



10,000 DAWNS

Auld Lang Moon

by James Wylder

The cords shoved the fluid into her, her pupils expanding, the white disk dilating the same way and cutting the starlight out of her vision. The vast crystal moon below her was her, as far as her senses were concerned. How startling to be an orb.

“Tell her to bring us to Dawn 378.”

“Not she, it. Its not a person anymore, its just the onboard computer for the Factory of Crystal. Don’t personify it, you’ll only get your thoughts twisted about it.”

“Its literally a girl in a chair with wires and tubes jabbed into her, its hard to think otherwise.”

“See, your thoughts are already getting twisted. Bring us to Dawn 378, FoC.”

She complied, after all, it was her job. She felt the energy flowing through her body-- no wait, not her body, the moon below her. Or was it the same? The energy ran along the cracks in her blue crystal, till she pushed through the white disk in space she had built from it: a portal to another reality, or another time, or another place. She cleaved through, till she felt the familiar tingle of a coming through into a new universe. She’d done her job.

“Excellent,” one of her two new handlers said (she didn’t like them as much as the first two), “its working perfectly. Now we just need to go down to the surface and clean the mess up down there.”

“I can’t believe a planet this backwards figured out timetravel.”

“I can believe they were dumb enough to write half their own universe out of existence though. Lets get it fixed.”

She felt purpose. She was helping. She was useful. She was... What was her name? She felt the chair pumping more chemicals into her, felt the question fading from her mind. No, she wanted to know! She’d had one, she had a name it was--

“GRAELYN SCYTHES WAKE UP! You’re going to be late,” Graelyn bolted upright in bed. Her pajamas were sweat-logged, her sheets damp.

“Coming Mom,” her voice said, cracking. She slid out of the sheets, and tried to find something to wear that would cover up the holes in her arms. The Crystal Orb rose up from her bed side and nuzzled her as she looked through her closet, like a dog seeing its owner distraught but unsure how to help.

“Is okay, don’t worry about me, just another nightmare,” she consoled the Moon. She took some solace in the humor of a massive military transport capable of expanding or shrinking at will and cutting through reality and time was trying to make her feel better about a bad dream. Her whole life sometimes felt like a dream, if she let it. It had been six months since she’d been liberated from the Factory of Crystal, the glowing orb she’d been wired into by the Firmament. Six months since she’d met another version of herself who had freed her. Six months of fitting into a family she had seen die, and who didn’t know their real daughter here was dead. It was a lot to take in, confusing to explain, and she hoped never to have to. She covered the ports for wires and tubes on her body with long sleeves and pant-legs, and went downstairs to start the day. She needed these extra classes over the winter holiday to catch up, she hadn’t had a formal education before being dropped into this world, and she was having trouble adjusting. Luckily her school offered them, the teachers who gave the courses getting beyond overtime pay. Not that all of them seemed happy about it.

“You know Grae, its new years tomorrow,” her mother said, handing her a roll and a glass of

milk.

“A time for new beginnings and all that? Its just another day. I’d rather be in class than have another day off.”

Her mother smiled, a bit sweet and a bit patronizing, “I think we can often use a chance at a new beginning. Don’t you thi-- What is that?!”

Graelyn turned, to see the Crystal Orb flying down the stairs to come hover over her left shoulder, glowing gently.

“This? Oh, its uh, an electronic pet. I won it in a Trivia contest at the Library.”

Her mother scrunched her nose up, “You never mentioned winning a contest.”

“I didn’t really try, it was really easy. Anyways I forgot to charge it till last night.” The lies perhaps shouldn’t have come so easily to her, but hey, here she was. She scarfed down the rest of her breakfast, and headed out for school, the moon bobbing along behind her all the way.

“Why are you following me?” she hissed at it, as several of her classmates who were also walking to school stared at it. The orb did a little swirl in the air and glowed slightly brighter. Graelyn of course, knew what that meant.

“You’re tired of being separated from a part of yourself?” she wanted to argue her own independence, that she wasn’t actually physically part moon, but she knew deep down she didn’t actually believe that.

“Okay fine, you can come. But you’ll need to shrink down to pocket size during lessons. My teachers don’t take kindly to electronic cheating devices. No. I know you’re not electronic, that’s not the point. Come on!” The two of them walked/floated down the street to the school, with no other students anywhere in sight, where Graelyn began her usual day of classes and study. That was, till she got called down to the office, which never happened. The moon rolled gently in her pocket as she walked through the empty halls.

She slid through the ajar door into the office conference room, holding her school tablet close to her chest, even more confused why the secretary had directed her into this room. She was even more surprised to see who was in the room.

“Hello, Graelyn 3777. What a surprise to see you again.” In the room with her principal, and the administrator for her year, were two figures in hooded cloaks, with the pointed tip of the hoods pulled down over their faces, a patterned stripe hemming the edges of the hoods and sleeves. She resisted the urge to bolt, but couldn’t work up the nerve to enter the room. She simply stayed halfway in the door with her eyes open like a sculpture.

“Graelyn, these two people have come here about a special scholarship for you. We’re very excited about this for you,” Principal Totev said. One of the two robed figures turned a ring on their finger, and waved their hand in front of the faces of Principal Totev and the administrator. The two continued politely smiling as the figure began to speak.

“Please sit down Graelyn, you know what this is about. If you don’t sit down we may have to take actions you wouldn’t like.” Graelyn slipped through the door, and took the farthest seat from the figures.

“So, the firmament has finally come for me,” she said, trying not to sound as terrified as she was.

“Oh, not for you. Your living situation has resolved itself in this timeline, altering it would only increase instability.” The same one said, the other had remained silent.

“I suppose the Firmament would be most concerned about stability.”

“It is in the name, you know. You helped us patch countless holes in time-space, you should know that better than most.”

“I didn’t help you of my own free will,” Graelyn snarled.

“Oh didn’t you? We saved you, carried you out of the burning world you lived on, that dying Earth, and in return you offered your services to us.”

“Death or slavery.”

“Don’t put it so harshly. You’re alive, and you should be happy, that won’t change unless you don’t give us what’s ours.”

“We want the Factory of Crystal,” the other Firmament said. This one’s voice was harsh, gravelly, like it had been distorted through a sound system.

“Quite right. The Authority of Reclamations here is anxious to get back what you stole from us. And I, being the Enforcer of Reclamations, am here to oblige them. You’re quite aware of how powerful that machine is, what its capable of. You know we can’t let that stay in the wrong hands.”

Graelyn rolled up her sleeves, revealing the ports in her arms, “These hands look pretty capable actually. More suited to run the machine than yours, ironically.”

“Don’t think being snarky will save you. You will give us back the Factory, or you will die. How does that sound to you?”

Dawn 3777, ten years ago.

She had been running all day. The great metal Striders that walked the surface were out in force, which had made her scavenging work extra difficult. She ducked behind an outcropping of rocks, and tried to keep her breaths shallow as the thick black metal leg stepped over her, the searchlights coming down from it illuminating the darkness. As soon as it had passed, she bolted. The parts jangled as she ran, and she hoped there weren’t any low-surface scouts. She found the manhole cover, and popped it open, jumping down into it, clinging to the ladder with one hand while she used the other to pull down the lid--

“WAIT!” She heard the shout and popped her head up to the black rocky surface. A man was running towards her, hand on a satchel. He was lit up brilliantly by the Strider.

She gestured for him to come, but knew it was hopeless. Something on the bottom of the Strider swiveled, and a claw shot down from it, grappling the man and with a lurch, pulling him up to the Strider. Graelyn shut the manhole, and began the climb down into the city.

“President St. John orders all citizens to stay alert for saboteurs. Centro will defeat the Strider menace,” the familiar propaganda voice said as she made her way into the narrow streets. Her stomach hurt with hunger. Making her way to the junk-shop, she laid her hand out on the counter, having to pull up a stool to get all the way up there.

“Scythes, surprised to see you’re still alive,” Grandpa Joe said (not her actual grandpa, it was just his nickname, not that she knew where he’d gotten it).

“How much?” she said, desperate to eat. He looked through the jumble of parts and shook his head.

“Not much I’m afraid, with the new missiles the military has been bringing down more Striders than usual, so these aren’t worth what they used to be. Now if you brought me Oolong Cores...”

“Those give you cancer. I’d know.”

“Yea, heard about your parents. Shame that. Still, beats the firing squad your siblings got for desertion right?” Graelyn didn’t deign that with a response. “Right then...” he took out the money he owed her, and she took it eagerly. It wasn’t much, but it was enough for food. More food if she got it stale or expired, which she nearly always did. She ran to the markets, and soon went home to the less-cold spot under the pipes in the back alley on 4th street to begin her feast of moldy bread, spoiled milk, and a blemished apple, pulling the ragged pile of blankets and clothes around herself to try to keep herself from freezing. That was when the end of the alley got dark. Two figures in weird clothes, robes like out of an old fantasy film, blocked the alley. She’d seen their kind before, bad people who wanted to kidnap orphan kids for nefarious ends. Its why she slept by the pipes, even if they sometimes leaked: Graelyn leapt from her spot on the ground, up onto a horizontal section of pipe, and began to monkey up the side of it. Then, she felt herself pulled off of it, into the air, where she didn’t fall, but was instead slowly lowered. She saw nothing physical holding her, but one of the figures had its arm outstretched.

“Graelyn Scythes. We’re familiar with your intellectual and problem solving capabilities from other iterations of you. We’d like to offer you a job.”

Work? She’d be desperate for a job. A real job, but sketchy people in alleys weren’t exactly trustworthy, “What kind of job?”

One of the figures made a swirling gesture with its arm, and a white disk appeared on the wall next to her. After a moment, it stabilized, and she looked through onto a room filled with pastries. Fresh pastries. She licked her lips. Her hunger was somehow stronger than the wonder she saw before her.

“The kind where you’ll never go hungry again.”

She could remember the holes being cut into her arms, her legs, torso, head. The nutrients being pumped into her bloodstream and stomach. All she could remember thinking over the pain was she’d been promised pastries.

The present

Graelyn nodded, and pulled the orb out of her pocket. The enforcer rose, and reached his hand out as it floated into the air, towards his outstretched palm, and then veered sharply slamming into his face and zipping back into Graelyn’s pocket as she sprung out of her chair and through the door.

“After her!” The Authority shouted, while The Enforcer reshaped their broken and bloody nose into a fresh one, shoving him out of his chair after her. The principal and administrator smiled pleasantly as the Firmament members ran past them, opening the door with a wave of the ringed hand. Graelyn looked behind her as she ran, seeing the two following her. She had to find a way to escape. Reaching into her pocket, she felt the connection to the moon. It was part of herself, that orb. She’d been connected to it for nearly ten years. Her blood ran through its plains, its rivers ran through her veins. She pulled it out, and hoped that she could do what she was thinking. The orb grew to the size of a basketball, and she hugged it tight as she lifted off of the ground, floating up into the air, and onto the roof of a nearby house. Without missing a stride, The Authority and The Enforcer made a gesture with their ringed hands, and they floated up to meet her. She ran again, using the orb to float between rooftops, hoping to lose them, but they followed her from house to house, sometimes trying to flank her or cut her off. She doubled back, slipped their clutches, and kept running. This wasn’t going to work, this wasn’t a plan that could actually get her freedom.

The Enforcer leapt to a roof to her right, and tried to wave at her with the ringed hand to lift her off her feet, but she jacked up the gravity with the orb, till her feet were smashing through the shingles on the house beneath her as she ran. Whoops.

She lightened herself again, and sprung onto the next house, when it finally hit her what she needed to do. She focused hard on the orb, pressing her hands onto it, feeling the connection. Cords sprang out of the orb, as if hidden compartments had opened up, and latched themselves onto her arms. She could feel her blood flow into the orb, and the orb flow into her. Then the cords snapped back in, and the orb hung glowing between her outstretched arms. She glowed in wonder just as it did, and as the Enforcer came up behind her, she opened the portal.

The white disk opened right under her feet, and she fell with the orb right down into it. She knew the Enforcer and the Authority of Reclamation would be right behind her. But she had a plan now, and even if this was the end, she’d go out on her own terms. She landed in the Labyrinth, the artificial space that lined different dimensions for the Firmament to travel in, and ran down its glowing bifrost. She channeled more energy into the orb, she knew where she had to go. They’d messed up, because unlike most beings who had ever existed, she knew where they lived.

The Evaluator of Travel, of many Evaluators of Travel of course, it wasn’t a high ranking position, stared at the terminal. It looked like Reclamations had brought back that stray they’d been being chewed out about finally, coming in at dock 18. She got up out of her desk, and wandered over to

the gate, watching as the portal formed, and readying the pedestal to receive the Factory of Crystal. The portal stabilized, and the Factory did shoot out of it, but so did an alien being. It's features looked firm, like it couldn't change them even if it focused very hard, and the Evaluator was pretty sure it was a human. Or one of the variants, she couldn't be bothered to keep up with all of the literature on them. Still, she knew about a few important parts of human culture, like N'Sync and Beethoven. The orb landed onto its pedestal, just as they were supposed to, but the human got up, and pulled it off of it. The poor thing was clearly confused, after all it couldn't even see properly without the transparent rectangles it had placed in front of its eyes.

"No, that's not for touching! Put that back. How did Reclamations get this careless--"

Reclamations, as if on cue, dropped in through the portal, and pointed at the human, who was already running away like a startled deer.

"Evaluator, stop her!"

She blinked, "I'm not touching that, you brought a wild animal here you go touch it."

"It's a criminal who stole valuable Firmament property!"

The Evaluator crossed her arms, "Did she really steal it? I mean, you don't blame a cat for hunting prey. Maybe humans just like picking up shiny objects?"

The Enforcer shoved past her, "By the forgotten gods, you're no help."

"Should I call animal control?"

"She's one of the lesser species, not an artichoke." The Authority said.

The Evaluator of Travel through up her arms as the Authority began chasing after the Enforcer, who was chasing after the human, turning her hair bright purple in exasperation. They always had to make everything so dramatic.

Graelyn passed rows of pedestals, most of which held another Factory of Crystal. In each one, there was a pilot. We're they all just like her? Unwanted people brought in just before they had been scheduled to die somewhere in order to run the Firmament's inter-universal fleet of traveling vessels? She felt guilty passing them, but she couldn't do anything. Not with those two on her tail. She finally reached a door, and pulled it open, stepping out into a square filled with robed people. In the center of the square was a giant marble statue of three figures, all of whom were featureless, their faces a blank slate. Their hands were open as though they were holding objects and performing tasks, but no objects rested in them. This seemed normal to everyone but her, but she couldn't stand and stare, after all, they were already staring at her. Holding the orb under her arm, she kept running, pushing past startled Firmament people, but couldn't lose herself in the crowd when she was clearly dressed differently than everyone else. She needed to blend in, and knew how to do it.

Graelyn had learned how to scavenge, and she knew about trash. She didn't mind things that other people discarded. Sure, the last six months she'd had fresh food, new clothes, and a warm bed, but she could tolerate the rest. And so she slipped down an alley, because all worlds have alleys if they have cities, and all cities have to have a way to get rid of trash. Maybe they'd just vaporize or burn it, but she got the sense they didn't. They seemed old and hidebound, and her intuition paid off. This alley was behind a store filled with robes, she'd seen them in the windows, though she couldn't tell what the differences in fashion were supposed to be. A pipe ran out the back, a thick one, down into a dumpster. She climbed up into it, and found some robes. They were clearly, even to her, unfashionable. The stuff that wouldn't sell no matter what. She dug around, trying on a few hastily, till she emerged with a somewhat dirty but well fitting firmament robe on her. She came out of the alley, orb in her pocket, and walked right past the Enforcer and the Authority, still trying to find her in this huge city. She was lucky she could read their language, speak it as well, having been part of one of their machines. The signs told her she was just where she wanted to be.

The City of Glory.

The capitol of the First and Final Firmament.

“The most stable and enduring Parliament of the Firmament recognizes the Authority of Reclamation.” The Arbiter of Arbitration said.

The Authority rose, trying to not show his embarrassment as he stood before the Parliament. He was in the pit, while the Parliament sat in seats encircling him above a wall too high for him to climb. It was intimidating. It was meant to be.

“Authority, you have let a member of a lesser species, an outsider to the Prime Reality no less onto the surface of the Firmament without permission. Are you aware of the severity of this infraction?”

He raised his arms up, “I was instructed to bring her to the Firmament.”

“In custody.”

“Partial fulfillment is not an absence of attempt.”

The Parliament muttered to themselves, “We accept your rules-mongering.” He breathed a sigh of relief, “For now. The intruder must be apprehended-” The Arbiter of Arbitration stopped, and raised an eyebrow, “it appears you have someone who has come to speak on your behalf. The... Minister of Scythes. Whoever that is. Let them in!”

The Authority was about to protest, when the door in the pit slid open, and a robed person stepped into it with him, lowering their hood to reveal the face of Graelyn Scythes.

“Hi everyone, did you miss me?” she waved.

“Ah, well, I see the criminal has decided to turn herself in. Commendable, and fortunate for you, Authority.”

“Sadly, afraid not,” Graelyn said, “because you promised me pastries.”

The Parliament was silent for a moment, then awkward confused laughter filled it, “Pastries? Be serious. Guards, arrest her.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t do that. See, I’m linked into a Factory of Crystal. My Factory of Crystal. A moon sized machine capable of contorting reality and space-time and its ready to tear a hole in the fabric of this city and let all sorts of terrible things through,” she rolled up her sleeve to reveal the orb, shrunk down small but littered in tiny cords that linked into her left arm. “I’ve been at the helm of one of these for ten years, I know my way around it. No wonder you were worried about me getting a hold of it, its insanely powerful now that I think about it. I’d never considered hurting anyone with it.”

The Parliament went into an uproar, the guards held back, the Authority looked terrified. The Arbiter of Arbitration made a gesture with their hand, and the room went quiet, “You expect us to make a deal with you when you’re threatening us?”

“Yes I do! Because you lied to me. You promised me I’d be safe, you showed me pastries, showed me a future full of plenty and hooked me up to this thing like I was a lab rat, or a CPU! You promised me pastries, and I never got them.”

“The Acquisitions Bureau is supposed to be completely honest with their promises to the pilot program. If your accusations are true, we will of course owe you an apology. But we must take back what’s ours.”

“Do you know why I came here to tell you this? Because I don’t believe people are inherently good. They’re not, and we’re not. We’re not hardwired to be kind, or to do the right thing all the time. We also have selfishness, hatred, all sorts of bad impulses that fight for control. And sometimes the bad things win out. The bad things become what we are, or they become all that surrounds us. And that means we have to survive. Because if someone is trying to kill you or take your freedom, you can’t just ask them to stop. I would know. They just keep taking it until you give them consequences. So I’ve given you consequences. If you want that moon, that you made a part of me, that you made me feel was as much my own flesh as my hand, if you want that back, you can ruin your planet. But this is a new year. Its a time for new beginnings. And I’m tired of holding on to my own hate at your broken promises. There were no pastries, and you used me, and it was wrong. You should hate yourselves for

that. You hurt me in ways I can't even explain. But I'm willing to forgive you, and let bygones be bygones. You forgive me, and I'll forgive you, and we both leave each other alone. If you respect my existence, all of it, then I'll respect yours. Deal?"

The Arbiter leaned back in their chair that was older than the planet Earth.

"Deal."

Graelyn clinked the glass with her brother and they downed the sparkling grape juice heartily.

"Happy New Year!" they shouted, a little belatedly, as the rest of the family began pouring out more champagne.

"Got any new years resolutions, Graeie?" her brother asked.

She laughed, "Not die, keep existing, eat good food."

"Cheers to that," he replied, and they clinked glasses again, that were this time joined by a small crystal orb, which floated up to join in the fun. Someone started singing "Auld Lang Syne," and two two joined in.

"When old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind!"

The doorbell rang.

"When old acquaintance be forgot, and days of auld lang syne."

"Who could that be at midnight on New Years?" Graelyn's dad murmured.

"To auld lang syne, my dears to auld lang syne!"

Graelyn shrugged, and went to get the door. When she opened it, she didn't see anyone, but looking down there was a box, with a note on the top.

"To Graelyn,

To help with your bygones, and maybe with ours.

Happy New Year.

-The Arbiter of Arbitration"

She opened the box, and it was filled to the brim with fine pastries from all over the world. From the distance, a cloaked figure on a rooftop raised a hand, then faded into the shadows.

"We'll raise a cup of kindness yet... To auld lang syne."