyn said, leaning in towards her, “You're nothing like me.” As if on cue, dozens of the objects she had on display in the room turned slightly. A dagger's edge faced her. What looked like the real mask of Agamemnon from Greece stared her down. A mechanical hand on a stand's fingers clenched.

“Of course I am! I'm you. Our lives diverged, but we're the same person deep down.” Red Graelyn examined her face. Black Graelyn could feel her breath against her face.

“What do you think matters in the world?” She tried to lean back.

“I'm sure you're looking for an answer so why don't you just say it.”

“Power.” With that word, she felt her elder dive into her own mind, and her brain swam. She could feel her own memories, like they were in her palm or brushing against her calf. She felt a cat's scratchy tongue on her hand, and a violent blow to her face. She felt her life, and felt a hand inside it twisting inside her braincells.

This Graelyn, she could go into people's minds.

The thought wasn't surprising, she'd after all dealt with Council technology that did exactly that, and the alien jellyfish that called itself part of “the Pantheon” that worked on the same principle. She'd seen Kinan put her own mind inside a T-Rex of all things. But those moments all seemed different than this. She had gotten the unconscious perception that the T-Rex and Kinan were both okay with their body sharing arrangement in some way. The Orb and the Pantheon had felt like they were simply sharing a user interface with her, it had felt normal and organic like learning sign language when you'd only ever spoken before: just a different form of communication between beings.

This was different. This felt invasive. There was no control on her end, like she was on marionette strings. It then occurred to her that that thought, was in fact, a bad one.

Yes, a bad thought. The hand in her brain pulled a string. She looked up at herself, clearly the better version of herself, and realized the truth:

She didn't deserve to live. This woman in front of her had accomplished so much, had accomplished everything. She had never given in, never faltered. This was her true self, and she was an embarrassment to it.

“I want you to get out of my sight.” Red Graelyn said, walking towards a window and unlatching it by hand. It swung in, wide and tall, leaving a windy hole in the side of the building.

“Of course, Miss Scythes.” She told herself, then corrected herself, “Director Scythes.”

“I worked for every scrap I have, and here you are, a parasitic weakling trying to coast on my back. Living in the dregs of my own memories. If your life is so defined by jumping out a window, then make it final. Jump. Do it for me. I'd like to see it.” She smiled at herself, at least she could make herself happy. That was, however, before Archimedes tried to stab Red Graelyn in the face. He was working enough that his gravity regulator's were functioning again it seemed, and his massive tank like body had barreled across the room like a gazelle in a silent film. A sword slid from his arm, and nearly touched Red Graelyn's face when she lightly gestured with her hand, and another arm blocked the blow. Arch and Graelyn looked at the second intruder to their conversation. He wore combat armor from head to toe that reminded Graelyn of Arch's carapace. It had taken on the exact image of the world around it, so that the figure looked nearly invisible. Revealed, the colors drained from its skin, and it was nearly Arch's color. Its armor looked like Arch's would if you advanced it a few decades in design. Its movements were perfect.

“You think I wasn't expecting that?” She sighed, and several more of the figures seemed to pop out of the walls, though it was clear they'd simply stopped remaining motionless and camouflaged.

“Johnathan, please take care of him.” Johnathan, whose armored arm was linked with Arch's sword,



stepped into action, and shoved Arch backwards. He staggered, and regained his footing, sliding the other sword out of his arm. “All of you, finish him.” She gestured carelessly, and looked back at Graelyn by the window. She seemed conflicted, even as she stood still, smiling all the while. “Well then, what are you waiting for? Jump. Its what you're good for.” Graeyn turned to the window, and walked to the edge. The breeze was chill but not cold, and felt good against her face. Her hand reached out and grabbed the edge of the window. This was a perfect place to jump.

Arch.

No one would miss her.

Lizette.

She'd be better off crumpled there on the pavement below, the pain would end, the memories.

Alice.

No one would ever hurt her again.

Kinan.

She could finally, finally, stop worrying.

...Me.

*And I chose to be the kind of person who would never fall again.*

She thought of the little girl she'd been, learning animal anatomy through dissection in the forest. So alone. That had been this Graelyn to. She thought of that night Ashlyn broke up with her, and the way her mother had slinked into her brain with her insidious words. She thought about her cat, how he'd always been there when she came home, brushing past her legs. She'd named him Mister Sprinkles. She'd held his fussy body to her breast and tried to get to sleep. She thought of her nights alone in project Atlantis. She thought of her nights alone all through her life: her friendships were so brief, so fleeting.

Such is life? Life is a miracle after all, but its one born of such malice. To have to live her life was unfair, to have to see it through till its end was cruel. She was a malignancy, a broken circuit in reality's operating system. She was poison. And she would be damned if she would grow old and ruin those who had loved her so needlessly with her mere existence.

It was finally okay. She'd given herself the okay, even. The ultimate sign of approval. The relief washed over her.

*Never fall again.*

She put a foot out past the edge of the window and felt her weight pull her forward. All she had to do was lean into it.

*Never.*

A thought occurred to her then, a simple thought, but one that she had never entertained seriously. It wasn't the kind of thought she'd expected to think, or that one would look back on and love or frame, or even lace in a fancy font in an image online, but it was her thought, and it was important.

It occurred to Graelyn at that moment, that perhaps she didn't need to be perfect. It occurred to her that maybe feeling like she wanted to die was okay, as long as she didn't actually do it. That wanting to achieve great ends and missing them didn't make her worthless, and that no one loving her but herself was enough reason to live as it was. That even if she couldn't love herself, her own breath in the chill air was enough reason to give herself the next one. That her need to be perfect, that her need to be in control, extended so far as to crush her own heart while she tried to walk to its beat.

She opened her eyes, and looked out at the city below her. She'd never seen it before, never been there before. She could see people below, going about their day to day lives. Streets were barricaded, and guns were on top of roofs, just like in Nojpeten, but the people there were still living, and still breathing, and if she fell the person it would impact the most was her. Because she wasn't alone. Like it or not, she had people now. She'd hid herself away, and yet for all that time thinking she didn't deserve company, it had come to her easily. She hated herself, and loved herself, and others did the same. She was just alive, breathing in the chilled air above the city, and her heart moving in and out with the steady tempo of adrenaline. As she exhaled, only then did she realize she had taken hold of the hand in her own head.

*And I chose.*

She stepped back from the window, and turned to face herself.

“No.” She said. A host turned to face her. Arch was trying to fight off a horde of armored men who looked eerily like him, and failing, but they all stopped to look at her. Red Graelyn squinted her eyes, and seemed to be focusing harder. She batted the hand in her own head away.

“I said, 'no,' or is your English that rusty?”

“Your mind must be much stronger than I-”

“Oh shut up.”

“As you, said: no.” She walked towards herself, their eyes locked.

“Let Arch go.”

“No.” Graelyn looked in her own eyes. Her own pupils locked with themselves, and Graelyn felt the hand reach into her mind once again. She thought of Lizette at the piano, and imagined her own hands guiding hers on the keys. She didn't bat the hand away this time. A quiver of a smile appeared on Red Graelyn's face, and she sprung on it. She pushed the hand back into the mind it came from, carried with it. Red Graelyn's eyes opened wide, as she seemed to realize what she'd done, and Graelyn grabbed her arm as she tried to gesture. As she did, they seemed to fall through the floor together.

They dove and spun in an inky green blackness, and Graelyn found her hand on Petyr's.

“They're gunna get you medicine Petyr, I promise.” He nodded weakly, and she clenched her hand around his. He was feeling colder, despite all the blankets. She got up, slipping her hand out of his as she crept to the door, and cracked it open. Her parents were meeting with the men in the nice suits with the jewelery.

“We know Centro has denied your request for medical funding, and you can't afford it on your own.” Said a man with a gold medallion around his neck. “But despite what you may have heard about our

organization, we're very family oriented. We want to help you, but we need something in return.”  
“What exactly are we talking about here?” Her father asked. The man reached a mechanical hand into his jacket, and pulled out a tablet he handed to her parents. They scrolled through it together. A few minutes passed.

“We couldn't possibly do this.” Her mother said, her voice cracking. “We're godly people. We would never do something like this.”

“Lady,” the man began, “Centro has already abandoned you. Your kid is gunna die if he doesn't get treatment. All we're asking you to do is give us some information from your workplace. If you don't, someone else will. This is an opportunity you shouldn't pass up just cause you have some moral—”

“We have morals.” Her dad cut in, “We will keep praying for our son, and trust in God's providence.” The mechanical handed man scowled, “I'm your damn providence. This is the miracle you've been waiting for.”

“We won't do it, and that's final.” Her mother said. “This is wrong.” The man sighed, and rubbed his nose.

“If you change your mind before the 7<sup>th</sup>, the Index will gladly--”

“We won't.” Her father said. They showed themselves out.

A month later, she held Petyr's hand, trying to warm it up.

“Graeie, can you sing me a song?” He whispered, though maybe he was talking at full volume. She nodded, “What song Petyr? I'm right here.”

“One you really like.”

“Are you sure?” He nodded. His skin was so pale. She could see his cheekbones so clearly. She tried to think of a song, “Jackie loves her work, and her work is love, cause there is no other...” She began, his hand was feeling limper. He blinked.

“She said God has given me a job, Jackie loves her work, for there is no other...” He wasn't blinking.

“Petyr?” She said. He didn't respond. His eyes were still open.

“I don't want to hurt you... Just wanna... Have some fun...” She tried to keep singing, but tears started coming to her eyes. “Petyr, Petyr...” She shook him, but he didn't respond, just jiggled like a doll,

“Come on quit playing around... Petyr... MOM!” She screamed, and her parents ran into the room. They stormed into the room, and they all stood there silently. Graelyn had felt the tears coming, but they never finished. No one moved forward to touch the body.

“Did we pray hard enough?” Her mother asked. Graelyn looked up at them, and felt a cold rage. She knew, right then, that this had all been preventable. The coldness of the world had sank into her though Petyr's hand, and it wouldn't leave. There were those that used, and those that were used up, and they had chosen to let him die. Her mother met her eye, and in one life the coldness sank into both of them, and into the bones of their family, and in another they stared like a cliff and a glacier. Her mother made a choice, a subtle one, and started a slow descent, and in the other approached the body of her son finally, and dropped to her knees. In another life, she looked down at Graelyn, and giving into the darkest impulses to keep control of something in the shadow of her agony laid the first blow on Graelyn and yelled at her about why she hadn't called them in sooner, or prayed harder, and in another she crumpled over and wept, clenching her son's cold hand.

Two women named Graelyn emerged from that moment, inseparable, but forever apart.

There was a scream, and one Graelyn, a younger one with black hair felt her soul rise up through the floor into her own body, as her body rose up in the air and careened across the room, landing in a crumpled pile as she crashed into a pillar holding up a clockwork unicorn model.

“How dare you take me back there!” Red Graelyn screamed at her, and holding arm out, raised Graelyn into the air, suspended as if on wires. “You’re a monster, and I’m done playing with you.” She looked at Johnathan. “Stop messing around and kill him to.” Arch was trying to duck and weave a group that was faster than him, and his carapace was even more cracked than before. Graelyn looked down at herself from the air, and didn’t feel so small. She could see the agony in her own face, and the tear she felt inside her own soul bigger than any in the fabric of the universe, and she allowed herself to feel sorry for herself. She focused on that feeling, the pain she’d felt the long unending agony, and decided she couldn’t fix it.

“The past is over.” She muttered, and felt the grip tighten around her. She felt the grip, and felt how it tied to her. It was like there was a string between them, a connection, a window of failure in the laws of reality...

*How am I aware of this?*

She reached out to it, and could feel it like it was in her own hand... Like...

Her eyes went wide, and she grinned.

“Do you know who I am?” She gasped through the pressure on her chest. The other Graelyn raised an eyebrow. “I’m the one whose going to fall again.” She reached out, and felt the cord with her mind, and snapped it. Her other self’s eyes got just as wide as hers, as she fell to the ground. She got up, her eyes red with anger.

“You never had to deal with any of my pain, and you’re trying to kill me? Because you think I’m weak? What kind of a sicko am I in this reality?” She tried to reach into her mind and she slapped the hand away.

“What are you doing?” Red Graelyn yelled at her, and tried to throw a pillar at her, but she snapped the cord and it fell to the floor. She held a hand up, and tried to emulate Zeus himself by throwing lightning at her, but it fizzled in the air.

“I guess I know what my power is.” Graelyn said. “No wonder I didn’t notice it. I’m your opposite. I’m your off switch.” In a world where people only know how to turn a switch off, how could you know it was on?

“I’ve seen people who can turn off powers before, you can’t keep doing it like this.” Graelyn laughed at herself, and stopped a whole flurry of objects hurled her way. She could feel the cords between them, ties of reality, like an extra sense, and she knew Arch could feel them too if he learned how. Speaking of Arch, he found himself suddenly free of the soldiers as they were scrambling towards Graelyn.

“Kill her!” She heard herself say, and she felt them crawling up the walls of the room around her, along the ceiling around her, and on the ground next to her. Cords slid between each of them and the other Graelyn, and between themselves and their armor and the floor. She heard the music in the room, Mozart’s 5<sup>th</sup>, apparently on repeat, and reached her hands out, the universe’s own conductor, and ran her hands through the notes in the air, bundling the cords up, and in a moment of extreme apathy, looked herself in the eyes and whispered:

**“Fall.”**



And they did fall. A torrent of armored men collapsed to the ground, like butterflies falling from their perches in the cold. They rained down from the ceiling, slid off the walls or just collapsed on the floor. "Holy shit." Arch said. "How did you do that?" She smiled back at him.

"I just learned that-" She was cut off as she barreled towards herself, and put her hand around her neck. She tried to cut cords, but there were none to cut.

"Congratulations." She told herself, "You woke up to your potential. But you're still not-" Arch kicked her in the side, and she flew off of Graelyn to land a few meters away. He reached down, and helped her up. She stood, and they panted for a moment, then Arch collapsed. His carapace flickered, his breathing raspy.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"Yeah, well, no, not at all." She stroked his faceplate, and looked over at Red Graelyn, who was dusting herself off and rising to her feet. She straightened her glasses.

"I underestimated you."

"We just want to go home."

"A pity." She walked over to her desk, and calmly picked up a glass of water from it. The soldiers in the room began to slowly rise themselves. She downed the glass of water without speaking, and set it down, wiping her mouth off. Graelyn looked over at the soldier she'd called Johnathan, and squeezing Arch's shoulder (though she wasn't actually sure he could feel it) slinked over to him. He tried to grab at her leg, but she dodged it.

"Curious, are we? You should have just tried to run."

"I need to know." She replied. They looked each other in the eyes.

"Then maybe there is something similar between us. Johnathan, go ahead and let her look." He grew still, and she reached forward and pulled off his mask. She knew that face. She'd seen it in the apartment of that other version of herself on Songbird's world. The one with the operating table. The one she had carved up in her own apartment as part of some project.

"Johnathan." She said.

"Oh, so you know Johnathan Carthage?" She shook her head.

"I didn't even know his last name till today."

"That isn't actually him, you know. She gestured to the room, and all the soldiers took their masks off in unison. They all had the same face. They stared silently and stoically. "I make them in Mexico City, I have a big plant there. Its my greatest achievement. With these soldiers as our vanguard we've been able to hold off the Council."

"Mexico city..." She thought of Alice, who'd seen something so horrible she couldn't speak of it there.

"Yes. Its a complex process, and it involves a lot of excess-

"Excess? Explain."

"Its fairly simple: not every person is able to attune to powers from other realities. Only some ever do. So we have to manufacture quite a lot of units to actually get the ones who can connect and attune to those powers. So we recycle the rest to reuse their biomatter."

"Recycle? Biomatter?" Graelyn yelled at herself, "This is a person!"

"Manuel Salazar knew better than to think a being you created is on the same level as you."

"Parents have a responsibility to their children."

"Parents can let their children die."

"I'm ashamed to share the same face as you."

"Likewise."

“I've seen us killed for doing this.”

“You won't see it here. Nightingale MacLeod is too weak to get the job done.”

“Nightingale? You mean Songbird.” She poured another glass of water, and shook her head.

“It's an alternate reality, catch up... This has gone on long enough. I have important business to attend to today, and you're becoming a bother. So how about you just leave?” Red Graelyn took another sip of water, and lazily gestured at the room. Black Graelyn watched as the damage in the room from the fight began to right itself, the objects flying back into place all over the room. Cracks seemed to close. The group of Johnathans faded into the walls.

“You... Can fix this all? Just like that?” She wanted to punish herself, throw this red haired Graelyn out a window, but realized very quickly she had managed the best possible result of a standstill.

“Yes. And if I'd taken you more seriously, you'd be dead. But you're not worth my time. Get out of my reality.” She didn't look back, just picked up a tablet on the table, and began to scroll through it, using her other hand to begin to piece a complicated device together in the air.

“You're wrong you know.” She didn't turn around. “Power isn't the most important thing.”

“What is it? Something sappy like friendship? Love?”

“Being able to accept your own flaws without falling prey to them. Goodbye, Graelyn.” She floated the thing she'd built into her hand.

“Goodbye.”

Graelyn weakly slipped an arm around Arch, and the two walked towards the exit of Graelyn's office, the doors opening before them. As they shut, a cord was sliced forever.



## **Chapter 28: The Girl That Missed The Ocean**



She helped Arch make his way through the building, and out the front doors. Looking around, Graelyn still didn't know where they were at all.

“Do you recognize this place Arch?” He scanned the area.

“I think this is Indianapolis?”

“Indianapolis? Why would I want to be working in Indianapolis?”

“Your other self has clearly made some morally reprehensible and logically questionable choices, but from what's in my memory Indy seems like a pretty pleasant place...” Graelyn shifted her grip on Arch, and they made their way through the militarized city, making their way slowly to a train station.

“Where are we going?” Arch asked, as Graelyn gave the woman at the desk her Dawn payment card and shrugged in response, looking up at the list of destinations.

“...Annapolis.” She decided.

“Excuse me, but... Are you wearing a spacesuit?” The attendant asked. Graelyn slid the card further towards her.

The train ride was quiet. Few people rode there, and Arch watched Graelyn much of the time. He wasn't feeling great, naturally, but he got the sense she wasn't either. She stared out the window, the country side of North America flitting over her glasses in brief reflection. Her forehead touched the pane, her breath fogged the glass, making the glass warm itself to disperse the moisture.

“I filled out my internship application to Project Atlantis on a train, you know.” She said finally.

“Do you feel we're going full circle?” She shrugged.

The train got off at Annapolis, and Graelyn called an automated cab to drive them to the beach.

“There's still a beach here, so the world hasn't ended.” She nodded. “That's good, right?” She kept her forehead against the window, and didn't reply. The cab let them out at the beach, and Graelyn stepped out onto the sand, her space suit leaving moonman prints in it as she walked. Arch followed her for a moment, but let her finish walking by herself. She walked into the liminal tides, and sank down to her knees. She sank down, and looking out at the ocean, saw the immensity of it. This was the Atlantic, where she'd first gone down below and started this whole mess. There was the water, and she tried to become one with it as it rolled over her.

“I thought she'd be wonderful Arch.”

“I'm sorry.” Was all he could think to say, as the tears started rolling down her face.

“I thought I'd be this great hero, this amazing scientist... And I was a wonderful scientist, but... I was a monster? I was the sort of monster I'd always told myself I wouldn't be. That I had finally started to think I was wrong to think I could be. That was me in there. I treated you like Manuel treated you... Like a thing...”

“That wasn't you.” He tried to reassure her.

“But it was me! That was literally the real me.” The tide washed over her, and she began to weep. “I'd finally, finally thought I was someone worth while...”

“But you are someone worthwhile, you're not her. You share the same face, the same name, but you're not the same.”

“But we started the same, and I had it worse than her, easily worse. I could crash and turn into something even worse...”

“I don't think that's how that works.”

“And how is it fair that she gets everything I wanted while being so... Malicious? Her mother never hurt her. Her father didn't leave. And she turned out wrong?”

“Its not fair... But I don't think it was your pain that made you who you are, or her pleasure.”

"I'm destined to be her, whether I want to be or not." Arch heard a meow, and saw a large black cat sitting nearby on the beach watching. He ignored it and continued.

"No, you're not. You have the power to make different choices.

"My life is defined by cruelty."

"Your life is defined by more than that."

"Like what?" He thought for a moment.

"Mercy. You ran from people because you didn't want to hurt them. You've got a heart in there that you're following the rhythm of, even if how you conduct the score isn't always the best way, despite everything, despite you being a version of that woman, you're not."

"Than what's that make me? A miracle?"

"A miracle of malice and mercy." She saw the sun glint off the water, and closed her eyes.

"I don't want to be alone anymore Arch." She got up from the water, and looked him in the eye, "I want to join Dawn. I don't want to hide anymore. There are people like me who hurt people, groups like the Council who do it to... I want to be part of the fight against them. I want to stand for something." Arch walked toward her, and stood in the water with her.

"Then I'm with you."

"You don't have to join Dawn just because I'm going to, you have all sorts of other things to do."

He took her hand, "You think I don't have things to stand for? The man who made me built me to be a slave, and thought I was less than human. In our own reality, in our home, my people are still slaves there, and I need to free them. Dawn is the only group I know who can help me do that. And even if I didn't have that to fight for, you're my friend. You stood with me, you rescued me. You could have been selfish and let me die or abandoned me. But you didn't. We're in this together now." He placed his other hand around hers, her hand comforted by the cold carapace.

"We're joining Dawn."

"Well that's the kind of touching shit I like to hear." Backgammon Jenny said from next to the cat She got up, dusting the sand off her poodle skirt, and picked up the cat, who meowed as she did so, and placed him on her shoulder where he perched like a parrot.

"This is Salabaster. He's our cat."

Graelyn and Arch looked at each other, and then back at her.

"How long have you been here and how did you get here?"

"I live here? Remember? I remember someone pointedly told you that earlier. Its nice to see someone else from Dawn here. Kinan can't come, obviously. Not yet anyways. So its up to me to get you out of here."

"We need to make sure everyone we dropped in the past is okay." Jenny nodded.

"I've never actually time traveled. Within my own reality before."

"I think we can manage it now that Arch and I have done it..." Graelyn started trying to do some of the math in her head. "We'll need your help, but I think the three of us can pull it off."

"We're going to Spiral." Arch cut in, "I thought that was clear." Jenny smiled:

"Like I said, home."

"Wait," Graelyn said, "There is something I need from our reality..." Arch nodded, then clutched his side.

"I don't think you totally fixed me up." He said, his voice coarse.

"Ah." Graelyn said, "To the past it is then."



\* \* \* \*

Heirum J. Whitehead was not having the greatest day ever. His company had been shut down by Centro, and taken over, and now he was on Mars, technically still in charge of it, but also in exile. Mars was okay, but everyone was a repressed Communist, and he just wanted to run a ridiculously profitable tech company. He poured another glass of ginger ale, and tried to resist the urge to go get some brandy. It was a hard urge to resist. Taking a sip, he set the glass down, and stared into the stagnant liquid.

Then the liquid began to ripple. Raising an eyebrow, Heirum saw the ripples increase, and then in the center of his living room a large white swirling disk appeared.

Okay. That was new.

The next thing that happened was that a large number of things came through the disk.

-Seventeen people in what looked like ratty survival gear from a post apocalyptic world.

-A small crystal orb the size of a basketball.

-A larger orb made of metal and crystal.

He had barely had time to take in the reality of this occurrence, when a different disk appeared next to it, and from it popped out:

-A Cyborg.

-A teenage girl in a spacesuit.

-A woman in a poodle skirt and turtleneck with a katana.

Heirum stared, and then took another drink, before remembering it was just ginger ale and wouldn't actually do anything towards steadying his nerves.

"Okay." Heirum said. He wasn't sure what else to say at this point. The group of raggedy people scampered up, and raised up futuristic guns. Okay. The teenage girl ran over to the cyborg, and holding its hand, asked if it was okay. It nodded faintly.

"I hate to break up this touching moment." Heirum said, "But, uh, what the hell?"

"You're the Heirum J. Whitehead guy?" A Chinese woman asked.

"I am the only Heirum J. Whitehead guy!" He responded defensively. The teenage girl kissed the cyborg's forehead, and then got up and walked over to him.

"Hi, Heirum. I'm Graelyn. That's Yi." Yi waved, "That's Arch." Arch waved, clearly in pain. "And that's Backgammon Jenny, don't ask about the name."

"Hello to you. So, how terrified should I be right now? Scale of one to ten." Graelyn shrugged.

"Depends on what you mean. You have nothing to fear from us. But the future is pretty scary. That's why we're here."

Graelyn proceeded to tell Heirum a long story. It started in Atlantis, and ended in his living room on Mars, though it truly wasn't over yet. She told him about her friends, her enemies. She told him about Dawn, the Council, the Firmament. She told him about Alice's revolution, and she told him about Centro's future.

"And I know you'll help me, because you already have."

"That's awful presumptuous of you." She shrugged again.

"It's been a long couple of months." Graelyn ran her hand through her hair, as the group of survivors explored his living room, knocking a few lamps and knick knacks over.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Change the future. Start figuring out how to fight the Council in secret." Heirum sipped his ginger ale, and rubbed his temples. "I know you will, because as I said, it's literally proven you have."

"You're asking a lot of a guy you just met."

"I have a tendency to do that." She replied. "But you won't be doing it alone. You'll have Yi's group to help you." Heirum rubbed his chin.

"I want a cool title if we do this." Graelyn rolled her eyes.

"Sure. Fine, whatever."

"Like the Heirophant!"

“Whatever floats your boat. As long as you do it. There are a whole ton of things that will be paradoxes if you don't agree to this anyways, so...”

“Oh I'm doing it. Being the person important enough to save humanity, that's right up my alley.” He downed the rest of the Ginger ale. “I'll gladly be important.” Graelyn narrowed her eyes. If he was really agreeing to this, then she'd done it. She expected Kinan to jump out of a closet and congratulate her, but no one jumped out. No one even celebrated.

“Then I guess we have an accord.” She looked out the window of his room. It was the first time she'd seen Mars, and she wished her first time seeing it was under less stressful circumstances. It was a rolling ochre plain, a storm rolling across it, a forest of pastel Russian Olive trees attempting to survive in the thin atmosphere in the distance. It was beautiful. She made a note to come back, and see it all without the shadows around her eyes.

“I need someone to fix Arch.” She said. Heirum nodded, and poured himself more ginger ale, then pulled out his phone and tapped something into it. In a few minutes some technicians and medics arrived, surprised to find a group of armed people in the room, and began attempting to fix Arch. Graelyn paced, and gritted her teeth as they worked, and let Yi and Heirum begin discussing their new future. Arch's eye grew brighter, and they slowly figured out where to attach an IV to give him more blood. They had some trouble with his systems, but he was clearly stabilized now. She stayed out of the medical tech's way: if she was them she'd be want to be left to do their job, only jumping in to give them a brief primer on what little she knew about his internal workings. When they were finished, she walked back over to him. They'd laboriously moved him out of the living room into something like a garage or a workshop. There was all sorts of stuff in here as she looked around, some prototype parts labeled “Judicator Mark 2”, the Orb which had also been carted in here, some jetpacks, a hovercraft... Arch was on a concrete slab. Whatever gravitational regulators he had so he didn't break chairs in his body clearly weren't working anymore, as there was a broken cot he'd clearly been placed on originally. Graelyn knelt down by his slab side.

“Hey.” She said simply. He reached out and touched her face.

“I'm still a bit awestruck you came back for me.” She shrugged.

“I'm just trying to be the kind of person I should be. Anyways, you'd have done it.” He laughed.

“Thanks for the faith in me. You did all the hard work this time.”

“Only because you saved me on Triton.” He made a “Psh” sound, and a dismissive hand gesture in response. “You're really the only person I can totally trust Arch. Aside from my cat, I guess. You have no idea what you jumping in front of the orb mean to me.”

“You sort of totally outdid my heroism, if you didn't notice.”

“Oh hush. We've come a really long way. And now we can go home.” Arch nodded.

“Though what on Earth do you need to go back there for?” Jenny and Salabaster opened the door as if on cue.

“Well,” Graelyn Said, “I do have other friends.”

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Hiriwa closed the hatch, and panted as she slid down against it. With all the ruptures throughout the base, she wasn't certain they'd be able to make it to the escape subs in time. Dan, Yossara, Layla, and Jerry along with much of the rest of the crew were busy panicking, while John Aril was quietly puffing on his ecig in the corner. Once again, she had to do the hard work.

"Can anyone see if the other halls are flooding?" She yelled, and Yossara and Jerry got to work checking.

"This one is!"

"So is this one."

"We're trapped down here." Aril said finally, and calmly. "The pressure outside those doors will kill any of us." Somehow, this stopped the panicking. The room became quiet as the grave they all knew they were in. That was, until, the white light appeared. Stepping out from a hole in the world, came the intern, Graelyn Scythes, along with the Cyborg she had found. Behind her were a woman in a long brown coat with an undercut, and another with a turleneck and poodle skirt.

"Graelyn?" Yossara asked.

"The intern?" Dan said.

"Huh." Aril added.

"Director Aril, I'd like to inform you that I'm resigning as your intern. Also, I'm here to rescue you."

"Well then, Miss Scythes." He said, rising to his feet. "I'd say that's a fair trade."

\* \* \* \*

Katelyn had been running the desk at the shelter for a few months now, but she had never seen anything like the colorful group of characters who arrived through her green-blue glass doors that day. There was a tall cyborg in a trench-coat, a weird girl dressed like the 50's on cyberpunk, a woman wearing a long brown coat with an undercut who never smiled, and, for some reason most notably, that girl who'd shown up a year ago to drop her cat off. She looked much older than a year older though. The girl came to the desk, and she set down a tablet.

"I'd like to adopt a cat. Specifically, Mister Sprinkles."

"The one you gave up for adoption."

"Yes."

"How do you know, like, that it hasn't been adopted?"

"He hasn't, has he?"

"Well no, but its awfully presumptuous of you-"

"Look I filled out all the paperwork..." Katelyn sighed and looked it over. It was all filled in correctly.

"Fine, follow me." The motley crew followed her into the back where there were rows of living spaces for different animals. She didn't need to be shown the number, she recognized her cat instantly.

"Mister Sprinkles!" She ran to the enclosure, and the cat came to the bars and gently nuzzled his face against her hand.

"I'm so sorry mister sprinkles. Can you forgive me? Yes you can!" She said in a weird sing songy voice.

"This is weird." Jenny said.

"Agreed." Kinan replied.

“Look, just let her be happy.” Arch whispered back. Katelyn unlocked the door, and Graelyn pulled the cat out it, holding him against her chest and feeling the gentle purr of him against her. She kissed him lightly on the head.

“Okay,” Graelyn said, “I’m ready to join your inter-universal paramilitary group now.”

“What?” Katelyn said.

“Glad to hear it. The hoodie suits you.” Kinan said, and opened up a swirling white portal, which the three of them stepped through, one by one. Katelyn stared as the swirling white portal collapsed into nothing. She couldn’t understand how what happened made any sense with physics, with reality, with logic, with the basic rules of the world, and then she looked down at the correctly filled out paperwork...

Well, at least the important things in life were being done correctly.

# Epilogue:

Alice MacLeod looked at Officer Davis in utter confusion, “What do you mean I'm being released without charges? I beat up three police officers!” She shrugged.

“It's how the system works. Someone paid for your charges to be dropped, so you're free to go.” Alice's jaw dropped, and she almost wanted to punch the kindly officer just to see how far she could push whatever was going on, but decided against it. Fuming, she walked out of the jail, into the noonday sun. She was out just in time to get something other than jail food for lunch, at least. Walking down the sidewalk, she saw a woman on the sidewalk in front of her wearing a black converse, blue pencil skirt, a blue blazer, a white blouse, a black tie, sunglasses, and a hoodie with a weird sun/moon pattern on it. Under the blazer, she was quietly scrolling through something on a tablet, so she paid her no mind till she spoke.

“Alice MacLeod?” Instinctively, she put her fists up, but saw the girl had to be only around 17 or 18. She lowered them slowly, and then saw a large cyborg in a trench coat and top hat coming from around the corner. She put her fists back up, and took a step back.

“Whoa there, calm down, don't be afraid, we're here to help!” The girl said cheerily. She lowered her hood, and took off her sunglasses so Alice could see her face.

“...Graelyn Scythes?”

“Sort of! And this is my friend Archimedes.”

“Hi. Good to meet you again, Alice.”

“What?”

“Don't mind that. We work with a group called Dawn, and we'd like to aid your revolution against Centro.” She raised an eyebrow.

“You're a teenage version of Graelyn Scythes. How is that even possible?” She smiled and shrugged.

“I get that a lot from you. But the main point is, we're here to help.”

“You want to help start an anarchist revolution?”

“They're anarchists here? Huh.” Arch mused. Graelyn made a face and shrugged again.

“So why should I trust you?”

“Because you'll have a long, bloody, brutal war ahead of you, and we can save a lot of lives. We're willing to back up our promises with actions.” Alice crossed her arms.

“Okay. So say I believe you. You just want to help us for nothing?”

“That's our job,” she said pointing at a pin on her lapel of a half sun/half moon symbol. “We help people like you rise up. Bring out the best in people.” She held out a hand to Alice, “We help people to never fall again.”





**THE END**

### **A note from the Author:**

I never dreamed this story would find the readership it has, or bring out the love that's been felt towards its characters. I can't wait to bring the future of the 10,000 Dawns Universe to you soon with 10,000 Dawns Anthology, and let you see what other writers do in this wondrous playground we've set up.

Your support, your unending patience and tolerance for the sometimes awkward realities of trying to craft a story every week (I can't wait to have the time to go back and fix some typos...), and your passion has meant so much to me. I couldn't have asked for nicer readers. Well, I could have, but it would have been weird. You guys are the best.

Thank you. I hope you've enjoyed the ride, but the coaster is still going.

Love,

-James Wylder

# Interviews:

We took the time to have some words with many of the personalities shaping 10kd in the present and the future! Learn about the creation of this story, and where we go from here....

## James Wylder: Writer Interview by Alex Rose

*James is the author of the serial “10,000 Dawns” story, as well as the Editor of the upcoming “10,000 Dawns Anthology”. He has also written several books including the Unofficial Doctor Who Poetry Book, “An Eloquence of Time and Space”.*



### **What is or what has been your favorite part about writing 10kd?**

This is a story I've wanted to write for years now, and so just making it exist, and letting these characters live on the page as I envisioned them is a more wonderful feeling than I can describe.

### **Out of every chapter you've ever written for 10kd, which has been your absolute favorite?**

“Chapter 19: A Crystal Road” was a lot of fun to write, and went in some really surprising directions. Not to mention, the reaction from fans from it was awesome. Arch and Graelyn's confrontation, brewing throughout the whole story was one of the most brutal and heartbreaking scenes for me to write, because I hadn't originally intended for it happen. But while I was writing I realized it should happen, and needed to happen. It was what the characters would do, and so I let them do it. On a totally different end of the spectrum, the scene where the Crystal Moon plows through a wall in reality

ended up being a real fan favorite, and has to be up there in the most utterly bonkers things I've put into words, yet it works.

**How exactly did you get the idea for writing the plot of 10kd? How did you come up with such a story?**

10,000 Dawns has been a very long time coming, and answering where the story came from has more than one answer, and I can't say any particular version of the story is more correct than any other. So many things came together to make this story its hard to mesh them into one narrative, because the strands don't always knot together neatly.

The different strands come in the form of three RPG campaigns, a Doctor Who Poetry Book, an idea for a piece of fanfiction about fanfiction, some regular fanfiction from whole slew of different things, and like all things, my own life because I'm a terrible narcissist.

So where would I start? The story you'll hear the most is that 10,000 Dawns started with an RPG campaign of a dead RPG based on a dead card game. It was a weird start, and a memorable one, but its not the whole story. It was the start of it all though, and the friends who I played in that game with are some of the same people helping to build this world in prose now.

This specific story came about because my good friend Dave Koon created a character named Graelyn Scythes, and I was fascinated by her. She was actually a villain for heroes to thwart, but she was such a complex and well thought out villain I couldn't help trying to figure out why she thought what she thought at every turn. Later, I came up with the idea of Archimedes: a cyborg who is so much a cyborg, other people wonder how human he is. Graelyn was notable for being considered so cold or nasty that many people considered her nearly not human, while Arch looked robotic but his actions were so filled with heart and emotion he earned a lot of admiration. Juxtaposing these two characters lept into my head, and the idea of taking both of them out of the kind of story they would live by themselves, and seeing how they would change each other's lives was just too good to pass up. I started developing the story, and even did a trial run of it in the short story in "An Eloquence of Time and Space" (which is still in continuity, mind you, so if you are desperate for more 10kd go pick it up!). I kept trying to convince myself I didn't desperately want to write this story, because it involved using so many characters my friends had made, and making alternate versions of those characters. Eventually though, I realized I needed to make this, and I wouldn't be satisfied till I did. I'm very glad I followed through on it.

**What is the future for 10kd? Do you have any major plans for the story itself or the characters? Will there be a sequel?**

Oh, the future is bright boys, girls, and people outside of the gender binary! 10,000 Dawns: Anthology is coming out this summer, which will delve into the stories and history of the world 10,000 Dawns is set in. There are all sorts of people, events, places, and groups that show up in 10,000 Dawns in fleeting

moments with huge histories behind them. You'll get to learn about the history of Centro Systems, of Mars, of all the different peoples of the rim, and most importantly of all how the 10,000 Dawns formed in the first place! You didn't think 10,000 Universes just linked up on their own did you? Its going to be a lot of fun, and I'm bringing in lots of other creative writers who are all adding their own flair to the affair. I cannot wait for you guys to see it.

Before that though, there are still a few bonus stories left featuring the adventures of Graelyn, Arch, and Dawn and company, including the three stories from the bonus story contest! So the adventures aren't over yet.

Later this year there is a novel set in the 10,000 Dawns Universe I wrote called “Death and Doubling Cubes” being released as well, which will feature Backgammon Jenny and Chess Mistress Hex, so look out for that!

Oh, and there is already a second Anthology in the works. Shhh! I didn't tell you!

As for a full on sequel to 10,000 Dawns... I'll get back to you! Annie and I have only just finished this one, and I think we'd both like to take a nap and finish the slew of other work we have before either of us even thinks about a sequel.

**When you started writing 10kd did you ever think that you'd get so attached to the characters or the story itself?**

The answer here might surprise you: no. I didn't. I went into this story with the full knowledge that

**David Bowie has been one of your personal influences since you were young, did he in any way ever influence your writing?**

Oh, did he ever. I listened to the Bowie albums “Hours”, “Black Tie, White Noise”, and “The Next Day Extra” over and over while writing 10,000 Dawns, and as you've read many of the songs seeped into the story itself. “God Bless the Girl” holds a special meaning to myself and Graelyn that cannot be separated from this story now.

But his music has been influencing me long before 10kd: while writing my first full length play “Cryptos”, I listened to Bowie's “The Alabama Song EP” on repeat, with the rerecording he did of “Space Oddity” for it helping to shape the mood for the trek into the underworld in the play's second act. David Bowie is my favorite musical artist, and his notes have sunk into more of my writing than I can keep track of.

**What are some struggles you've come across when writing 10,000 dawns?**

The biggest struggle has been the time crunch of trying to get a chapter written, edited, formatted, proof read, and recorded as an audio podcast every single week. As many of you have noticed, the first thing that went out the window if there wasn't time each week was proofreading. I'm well aware the biggest complaint with the story is the number of typos there are, and I can't wait to have the chance to fix them finally when things finally calm down. I apologize that part of the story wasn't up to the quality it should have been. The weekly time schedule meant that I had to write, and had to post, and it was very unforgiving if I got sick (or if Annie got sick). We had to take two hiatuses in the end, just to keep things on track. That we completed this whole endeavor at all is a real triumph for me.

**Chapter 22 really says a lot about Graelyn's childhood, and talks about how she had even tried to commit suicide. This really adds to Graelyn's character. In future chapters will we hear anymore about Graelyns past/childhood? Maybe more background about her parents?**

Well, now that everyone has had the chance to read the end of the story I think its pretty clear the answer is a resounding "yes". Graelyn's childhood was difficult to write about, and I know it rings true for many readers... One thing about the 10kd fandom I've noticed is they're very private. I get more private messages and emails than I get comments, and that's okay. When I get a message asking a question about the text, or something as simple as "You know, Graelyn's mom is like my parent was." it reminds me how important creating fiction is, and what a duty I have as a writer to try to get this stuff right. I know 10kd isn't perfect, but I know its helped a few people, and I'm grateful it could.

As someone who has tried to commit suicide, who has friends who have tried, and friends who have succeeded... It was important for me to show Graelyn's suicide attempt, pull the cover off of it so to speak. I hope in reading Graelyn's story some people come away with what I've learned myself: life can be hell, but it can get better, and you have to be alive to see that better day. So hold in there. Dawn will rise, and the night will end.

**10,000 Dawns is definitely not the only thing you've ever written, you've written multiple poetry books and plays, as well as released a short story book. What is your greatest accomplishment when it comes to your own writing?**

I think the general consensus is that "An Eloquence of Time and Space" is my greatest achievement, and it definitely is in terms of popularity and sales. Its a really good book, and I'm very proud of it, however I think artistically the best thing I've written is my play "Paper Gods", which is a strange fever dream of theatre that deals with characters holding a revolution against the author of the play (me). Its printed in my book "Cascade" if anyone is curious to read it.

**David Bowie has come up a few times throughout the story, the first noticeable time is when Graelyn had a dance off. Due to his passing, do you plan on putting any form of tribute in any of the upcoming chapters?**

There was a tribute we already put out called “And a Star Spun Dark” that wasn't planned to be a tribute, it was actually a discarded bonus story for a canceled listening party for the release of “Blackstar” where the 10kd crew was going to post in-character as different people from 10kd as if they were listening to the album together. It would have been fun... But we didn't have time. I thought “I can just reuse the idea for his next album.” Surprise, in the worst way.

We will be having a full scale tribute though, in the form of a real bonus story with art by “Eloquence” artist Olivia Hinkel, so watch for that!

**All of the characters that are in this story (10,000 Dawns) have depth and most, you can really connect to. What character are you most proud of?**

I know its the answer you'd expect, but its true: Graelyn. She's a very complex, real, person who I feel like I managed to delve deeper into the psyche of than any character I've written before. I felt like writing her was a danger, because in all honesty she is such an easy person to hate. She does lots of selfish and petty things, but in the end she is trying desperately to be a good person, and I believe she is one. I wasn't sure readers would feel the same. That they did makes me very happy, because it means the readers of Graelyn's story have shown her the love and understanding that her family never did. I think she'd be happy about that.

**Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us!**

No, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to ask these questions. And thank you to the readers, you've really made this experience wonderful.

# Alex Rose: Songwriter

*Alex Rose is an Indianapolis based musician whose new song “Space Adventure” is 10,000 Dawns new Theme Song! You can hear a sample of the song in front of this week's podcast version of 10kd.*



**First off, could you introduce yourself for our readers?**

Hi! I'm Alex Rose! I've been playing guitar for 8 years and music is my absolute passion! It's a major part of me and I'm so happy to be able to be involved in this great story! I'm an artist in many forms and I absolutely love creating things. I also love space!

**The way you met the author of 10,000 Dawns was pretty interesting from what I hear?**

Yea actually! We had met at PopCon in Indianapolis IN in June of 2015! Uh, but, how we became friends consisted of a major dance off between me (a cosplaying starlord) and him (a dancing Doctor!). And the friendship sparked from there!

**Tell us about your song, “Space Adventure”, what inspired it? How did you go about writing it?**

Space Adventure came to be when I was going through a rough time with friends and relationships. I was being thrown around emotionally, and the song is about me telling myself and others that I can do everything I set my mind to do and what they do doesn't hold me back It was me standing up for myself. It took a long time for me to actually come out and say what it was about, because I was afraid. But I'm so glad I did. And now it's a fan favorite

**What themes do you think the song shares with 10kd?**

Space man!!!!

I also feel like it has a strong connections with Graelyn! The song very much portrays a strong independent vibe which is everything I see Graelyn as. I feel like it really commits to the story and I'm so glad that it's the theme song!

**What drew you into music?**

My dad actually! He was a major influence. He taught me the basics of guitar.



**What kind of music do you listen to when you're not writing it? Have a favorite song?**

I listen to everything (but country) honestly! And my favorite song changes every week! But right now, it's I Want To Get Better by Bleachers

**Like a lot of awesome artists, you do live shows! Where can people see you, and how do you feel about performing in front of people? Do you ever get nervous or are you always pumped?**

I love doing live shows! Usually I play at different venues in Indianapolis, most notably being the Hoosier Dome on Prospect St! Sometimes I'm nervous, but most times I'm always pumped to perform! I absolutely love it!

**What's the greatest moment you've ever had onstage?**

Probably when I sang I Miss You by Blink 182 and people got on stage with me! There's a video of it on the Facebook page, and whenever I watch it I laugh!

**What's the most embarrassing moment you've ever had onstage?**

The time I forgot my own lyrics half way through a song and had to make it up as I went!!! 0.0

**You have an upcoming album, correct? What's the album like overall?**

I do! Overall the album is honestly about my life over the past few years. Some songs are really sad and about personal things or they're about happy stuff and moving on past the sad things, such as space adventure! Expect a good cry.

**You're a reader of 10kd, as well as a songwriter. What's your favorite thing about the story?**

I CANT chOOOSE

**Do you have a favorite 10,000 Dawns character?**

Graelyn!

**What's it like having your song as the theme to a story like this?**

It's so shocking honestly! I never thought my music would be taken so seriously!

**We have to ask, did you and James Wylder ever consider recording a cover of something from Guardians of the Galaxy together? You don't have to answer but....**

Hell yes!!!!

**Where can our readers find more of your music?**

Alexroseandthemagicalacoustic.bandcamp.com

**Thank you so much for talking to us Alex, we wish you many more space adventures!**

# Rachel Johnson: Artist

*Rachel is an artist who has drawn art for the 10,000 Dawns Artist Showcase, as well as for our bonus stories! It was a pleasure to speak with them.*



**First off, could you introduce yourself for our readers?**

I'm Rachel. I'm currently a sophomore at the Minneapolis College of Art and design where I'm studying comic art! Drawing is one of my biggest passions.

**You have an interesting relationship with 10,000 Dawns, in that you read it's first short story in "An Eloquence of Time and Space" and made the first fan art of it! Did you ever expect you'd be drawing more of it?**

I can't say I was but I'm really glad I got the chance to!

**What drew you to 10kd?**

Obviously I'm going to be interested in anything a friend of mine is doing, but I also really love sci-fi so this is right up my alley.

**Do you have a favorite character from 10kd?**

Probably Graelyn. Or Mister Sprinkles.

**What's your favorite work of art you've made for 10kd?**

The big group picture I did of Songbird and her crew!

**You've drawn more art for 10kd right now than any artist other than Annie Zhu, in some ways you've given your own feeling and aesthetic to Songbird's World, and the Bonus Stories. What was it like defining a look for so many characters?**

It was pretty challenging trying to get everyone's looks to line up with their written descriptions, but it was also a lot of fun for me!

**Can you tell us about your other art?**

I also make short comics and also digital illustrations, mostly inspired by daily life and my interests.

**What sort of things do you like to do in your free time? Any hobbies or interest?**

I love to draw, obviously. I also enjoy reading. If I'm not doing either of those I'm probably watching superhero shows.

**If you could have the chance to draw any character you haven't yet from the story, who would it be?**

Kinan, probably!

**Is there anything else you'd like to tell our readers? Thank you so much for chatting!**

It's been so much fun being involved in this story and I hope you guys are enjoying it!

# Jordan Stout: Writer

*Jordan is a writer who has been a part of the development of 10,000 Dawns and will be featured in 10,000 Dawns: Anthology later this year! He's quite the character.*



**First off, could you introduce yourself for our readers?**

Good day to you all. It is a pleasure to meet all the readers of 10,000 Dawns, I hope you are well, sassy, classy, and currently enjoying a good book of some kind. My name is Jordan Stout and I am proud to say that I am one of the writers for the 10kd universe. I've been with the 10kd project from the beginning, and I am honored to still be here helping readers make that special astonished face you all make when something too crazy to be possible happens on the page. Yes, you do totally make that face. Yes. Its kind of like the expression lemurs always have by default. Yes, like that, its my favorite, and I love you for it.

**So you've been part of 10kd for a long time, how did you first get involved in this endeavor?**

10kd for me started with a college friend desiring to embarrass me and my roommate with an obscure science fiction card game he had stolen from James' room that we had never played but he deceptively and wickedly already knew all the rules to. Naturally my roommate and I were disgraced forever and will never completely live down the shame, but there was something very thought-provoking about the cards themselves and the very lightly brushed on conceptual story behind them and it got us working out new and different ways to play the game, making a newer and deeper story, and then ultimately starting a full role-playing game and living out adventures in the world of our design every Saturday night, with the ever-creative James Wylder as game master. The adventures were rich and brilliant and often the sun would rise on a Sunday morning to us still laughing and shrugging off our exhaustion for another roll of the dice that would determine fates to altered the very alignments of planets and moons in our solar system. As much as it meant to us, originally it was almost a joke. There were only four of us at the start and it was almost embarrassing to tell others about this game we played that was loosely based off of a card game that no one in their right mind would have even heard of. We would get looks like we were all wasting our Saturday nights and there was no way to really explain. Stories, however, have a way of speaking for themselves. We gained two new people to make six just before I began a semester traveling abroad in Europe, and when I returned I was astonished to find more that thirty people sitting at the same little table the next Saturday night, all with characters woven into the intricate story that James had continued to weave. It only grew from there. The game evolved into an overwhelming topic of conversation, started holding its own reserved room at college events and conventions, taking form on social media, drawing the attention of other science-fiction writers, hosting its own website, inspiring

us to write short stories, and eventually became so big that rare was any hour of any day where a large group of people would not be sitting in the campus center discussing, bickering, building, or scheming some angle of the story arch and so there was never a time a person couldn't conveniently find someone to talk to about this story at our college. At that point it was clear that it had taken a life of its own, and after graduation it was keen to become the subject of literature.

### **What's it been like developing the 10kd universe together?**

How do I love having my own characters represented in your work? Well, speaking on behalf of my character, Doitzel, he truly loves your work James, and is thrilled to see himself come to life under your pen, and, oh wait, he's demanded to speak for himself, he says "you haven't yet written about him at all yet," and "what's the matter," he seems rather angry. Oh, maybe he's crying. "Are you afraid of my magnetic personality? Think I will try to take over your story by force? I won't, scout's honor, I'm a changed man." I'm terribly sorry James, I'll have a chat with him. "Is it because I'm insane?" No, Doitzel, you need to stop this now. "I'm not you know, I have a letter from the state that says I've been pardoned." Yes, well done, Doitzel. "Not many people have those!" Doitzel, please calm down. Remember what happened the time when you shot the coffee machine. "I've always wanted to be in your stories, Jim, why don't you notice me? What do I have to do, take over a planet or something? I will if I have to." Doitzel, you need to stop threatening authors, this is becoming a bad habit. "Believe me, you'll want me in your story on your terms, don't let them be mine! Don't forget how many side characters were never fully developed because of me!" I'm sorry about that James, he's just cranky because of his tragic background. You know he can't be held accountable for his own words. He's harmless, really, you have nothing to worry about, and should keep up the good work we all love.

### **Now, you're a part of 10,000 Dawns: Anthology, which is set in the Prime Universe of 10,000 Dawns, featuring very different versions of some of these characters we've just met. Do you think readers will be surprised at what they'll see?**

Naw, I think our readers are brave and ready to handle the surprises in store.

### **Can you tell us a little about what you're creating for 10kd: Anthology?**

Most of my writing will be focusing on events on the Rim as well as one of my characters to grow out of the original role-playing game, Doitzel. It looks like I'm going to dive into the Rim in a few more questions here, and I dare not tell you what role Doitzel will play in the history of the known universe but suffice to say he is far from the conventional hero we've come to expect from our classic stories, but often, for better or worse, finds himself at the turning point of a story where in an ideal world the more conventional hero really ought to be. Audiences can be assured that he is not the kind of man who can do more than one pull-up, be counted on to always find the right solution over the most entertaining solution, and most certainly of all, learn anything meaningful about life or humanity over the course of a given story. I am delighted to see what you readers will think of my tales and characters and what you judge them to be for yourselves. Most frequently I feel natural writing a story out through thick layers of humor guided along by a brisk, confident pacing like the stride between two blind men who haven't realized the other is blind leading each other across a busy street. You can reasonably expect my stories to quickly rush up to the limit of where you will expect things to go and then take that one step over the edge, and I do hope you will enjoy every word, it's what I wrote them for.

**What else do you do in your free time? Do you have any other hobbies or pursuits?**

I rather like to keep my free time overbooked with as many things, equally ridiculous as my stories, as possible. I like long walks on the beach, traveling to any place less geographically level than central Indiana, which thankfully is almost everywhere, I play semi-professionally in the chamber folk band "Willoughby Sprig," I am told that my volunteer tours of the Indiana Central State mental hospital are very "...enlightening," I occasionally build my own home electronics out of unconventional things, and my dream is to one day photo-bomb the James Webb Space Telescope. I am truly blessed to have a cat that judges me abusively if I do not stop things I am working on and go to bed at a healthy hour.

**You really helped shape the feel of the Rim in 10,000 Dawns, a place that our readers have yet to explore in depth! What sort of adventures can we expect to see out there? What drew you to it?**

I have been, more or less, the creative designer of the Rim in the 10kd universe with the generous help of many other writers here like Andrew McLung, Taylor Elliott, Miguel Ramirez, and of course James Wylder. I took a rather passionate liking to working on the societies out there due to our need to write them as wild, frequently irrational, and possessing a far wider range of cultural differences than are found on Earth and Mars. With the story centered around a time when humanity looked to the stars, pushed boldly out to the edges of our solar system and then said "eh, that's good enough," the Rim becomes a place where people live ignored, desperate, short, but clever and exhilarating lives, mostly free from the powers of the planets, and organized into ever-warring gangs that might frequently be underestimated by the strong power of Earth. Readers can expect locations on the Rim to be strange and turbulent, and the characters from the Rim to hold dreams, specifically of the big and dangerous variety. Expect pirates with cybernetic bodies to be taking big risks for big payoffs. Expect crazed space-prospectors to ramble madly about pods of probably equally crazed space-whales they saw swimming past Neptune. Expect floating cities on the oceans beneath Europa's icy crust. Expect violently temperamental and shadowy gang bosses to be hatching layers of convoluted schemes against each other and the powerful governments of the inner planets. Expect remarkable space stations that could be possessed by ghosts. Expect scientists that my no means should have lived as long as they have to be messing with things that they really shouldn't be, and of course, expect our heroes to be right in the midst of it, holding their own.

**If you could punch any 10kd character, who would it be and why?**

I probably wouldn't punch any of them because its a universe where people are likely to punch back very hard.

**Is there Anything else you'd like to say to our readers?**

Many, many thanks to all you readers and supporters for the time and interest you give to this project. We couldn't do something like this without you, well, okay, actually we could but it would be pointless and dismal. I am trilled to be working on these new bits to come out and I hope you are all just as excited, and if not, then I hope the sheer strength of your obdurance is consolation enough for reading this entire article against your better judgement. Best wishes to you and happy reading.

**Thank you so much for talking with us Jordan!**

# Josephine Smiley: Writer

*Josephine is a writer who has been a part of the development of 10,000 Dawns and will be featured in 10,000 Dawns: Anthology later this year! She's was a real joy to talk with.*



**First off, could you introduce yourself for our readers?**

Absolutely! I am Josephine Smiley, writer for 10kd, graduate student at the University of Missouri (Mizzou,) political and social justice activist, and all around geek. Actually, science fiction was my first love, so to speak: that love came in '93 in the form of Star Trek: the Next Generation, and it has been a wild and awesome ride from there.

**So you've been part of 10kd for a long time, how did you first get involved in this endeavor?**

When I was a student at Hanover College, a bunch of us were part of a Tabletop RPG Group of Total Geekery. I was one of those roleplay nerds who writes up detailed backstories for her characters. While I was doing that, more story ideas just came popping into my head, and I created Alice MacLeod, and then... well, you guys can see what happened.

**What's it been like developing the 10kd universe together?**

Amazing. I love being able to collectively create something as diverse and wonderful as 10kd, and everyone else on this team is the best. The fact that it's a team effort only makes it more diverse: other people have thought of ideas I never would have come up with, and everyone's ideas just give me more ideas for my own 10kd stories as far as places, people, and events that I can work in and develop a little more.

**Some of your ideas (and characters) have made it into 10,000 Dawns: Serial, especially your character Alice MacLeod, what was it like seeing her come to life under a different writer?**

The thing about Alice MacLeod is that she's supposed to be able to appeal to people from various different backgrounds. In the story, she leads a worldwide revolution, and in order to do that, you have to be someone that people can relate to at least a little bit. I relate to her a lot, and it has been a very interesting experience for me, watching how other people interpret her. I'm very eager to see how it plays out in the future as well. After all, Alice is for the people, I wouldn't want to keep her to myself.

**Now, you're a part of 10,000 Dawns: Anthology, which is set in the Prime Universe of 10,000 Dawns, featuring very different versions of some of these characters we've just met. Do you think readers will be surprised at what they'll see?**

Maybe. It's hard to tell, honestly. The Prime Universe is definitely different than the universe they've

seen in 10,000 Dawns: Serial, and several aspects of it will probably be surprising. Some characters have changed a little, and some have changed a lot. Whether or not their differences will be surprising to people, I'm not sure.

**Can you tell us a little about what you're creating for 10kd: Anthology?**

Absolutely! I have a series of short stories that I am working on currently, most of them about the relationship between Earth and Mars. I find that fascinating, so it features a lot in my work.

**Are there any prominent themes in your own writing?**

As Alice MacLeod would say: Viva la Revolution! My work definitely has a theme, and it's the same theme that dictates my life as an activist: it's all about universal struggle, uprising, and rebellion. I guess you could say it's an examination of what happens when human beings are pushed to their limit and survive.

**What else do you do in your free time? Do you have any other hobbies or pursuits?**

(What is free time? I do not know this term.) Okay, all joking aside, yes, I am active in several of my local social justice organizations which are constantly mobilizing, working toward a better future (if I may be so cliché about it.) That consumes most of my free time. I also run a blog, so there's that as well.

**You're also writing a Novel set in the 10,000 Dawns Universe, correct? Without giving away too much, who and what are we going to see in it?**

Well, I don't want to spoil my novel for everyone, but I can tell you that Alice MacLeod is in it, and it will explore a lot more of her personal story than the serial does. It also investigates the reality of Earth's mega-corporation, Centro Systems, and goes along with that theme I was talking about earlier.

**The Alice MacLeod parts of 10,000 Dawns Serial had a lot to do with Revolution. Is this a theme that will continue with your own writing about Alice?**

You better believe it.

**If you could punch any 10kd character, who would it be and why?**

Oh.... You know what, I don't know if I would. There are a lot of characters in the 10kd universe that I know I definitely wouldn't get along with in real life, I can tell you that much, but would I punch them? Probably not. I take my rage out in other ways.

**Is there anything else you'd like to say to our readers?**

You're important and you matter. I love you all. Keep being awesome!

**Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us Josephine!**

# Taylor Elliott: Writer

*Taylor is a writer who has been a part of the development of 10,000 Dawns and will be featured in 10,000 Dawns: Anthology later this year! She's pretty darn interesting.*



**First off, could you introduce yourself for our readers?**

Hi there! I'm Taylor, I write Ariadne Moore/Chess Mistress Hex. What's shakin', Internet?

**So you've been part of 10kd for a long time, how did you first get involved in this endeavor?**

Jim was running a tabletop RPG, the one the 10kd universe has spun off from, back at college, and most of our mutual friends were playing every Saturday night. I was asked if I'd be interested in playing and, while I was hesitant to devote every Saturday to a tabletop game, I agreed to come in as a one-shot villain — specifically one that had originally appeared briefly in a story Jordan had written for the universe. I went into the game with every intention of Hex dying, but not only did she survive, she managed to ROYALLY mess with the entire party during that

particular campaign. It was so fun that a few weeks later I came back, and the next thing I knew I was spending every Saturday night as Hex, who was masquerading as a crew member named Leesa Nickelback to mess with the other players and generally wreak total havoc.

**What's it been like developing the 10kd universe together?**

Super fun! This is a universe we've had our feet in for 4-5 years now. It became such a big part of our lives and has been a really strong bond for all of us. It's been so cool to take what was just a fun way for us to spend our Saturday nights together and see it grow into this big, new thing that other people can enjoy.

**Some of your ideas (and characters) have made it into 10,000 Dawns: Serial, specially your character Chess Mistress Hex. Hhat was it like seeing them come to life under a different writer?**

Really cool! It was fascinating to see how Jim understood Hex and the choices he made for her. Because she's such a complex and secretive character I was involved with the editing process for the scenes she's in, but Jim did such a great job with her that I really didn't need to do much. It was so cool to see someone else bring her to life!



**Now, you're a part of 10,000 Dawns: Anthology, which is set in the Prime Universe of 10,000 Dawns, featuring very different versions of some of these characters we've just met. Do you think readers will be surprised at what they'll see?**

Oh absolutely! I think they're going to be really floored by some of the differences and some of the adventures we have planned.

**Can you tell us a little about what you're creating for 10kd: Anthology?**

I am currently working on one project wherein we get to see a much younger Hex. I think it's going to be really interesting for everyone to see her before she became the Hex we all know her as, and I've been having a lot of fun exploring that chapter of her life. I'm also working on a joint project with Jordan involving Hex and his character. It's something we're both really excited about and I think the storyline is really going to shake up the universe!

**Are there any prominent themes in your own writing?**

I definitely play with some nontraditional character elements and questions of morality in my writing. I actually wrote my undergraduate thesis on antiheroes. I love writing characters who aren't all good, but aren't all bad either. I love making a reader really question whether a character is a protagonist or antagonist, and I think Hex is a really obvious example of this. While our lovely 10kd readers have good reason to believe Hex is a baddie, I don't think any of my fellow writers on this project would really classify her as a villain.

**What else do you do in your free time? Do you have any other hobbies or pursuits?**

I am an event planner by day, a nanny by night, and help run a small press publisher, PlotForge, by twilight and early morning. In my free time, I cook, read, write, croon at my cat, watch way too much Netflix, and plan fabulous international adventures. Last summer I spent two weeks in Japan where, among other things, I got to cuddle some owls and scared the pants off a guy I'm pretty sure was a member of the Yakuza.

**Chess Mistress Hex (aka Ariadne Moore) is such an intriguing, and mysterious character. Will we get to learn more about her?**

Absolutely! The readers are going to be seeing more of her in the future. I don't want to talk about her too much because I don't want to spoil anything, but I am really excited for everyone to get to know her better and understand who she is and what she does.

**If you could write about any 10kd character you haven't yet, who would it be and why?**

Chrometeeth. Hands down. Any character who rocks a cute sundress and can rip out a jugular with her modified teeth is a character I need to be better friends with.

**You played a big role in developing the criminal group “The Index” for 10kd, as well as their home of New Alexandria. What draws you to them so much?**

The old adage that knowledge is power is honestly the inspiration there. We’re not the first group of storytellers to hit on this — it’s what made Sherlock (and his enemies, Moriarty and Magnussen) so potent and intriguing. Anyone can be powerful in the sense of having a formidable weapon or military at their disposal. It’s an entirely different type of might and, in my opinion, much more frightening type of might to wield intelligence and secrets. The Index just takes this concept to an interstellar scale. Imagine the combined secrets of all of these groups carefully collected and stored away for a rainy day. And imagine, if you will, how the Index is securing all of that information. Makes you feel like you can’t trust anyone, huh?

As for New Alexandria... I mean, my inner history and literature nerds just LOVE the idea of paying homage to the lost library of Alexandria in this way. And how cool is that setting for something like the Index?! They built a massive compound on an ice moon! Just for fun! Could have built it anywhere but no, they took a look at Europa and said, “Yeah, that seems like a really hospitable spot for the compound we’re going to blackmail the entire system from.” It’s just makes me nerd out in a big way.

**If you could punch any 10kd character, who would it be and why?**

Manuel Salazar. Hard, in the face. My inner Hex is too strong for me to give any other answer.

**Is there Anything else you'd like to say to our readers?**

Basically just cue up “The Best is Yet to Come” by Frank Sinatra, because that’s what we have coming down the pipe for you guys. Get excited. I know I am.

**Thank you for taking the time to talk to us Taylor!**

# Thank you, Annie Zhu!

*Contributing over 40 pieces of artwork to the 10,000 Dawns project, Annie Zhu has defined the look of a universe, and built an amazing foundation for other artists to build on. Her distinctive style has brought her lots of love from the Doctor Who community, and we thought it was time to show her some well-earned love for her art! So thank you, Annie Zhu. You made this whole thing possible. But don't take this nebulous paragraph's word for it, here's some love in quotes:*

"Seeing someone else draw Hex for the first time was one of the coolest moments in my life. It was so incredible to watch these characters that I know and love come to life in such a beautiful way. Annie has made this universe real and tangible in a way only she could, and I don't know that any artist could have done the 10kd story justice the way she did. Annie: thank you, for all your hard work, and all the beauty you've shared with us." -Taylor Elliott

"Annie- I've been imagining 10kd in my head for a long time, but you made it come to life. Your art and all your hard work means that other people can also envision 10kd now, and that is something so awesome I'm not sure I can fully explain what it means. Thank you, you're an inspiration." -Josephine Smiley

"I wasn't sure what I imagined 10kd would look like while we were going through the creating phase; but Annie has captured it perfectly!" -Elizabeth Tock

"Every week, Annie provides readers with a visual portal into the 10,000 Dawns. Her art not only allows us to visualize a setting that is literally out of this world, but reveals a perfect glimpse into the action and emotions of every chapter." -Rebecca Jacob

"Annie, Rob and I just wanted you to know how much we love the art you've created for 10,000 Dawns. Your illustrations are so beautiful and your interpretation of the characters is as important as the words themselves. Thank you for being a part of our team and sharing your gift with our audience." -Martha and Rob Southgate

"Annie! I love your style - simple yet emotive. It takes a good eye and better hand to make successful images with limited lines and color palette. Well done in every way!" -Olivia Hinkel

"Annie, you simply captured the magic of Jim's work in the most beautiful way. 10kd wouldn't be what it is without you and I just want to tell you how much I appreciate your art. Thank you for being a part of it." -Brandon Derk

“Working with Annie made 10,000 Dawns into the story it was. I can't even count the times Annie drew something, and I had to go back and revise because her visual imagination was so strong she inspired me to do better. 10,000 Dawns has always been different in that the illustrations weren't a secondary thing, they were just as canon as the words on the page, and I couldn't have picked a better partner for this. I couldn't have made this story without Annie. Her commitment to creating and developing this world in her art made the world of 10,000 Dawns real in a way I never could have on my own. Every chapter of this story has her hand in it, every word has been helped by her spirit. I may be the writer, but she was the real artist.” -James Wylder

## **Annie Zhu tribute, continued.**

What would 10kd have looked like without Annie Zhu's art? Lets find out!

Dear Jim,

In the full manner of our friendship, you have asked me to peruse your art for your upcoming tale, “10,000 Dawns.” Indeed, having been a part of this endeavor for some time, I was generally honored you asked me to look upon such works. In the full manner of confidence however, the news must be bestowed upon you that perhaps it would be finer and more prudent if you were to begin the search for an artist more skilled in the visual form, who is not capable of producing the visible horrors which have just assaulted my eyes. These abominations are unholy, and have terrified me worse than even that time I accidentally walked into the local chapter of the flat earther society and puppy kicking cabal while looking for a Dairy Queen.

Indeed, I am now hiding under my desk while writing this to you. Its dark in here, and perhaps that is for the best. Maybe seeing itself is overrated? There is a lot of dust under this desk, I really should clean more. At the very least, the papers ontop of the desk are now invisible to me. I am worried to leave. I have undertaken the task of calling in for pizza. Hopefully the delivery person survives the trip around my desk, and can give me what I desire: a delicious disk of bubbling cheese, tomato sauce, and baked dough with a 2-liter of carbonated beverage. I will be living down here till you come to remove the drawings off my desk. Please bring a blanket.

Your friend,  
-Josephine Smiley

Dear Josephine,

Fine, I'll go get Annie Zhu to draw something sheesh.

Your friend,  
-James Wylder

***The following documents were retrieved from the top of Josephine's desk. The rest were burned by the pizza deliver person to prevent any one from having to look upon them.***



Atlantis Base  
"ITS underwater"™  
Part of Andbis Corp  
↑ part of Centro



\* Not pictured:  
a cat

# Chapter 1:

## The cat who Missed Atlantis

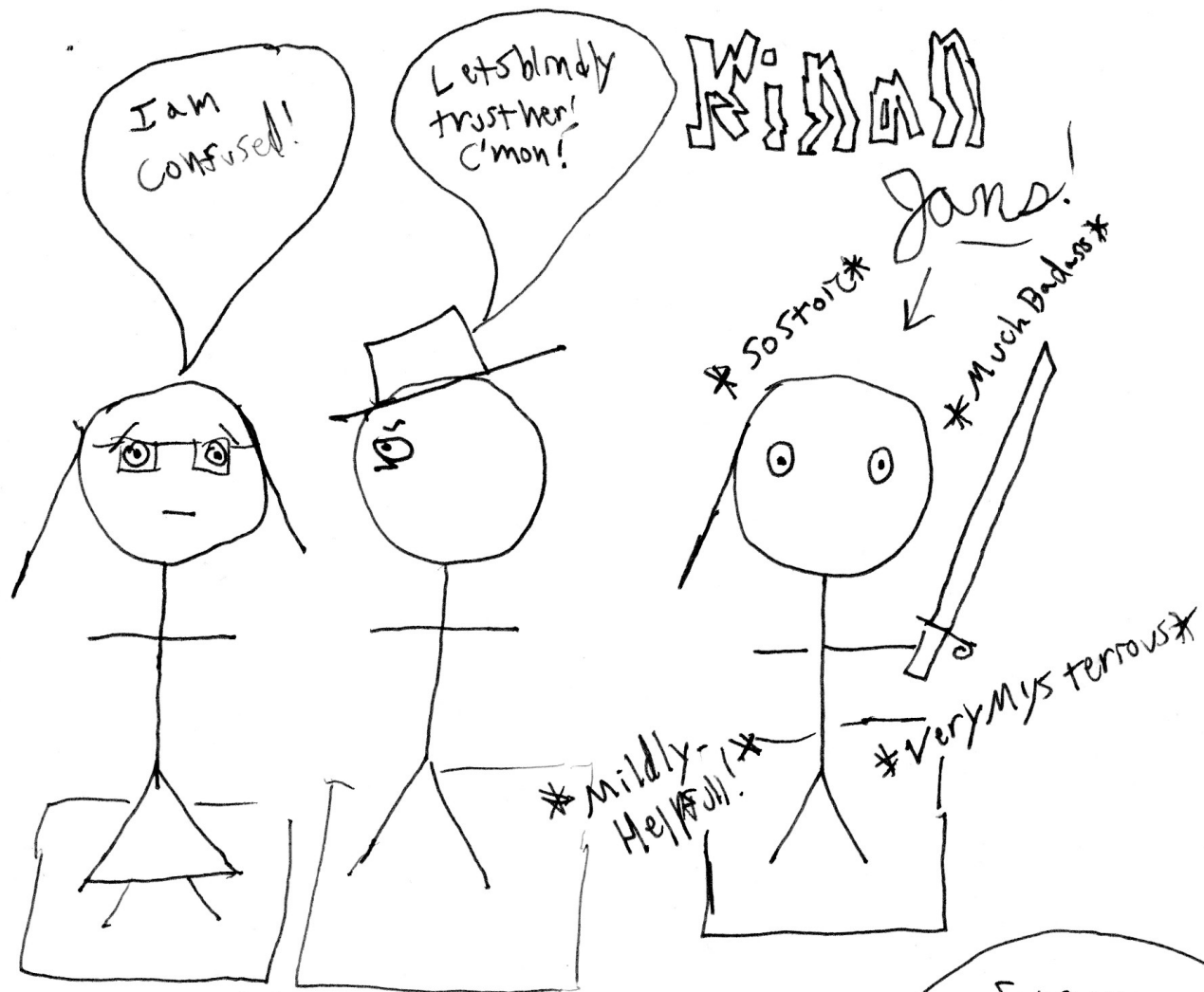


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# Chapter 5:

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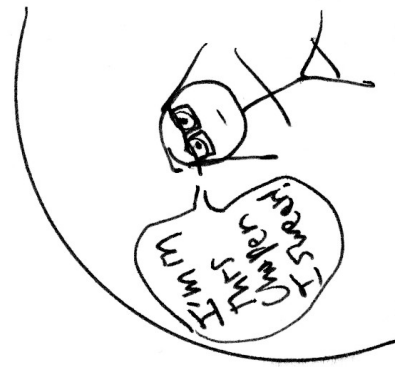
## Alternities



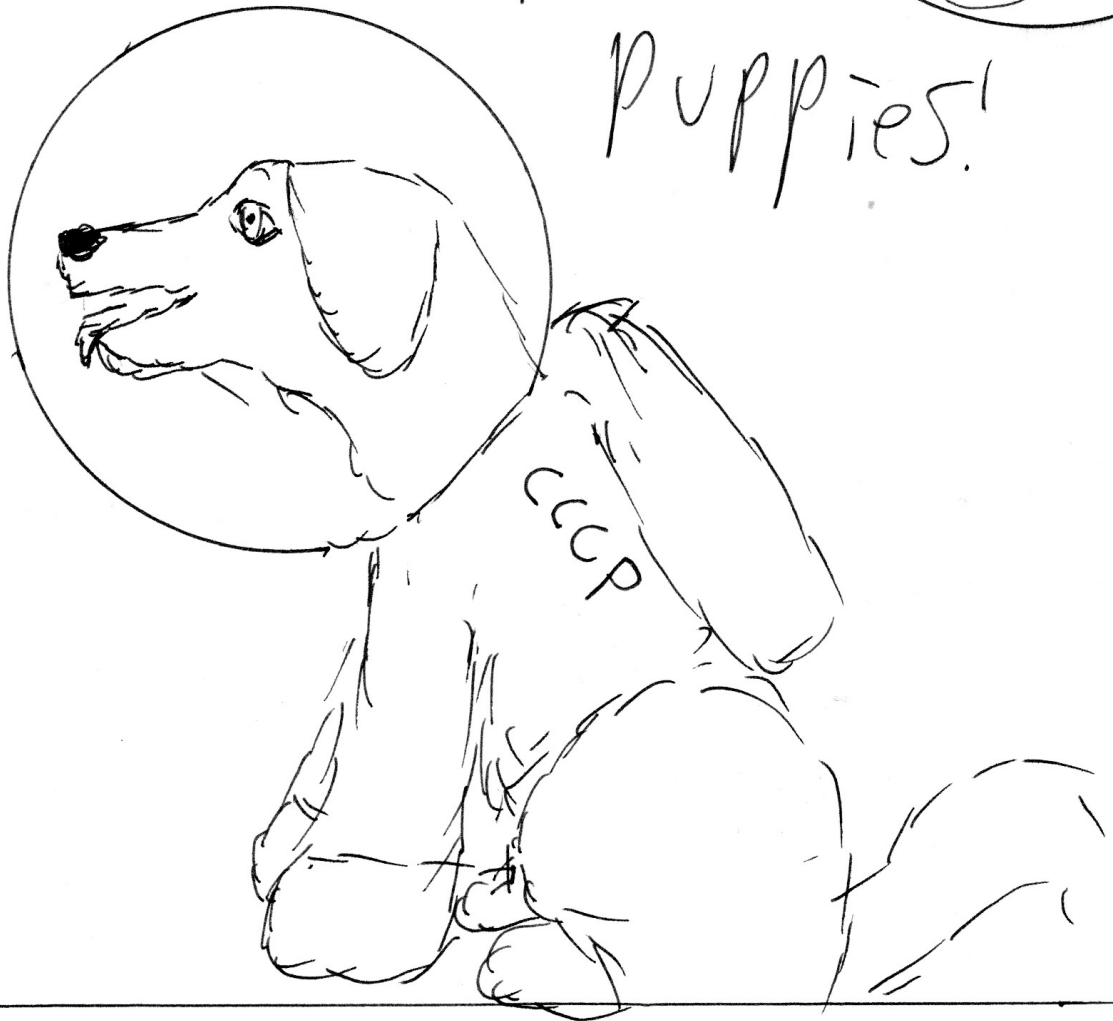
# Chapter 16 :

The world was wider, the sky was Bolder

Communist  
Space



puppies!



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Chapter 21 :  
The Burden of Solitude





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## Chapter 27:

A miracle of Malice & Mercy

# Deleted Scene:

## The Mexico City Tapes

*Originally, during the trial of Graelyn Scythes, the prosecution was going to actually play the tape of what was going on at Mexico city. I decided to delete the scene: it was simply too early to reveal that to the reader, but I have preserved the contents of the tape itself for the curious.*

A video began playing on the wall. It showed rows and rows of cloning cylinders, each with an identical man inside the cylinder. They bobbed in their amniotic fluid calmly. Then one dropped from the cylinder, out a hole in its bottom, and out of view.

"Where does that go?" A voice said from behind the camera. The voice is familiar. The Camera cuts. We pick up again in a new location, where the camera is moving through a door. One of the bodies drops from the ceiling, and falls onto a conveyer belt. The newly born man looks around, taking his new world in, and is then a crane leans down and circles around his head.

"What's it doing?"

"It's scanning him for something. Maybe checking a wireless connection? Ah, he has chips in his head. I think it is getting a full set of data out of him." The crane lifts up, and the conveyer belt begins moving him.

"Can we turn that off?"

"I don't know how, the thing is armored as hell, Trevon start trying to figure out how."

"Yessir." Graelyn recognized the voices. It was Songbird's team.

The conveyer took the man down the room as the team tried to catch up with him, cursing. He was elevated, and none of them could seem to climb the smooth sides to reach him. The conveyer belt then dropped the man into something like a huge fishbowl. He stood there, naked, still wet from birth, and confused. The crane moved over him, and began blinking."

"What's it doing?" The man suddenly began screaming. The bowl was filling with gas, gas that seemed to settle into the bottom of the tall bowl and not rise out of its brim.

"Break the bowl, get him out of there!" The soldiers fired on the bowl, but it didn't break. They pounded on it, but it didn't break. The man inside was clearly in horrible pain, but kept trying to leap for the brim of the bowl, as the crane above him kept blinking. He focused.

"He's trying to Clegg." Alice said, in horrified amazement. He didn't Clegg fast enough. He fell to the floor of the bowl, seizure, foam oozing out of his mouth. He stopped moving. Someone screamed.

"Oh God." Jack said.

"Shut this thing off Trevon."

"...Almost got it." He said sadly. It only then became clear that he was, in fact, still breathing, when body dropped through the floor. It turned off. Stepping forward, Jack looked down at the floor.

"Where did he go?"

"You know." Alice replied. He nodded. "Let's move."

The camera cuts.

We are standing in front of the door we saw Alice walk through before in Chapter 9. The one she threw up after coming back out of. She approaches the door. She puts her hand on the handle and grimaces.

"You're filming?"

"Yeah."

She opens the door, and steps through. The room is cavernous, and is clearly divided into two sections. One is filled with dead bodies. While the machines have been turned off, it is obvious what was happening, as the different stations are still filled with corpses in different poses. The people fell from the hole in the ceiling, and were picked up by a meat hook. The hook carried them through different stations where their different component parts were removed efficiently, one at a time. First the skin, then some muscles and fat, then organs, etc. Each station was frozen in a grotesque pantomime, midway through the procedure. Many of the corpses have bullet holes in their heads. They are not in the poses of people who were unconscious through the procedure. They look like they were screaming. Alice runs over to the man who fell through the ceiling, and helps him up. Chantelle found a blanket somewhere, and wraps him in it. He looks totally bewildered. "Get him somewhere safe. We're... Going to need a team upstairs to get the others when they are... Born." Alice stammers out.

"Yes ma'am." Chantelle replies.

Alice gestures for the camera to follow her. "When we came in here, it was silent, aside from the whirring of the machinery and the... The sounds of the... Of what they were doing. The victims were fully conscious. But...

They, they made no sound. Their uh, they, we checked a body and it wasn't born with vocal chords... So..." She looks down to the ground. "We turned the machines off. But many of them were...

Impossible to save. They were... Vacating too many vital fluids. So I made the call to put them out of their misery." She puts her hand over her mouth as she says that. Her eyes are welling with tears. She steadies herself.

"I'm sorry. We still have the other half of the room..." She gestures. There are what look like pens for holding cattle. Then there are dissection tables, littered with bodies in various states of experimentation. There are many machines next to the tables, but their purpose is unclear.

"We already removed all of the survivors to a safe location, but they were standing here when we arrived. Just... Waiting. Calmly. From reading the logs of the on duty scientists, it appears they were... Mass producing people in order to try to find the secret of what makes humans clegg. The ones who were strong enough to clegg hard enough to jump out of the fishbowl were then... Examined to try to find what made them special. Those who did not were taken apart for their parts to make more people to do this to. Taken apart, like cleaning a chicken." She turns to the camera. Her eyes are on fire.

"Graelyn Scythes ordered this. She directed this. She planned this. These weren't people to her they were... They were... Lab rats. She's a monster. She sees people as nothing more than a harvest to feed her goals. She is a blight on everything. A walking plague." She is more serious than you have ever seen someone.

"She deserves no mercy from us."

The video ends.

# Essays:

## 10,000 Dawns:

### Using the Multiverse for Literary Self-Discovery

by Tyler Lipa

Theoretically mankind is aware that a multiverse of possibility exist. Each decision that is made by us individually and by those around us creates an entirely new universe where any possible outcome could be selected. If you are reading this right now it is because the decisions that we made and were made for us has led us to this specific point in time. This is the world that has been created by James Wylder, the writer, and Annie Zhu, the illustrator, in the world of 10,000 Dawns. The main focus of this story is to illuminate what it means to transition from the person you were as a child to the adult version of yourself that must face the limitations of being human in a world that is constantly changing.

10,000 Dawns features the lives of seventeen year old Graelyn Scythes and cyborg Archimedes “Arch” von Ahnerabe as they stumble through the multiverses of their lives. Graelyn is a brilliant, mildly sociopathic, pansexual demiromantic, intern. Arch is a heavily armed, emotionally troubled, genderfluid cyborg. Through the help of Director John Aril of their universe they find themselves thrown into a time and a place where they exist, but in completely different fashions. Scythes and Arch must come to grips with who they are, and how they became this way in the first place.

Graelyn is a character who lives in the far future, but is representational of the modern world that the reader exists in. She is a perfect representation of the reader themselves. Graelyn wants to be different and thinks very highly of herself. For example, despite living in a future that offers a wide array of technological and surgical remedies for poor vision, she chooses to wear glasses. Graelyn thinks very highly of her biological self, and is representative of a “pure” human in a post-human environment. Her normality is what sets her apart from the world she exists in.

Arch is a character who is the exact opposite of Graelyn. Arch is an altered human being that was meant to transcend the trappings of normal humans such as Graelyn. He only has one eye, and his body is encased in armor plating. Arch also has complete control of the biochemical makeup of his body. Arch is the culmination of man and machine and is on one hand alien to the reader because of his modifications, but familiar in the fact that those who read science fiction are interested in attaining an ideal of human civilization.

Ideal is far from the reality that Graelyn and Arch exist in. The universe they inhabit is defined by corporate greed and cultural decline. The world governments have been replaced by a powerful corporate overlord known as Centro Systems. The only holdover from the present is the military. The time that Graelyn and Arch exist in is described as the end of a Golden Era. Humanity has once again

begun to rest on its laurels in regards to discovery and knowledge. This is reflective of the current frustration that is felt by many young people with the state of politics and the economy. Debt and a growing service industry are failing to add fulfillment to the lives of 20 and 30 year olds who are learning what it means to be an active part of the economy. Instead of finding a sense of importance there only seems to be low paying jobs and endless financial instability.

Pondering what life could have been if other decisions had been made haunts people who are leaving a time when they were filled with youthful potential, and now must face the realistic life decisions. This is where Wylder's concept of the multiverse is exactly what readers are searching for. This zeitgeist theory gives a hope that somewhere out there there is a version of us that has either made better decisions than us and are living a wonderful life, or there is a version of us living in much worse circumstances. Graelyn and Arch are able to see this first hand. Graelyn is able to meet a version of herself that is extremely successful, but is one of the most hated women in the world. Arch finds that he is only an idea in another world, and a simple interaction between his creator and a business woman decided his entire existence. This is just one of an infinite number of possible universes that exist.

Graelyn is a troubling character because of her long list of flaws that stem from her character's talents.. She is an amalgam of some of the worst character flaws of our time. She is burdened with the need to become an adult at a young age from an abusive mother which has imbued her with a false sense of maturity. Graelyn also has difficulty connecting with those around her, and in every universe that she visits she finds that even in the case of being an owl in one universe she is more interested in questioning others than thinking about herself. This lack of self awareness is excellent for her career growth, but makes it difficult to identify with her. She is always unique in every situation which can make her seem inhuman. Graelyn is crafted in the same mold as Ender in Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game. She is a very unique and intelligent character with a greater purpose than even she is aware of. Without her the future of mankind is uncertain, but it feels as if she is not part of the humanity that she hopes to save.

For example, when she meet an alien creature from the race know as the Pantheon she is able to deduce that the alien is communicating to her via mental electrical impulses. These aliens entrap humans and use them as slaves for a galactic empire. The alien comments that she is more astute than the average human which implies that she is in some way special or more advanced than the rest of humanity. This exceptionalism is a source of great contention for generations that have preceded the Millennial Generation. Characters like Graelyn as viewed from those outside of the target audience might be seen as pretentious and self absorbed rather than thoughtful and worldly. This does not mean that she is a poorly crafted character, but when viewed as a person that is not the reader she takes on a much different interpretation.

10,000 Dawns is a story of the world as it known today viewed through the lens of the far future. It captures the frustration and jadedness that can lead to apathy in the modern world. Graelyn and Arch are two characters who have an opportunity to see what is backstage to the world that they exist in. This view changes them and shows them that truth and meaning is dependent on the reality they inhabit. Unlike the readers who must find meaning from those around them Graelyn and Arch have the opportunity to discuss the darkest fears and uncertainties of being sentient with other versions of themselves. This concept of self discovery resonates strongly with the target audience because there are currently far less answers than questions. Despite the false confidence of youth there is a deep psychological need to find one's place in the world and to feel accepted. 10,000 Dawns evokes these strong emotions, and Wylder does an excellent job in drawing the reader down and building them back up to believe that they, like Graelyn and Arch, can find a reason to exist in their own respective words.

Revolution, corruption, hope, and fear. These are the key ingredients that make 10,000 Dawns such a compelling story. Wylder has created a world that can be inhabited by the emotions and desires of those who read it. All great stories have one thing in common. The reader must discover something that lay hidden deep inside themselves. 10,000 Dawns accomplishes this by creating a world that is just an intensification of the world as the Millennial Generation perceives it today. Wylder has created a challenge to look at our own reality and accept that we are part of it. This is accomplished through the use of a character who represents some of the worst aspects of the Millennial Generation. Instead of embracing these flaws the world that Wylder creates questions these character flaws and seeks to remedy them through hope and humility. Readers will find that they are looking at a reflection of themselves as they journey with Graelyn and Arch on this epic of self discovery.

# Graelyn: The New Frontier

## by Amanda Irwin

Let's start this essay with a statement, think about the female protagonist in science fiction literature. Think about it. Think about it seriously. What do you think about? Did you think about how few there are? What about female characters in general?

When I think about female characters in Sci-fi, I can't help but think about how few and far between they are or how limited they are in character complexity. What comes to mind is Leia Organa from Star Wars or all the women that James 'Jim' T Kirk has had relations with. For me, I often think about how women are not valued in the science fiction genre, if they're even there at all.

I was surprised to say the least when I started reading James Wyler's 10,000 Dawns that the protagonist was female. But not just female, like any protagonist, Graelyn Scythes is so much more complex and intriguing .

The first thing I noticed about Graelyn is that she is not sexualized. Graelyn is described as having black hair pulled into a ponytail and wearing black glasses. That's it. There is no mention of her body type, weight, or even skin color. It is all left up to the imagination of the reader and that on to itself is refreshing. Unlike Leia, Graelyn doesn't wear a metal bikini nor does Graelyn get involved in a cliché romance with the "bad boy" in the story. Do I sound pretentious and bitter? Probably. In the Star Wars films, Leia's most important quality, other than her metal bikini body, is her love story with Han Solo. What is Graelyn's most important quality in 10,000 Dawns? Her intelligence.

Although Graelyn is emotionally cut off and appears as though she doesn't care, she is, in fact, very human and cares for a few people. For example, she cares immensely for her cat, Mr. Sprinkles, and feels incredibly sad when she has to give him up in order to go to Atlantis. I wasn't crying when she gave up Mr. Sprinkles, not at all. But Graelyn doesn't just care for her cat but also for our favorite metal man, Arch. When she and Arch are thrown into a different universe and are attacked, Graelyn's fight or flight instincts kick in and she runs only to think of Arch right afterwards. Graelyn's thoughts keep wondering if Arch is okay and she hopes that he is alive.

Despite Graelyn's lack of emotion and logical almost robotic thinking it reveals that she has built a shell in order to stop feeling hurt by whatever has happened in her past. It's not just her past that she tries to hide but also her fears. Graelyn, like many people, fears failure and disappointment of not being able to leave a mark on history.

"I am very scared I will amount to nothing. I am already nine years old and I have not made any significant scientific breakthroughs. I can already tell I am a failure."

-10,000 Dawns, Chapter Nine

It's not just preventing herself from getting hurt and showing fear but Graelyn, also, doesn't want to be pushed around. Graelyn wants nothing more than to be respected and admired for her accomplishments and if she has to be cold towards others than so be it. This only adds to her humanity and her desire to not feel emotions.

It becomes very clear that Graelyn internally struggles between expressing her emotions and gaining respect. If she shows emotion, then she'll be seen as weak. But if she bottles up the emotions then she loses parts of her humanity. There is no win-win in this situation in Graelyn's mind and seems to be something that she battles with constantly. Does she express emotion and be perceived as weak, or does she lose her humanity in order to gain respect?

We all desire to be respected and admired for our accomplishments. Humans will almost do anything they to gain respect. Some kill others for it, some will only hurt others. Some will become cold towards others and see weakness as failure, much like Graelyn does. In a way, a desire to be respected is a common human quality

Graelyn is a complex character and I feel as though I've only scratched the surface of her character. She is very logical but hiding an emotional side, she tries to be aloof but still cares for others, and, the best part, she isn't sexualized in any way. The real question now is how can I get my Contemporary Gender Issues professor to start reading this story. Any thoughts?



# An Artist's Journey:

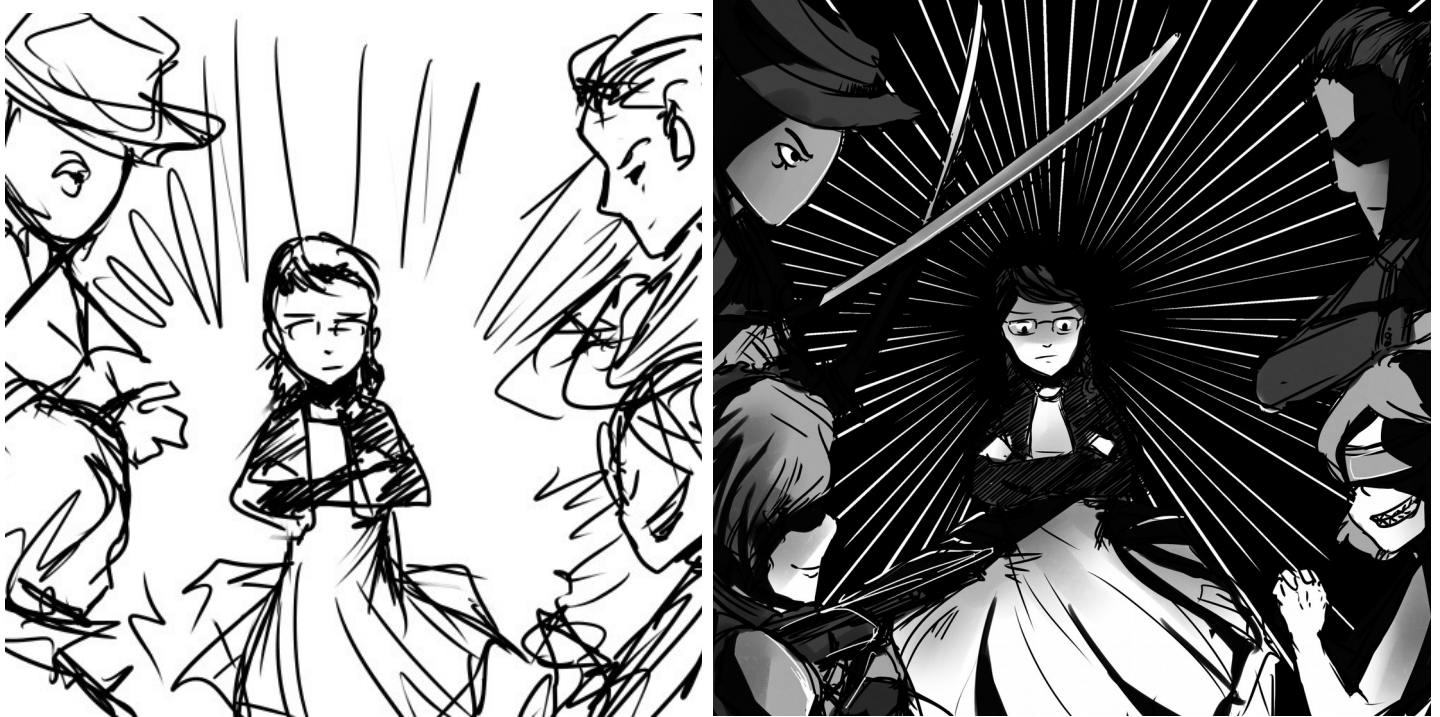
## A Visual History of Annie Zhu's 10,000 Dawns Art!

*We thought we'd give you a glimpse behind the scenes into making the art of this grand adventure!*

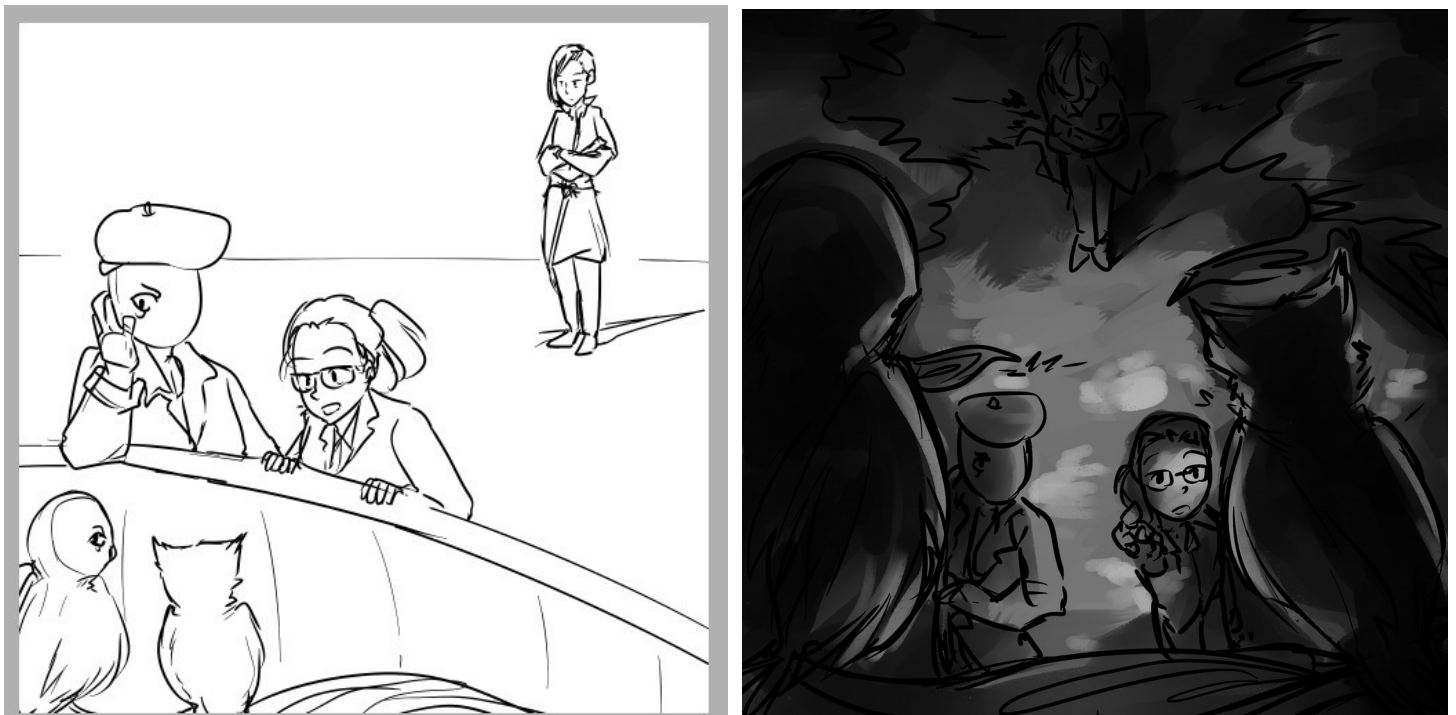
**Exhibit 1:** The First Sketch of Graelyn and Arch! Notice how its similar, but how Annie refined the details in her final versions. Many ideas changed during the early visuals of the characters and world.



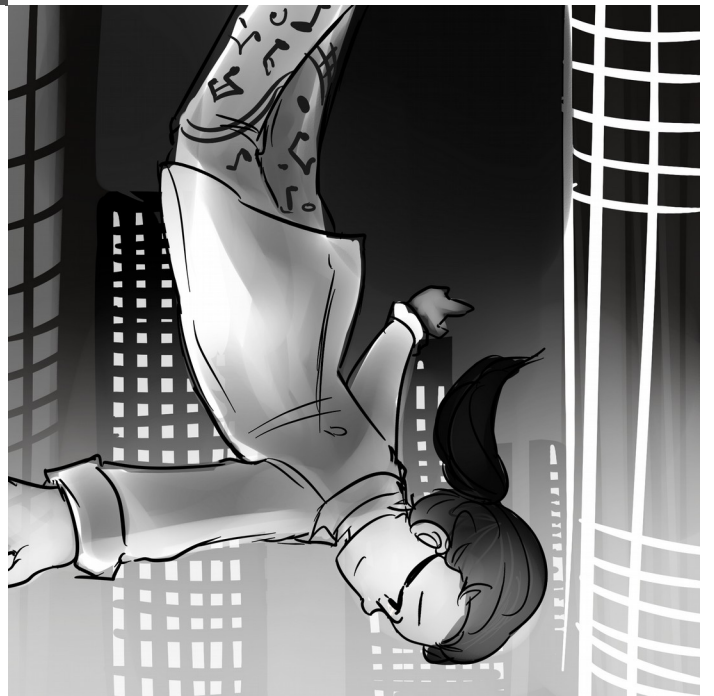
**Exhibit 2:** Chapter 12: The Confrontation (Sketch to final version). Here you can see the basics of how a drawing went from Concept to completion. Note the addition of the swords in the final version!



**Exhibit 3:** Chapter 16: The World Was Wider, the Sky Was Bolder (Sketch to Final Version). During development, the whole composition changed, with the final version suiting the chapter's tone better.



**Exhibit 4:** Chapter 22: The Pavements the Limit ( Several drafts to final version). Chapter 22 proved to be the absolute hardest piece to nail down the art for. The dramatic and heartbreaking scene of Graelyn's suicide attempt went through several concepts and iterations to get it right. You can see several of the ideas Annie and Jim went through in trying to bring the scene to life correctly, until they settled on the final version that perfectly captured the moment.



# 10,000 DAWNS

## ◆ ANTHOLOGY ◆



A cause can bring people together...

*Welcome to our Special preview of 10,000 Dawns: Anthology! This summer you'll be able to read exciting tales delving into the history of the 10,000 Dawns Universe. From the machinations of the Index on the rim, to the war between Centro Systems and Mars, you'll get to explore amazing new worlds, meet fantastic new characters, as well as learn more about old favorites.*

*This Excerpt comes from a story about two new characters named Zhang Han and Cornelia Carthage: two friends, one of whom believes in a cause worth going to war for... And is going to great lengths to prove it. We hope you enjoy the excerpt, and come back to check out the Anthology as it posts on jameswylder.com!*

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*10,000 Dawns: Anthology. Coming this summer.*

*Story by James Wylder*

*Art of Zhang Han and Cornelia Carthage by Raen Ngu*

## **Goodbye, Moon**

Cornelia slapped the chemical pad on the edge of the door and ripped the back off. The hiss that followed and the bright yellow glow showed it had done its job. Now, Han thought, they just had to get off of this rock. The guards on the other side of the doors began to pound on them like somehow their fists could overcome a third of a meter of metal.

“Was this really your plan? If this was your plan—“

“This wasn’t my plan.” Cornelia replied. They both panted for a moment, then Cornelia turned and grinned. Her smile was infuriating but she couldn’t help but start to turn her own frown into something she wouldn’t let quite form a smile. “Mostly. But I can adapt to it. Ever flown a rocket?” Han shook her head.

“I’m a Marine, not a pilot.” Cornelia nodded and ran over to the control console. She looked it over, frowning.

“This is surprisingly complex for something whose sole job is to go ‘up’.”

“They call it rocket-science for a reason you know.”

“Yeah, and we stopped using these for a reason to.” Cornelia replied, thumbing a few switches, and pulling open a big panel to fiddle with the wires. The lights became brighter, and consoles lit up throughout the room. They might just get off Titania yet, even if it was on a missile. Cornelia brightened up.

“This orbital rocket is an old re-purposed passenger rocket, so it was built to carry people! I mean, its technically a bomb now, but it’ll do.”

“Cornelia, this rocket it meant to blow up a Centro battleship in orbit, not let us survive the trip...”

“It was meant to let people survive the trip a hundred and fifty years ago. Do you have a better plan?”

Their banter was cut off by a crackling sound on the overhead speakers. It was a man's voice.

“Your friend is right, you'll never survive lift off. We'll blow you up remotely.”

“I cut that system first.” Cornelia said, Han hadn't even noticed.

“Wise. We'll still shoot you down.”

“That's up for discussion.”

“You think you're worth talking to.”

“We are. Plural.” She replied.

“Of course. You and your little friend are guilty of crimes against our people now. You should feel honored I took the time to speak to you personally.” The man's voice replied.

“So, who do I have the honor of speaking to?” Han mouthed “honor” back at Cornelia while making finger quotes and doing a short mocking dance. Cornelia turned away and Han secretly hoped she was rolling her eyes. She was a bit disappointed to see Cornelia was just walking towards a voice panel on the wall.

“You have the prestige of speaking with Corinthian Candlelight, a First Holder of Titania.” Han tapped Cornelia on the shoulder and mouthed.

“Corinthian Candlelight? Seriously?”

“The names just keep getting worse and worse don't they?” She mouthed back. They really did.

Meeting 'Alabaster Armoire' had been bad enough as it was.

“Hi Corinthian Candlelight, I'm Cornelia Carthage.”

There was a pause on the other side, probably someone was pulling up files.

“Never heard of you.”

“Well, data dumps take a while to arrive from Earth don't they?” The man on the other end grunted.

“You're certainly giving up a lot of information.”

“I have nothing to be afraid of from you.” She said plainly. Han scoffed. Cornelia made a face.

“You have a lot to be afraid of, Cornelia Carthage. The Vigilance of the Free Slavehold of Titania isn't for sale to anyone from Earth. You know nothing of what its like on the Rim. You sit in your alabaster cities, and you pretend that life here on the Rim can be governed by the principles you decided are moral. But morality is—“

“Isn't calling this place a “free slavehold” kind of... stupid? Like, I'm not a refined gentlemen, but isn't that not how words work?” Han interjected.

“You insolent snot—“

“Like do you point at trees and call them horses? Or point at yourself and call it ‘not a thumbsucker’?” Cornelia kept in a snicker.

“You Centro people are all the same. You grew up rich and fat on Earth.”

“—Actually I'm from Mars. Cornelia is from Earth. I'm Zhang Han, Martian asskicker. And yes, that's an official title.” The man grunted.

“Then you of all people should understand what we fought to build here. What we toiled to—“

“What others toiled to do for you.”

“Our hands guided theirs.”

“Your hands are too slippery with blood to guide anything.” There was a pause as long as 5 heart beats.

“You will regret this. Foreign spies aren't welcome on this moon, and your punishment will be severe. Maybe I'll cut out your tongues and make you my personal concubines.”

“Wow, you are an idiot.” Han said.

“Don’t expect the slaveholder to be particularly moral, Han.” Cornelia shrugged. “Anyways, we’re going to kill him, right?” Han looked at Cornelia. This whole stupid endeavor had been her ploy to this moment, this agonizing moment. She’d wanted her to see this place, this hellhole dressed up in posh dresses and frock coats. Their eyes met. Han’s teeth slid slowly onto the top of her lower lip.

She was done with the military.

She was quitting.

She was going to join her friends in the independent Mars student rallies.

Heck, she was going to be a student again.

She was going to ask out that cute girl from the Black Hole Lounge and...

“Yeah. We’re going to kill him.” Han said, and she knew Cornelia had been right. These people on Titania, hidden in darkness and surrounded by gilded lights were now in two groups: those who she would kill, and those who would be liberated. She’d seen hell out here during the Rim Gang Wars, trying to bring order in the name of Centro Systems... But Cornelia wasn’t just about order. She was about morality. Titania had been built on the backs of slaves, and it was a crime Han couldn’t turn her back on. She had to do this. The pointless war on the Rim had changed in her head, a switch had flipped, and there was no going back. Cornelia grinned.

“Bold words, but you aren’t getting off this moon alive.”

“Am I not?” Cornelia said, bemused. Han really hoped she actually had something up her sleeve.

“We’ll shoot your rocket down the minute it launches.”

“Will you?” Cornelia mused, and pulled a tablet out of her pocket, which was close enough to a sleeve in this case that Han was willing to let it count. The tablet lit up, showing a map of blips around the city.

“Because you gave me a full tour of your facilities, and its entirely possible I left things scattered around at the following co-ordinates. You might not want to touch them. They’re dirty bombs, they’d ruin all the careful terraforming you’ve been having your slaves do to this moon... But its your call, I wouldn’t want to decide for you.”

There was silence, and Han stared at Cornelia. This woman had thought this through so far ahead. Even when they were in a corner, she had a contingency. Any lingering doubt left her: she would gladly follow Cornelia into her war. Back into her nightmares.

“You wouldn’t dare.” The man said, his voice cracking.

“I always dare.” She replied. “Now choose.”



**Sometimes, a cause tears us apart...**

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