

Rachel Survived

by James Wylder

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A 20th Anniversary Crossover.
Special thanks to Andrew Hickey.

Racheledwards.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 11th

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

President, and tried to ignore that too.

That was when I noticed the cat.

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

“What’s got you bothered?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I ran again.

I tripped, and everything went black.

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

Then I woke up in my bed.

What the hell, right?

News Report: ViralNoiseNews, November 12th

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

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

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

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Entry: November 12th

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

Me: So what does this discovery mean for readers?

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

Me: Speculative?

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

Me: What are the books about?

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

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

Racheledwards.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 13th

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

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

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

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

I was walking by an abandoned shopfront, the windows obscured by cardboard lining them on

the inside. The door opened, and a hand reached out in front of my face.

It wasn't a normal hand.

It was dripping neon.

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

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

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

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

"You're crowding me!" One said.

"I'm large!" The other replied.

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

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

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

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

"Are you okay?" he asked.

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

Should have.

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

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

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

"Look," Arch cut in, "we both legitimately don't like hurting people. But we will."

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

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

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

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

"Are...what the hell was wrong with those people?"

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

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

I stared dumbfounded.

“Well come on then!”

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

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

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

“Okay, yeah, sure.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right,” I said.

We reached the door of a theatre, announcing it was setting up for some show based on some corporate property to premiere in the future. We reached a side door, which was of course locked. Arch’s finger opened up, and little...thingies came out and slipped into the lock. In a second, it clicked, and he barged in.

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

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

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

“Okay, how do you know who I am?”

Graelyn thought a moment.

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

“Who the heck is Andrew Hickey?”

Graelyn frowned, “Oh come on. He’s really good. He wrote that book about the Monkeys.”

“I’m not familiar.”

She sighed, “Not appreciated in his own time. Anyways, Arch and I used this novel about you in

order to find you.”

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

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

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

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

“Just look in the book, it’s all in there.”

I took the book from her, and began reading.

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t say former, it weirds people out,” Arch cut in.

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

I shook my head, “The heck?”

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

I threw my hands up, okay.

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

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

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

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

* * * *

(Transcription inserted)

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

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

Eternity:

I was old and eternal,
my hooks had me bent

trying to run the
First and final
Firmament
Everything was easy
I was utterly bored
when my girl the Arbiter of Knives
came on board.

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

Knives:

Eternity sucks, we've been here forever.

Eternity:

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

Knives:

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

Eternity:

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

Knives:

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

Eternity:

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

Knives:

What if you never ran out?

Eternity:

Okay, I'll hear it all.

Knives:

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

Eternity:

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

Knives:

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

Eternity:

I am pretty tired...

Knives:

So go get some words!

Eternity:

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

Knives:

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

Eternity:

You mean...

Knives:

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

Eternity:

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

Knives:

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

Eternity:

Edwards? I've read a book about her.

Knives:

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

Eternity:

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

(there is a record scratch)

No help's gunna come.

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

Hyperion:

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

GALVIN

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

Hyperion:

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

We could take this precious book

Bring it back home to our world
Make our emperors so happy
Give our Council oh such Joy

Together:

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

Galvin:

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

Hyperion:

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

Together:

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

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

Graelyn:

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

Arch:

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

Graelyn:

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

Together:

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

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

The Strid:

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

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

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

All Together:

When we--

Rachel Edwards:

Jesus, okay, I get it.

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Because you want the book?"

"Yes," they replied together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

That's more what it's like.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Update: November 14th 6:38 AM

It is.

Firmament Data File: The Strid

The Strid are unusual in that they have been enemies of some of the most powerful people in their native universe for longer than many civilizations have existed. However, they rarely act on their intentions, and this has fermented their survival. You can see the Strid throughout important documented events and adventures in their native universe, only you'd never recognize them. They're there in the background, watching. Did you see them? They never speak. If they spoke, you'd know. When they take a host, speaking causes their natural form (a blue goop) to seep out from the host they

are inhabiting. Indeed, they only ever appear silently in the background. They're there in the crowd, observing. Learning. They learn, and they use intermediaries to disseminate that information. Their goals are unclear, but they have avoided any outright conflict with people from their own universe. More than anyone, they seem aware that the great figures they seek to fight have an inevitable draw towards victory, something scorched into the nature of their world. They've seen it a thousand times. So they watch. And they learn.

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

News Report: ViralNoiseNews, November 14th

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

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

Racheledwards.dreamjournal.com

Entry: November 14^h

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

person, and then a few who looked like everyday New Yorkers or tourists, only with blue goo dripping from their orifices and cuticles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arch and Graelyn held me back, and I think Graelyn slapped something on my neck and doped me. (Real classy, these guys.) I didn't pass out, but I felt the panic drain, the need to run disappear. I still felt sick to my stomach though, so a little more politely, I threw up in the middle of what the lady started saying.

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

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

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

I threw up.

--those not from this...is she okay?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your friends...?"

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

Someone else spoke up, one of the blue goo people Graelyn called The Strid, "We have it. We

have contained it within our person, and will release it to the one who provides us with the finest offer. If you attempt to take it from us, we will destroy it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then it struck me. The most obvious thing. To them, I was a character in a book. Graelyn had

read about me. She'd said as much. And they didn't want anyone to know they were here. These books were all dangerous. They were all something people wanted. They had to be dangerous for a reason. I picked up the copy of "Head of State", and opened it to the last page. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a pen, and wrote in it:

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

I closed the book and waited.

Nothing happened. Rats.

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

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

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

She nodded, "Yeah. I was thirteen."

"Did it matter to you?"

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

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

Moscow Russia, 2471, Another Universe

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

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

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

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

Someone who wouldn't die.

She wanted to feel that way herself.

She kept on reading.

She still had no idea who the killer was.

But Rachel survived.

November 14th, New York, New York, USA

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

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

I placed the sharp tip against my own jugular.

"Excuse me," I yelled.

They stopped.

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

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

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

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

I looked around. There was silence.

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

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

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

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

I just stared them down, till they looked away.

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

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

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

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

"Same," the Assimilations said.

Graelyn and Arch high fived.

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

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

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

The Arbiter frowned, took a step towards the orb, and the vanished into it. It zipped away,

disappearing in a flash. The Great Assimilation just walked out the door, as did the Strid. This time they flipped me off though. I gave them the two fingered salute in return.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

November 15th **World Daily Updatez**

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

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