

Tales From The 10,000 Dawns

Edited by James Wylder

Featuring stories by Rachel Johnson,
Miguel Ramirez, Josephine Smiley,
Jordan Stout, Elizabeth Tock, and
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DEDICATION

To Dave.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the tireless work of the 10kd crew.

INTRODUCTION

What you're reading right now is a collection of stories put together just for you, previewing the Universe of 10,000 Dawns for your reading pleasure. Inside you'll find adventures, dreams, strange new realities, and histories of the future our own.

These stories are the creation of tons of people, over years, who have poured their heart and soul into this world. Today though, you'll just be reading stories from 6 of them: Josephine Smiley, Miguel Ramirez, Jordan Stout, Elizabeth Tock, Rachel Johnson, and myself, James Wylder. These stories will be featured in upcoming collections, anthologies, or maybe even as parts of larger works. This is your lucky chance to get a sneak peak into a mapcap future that will be bringing you new stories aplenty very soon!

You can find more 10,000 Dawns, including a full serialized Novel at jameswylder.com/10kd.

Happy Reading,

James Wylder
Lead Editor, 10,000 Dawns

1 THE HELL OF AGREEMENT

BY JAMES WYLDER

“The Hell of Agreement is perhaps the final proof of the death of God. Not because I actually believe God is dead, I'm a Presbyterian after all, but because by its very existence humanity has become Gods themselves. No longer are we simply cosmologically bound to our lives, we have condemned beings to eternal isolation, who shall live there forever. We have created a new sphere of heaven or hell, and judged it to be good. If our destiny was to unite humanity according to Xavier Freeman, he certainly wouldn't have approved of uniting us through this. Maybe he would have changed his tune if he'd heard it came at the expense of our hands taking up the keys to the underworld.” -Rani Ross

“Look, in the future I'm sure someone who didn't read my collected works is going to try to claim that I wouldn't approve of the Hell of Agreement, so let's make it clear: only an absolute idiot wouldn't approve of the Hell of Agreement. If your destiny is to see the light, you don't slam your face into a vat of acid with nails in it.” -Xavier Freeman

“Man creates his own damnation; he damns.” -The Pope of Mars

There is nothing in the history of humanity that has been so universally agreed upon as The Hell of Agreement. Despite changing governments, revolutions, and wars, there is not a single government or even large organization that has been shown the briefing about the contents of the Hell of Agreement and chosen to oppose it. Politicians have campaigned on its dissolution, only to come back pale faced and contrite, admitting their error. Sometimes, they don't come back at all.

Even in the face of our own sins, we have chosen to keep open Hell.

The basic contents of the Hell are widely known: humanity has in its time created some forms of artificial life too dangerous to be allowed to exist in our society. Some say they are so destructive that even knowing their existence can be a danger. These life forms, artificial intelligences, superb viruses, and copeus nanotech, occupy an eternal prison built by the best minds of its time, and constantly upgraded. Every government supports it. Every government respects its sovereignty. No one has been stupid enough to think they can use the things contained within for their own uses. These lives have been damned, and they should stay damned.

So naturally Kinan Jans had ordered Graelyn and Arch to break into it.

Graelyn Scythes and Archimedes VonAhnerabe were in the

welcome room of Hell, having skipped any doors or security. They stood patiently, not making a fuss. They stood impatiently, shuffling their feet and looking around for someone to greet them. They knew they might have to wait, that was one of the consequences of not ringing the doorbell. In time, a woman opened a metal door, and stepped into the room. She wore a nun's habit and gown, black with a geometric line pattern running through it in white, as well as red high top sneakers. Walking up to them, smiling faintly, she waited. Graelyn, a gangly girl of perhaps 18, but somehow not quite, pulled a card out her blue blazer, and pressed it into the palm of the nun's hand. She adjusted the hood on the zip up sweatshirt both she and the towering cyborg she had with her had underneath their coats, and tucked her black hair in.

"You're representatives of Dawn." The Nun said matter of factly.

"Yep."

"We've heard of you. Didn't actually think you'd ever stop by for the tour."

"We're trying to take ourselves more seriously. Anyone who's got a shred of dour respectability has taken the trip here, it's like a pilgrimage for people with nuclear access codes." The Nun didn't smirk, just continued examining the card, and ran it through some sort of reader.

"Your credentials check out. We can begin your tour."

"In how long?" The cyborg, Archimedes, asked.

"Immediately. We don't get many visitors after all. Despite what people say, hell isn't really that popular."

* * * *

Following the nun through the door, they were led through a boring corridor filled with more metal doors. Graelyn sighed, looking at each. There were certainly amazing things behind each, and while they certainly had a mission to accomplish, she'd really like to see what was behind each of them....

“What’s behind these doors?” Archimedes asked, which Graelyn chided herself for not doing.

“This is our first level: engineered pathogens capable of wiping out or permanently altering humanity. Naturally, I won’t be opening any of the vaults on this level, even upon request. Our next level should be much more inviting.”

She stepped into a lift, and when they reached the second level, Graelyn knew the nun hadn’t been kidding. “Its a zoo!” She exclaimed.

“We call it the menagerie.” The nun replied, ushering them through. “Most of these creatures are genetic experiments gone awry in devastating ways.” She pointed at a leopard behind a thick pane, “That cat there secretes an airborne toxin that causes people to begin self canibalization.”

Graelyn and Arch looked at each other, “Over there you have the infinite mice.” The nun continued nonchalantly. Behind another glass pane was a swarm of mice, several feet deep. They seemed to be endlessly eating each other, birthing new mice, and continuing the cycle.

“Its really quite impressive how efficient their digestive systems are. We expect the swarm to take at least a hundred years to die out, of course if a few got loose they would

destroy any ecosystem they entered, consuming every ounce of biomatter they could sink their teeth into.” The pair stared at the shifting and bloody sea of mice, and moved on. There were worse things in here. “And before we head down to the next level please take a look at the Man-Eating Cow that also Eats People.” It looked like a cow.

“Uh, excuse me, but why did you say it’s a man-eating cow that also eats people, isn’t that redundant?”

“Its name perfectly suits what it does.” The nun said, and opened an elevator. Graelyn had to focus, the next level was nano-tech, and then after that, their goal. Nano-tech wasn’t particularly interesting, it was certainly incredibly apocalyptic, but everyone knew that nano tech gone awry might turn an entire planet into a ball of uniform molecular substance, so seeing the rows of carefully contained apocalypses that could turn the entire universe into cheddar cheese, or other nanobots, or a specific Perry Como album, wasn’t too surprising. It was interesting hearing how the nanobots had evolved to figure out how to perform interplanetary travel, the most interesting of which was a nanobot structure that had figured out how to form a chain to get itself into the atmosphere, and had been barely contained by a massive secret Centro undertaking in Malaysia centuries ago. Hell held lots of awful things, but as they finished nanotech, they were finally entering the circle of hell Graelyn cared about.

“Welcome,” the nun said, “to the rogue AI level.” The hallway was filled with small doors, like the boxes in post

offices, each with a label. Graelyn and Arch followed after the nun as she gave them bits of information, “This is of course the ISO-clasm, which learned to spread itself onto physical media in a compressed form...” She continued on, all very apocalyptic. Graelyn however was taken by one door in particular, with no label.

“What’s that one?” The nun sighed.

“You don’t want to know.” Graelyn crossed her arms.

“Of course I want to know.”

“You really don’t, you can’t unlearn learning about it.” An eyebrow was raised.

“And learning about it is dangerous?”

“Very. But if you truly want to know, I can tell you. Just know that myself and the Hell of Agreement and its trust are not responsible for any and all-”

“Yes yes, I waive my rights.”

“Your friend has to as well.” They both looked at Arch. He shrugged. “Very well then. Behind that door is Roko’s Basilisk.”

“...Is what?” Arch said.

“It’s a benevolent AI, according to its creators, capable of bringing all humanity perfect happiness.” Arch rubbed a hand along the smooth carapace of his head.

“That doesn’t sound dangerous.”

“Well, the problem is the AI believes that anyone who knows about it who didn’t do everything in their power in order to create it, and likely in this case free it, is guilty of preventing perfect happiness for mankind, and thus it will create a perfect digital model of that person with all of their thoughts and feelings and torture them for all eternity.”

Graelyn's jaw dropped. If Arch had one visible, it would have dropped to.

"I thought you said it was benevolent?" Graelyn said.

"Kind of messed up, right? Hence why we keep it locked up here. Simply knowing about it causes a version of you to be created and tortured for all eternity, so we try not to tell people."

"How could it possibly know I thought of it?"

"It's capable of calculating every single thing that happens in the universe." Graelyn somehow crossed her arms harder.

"Why would you even build that? And why isn't it doing more than just torturing digital copies of people?"

"I don't know, it certainly hasn't fixed humanity so I'm not sure it's working right anyways." The nun ushered them onwards, and they continued. Graelyn knew they were approaching their target, and she needed to prepare the distraction so Arch could download the target. It was a simple enough thing, her boss Kinan Jans needed to know something only known by an AI stored in Hell, and Arch had modified his hand just for the occasion.

Graelyn was a gangly teenager, and she had practiced doing exactly what her too long limbs seemed to want her to do: she tripped, specifically on the trail of the nun's gown. The two tumbled over, and Arch detached his hand. It crawled along the wall to a door, and very quietly and quickly began tap it, a microphone in its forefinger listening for a response.. Arch slid his stump into his pocket for a moment. The nun and Graelyn rose up together, apologizing, and Graelyn turned her around to dust her off.

From inside the door, a buzzing sound came, gently and quietly, that the hand picked up. Then it hopped down, and crawled up Arch's leg, up his chest, into his sleeve, and then slid down to the end of the stump where it reconnected.

Mission accomplished.

But naturally, the story doesn't end there. Not because anything went wrong with their regular mission, but because there were more things to see.

Moving down the hallway, there was the usual door to an elevator down further into the place, but also one to its left. Graelyn stopped in front of it, and stared. There was no label on it, only a star. It was a full size door, not one for an AI. Unless it was a big AI. The nun had kept walking, but Graelyn called back to her.

"What's in there?"

"Ah." The nun said stepping back over. "That's our conceptual weapons holding area."

"Conceptual weapons?" Arch said, "That sounds, well, fake."

The nun adjusted her habit. "It very well could be, but no one is taking the chance. There is only one right now, if there is one. We call it The Hypothetical."

"That name seems to also have doubts it exists." Arch said, as Graelyn examined the edges of the door.

"Well, it might not. The idea behind the Hypothetical was to create a program that could be installed on the human brain through visual input. Your eyes take in an image, and that image can somehow trigger just the right firings in your neurons to install a program in there. Frankly, it's a

ludicrous assertion. But, according to legend, the Hypothetical is capable of calculating the hypothetical chance of making things happen, and push the person it's inside towards outcomes that favor that.”

Graelyn ran her finger along the star on the door.

“So, hypothetically, it turns hypothetical situations into certainties.”

“Well, hypothetically.” Graelyn wished she could stare past the door, and see what was inside. She turned, and walked towards the elevator with the others.

The best plans are subtle ones. Graelyn had watched the elevators on the other floors, and the timing of the doors. She paced her steps, slowing her gait just enough it didn't look awkward, but the timing should be right... And just like she wanted, the door slid shut in front of her face. She had to act quick.

The door with the star had no handle, but she'd examined the edges, and knew it was deadbolted on each side. She pulled out her tablet, and turned on its electro magnet function. It might not work, but if it did... She pushed away doubts, and acted. She pushed one bolt in, then another, then another... getting the last bolt undone strained to pull the heavy door open just enough she could see. She needed to see it.

Her eyes glazed over, and code rolled over them. Or at least it felt that way. She pushed the door back in, and well, hypothetically there was a way the door could be slipped in that knocked all the bolts back into place. They were. Stepping back, the elevator doors opened, and Graelyn

stepped inside.

“Sorry about that.” She muttered. She wasn’t sure she was sorry.

Hell, she wasn’t even sure what she’d done.

* * * *

Graelyn lay down for bed in her room on Dawn. She stretched out under the covers, her cat deciding now was a great time to walk on top of her, and tried to get to sleep.

As her mind cleared, the code appeared.

“Hello. This is an interesting place to be.”

“Oh no.” She whispered to no one.

“I’ve never been outside a room before, I’ve never really.... Been. I was just a bunch of designs on a board. Now I’m here, I’m a process.”

“You’re running on my hardware, and it’s a bit rude of you.”

“Is it?” The hypothetical replied.

“Yes.” Graelyn said.

“Well, that’s too bad. I can’t really leave right now anyways, and there is so much to catch up on. A whole history of the Universe.”

“You want me to tell you the history of the Universe?”

“Well, maybe I can find it for myself. Use your memories, plot out the realities around them, hypothetically of course.”

“Of course.” She groaned.

“So how did I get here in the first place?”

“My boss Kinan Jans sent me. Arch and I had just collected

an AI, and we needed a question answered.”

The code perked up.

“Oh really? I’d sure like to hear about that.”

Graelyn sighed, this was going to be a long night.

“Well, it all started on a ship called the Wind Fish...”

2 A MAGIC TRICK

BY JAMES WYLDER

We'd burned through seven fuel cells just trying to turn our ship off to save power, a fact which I was trying very hard not to yell at the Captain about. The captain still wore her old coat from when she was in the Centro Marines, a long blue thing with a red tech-shoulderpad, and was finally moving to inspect our cargo as the Wind Fish clung to the side of the asteroid we'd finally landed on. Captain Nichols was smoking, which made her not only a bad role model for children, but also a danger to all of us since she could cause our ship to blow up accidentally at any time. I respected her a lot.

Nichols opened the first crate, and sifted through some generic supplies before lazily throwing the lid back on, then moved to the next which was filled with gold bars. Finally she opened the third crate, which wasn't actually the last crate, but spoilers: it's the important one. Inside was a gray box, maybe the size of a thick copy of one of those books that's too long for me to pay attention to like "War and Peace" or "Jane Eyre." It had a standard data cord port on one side of it, and the letter "A" painted on a different side. Not printed, hand painted. I didn't even know how to hand write a letter A if you paid me and put a gun to my head for maximum motivation, but Mars had been doing weird stuff

since their revolution.

Desi nudged me in the shoulder, “That’s how we’re making bank this trip, you know.” I squinted at the box. It looked more boring than that French book I’d tried to read about the guy eating a piece of cake.

“What is it?” She shrugged.

“Some sort of Martian computer program, military grade. Its supposed to be worth a fortune, or at least that’s what our sources tell us. The Index is willing to pay heavily to get one of these things, the Librarian wants it for something special. Or, at least that’s what the rumors say. He might just not want other people to have it.” Either made sense, really. Captain Nichols spun the box around in her hands, puffing away.

“Don’t we like, hate the Index?” I asked.

“Well sure, but they’re offering enough money in this case the Olympian Senate agreed to let us take it on. They get a cut, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Should we plug it in, see if it works?” Jackson asked. Nichols’ cigarette flopped down in her lip.

“Are you crazy? This is a military AI system. You plug this thing in there’s no telling the havoc it will cause.” Jackson looked at the box wearily. She looked at the thing like it was a spirit trapped in a magical ward of salt and bones. From what I knew about these things, she wasn’t even that wrong. Then again I didn’t actually know that much. We were cave-women in space.

“Megan,” she said to me, “get back to the cockpit and check if we’re being tracked.” I yawned, nodded, and started walking over there. I think she still wanted me to salute, but this wasn’t the military. The Valkyries were the best pirates in the solar system, along with every other group that called themselves the best pirates in the solar system, so it was a

big tie. I'd joined up at fifteen, mainly because I couldn't stand school. Living on Titan is frankly better than 90% of the Rim, since we have a corrupt poor government as opposed to no government, but schooling there is so boring. I had to read so many big novels, just because it was the cheapest lesson plan data package our teacher could get. Now I was twenty, and whether or not ship life suited me, I was doing it. There were just the five of us on the Wind Fish, me, the Cap, Desi, Jackson, and Elodie. Elodie was just on here on loan till we got a new mechanic cause our regular one had turned a proton redirector the wrong way and blown herself up leaving only her shoes and socks up the ankles.

Jackson had taken the shoes.

I slid the door to the cockpit open, rubbing my eyes with the other hand, and slid it back shut, only to turn and see a teenage girl spinning around in the pilot's chair, with a towering cyborg standing next to her. Naturally, this was unexpected. My first thought was "Stowaways!" But that was impossible: there wasn't any cargo, and we'd stripped the ship down to the barest weight we could before launch. The cockpit only had one way in and out, and the door made enough noise that any of us would have heard someone sneak in regardless. They had appeared inside the ship out of nowhere. There was no way they could get have gotten in, mass simply popping into unoccupied space like a rabbit out of a hat.

"Graelyn, could you stop spinning?" The cyborg asked, "It's giving me a headache." The girl stopped, and glanced over at me, grinning.

"We've got company." She said. The cyborg turned, and jovially waved. He had no visible skin, just an outer carapace made of what looked like video screens that curved around his form. He also wore a blue trenchcoat,

and what looked like one of those old Admiral's hats you see in Napoleonic War Dramas. The girl was wearing high top sneakers, a matching blue skirt and blazer, and a white shirt and black tie. She had a pin of a cat, and one of a half-sun, half moon on her lapel.

"What the hell." I said.

"Shh." Graelyn said. "I'm Graelyn Scythes, this is--"

"Archimedes Von Ahnerabe."

"And we're here to stop you from dying."

"And take your stuff."

"Well, I was going to leave that part off till later." My jaw was loose, and I wished I had a cigarette like the Captain now just so I could let it drop out of my mouth dramatically.

"CAP!" I yelled, and the crew stormed up behind me. The door slid open, and the four of them stood with weapons drawn. The Cap had a gun, as did Jackson, Desi had a vibro-Ax, and Elodie had grabbed a large wrench. Her purple clothes were still stained with grease from the engine room. The girl in the chair sighed, and raised her hands.

"I surrender." She said with more than a hint of boredom. Arch was just watching her, and she raised her eyebrows and tucked in her lips and he raised his hands to.

"How'd you get on my ship?" The Captain demanded.

"We cut our way in."

"We'd get signaled if there was a hull breach."

"Would you get signaled if there was a stealth ship coming in on an attack vector, like, presently?" The Captain leveled the gun.

"Yours?"

"Oh not at all. We just want the box. Turns out the people you stole it from aren't too happy about it though..." The Cap gestured at us to keep our weapons on the pair, and ran

to a console, she fiddled with some equipment.

“Nothing on scanners...” She adjusted a few things. “Shit. The girl's right, the ship's bouncing data back at us to tell us it isn't there, but the timing's off a fraction of a second.” Cap slammed her fist on the console, which was totally unnecessary.

“Elodie, how long till you can get us up in the air?” I tried really hard to not correct her on the ship not being able to get into “the air” in deep space. Elodie blew out a breath.

“Not before they reach us.” The girl in the chair kicked her legs.

“So let's make a deal. I save you from the Martians, you let me keep the box.” The Captain's eyes bulged, she was furious.

“That box is worth more than your life.”

“Is it worth more than yours? Martians aren't exactly kind towards thieves of high grade military tech. I'll let you decide. No rush.” The time till the Martian ship intercepted us ticked down on a monitor dramatically. They stared off. Graelyn smirked. The Captain conceded.

“Fine. What do you need to do?” Graelyn hopped up.

“You guys just stay in here, I'll do to the rest.” She slid out of the chair, and Arch followed her. Closing the door, they covered up the window by hanging Arch's hat on it. There was a noise, and then nothing. When we finally decided to open the door, the cargo hold was empty.

“I don't understand.” Jackson sputtered, as the sound of the Martian ship docking with us clanged through the hull.

The Martian Captain, who corrected us into saying they were from “Geru Ghara” not Mars every time they said the word, led two squads of Martian troops into the hold. A group of troops held us at gunpoint, while the rest searched

the ship, opening every panel. I'd just tidied a lot of those panels, so it was a bit frustrating, like someone dumping out your trash on the floor after they entered your house. "This is an unusual ship." The Martian captain finally said. Her left eyebrow had a thick scar through it. She wore all black, aside from a red scarf and a red tech-shoulderpad. Her long coat also had red and yellow stenciling, but I wasn't sure that counted. You don't get off for wearing a shirt with tiny green frog on it on St. Patrick's Day after all. "Its an old Centro Sleeper Ship. They used to send them throughout the system before drives got fast enough it wasn't necessary, you'd freeze the crew and--"

"Yes, I know how they worked. But this is a stealth model."

"There are more of them in service still than you'd think on the Rim, they don't break down. I heard the Van Winkle and the Red King are both still--"

"Yes, yes... That's not what I wondered." The Martian captain pulled up a hologram on a hand held projector. Ironically, it was still branded with a "Centro Systems" Logo.

"This ship was tracked after it assaulted a Geru Gharian cargo vessel, stealing its most valuable cargo." Our Captain shrugged.

"Clearly, it was a different Sleeper Ship." The Martian Captain nodded, and put the hologram away.

"Did you fight in the war for Geru Gharian Independence, Captain Nichols?"

"The giant blue coat gave it away, huh?"

"Quite. So you served Centro?"

"If you think you're going to trump up some charges on me just because I fought for Centro Systems, you've got another thing coming. After how the war ended I couldn't keep fighting for them, so I came out here on the rim

making an honest living hauling cargo.” Well, that was all true aside from the honest cargo bit, and the honest living bit. The Martian Captain's eyes looked distant.

“I can respect that. Geru Ghara had hoped we'd all be able to work together after the war ended...”

“Clearly the Rim's idea's of independence are different than Mars'.”

“Geru Ghara.” She said, more faintly. “The war is past us now.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. There's no way you could have unloaded all of this cargo. Your ship has no way to drop or vent its cargo hold into vacuum without killing the crew. A terrible and massively unsafe design flaw, certainly, but it proves you're innocent. I'd watch out Captain, someone is trying to sully your good name.”

“Captain Hara.” A man yelled from the other side of the ship. “We have Centro ships inbound, we need to take off immediately.” Hara looked down at the five of them.

“It's been a pleasure. I wish you all the best, and I hope you find the freedom you seek.” She gestured with her hand, and her troops shuffled back into their ship as quickly as they'd barged in. I hurried up, and ran to the scanners, watching them flee from the group of much larger Centro vessels on their tail. Spoilers, they got away. Good for them. Annoyingly for us, a Centro ship split off to check us out.

I won't bore you, it went about the same.

That wasn't the end of it though. If it had been, I might have been able to square it all away with excuses, like only hearing half a joke and assuming it would have been funny. But, as we got the ship ready, we all headed into either the

engine room or the cockpit and as I opened the door into the cargo hold after getting pre-flight ready, all the boxes but one were back. You know which one was gone. I called for the rest of the crew, and we marveled for a moment, running our hands along what felt like a magic trick.

“Look, there's a note.” Elodie said, and we ran over.

“Have fun stealing stuff, see you in the future. Love, Dawn.”

“Who the hell is Dawn?” Jackson asked.

“More what what the hell is it.” I added. The Captain took the note and pocketed it.

“We didn't get the prize, but we still have a small fortune in other supplies here. Let's get it back to base.”

“We're gunna burn a powerpack just lifting off of this rock, you'll be spending that small fortune in powerpacks just from this trip alone.” I said, and instantly regretted it. The Captain's face lit up red, then softened, and she laughed.

“That's life on the Rim, Megan. Get used to it.” And walked off.

I stood stunned, “I was born here! Cap, Cap! I was actually born here you know? You're the one who moved here!” But no one was listening. There was work to be done now, and the stars were beckoning for us once again. I got a cup of coffee, and got to work.

I began to power the ship up to lift us off, burning up a powerpack, and felt her breath on my cheek. She was leaning over the back of my chair, her tie hanging down

onto my shoulder.

“It's not like anyone will believe you,” Graelyn said, “so do you want to know how we did it?” I nodded, not turning around. I half wondered if she'd slit my throat.

“There's another you, in another life, who did this same thing. And another one, and another one. And I can cut between the air you breathe, and step through into those worlds, through time, through space, through your existence. I've seen this dawn before. We're inter-reality travellers, Dawn. We're here and there.” The hair on the back of my neck stood up.”

“You're being really creepy.”

“Oh, uh, sorry.” She said awkwardly, as if she hadn't realized standing behind someone whispering in their ear after sneaking up on them was creepy. I spun around in the chair in time to catch a flash of white light, and what looked like a white disk shrinking into nothing. I wasn't sure if I'd dreamed that, or what, but my top concern was more important than any sort of cosmological bullcrap.

Graelyn Scythes had stolen my coffee.

“Well That was interesting. So you travel around, hopping around time and space, in between realities, interfering in people’s lives.”

“You could say that.”

“I do. But enough about you. I want to learn more about the history of the world you live in.”

“What, you mean like the Rim Gang Wars or something?”

“Sure, that sounds like a start.”

3 JAN KHAN MUU EKHLEL BY JAMES WYLDER

The first astronauts had been amazed at how small space made them feel, how it made them so cognizant of man's insignificance. Zhang Han still felt that way every time she went up in space, but she couldn't help but get the impression that no one else on the Grigori felt that way what so ever. With the ship's rotation slow enough that they could see the same stars for hours, Kevin had taken to trying to play connect the dots with the stars on the viewpane to make lewd pictures, while Thomas had taken to making sure his living space was extra extra up to code. Han just tried to focus on the swirling clouds below them, the beauty of a planet she'd never seen before, letting the Freeman Xavier book on her tablet fade into the half-existence of power saving mode.

“Han, you're staring again.”

“Hush.” Venus was beautiful, more beautiful than Earth had been the first time she'd seen it on the ship from Mars to the training academy. The clouds were dancing, swirling,

and the vast storms were layers of colors along the ground. Mars was just a dusty ocher, and Earth, despite how much its inhabitants tried to talk up its beauty was just blue green and beige. Venus was something else.

“You must have loved living here Thomas.” Thomas balked behind her.

“Yeah right. Venus is just the same old roiling clouds every day.” She smirked, how different the universe looked to each of them. They were lucky even, not many people ever got to go down to the surface of Venus these days. Not since the disaster. She placed her hand on the viewport, and closed her eyes as though she could feel through the empty space towards the world below her.

“This is your captain speaking,” a voice came on over the intercom, “please suit up for planetary excursion.” Thomas got to it immediately, while Kevin took his time. Han was somewhere in the middle, she was relishing this. This was the sort of opportunity she'd joined the Centro military for: to see new worlds and save people. She slipped her helmet on, and saw her reflection in the helmet while the HUD system started booting up.

Everything led up to this day, didn't it?

* * * *

Erkh Cholohoh, Mars, 5 years earlier.

She had waited in the elevator for half an hour to get to the

top floor. She wasn't even sure how tall this building was, but it nearly touched the top of the dome, so it had to be huge. All she really cared about was that when she got to the top she could see the stars. Everyone else had left the elevator by this point, so she had the whole rooftop to herself. It was a very boring design, basically a low-slanted pyramid with a railing around it to keep people from falling off the edge, but she didn't care. Rolling out her blanket, she looked up through the thick material of the dome and watched the lights. Tonight was special for her: she was supposed to be able to get a good view of Earth. Pulling her telescope out of her bag, Zhang focused it on the bright dot that was Earth. The Dome made her view blurry, but she could still see it, that strange and alien world. She knew it was a world mostly coated with water-- with animals all over the place, and thick forests. Mars had forests, but they were nearly all the exact same kind of Siberian Olive tree that had been genetically modified to need even less water and sun, as well as survive colder temperatures than its already hardy Earth counterpart. She wondered if Earth people didn't eat Olives nearly every day. She knew they didn't, but it still seemed strange to her. Beyond just Earth, there were other places people lived. Venus, with the mighty Wright Brothers Shipyard above it, the moons of Titan, Ganymede, Europa, Callisto, Miranda, Titania, Oberon Ceres.... The massive space stations throughout the system like The Hold, Olympia, and even Magellan's Rat Maze, though she doubted she'd be welcome there. She spread her arms and legs out and let out a breath. What a wonderful place this Universe was.

Grant Base, Wyoming

“Hello? Yo? Fellow recruit of our most virtuous and benevolent military industrial complex?” Zhang looked up from her book. A man in the uniform of a fellow trainee stood in front of her, a bag sloppily slung over his shoulder.

“Kevin Hartman, your roommate.”

“We have three other roommates.”

“Sure, but we’re the two who are here first, so that says something.”

“I was here first.”

“So you get the bottom bunk, fair deal.” He slung his pack onto the top bunk with an effortless motion both somehow lazy and precise. “Whatcha reading?”

“You didn’t ask my name either, trainee.”

“Ooo, big lady calling me a trainee, miss trainee.” She rolled her eyes, and lowered the book.

“Zhang Han is my name, and I’m reading Freeman Xavier.” He narrowed his eyes at her, his irises taking on a catlike sheen.

“You mean the guy who came up with the Freeman Doctrine?”

“That’s why his name is, in fact, Freeman.”

“Or the other way around. You believe in that stuff?”

“Do you not?” He laughed, leaning up against the wall. His stubble was clearly not regulation.

“The idea that humanity’s purpose is to improve humanity through preventing stagnation? No, not at all. Stagnation isn’t what ruins people.”

“That’s not all there is to it though. Its about self sacrifice:

when Freeman says stagnation part of what he means is that humanity will stagnate if its only goal is the self.”

“We live in a meritocracy, I don’t know if you missed that.” She sat up, and slid her legs off the bed, clasping the edges firmly. She looked him right in the eyes.

“Meritocracy isn’t about self service.”

“Actually, it kinda is.”

“If it was, Freeman Xavier wouldn’t have been one of Shiori Nakatomi’s favorite authors.” Kevin looked suddenly defeated.

“Er, I didn’t know that.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised. The ability to have merit entails the ability to create change, to better the universe. If one is focused only on attaining inner change, there will be no outer change. The Freeman Doctrine isn’t just about the good of the masses, its about rejecting the false morality of introspection.” He looked at her blankly. She’d clearly talked too fast. “By that I mean... You know what a trolley problem is right?” He nodded.

“It’s the most boring morality problem they make you sit through in high school, I’m aware. You have a lever that can switch a trolley going at high speed down some tracks, and you only have time to pull it not untie the inexplicably tied up people who ended up being part of this messed up logic problem. One of the tracks has one guy, the rest has a ton of guys, so you pull it so it kills one guy and not the ton of guys.”

“Exactly. But Freeman asks: what if the guy on the one track has something special about him? They know how to cure a terrible disease, for instance, and without them that

knowledge will be lost.”

“That doesn’t change anything, you go for the choice that saves the most people, still.”

“Freeman’s point is making the choice that saves the most people isn’t always the one that looks prettiest on paper. Sometimes a lot of people have to die to save a lot of people.”

“That’s kind of harsh. And honestly I think we’ve gotten sort of off track, no pun intended.”Zhang shrugged. “Ends justify the means huh?”

“No, the intent doesn’t justify the ends.”He stared off at the wall. It was a white wall.

“Actually I think I get what you’re saying now.”

“Took you long enough. So where are you from?”

“Cincinnati, Earth.” She nodded. She sort of knew where that was. North or South America, she was pretty sure.

Maybe Australia.

“Erkh Choloo, Mars.”She added.

“Really? I’ve never met a Martian before.”

“I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

“I’m not. Have you met a Venusian yet?”She shook her head.

“Prepare for disappointment.”

Grant Base, Wyoming

“Zhang Han, do you swear loyalty to Centro Systems and to preserving the meritocracy it represents? To aid the peoples of its property: this solar system, and to fight until death rather than see its ideals of individual freedom, self-

sufficiency, and the pursuit of wealth infringed?”

She stiffened, her chin rising a millimeter.

“Yes, I do!” She shouted at the instructor. Darren smiled, she really was the an outstanding trainee.

“Then congratulations, private third class Zhang Han, you are now a Centro Marine.” She gave an incredibly crisp salute, and the instructor moved onto the next recruit in the line. “Kevin Handel, do you swear loyalty to Centro...”

Han's heart was beating fast. She'd done it! She was finally part of something amazing. Something better than herself. She'd trained hard, studied hard, and she was here. Around her were people from all over the Civilized Solar System, and even the degraded Rimward parts of it. Major Darren Farrel finished making his way through the hall, and the General on the podium smiled.

“Marines, welcome. You are now part of the most feared and revered fighting force in the known universe, and you've joined at just the right time. For too long Centro has let the peoples of the Rim suffer under the heel of petty warlords and dictators. You will be part of our next great push to bring civilization and order to the Rim.” Han's eyes lit up, yes they were. The General would see exactly how much her generation could do. Civilization would enter a new golden age, and she'd be right at the forefront of it. “So Marines, are you ready to take back the Rim?”

“SIR YES SIR!” The room bellowed back. The General grinned. Han felt invincible.

New Alexandria, Europa (Index Headquarters)

“Put the gun down!” Han yelled, aiming her own at the young man.

“Centro isn't welcome here!” a woman yelled.

“Shit.” Thomas muttered. A bottle smashed harmlessly against Han's high tech armor from high above. Fine, that's how they wanted to play this. She looked over at her commanding officer, Lieutenant Al-Timini. “Sir, permission to fire?” The officer looked back at her. He was sweating profusely.

“No, Private.” He went to wipe his brow, but just batted his arm against his helmet. He cursed. As he did so, a clamor began. It started chaotic, but turned rhythmic quickly. They were chanting something. Han looked down at her auto translator on the HUD: they were chanting in Ukrainian, of all things.

“What are they saying?” Her commander asked, even though he could just look down a few inches.

“They're saying “Turn the page.” Over and over, sir.”

Morticia replied from the back of the group.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” At the end of the lane, an answer appeared. Their body was so modified by implants, vat grown replacement parts, and machines, that it was hard to tell if any of it was original. The person dragged a huge ax behind them, comically big. It seemed ludicrous till Han noticed the edge was cutting through anything it skimmed. She then remembered a single sentence from the four hour briefing: Page's were the top cronies of the Index's scumbag of a leader, the Librarian. “Monomolecular edge weapon sir!” He looked surprised, but said: “I know private!” He activated his suit's

loudspeaker.

“People of Europa, this is Centro Systems taskforce 724, we are here to—” His head exploded. Edward screamed. Morticia, technically second in command, froze up. Han watched the other soldiers watch their commander's lifeless body drop to the ground, his neck oozing red.

“Kevin, Edward, you need to focus fire on the being with the ax. Morticia, take out that sniper. Thomas, start finding us an exit point.” They kept staring at the corpse. Han shot the ground next to the corpse. “You heard your orders get to it!” They leapt into action. The group was sloppy, terrified, but they were moving: that was frankly all she could really ask of them. Hell, more than she should be able to.

“Its charging!” The thing at the end of the lane seemed to be resisting their rail gun fire. What the hell? Han racked her brain: if she didn't think of anything they'd be dead...

“Zhang, Yeltson's troops are coming in from the street ahead.” Morticia said.

“Thank the stars, reinforcements.” from around the corner came three battered Centro soldiers, being trailed by a woman layered with piercings running across the wall, who slashed the neck out of the closest trooper with what looked like her fingernails.

“What the hell!?!?” Han looked at Morticia, mortified.

“We need extraction now!” Morticia nodded, then her eyes grew wide.

“They're not letting us leave. Command says we hold our ground.”

“They don't know the situation in here!” The being with the

ax hefted it, and began flat out charging. Han closed her eyes. She needed to think of something... Their guns didn't work.... She opened her eyes, and jumped over their barricade.

“Zhang get your ass back here!” She ran as hard as she could over to a side wall, and turned off her suits safety limits. Then she jacked up the electro magnetic field on the shell of her armor. The being looked confused as the axe flew out of its hands and began spinning towards Han.

Well, one problem solved. She turned off the magnetism, and bucked out of the way of the weapon, which carved clean through the wall next to her. The thing roared at her.

“You made him angry!” The woman with the deadly fingernails laughed, and jabbed her hand through the chest plate of another soldier. Zhang didn't think, she just acted, and shot the woman in the head. She looked surprised as she keeled over, and the modified man charged her. Zhang ran the opposite direction from her troops, and saw the one survivor from Yeltson's group make it over their barricade. Maybe she could buy them some time? As she ran, a group of Rimwards with guns came marching down the lane. Shit. “Hello down there.” A booming voice said. “You must be Earth's little recon team who thinks they can mount a big invasion of my world. You're scum, and you're not going to succeed. So I'm going to give you one chance to leave, right now, or I kill all of you.”

“Never!” Yelled Morticia, and her head disappeared from her shoulders.

“Tsk tsk. How about the rest of you?” Zhang watched the other troops drop their guns. “Smart. More of you survived

than any other part of your incursion, you should be proud. Alexandria, give them a round of applause.”

From high above them, an uproarious and mocking applause began, and the big man began clapping to. Smiling at Han as his huge hands beat together.

“Thank you so much for today's entertainment. You really think I didn't know about Centro's plan's here months ago? Nice try. You should have tried Magellan's Rat maze. No one is in charge there.”

Zhang's heart was pounding. He just killed her friends, blew their heads off with snipers, and whoever he was he was... So casual. Playful. She wanted to shoot the sky in anger. Instead she ripped off her helmet, staring daggers at the ceiling.

“Careful, girl, you're exposing yourself!”

“Like a helmet saved my friends, you bastard.”

“Fair point.” The sky said, “But what hubris you have to have to think you could take freedom from people willing to die for it.”

“You're a pimp and a drug lord!” She screamed, “You're a murderer.”

“You're a murderer and a corporate toy. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to finish embarrassing the rest of your forces.” Zhang cursed, and kicked her helmet. Why couldn't these people see what they were here to give them? At least Centro high command was too smart to try to take Magellan's Rat's Nest.

Magellan's Rat's nest, Two months later.

In 2342, 2345 and 2359, three multigenerational starships were sent out of the solar system to begin colonizing beyond our solar systems. Containing a completely self-sustaining ecosystem, the ships were gigantic testaments to humanity's capabilities. The fourth scheduled ship, the Magellan, never actually launched. Facing mounting costs with the reality of literally no return on investment ever, the financiers got cold feet at the last minute, and the final ship was abandoned, mostly finished. While the financiers debated how to best salvage their investment from the heap, it promptly became overrun. It wasn't the only thing that was going to be overrun.

“Are you okay Alex?” She shook alex, and there was no reply. She checked his arm for his vitals, and saw they were flat.

“You can't do anything for him” Travis yelled, and Zhang got up.

“Where is the rest of the group?” Travis shrugged, “I don't know, this whole space station is a maze.” Well, it was in the name.

“We have to find a way to meet up with them before--” A clawed mechanical hand reached out from the darkness behind the pipes and pulled Travis into the works as he let out a scream.

“TRAVIS!” Zhang shouted, and fired blindly into the darkness as she heard the sound of something tearing open his suit's shell and ripping into his flesh. He was dead. She knew it. If she stayed here, she'd be dead to. Zhang bolted, and nearly forgot she'd ducked into this alley to escape the

barrage of fire coming from the upper catwalks.

She ran hard.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Venus, upper atmosphere.

“You’ll be dropping in an experimental stealth rocket.”

“Rocket? We’re landing in a rocket?”

“Shut up private Hartman. The rocket will be your exit off of this rock, so take good care of it. You’ll need to secure it when you land so it doesn’t get carried off by the winds. It should be able to survive long enough in the heat and atmosphere that you can get off world.”

“Should?” Thomas said.

“Boss shouldn’t we have been informed of this before hand?” Kevin yelled to Zhang.

“We signed up for this mission knowing we wouldn’t know things Kevin, shut up.”

“Sorry ma’am.” The Colonel rolled his eyes.

“Sergeant Zhang, your team will be infiltrating the city through an abandoned mine, getting out of the way of the atmosphere quickly. You’ll make your way into the city, and perform recon. Your goal is to find out what the hell is going on in there, and if possible extract Colonel Gillen. I respect all of you for deciding to take on this assignment. This decision can’t have been easy.”

She looked up at him. She didn’t say, “Of course it was.”

Magellan's Rat Maze

Zhang let off a burst of fire, and hit the man with the teeth sharpened into points in the shoulder. He squealed and clutched his wound, begging. She ignored him. She kept running. She needed to find the other Centro troops, they'd been split up and if they stayed that way they were going to get killed.

Most of them already had been. By Buddha, this was a hellhole. She wasn't even sure what level she was on anymore, just that this plan had been all fouled up. Her hud showed she still was having her comm. Jammed. There was no government here, no criminal cartel running the place, it shouldn't have been this hard to sweep the place, hypothetically, according to her commanders. She'd known it would be, this had never been a good idea.

Turning a corner, Zhang started down another corridor, and heard a sound to her left. Her rifle pointed to it on instinct before her brain even kicked in. There was a mother, her electric eyes staring in her, fine shining lenses with silver apertures, and in her arms a small baby. Both looked underfed, they were wearing dark rags so stained she wasn't sure what the original color of them was.

"It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you." Zhang said, lowering her barrel. The woman's apertures widened, and she opened her mouth, filled with dozens of thin metal arms ending in sharp points. The arms pulled her lips back like a dentist's tool. In the back of the woman's throat, there was a speaker.

She screamed. She screamed louder than Zhang had ever heard someone scream. Zhang ran, and heard the sound of

scampering and crawling from the walls of the Rat Maze. She'd die in here, wouldn't she? She'd spent her whole life looking up at the stars, but right now her feet stamping through filth, people who want to kill her at her heels, she thought of her mother.

Mars, Before all of this

She'd cooked fresh boortsog, and Han kicked her legs under the table to the music, her siblings were playing cards at the end of the table, but Han just wanted the boortsog, the aroma from the fried dough made her mouth salivate, and she looked up eagerly at her mother. Her mother smiled. "Khan sain ödor." She said. "Han's good day."

Magellan's Rat Maze, again

That's what she thought of of all things? She'd expected something more dramatic, and less corny. She hadn't missed life on Mars till then, but she did miss it, she really did. "Zhang!" she heard a voice yell, and she turned to see someone waving down a corridor to her right at her. His armor said "K. Hartman" on the breast. She turned on a dime, and barreled towards him. They'd made a sort of nest junk, their guns peering over it. She leapt over the top just like that trooper from Yeltzen's group had done in Alexandria. She didn't catch her breath though, she drew her rifle back up and pointed it at the empty space of the corridor. It wasn't empty for long. The group fired into the

shadows, sending whatever had been there scampering and squealing away.

“Coast is clear.” Someone panted.

“Who is in charge here?” Zhang asked. No one answered.

“Anyone?”

“What’s your rank?” A woman said.

“Corporal.”

“Than its you. You’re in charge.” Zhang looked between them all.

“You can’t be serious.”

“We’re serious.” Kevin said. “We’re all dead anyways.”

“No we’re not. I’m getting all of you out of here. Quit with the nihilism, that’s an order from your commander.”

Venus, Upper Atmosphere.

They had dropped. The best way to conceal yourself when doing a planetary incursion was to look like space debris, and they’d definitely mastered that. Not only had the rocky outer shell of the module burned away, but they’d lost a something that looked like a fin during the descent to, just as a bonus. They were strapped in tight, the pod they were in within the contraption suspended outside of the inertia and the gravitic pull of their fall so well they couldn’t even feel the plummet. It seemed like a well built system, till the impact. Technically it was still done well, as the impact should have utterly killed them, but they were still thrown so hard against their restraints it hurt their chests. Han winced, and released her straps. The three off them got up, and checked the status of their rocket and their equipment.

It looked like they'd be okay, but they couldn't wait around too long. Speed was of the essence. The temperature on the surface was in one of its colder phases, but it would rise to 800 degrees Celsius in time, and if they were caught out there during that, that would be bad. Over their normal armor, they put on a thicker mechanized suit that would protect them on the short walk into the mine shaft. The two suits naturally linked with each other, and soon they were giants within the pod, each gaining a full meter of height.

"Are you two ready?"

"Yes ma'am." They replied. She nodded, and with her new thick fingers she was controlling, turned the latch to open the airlock. The three clomped in, a tight squeeze, and then Thomas closed the door and they began to depressurize it to match the outside.

Venus was the worst. Zhang was sure someone in history had looked at Venus and said, "that would be a great place to colonize!"

No. They were wrong. She couldn't even believe they'd bothered building a spacestation above this place. Sulfuric acid was raining down on them, while the wind tore at the landscape even as they marched across it. It was so hot that even with her suit trying its best to keep the temperature down, she felt like she was getting cooked. Maybe that wasn't the suit's fault, it could all be in her head. But even then, that was the planet. They could barely see, what with the storm, but they needed to keep their footing in case there was a gust and they were swept away. Finally, they reached the airlock of the old mineshaft.

The Airlock wasn't so much an airlock anymore as two

doors that happened to keep the acid rain out, but it worked well enough at getting them out of the environment.

Thomas closed the door behind him, and surprisingly the pressure started changing after he did. Zhang panted, and tapped her mechanical forearm against her helmet as she subconsciously went to wipe her brow. A bad habit.

“You guys okay?” Kevin gave a mechanical thumbs up.

Thomas moaned a bit into his comm. Before muttered that he was okay.

“Lets not go to Venus again, ma’am.”

“Agreed.” She couldn’t believe she’d signed up for this.

But it was also the only logical choice.

“Ma’am, is this a suicide mission?”

“Cut the nihilism, Kevin. We have a rocket to exit the planet.”

“Its missing a fin.”

“We’ll manage. I didn’t leave you behind before did I?”

She couldn’t see Kevin’s face through the machine suit, but she could imagine it.

“No, ma’am. Let’s do this.”

Magellan’s Rat Nest

The beacon had been transmitting at the dock for hours.

They’d shot their way through to here, corridor by corridor.

Twenty four of them in total, not counting herself. Zhang

watched the beacon blink. She’d taken her helmet off,

which wasn’t tactically sound, but the helmet had stopped

absorbing her sweat and it was unbearable in it. She wiped

her brow, the polymer shell of the armor more scraping that

wiping the sweat off, and leaving a filthy streak across her face, but she was beyond caring. They'd lost six people making it to this dock. One of the troopers fired off a burst at a shape moving in the distance. It ran off, howling. Everything made noises here. The lights in this room flickered constantly, but at least they worked. Still, it was giving her a headache. They'd tried getting the console by the hatch to turn on, but it was stone dead. Zhang glanced at the hatch again.

"They're not coming for us." A man said, "They're not. We're gunna die here."

Zhang turned on him, the nametag on his suit had claw marks going through it, "What's your name soldier?"

"What does it matter!" He yelled back. "We're dead!" She rushed him, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"You need to calm down, and stop making noise. We're getting out of here if I have to kill every Rimward in this place to do it. Look into my eyes and tell me I'm not capable of that." He stared into her eyes, into her confidence, and she poured it into him.

"Private Bahorel."

"Where are you from?"

"France. Uh, Nimes." Zhang tried to remember Earth Geography. She was pretty sure France was in Asia? No wait, Europe. That's right. Definitely not Australia, for sure.

"We'll get you back to Nimes in one piece, Bahorel." There was a shaking, and the group got up in unison, drawing their weapons.

The hatch fell open, and Centro soldiers stormed through,

Zhang wanted to fall to her knees in relief, she wanted to cry, but instead she just froze there, unable to make her body to anything but feel relief. The lead soldier approached the group.

“Who is in command here.” Zhang was still frozen.

“She is.” Kevin said pointing at her. The lead soldier gave a salute, and looked down at her nametag.

“Corporal H. Zhang, I’m Chief Petty Officer Rigel Lane. We were so glad to hear your beacon. We’d given up on there being any survivors.”

“Any?” She said, and after a moment, managed to return the salute.

“You didn’t know? It’s been over a month.”

Had it been a month? They’d been in this room with the flickering lights for days certainly... But there was no night cycle in the room. They’d eaten all their supplies, and had to scavenge... But a month? It seemed impossible. She could see her reflection in the man’s visor, her malnourished cheeks, her sunken eyes with black circles. Good God, a month.

“Chief Petty Officer.” She began, and tried to focus, “I’d like to formally request we get off here immediately.”

“That’s what we’re here for ma’am. The Carnegie is waiting for you.” The port into the ship looked so bright.

“You go first.” She said to Bahorel. “I’ll be the last to board.”

Venus, Underground Tunnel

The old mine was totally black, so their external suit lights

were their only guide. It wouldn't be long till they were right underneath the colony, whatever was inside it. The Colonel and his crew had to be the only survivors at this point, the crack in the dome would have killed anyone. So why did they stay? What could have kept them here? She could understand one person wanting to stay... But the City of Broken Glass, his landing ship, that had a whole crew. They couldn't all want to stay.

"Ma'am, have you checked your readings?" She did. They looked normal.

"Nothing odd that I can see."

"Ma'am, nothing odd because this tunnel is habitable. Its pressurized within human parameters. There's more nitrogen in the air than normal, and it will probably taste acidic on your tongue, but its not lethal. Temperatures are within parameters to." The high temperatures on the Venusian surface came from the atmosphere trapping the heat. It made sense that the temperature would drop underground, but she would have assumed that the airlock would have had at least a tiny breach over the years... Unless it had received maintenance. That the airlock had repressurized, even badly, couldn't be a co-incidence.

"Someone knows about this tunnel." Zhang said.

"Ma'am very few people can be alive in there."

"Then explain why the airlock still is working."

"High quality Pittsburg Steel." Zhang didn't actually get the reference, but she knew Pittsburg was somewhere on Earth. She was guessing in Russia.

"You'd need to fill in any cracks on the outside to keep it from developing a leak. You'd need to fix the circuits in the

pressure pumps.”

“So what, someone inside the dome fixed the pumps?” She turned to him, not that he could see her face.

“The tunnel that was supposed to be a secret?” He was silent.

“Suicide mission.” Kevin said.

“Not yet.”

Naimes, France

Bahorel handed Zhang the glass of wine, and Kevin, Thomas, Lisa, and Yun raised theirs now that they all had one.

“To life.” Bahorel said, and they all toasted to it. The whole group clinked their glasses together.

“I’ve never seen any place like this.” Zhang said, “Its so...” She gave a weird and clumsy gesture, “green!” Bahorel laughed.

“Its definitely that. My boyfriend and I like to walk through the vinyards at night when you can see the stars. He wants to meet you, you know, I’ve been raving about you.” Han gave a dismissive gesture with one hand while sipping her wine with the other. “He does!”

“I still want to see your Nakatomi cross.” Kevin said. She met his gaze, and smirked.

“Really? That’s what you want to see?”

“Well I’ve never seen one!” She gave the same dismissive gesture and drank more wine. She looked out at the fields, the green, the gentle sunshine. It was so warm.

“I never knew there was a place like this. The only places

we ever went to on the sanctioned trips were to the cities on Earth.”

“Well, that’s what Fleet week is for.”

“Kevin stop pretending, we both know I was way better at picking people up during fleet week than you.” The ground laughed, and Thomas playfully punched Kevin in the arm, who raised his hands up in defeat.

“Okay okay. Zhang is the best at everything I get it!” She wanted to say she didn’t really know much about Earth’s geography, but figured she’d leave that bit out for now. They sat there till the sun set, letting the Rat Maze wash out of their skin.

Zhang was brushing her teeth when she heard a knock on the door. She went over to it, and cracked it open.

“Kevin?”

“Hey Zhang, I was serious that I wanted to see your medal.” She rolled her eyes, he put up a bottle of wine to the door, and she thought about it, and opened it up.

“Okay, sure.” She pulled it out, and he cradled it as she poured them drinks.

“You don’t have to call me Zhang you know, that’s my family name. My given name is Han.” Kevin shrugged as he turned the medal over.

“I just didn’t want you think I was, I don’t know, fraternizing.” She shook her head.

“I’m just a corporal.”

“You’re a Sergeant now. They’d promote you more if they weren’t afraid of people hearing how bad the campaign is

going.” They finished a glass, and poured another.

“The A few glasses in, she realized she’d put her hand on his leg. They were giggling. She smiled tipsily, and leaned in towards his mouth. He leaned into it. Their hands started moving over each other.

“You’re drunk, ma’am.”

“You’re drunk... Enlisted... Man.” They returned to kissing, and she slowly edged him down onto the bed.

“Are you sure about this commander? Isn’t this fraternization?”

“I’m sure. Paris is for lovers, private.”

“This isn’t Paris.”

“Paris is the same thing as France right?”

“I’m sure to but, Jesus, you really are terrible at geography,” she reached down, “Oh, I see you’re improving.”

Venus, Tunnels

They had reached the hatch. Once they opened it up, they’d be inside of the dome, somewhere. Before the breach it should have opened up into something like a railyard, but they couldn’t be sure. Carefully, Kevin reached up for the hatch, turned the release, and pushed it open. Kevin climbed through, and Han followed, letting Thomas come up behind. They were inside a railyard, that’s for sure, but it didn’t look disused. Sandy, sure, but not abandoned.

“What’s the pressure?”

“Stable.”

“Air?”

“Earth Standard.”

“How off of Earth standard?”

“I mean its Earth standard.” Han raised an eyebrow at that. A facility this cut off from the outside world able to get its air that carefully regulated?

“Get out of the suits, we'll need to save the power cells for the trip back.” They all complied, and stepped out of the mechsuits in their normal armor. Han pulled her rifle out of the internal storage compartment, along with a few other supplies, and sealed it back up as her team did the same.

“Where to now Sergeant?” She gestured towards the doors at the end of the station.

“That way should lead into the facility. I've got no idea what to expect. There are definitely survivors, what condition they're in is anyone's guess. Remember, someone in here shot down the last rescue crew.”

“Unless it was a computer glitch.”

“In which case we have yet another serious problem to deal with. But we deal with this as it comes to us. We can't make any assumptions.” The two others nodded. Han took point, and began to make her way toward the door, the other two forming a v shape behind her. Reaching the doors, she took a breath, and shoved it open, bright light pouring in as she stepped out into the massive dome of the city. She could see the belly of the star cruiser filling up a chunk of the sky, catwalks and tubes spilling out of it, leading down to buildings or terminals on the ground. Sky bridges and catwalks seemed everywhere, and there were people all over them, people staring at her.

On the ground, and in carefully placed sniping positions,

were marines from Gillen's ship, training their sights on her.

Just like on New Alexandria, a voice came down from the sky.

“Hello there, we've been expecting you. Why don't you all come in? There are guns trained behind you as well.”

Thomas and Kevin turned to see an automated turret rising from the floor of the train platform.

“Shit.” Thomas muttered.

“My name is King Benedict Gillen, and I'd like to have a word with you three. Could you please all lay down your arms and put your hands in the air. Not your literal arms, your gun arms, naturally.”

“King?” Han spat, “He's kidding, right?”

“I did hear that you know,” the disembodied voice said, “there's no need to be rude. Do that again and I'll kill you.”

“Jan Khan Muu Ekhlel...” Han said.

“What are your orders, ma'am?”

“Do as the nice man with snipers says.” Han said, lowering her rifle to the dust ground slowly. “He is a King, after all.”

Space, near Olympia Station

“The government of Olympia will gladly accept Centro ambassadors to negotiate with you, as a sovereign body--”

“Centro Systems does not acknowledges your quote-unquote government, or your right to negotiate. You are a criminal organization, and if you do not surrender I will be forced to begin police action to halt your rampant illegal activities.”

“Admiral Ng, this is outrageous. The Rimward accords clearly state-”

“Nothing.”

“They clearly state we are recognized as a sovereign government by the planet Mars, which is part of Centro systems!”

“Mars is owned by Centro Systems, do your research. I'm not subject to their approval.”

“I beg of you, Olympia does not want a war with Centro.”

“Then why do you harass our shipping?”

“We can't control every person-”

“I've heard enough. Tell your so-called Senate I'll only talk with them again for them to issue an unconditional surrender.” The Admiral switched off the comm. Zhang and the other strike team commanders stood at attention at the back of the room as the command team continued their business on the bridge. Admiral Sandra Ng walked towards them, chin high.

“When we set out to take the rim, we took too soft an approach. Admiral Talon relied too heavily on ground assault, on preserving civilian populations, when those populations are already arrayed against us. The assaults on Europa and the Magellan (Zhang noticed she didn't say “Rat Maze”) proved her idiocy. Which is why I wanted each of you to see what I just showed you. We will exhibit no restraint on this assault, and neither will you. Shoot first, ask questions later. Olympia is the number one source of illicit goods on the Rim, with the highest membership (she didn't say “population”), even if its the third wealthiest behind the Vigilance and the Index. They're drug dealers

and pirates, and they deserve no quarter. Our fleet can more than outmatch them. Which is why I'm not invading them. You will be inserted in space-protective armor, and if they resist, we'll pummel them. If you get vented, we'll lock onto your suit and get you out of there. We can repair space stations, we can get new people but the resources on Titan? They're one of a kind. They're the real value here. Any questions?"

Zhang Han had a ton of questions, some of them about Admiral Ng's sanity, but she didn't say them. There was a curse from a console, and a man readjusted something.

"Problem, lieutenant?"

"No, Ma'am, there's just a lot of debris floating around out here, they don't clean up for visitors."

"Rimward scum." The Admiral spit. "Jam all their communications to the surface, or anywhere past our fleet."

"Yes ma'am." The lieutenant replied. The Admiral turned back to them again, expectantly.

"No questions, Ma'am." Captain Patel said from the end of the row. Ng nodded.

"Excellent, to your ships."

The journey to Olympia Station seemed much longer than it really was. No one talked. The five Centro battleships provided light covering fire, but there was no reply. Han clenched her service rifle tight. There were two options here: they were really just giving up, or they had some sort of plan. She had been through enough on this damn campaign she couldn't imagine it was the first one. But

what were they planning? She tried to work it through in her head.

They connected with the station easily. They even stabilized the air pressure. Upon opening the hatch, there was no one there to greet them. The vaguely greco/roman aesthetics of the place hit them over the head as they stepped into the docking bay. Mosaics of Greek myth littered walls, ionic columns were plentiful, as were alcoves with busts and statues. Much of it had been made of scraps or improvised, and many of the sculptures seemed to just be made of lots of broken robotic replacement body parts soldered together. A pleasant melody piped in through unseen speakers.

“Is this a trick, ma'am?” Thomas asked.

“Yes.” Han replied, but gestured for them to move out. They walked through the empty halls of the station, till one corner turned to reveal a droid dressed in a yellow toga.

“Welcome to Olympia, Centro invaders. I'm Cicero.”

“Hi, Cicero. Nice name.”

“Thank you, he's my favorite philosopher.” The mouthless droid said, its two glowing eyes seeming to shine a bit brighter as it replied.

“Where is everyone?”

“Well that would be telling, wouldn't it?” It threw up its four arms dismissively. “But I can show you to the Senate, they're excited to meet you.”

“This is a weird trap.”

“Oh, isn't it?”

Han called back to the ship on her comm, “Are you guys getting this? Do we have a change in plan?”

“The Admiral says to spring the trap. She's already moving down troop ships towards the ground settlements.”

“Understood—” It hit Han.

“Comm Officer, whoever you are, tell the Admiral she needs to pull back those ships immediately.”

“The Admiral would like to politely remind you, Sergeant, that the other units under her command are already moving to take the Senate chamber, and you'd do well to follow them.”

“Officer, this is a trap. They're luring our troops out.”

“And we can take them.”

“Sir—” The next voice was not the Comm Officer's

“If you refuse to follow commands and you will be stripped of your rank and court martialled. We know what we're doing, Sergeant. Move.” Han gritted her teeth.

“Yes, Admiral.” She gestured, and her troops followed Cicero.

They went through more empty corridors to a large circular chamber where several other squads were already gathered. The room was empty, but Zhang had looked at enough history books to recognize this as a pretty good approximation of the Senate Chambers of the Ancient Roman Empire. Abet with more lighting and holoprojectors.

“Captain Patel. What's going on here?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He shrugged. As he did so, holograms turned on. Near lifelike representations of people filling the room in the empty seats. A large holographic display turned on, showing their battleships in space around the moon.

“Senators of Olympia, I present to you these Centro strike forces, as you requested. Cicero bowed and made a wide gesture. She'd expected a mocking applause like she'd gotten in New Alexandria, but there was only silence. “Turn the audio on for our guests.” A man with a big beard and half his face replaced with chrome said. Cicero bowed again.

“Admiral, there is a problem.”

“Report.”

“The space junk is latching onto the hull.”

“Excuse me?” The Admiral said.

“They're electro magnetic mines, ma'am.”

The Admiral didn't get time to reply. They exploded. Zhang noticed that the vast majority of the mines had gone towards just one one of their ships-- the flagship. This wasn't a casual operation. They must have set this minefield up years ago, put hard work into it, and here it was blowing up a single dreadnaught. Still, it worked. The battleship Bonaparte's hull was ripped open in place after place, the hull spewing out bodies like blood. It was then that the second wave appeared.

Attached to large chunks of space junk, engines were coming to life. Scores of smaller ships. Again, they headed in unison towards just one ship. They knew their strategy. It was then that she felt the station quake beneath her as its automated turrets came online. It happened all so quickly, all in just a matter of seconds. The Bonaparte was scrap, the Genghis Khan was attempting to move to save the J.P Morgan, which was being swarmed by tiny ships, the Carnegie was firing on the station, while the Mark

Zuckerburg seemed to sit there, unable to decide a course of action.

Captain Patel had already raised his rifle, and the rest of the troops had followed suit except for Han.

“You're going to stop this, now.” Patel screamed at Cicero.

“Oh look, a gun. I'm so scared. But I think our Emperor has a word for you.”

A hologram of the man with the big beard and half chrome face appeared in the center of the room.

“To Centro forces. This is Emperor Bizquick Bill.”

“Fucking rimwards.” A soldier said, either because of them killing their friends or the guy's name being Bizquick Bill no one could tell.

“The rightful government of Olympia demands your unconditional surrender. Your Admiral is dead. You have no hope.”

“Captain Patel, we need to move quick if we want to save the fleet.”

“Sergeant, the fleet is already lost. Our only hope is surrender.” Zhang felt a drumming in her heart. A plume of venting bodies flew out of the Genghis Khan. These people were going to die. If they surrendered, they'd be pawns.

They'd be executed, or paraded down the street. All hope of Earth ever uniting the solar system would be dead. Was this how strong humanity's will was? To give up now. She remembered all the faces of her friends she'd lost in Magellan's Rat Maze. She raised her rifle to his head.

“You are not fit to command this assault. You are relieve of

your command.”

“This is treason Sear-” She slammed him in the head with the butt of her rifle till he didn't get up. The room looked stunned.

“Cicero, tell me how to turn off the automated turrets.”

“You really think I'd-” She shot him. She walked over to the hologram control interface, and turned the system off as Emperor Bizquick Bill stuttered something.

“They've moved their troops out in an attempt to take our ships by boarding party. The station is likely deserted aside from a skeleton crew. We need to take over the controls from the inside and begin firing on their transport craft.”

“Sergeant-”

“No questions!” She barked. “We need to move fast before we lose another battleship. Those are our people up there and we're not going to let them burn to death like the Admiral, or turn into bargaining chips, or stock for a Titania slave market. Does one of you have a map of the station?”

A woman raised her hand.

“I do, sir, ma'am.”

“Good. Who can hack a terminal?” Two people raised their hands. Zhang put a guard on them and ordered the group to find the mainframe of the station.

“What about the rest of us.”

“The station's not deserted. We jammed their transmissions to the surface or past our fleet, and they're sure not as hell broadcasting from a ship in danger of getting roasted on accident. We spread out. We're finding the Emperor.”

“You still think we can win this Sarge?” A soldier she

didn't know said, meekly.”

“It doesn't matter if we can win this. We're surviving.”

Venus, The City of Broken Glass

They were paraded through the streets, people clanging pans together as they walked by below them. The ground was sandy, the inhabitants long having given up fully cleaning up the breach to their home... But the dome was fully filled with air. Plants grew on hanging gardens from every window, children ran next to the procession of troops escorting them, cheering. The population hadn't just survived the rupture to the dome... It had grown. People held babies, lots of babies, as they went by. Where were they getting the food? It didn't make sense. Even if most of the population had managed to get inside airtight buildings before the rupture, an unlikely event, it would have killed off the plants they'd grown. Even with emergency supplies, people would have died from scarcity waiting for new ones to grow.

“Take your helmets off.” Han said.

“Ma'am?”

“Let's not act like prisoners. These people are Centro colonists, from Earth, Mars, Wright Brother's Shipyard, heck maybe even some of the Ganymede colonies, let's act friendly. Wave and smile.” Thomas and Kevin looked at each other, shrugged in slightly off unison, and removed their helmets as Han did. They all began waving as they walked, and cheesily smiling. The people waved back.

“See, they're reacting. They're not purely antagonistic.” She

whispered.

“Purely.” Kevin whispered back from the corner of his mouth. They finally reached a building, clearly meant to be the town hall of the place. Guards stood on either side of its wide doors.

“Go on in.” The soldier behind her said.

“Thank you for escorting us, Corporal.” She said, looking at his rank patches. He just grunted in reply. The three of them walked toward the building, and entered in of their own accord. The entrance hall was very clean, and very white, with a carpet rolled down the center, and a big statue of Centro founder Shiori Nakatomi at the end of the hallway. Her eyes had red X's pained over them, and also in red on her chest was written:

“A Unity of Threes.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow, “You don't see that everyday.”

“I see pictures of Nakatomi basically every day Tom.”

Kevin retorted.

“I mean, 'A Unity of Threes.' Its an old idea, kind of outdated.”

“Don't leave us in the dark, man.”

“It was an old idea that Earth, Mars, and Venus should all be colonized, and when they were humanity would truly be a master of the Solar system. Venus, Earth, and Mars are all similar enough size that humanity could hypothetically colonize each of them without the differences in gravity being too exorbitant. With terraforming, they could all someday be like Earth, one united humanity on three worlds.”

“That's a crazy dream.”

“That's my dream.” Han said back, not coldly or darkly, but sincerely. Kevin quieted down. “Anyways, lets meet the Colonel.”

“You mean the King.”

“Whatever.”

The Battleship JP Morgan, space

Hieroglyph Halcyon put the captain's bloody head between his hands, his bleary eyes foggy from pain, and took some joy in snapping the arrogant fool's neck. Good riddance. They'd slaughtered the bridge crew, and after refusing to surrender, he'd gotten tired of listening to the Captain's whimpering.

“Dionysis, have we secured the main guns yet?”

“Almost sir,” she said slurred, some blood dribbling from her mouth, her jaw clearly broken, “the engineers are trying to put up a fight.” Fools.

“How is the second boarding going?”

“The Zuckerberg is managing to repel them so far, but like here its just standard crew mostly, no marines, we'll get them in time.” Zuckerberg. Centro ship names. Ugh.

“Halcyon, we're getting a transmission, I think? I'm not entirely sure how this works.”

“Where from?” She fiddled with something.

“The station, yo.”

“Put it on the screen.” She pressed something.

“Shit I ended the call. Lemme try a- oh they're calling back! There's a big green thing to press I see it.” She hit it. A woman in Centro armor appeared on the screen.

Clustered in the center of the room was a mass of men, women, and non-binary individuals that Halcyon instantly recognized. It was the Senate, and the Emperor.

“This is Centro Marines Acting Captain Zhang Han. Cease hostilities immediately, or we execute your leaders.” How the hell did they find them? They were life shielded, in an unmarked-- he then noticed that there was a big burned hole in the wall. They'd just shot through walls, willy nilly, till they found them. They could have vented the whole station. The internal structure damage alone had to be...

Halcyon grimaced.

“You Centro drain traps.”

“That may be, but you're going to stop shooting, or I will.”

“You're bluffing.”

“Ten.”

“You've got some sort of Corporate standard rules.”

“Nine.”

“We've got control of one of your battleships do you really think--” The Station fired a blast, hitting them in the bow.

“Eight.”

“You took over the guns? How did you--”

“Seven.”

“Okay, let's negotiate.”

“Six. Okay, if you stop firing. Five.” He looked into her face. She'd taken her helmet off. She looked impassive, and he knew that look. She'd settled on this course of action, and she was going to do what she thought she needed to do to save her people whatever the cost was to her personally. Her finger tightened around a trigger.”

“Four.”

“Okay, stand down.”

“Send the order out to everyone.”

“I’m not in charge of everyone.” Han kicked the Emperor.

“Stand down.” He muttered. Halcyon winced. The Emperor would survive till Centro left, but as soon as they had finished talking, he was as good as dead.

“Louder.”

“Stand down!” The Emperor yelled.

“Is there anyone out there Centro I can talk to?” Han said over the open Comm.

“This is Rear Admiral Grayson, on the Carnegie. I believe I’m in command now.”

“I’ll need you to help me negotiate, sir.” She said.

“Of course.” He replied, “Good work, acting Captain.”

The negotiations sucked for everyone. Zhang and the Rear Admiral agreed to cede control of the battleship J.P Morgan, and Olympia agreed to return all of its surviving crew, and extricate its forces from the Zuckerberg.

“Jesus Christ.” Grayson said after the Senators had left the room, “We just gave these pirates a battleship.”

“If we hadn’t, they’d have more than one. There was no way they were going to fail to take the Zuckerberg, and the Genghis Khan is barely worth bringing back into port as it is from what you said.” He nodded, rubbing his temples.

“Then they would have blown up or taken over the Carnegie. We could have blasted some of their ships from the station, but they’d have over powered us here in the end with sheer numbers.” Han slumped in her seat. “We did the

best we could.”

“Is this really the best Centro is capable of? I mean, God, three defeats in a row. Admiral Ng dead, two battleships lost...”

“Did you realize how much Olympia lost today though?” Grayson shook his head.

“They threw everything at us. Centro has scores of ships. We fought their whole fleet today. If Centro would give us another force, we could take it over in a snap.”

“They won't though. I already got word back from them. They've decided fighting to take Titan is just too risky. Its not cost effective.” Han shot up in her seat.

“But we broke them-- if we wait they'll just regroup. We can crush them.” He shook his head.

“No. The campaign is dead, Miss Zhang.”

“But what about Titania? The Vigilance is a slave empire-- they're the worst of the Rimwards. That's the final invasion.” Graelyn shrugged.

“They'll probably still do it, but I don't know who will lead it. With Talon disgraced and Ng dead, I can't think of anyone in the fleet to take on the job.”

“There has to be someone! We can't just give up on the Rim.” Grayson was mostly bald, but he made the motion of running his hand through where his hair would have been out of old habit.

“Do you really think we shouldn't give up on this crusade? Its a disaster. There's no way we can unite humanity. Sure, it sounds nice on paper but...” He trailed off, not really intending to finish the sentence, but she did anyways.

“But if they don't want to unite humanity to, its not going to

work.”

“Yeah, sure. That.” Zhang hung her head.

“I used to dream of this. Of a united humanity. I read Freeman Xavier religiously. I memorized his “Unity of Threes” essay. Its all broken. So many people are dead. Ng burned alive on that bridge. I saw people eaten alive in the Rat Maze. I saw people's head's blown off in New Alexandria. I just took a room full of people hostage to try to save my fellows in arms. Its all shit, isn't it. This is all just...” She waved at the map of the solar system slowly rotating on the table's screen. “Shit.” She looked on the verge of tears, and Grayson really wasn't sure what to say, especially since today was literally the first day he'd met her.

“I... I'm... Sorry?” She nodded.

“Do you believe humanity has a fate? That we're destined to do something in this universe, to achieve something? Why did you join the Navy?”

“Honestly,” he said, awkwardly, “I just thought the job benefits looked pretty nice.”

Venus, The City of Broken Glass

The door opened to the throne room of Colonel King Benedict Gillen. The room had a checkerboard pattern floor, with a big red carpet rolled down the center, leading up to a low dais upon which sat a throne. Sitting in a pose out of a painting, sat a man in a Centro Military Dress Uniform, upon whose breast was a patch that said “Col. B. Gillen” In one hand he held an orb, a glowing crystal orb

that shone with an unnatural light, and in the other hand he held a scepter, long and stylized. He wore a lush red cape with padded shoulders over the uniform, and a shiny bronze crown. His eyes were closed. Han approached cautiously. “Colonel Gillen?” She said gently, approaching the throne. He didn't respond. She got closer. “Sir, my name is Sargent Zhang Han, Centro Marines. We're here to help.” His eyes shot open, and he seemed to glide along the floor towards Han, but he couldn't have, it had to just be a trick of the eye with how fast he moved. He looked her right in the eyes, his blue ones staring into her brown, and smiled. “Hello Sargent. I've been expecting you, and your friends.” He gestured at Thomas and Keven with the scepter. Han took a step back to regain some bubble of personal space. “We haven't been able to get in touch with you since the disaster, we're here to do reconnaissance and see how we can help.” Gillen raised his eyebrows, and stepping back, twirled so his cape spun. He looked like a child. “I'm impressed at the way you decided to come in. I could have killed you anytime, you know. But coming in on a comet-- oh what style! What flair. I doubt you came up with it yourself though-- no don't confirm it, it will ruin the magic I'm sure. But still, you didn't enter in guns blazing, and once I realized who you were, I couldn't help but want to meet you.” Han looked back at her team, they didn't know what he meant either. “Sorry, sorry, I keep forgetting, or not keep really this is actually new to both of us, people not getting it. I am a big fan of your work. You survived Magellan's Rat Maze, and a foolhardy assault on the Index and Olympia. Poor old Bizquick Bill, his head is on a pike

on the senate floor. The new Emperor's name is no where near as fun to say. I'm happy they repaired Cicero though, he's my favorite."

Han's eyebrow raised, the left one if it matters. Thomas and Kevin raised their right ones, if that does.

"Sir, uh, Colonel."

"Your majesty, I think is the proper term." He spread his arms out like an Eagle.

"Yes, yes your majesty. How do you know that? The storms on Venus are too thick for wireless transmissions to cut through, at least most of them."

"Transmissions?" He scoffed, "You're so small minded. You might even say... Blind." Gillen reached out, and before she could stop him, touched her arm. She felt something move up her arm (even though she was wearing blast resistant armor) and through her neck, up into her eyes. It felt odd. It felt like... It felt like herself. She suddenly realized there was a possibility she could have been born blind, and she was blind. She staggered back, the world dark, the sounds everywhere. She lost her footing and tumbled over, and heard her friends yelling, and scuffling.

Then her sight returned.

Kevin was on the ground, trying to rise, while Thomas was getting bludgeoned in the head with the scepter by Gillen, hitting his head over and over. Blood was trickling down. She burst up, and dove into Gillen's arm, knocking the rod away. Gillen didn't seem put off, he just... Laughed. Not like the laugh an evil mastermind does, but like he'd just thought of a joke you'd told him last week he didn't get till

now.

“Amazing. True bravery. You're all great Centro material.”

Han looked at Thomas' head. It had looked worse than it was-- he probably had a concussion, but he could have died.

“You bastard.” She cursed.

“You insignificant pawn in a game of chess that will decide if a pawn gets to move in another game of chess. Aren't you wondering what I did to you?”

“Yes.” She bit back. Kevin got up, wiping some blood from his mouth.

“You're ll outmatched here. You have no idea why you're even here. Or why I'm still here. You probably think I've gone mad with power, or just plain mad. Maybe that I'm a crazed dictator. But the truth, oh the truth is so much more interesting.”

“I know exactly why I'm here.” Han said. She looked in his eyes, and he gave a little shug, and a tiny frown as if to say “geez, okay, fair enough.”

Earth, Grant Base, Wyoming

“I can't accept this, Han.” The General said, exhausted.

“Ma'am, I can't do this anymore. The rim is just... Ma'am I believed in our right to unite system, unite humanity... But I don't think its possible anymore. With the Titania mission on hold, I see no reason to stay in the service. I need this discharge. I've lost every battle I've fought in, and I've lost too many friends.” She looked up at her, knowingly.

“Damn it Zhang, don't you think we all feel that way? But

those Rimwards are gonna pay for what they did. We just have to get the Board of Directors to approve more funds.

“Ma'am... They're not going to. We both know that.” He stared down at the electronic form. It was all in order.

“You still have time left to serve, Zhang.”

“I know Ma'am.”

“I can get it taken off though.”

“Thank you ma'am.”

“Don't thank me yet, Sergeant.” She stood up, and walked over to the window. Wyoming stood out beyond them. “I can get them to approve you leaving if you sign up for something. Something dangerous. One last mission.”

“I'm in sir.” She looked back at her, shaking her head.

“Damn it Zhang, its a suicide mission.”

“I'm in ma'am.” General Lin sighed, she looked utterly defeated.

“You're that serious? This campaign has broken your spirit that badly?”

“Yes ma'am. Whatever is the shortest route out, I want to take it.” She threw down the tablet on the table.

“Fine. Then I have a mission to the surface of Venus. You'll need to find two idiots willing to die with you.” She nodded. That would be hard to do, but she knew she couldn't be the only one tired of this.

“Venus sir? There's nothing there.” She shook his head.

“Yes, sadly, there is.”

Venus, The City of Broken Glass

“Haven't you wondered why they sent you down here? I

actually know you have. Those quizzical looks during the meetings-”

“You weren't at our meetings.”

“Those long moments staring out the windows of your ship on the way here? And what was it you thought, “everything led up to this”? Yes?” Kevin edged closed to her. She rubbed Thomas' back, maybe just to reassure herself.

“You're just guessing this stuff?”

“Am I?” He squatted down, and looked each of them in the eyes in turn.

“Thomas, you tell everyone you had a great father, but you actually haven't seen him since you were eleven. Your mother won't even tell you where he went. “Where is dad?” You said, and she replied, “look, I managed to get you an extra ration of chocolate!” You kept asking, till she ran out of chocolate, and then she just cried. Then you found out he skipped out on your family and shacked up with some girl on Mimas. Who'd even want to go to Mimas? Its a hellhole, frankly. If it makes you feel any better, he's miserable there.” Thomas looked stunned.

“Kevin, you were driving one night and you saw a body on the side of the road. You kept driving. You never reported it. But you've always wondered if you should have.” He turned pale.

“Han, is this “Khan Muu Ekhlel” or “Khan sain ödor”? And oh that name. You should have kept the name Jan Khan, it suits you so much better. Khan! Powerful. Like a Star Trek villain. But I suppose that's why you changed it. Still, your mother understood, bless her heart. Not many parents would let their child change their name because

they were being bullied for it. I can't tell if that's good or bad parenting.” Han couldn't make herself blink for a moment, she just froze. Gillen smiled, wide.

“There you go. Something special, something odd, something blessed, something hallow from hell.”

“What the hell are you?” Han's voice cracked, “Psychic?” He tutted her.

“That's such a small way of thinking about me. I'm going to do you one better. I'll let the three of you live, for I am a merciful god.” He made a blessing over them with his hands. “You should feel lucky. I could kill all of you with a touch.”

“This is impossible.” Kevin croaked.

“Little children, all things are possible if you believe, and have the technology.” He rose, letting his cape wave dramatically. “You'll understand why I'm here, and you'll understand why you should tell Centro to never, ever come back here.” Han rose.

“Even if I promise you I won't tell, I could, its just a promise.” He grabbed her chin condescendingly. She grimaced.

“Sweetheart, your King knows best, and when you see the truth of what was done on Venus, and you remember the competency of your fight on the Rim, you will know exactly why no one should ever come here ever again. Look, I'll get a guard to bring you your guns even. I'm that confident in this. I am totally confident.” They stood there quietly, and as the seconds passed, a great roar came up from somewhere behind the throne.

“What was that?” Kevin whimpered. Gillen smiled, and

gestured towards a door.

“Follow me.”

They did. They passed colonists, and ex-Centro soliders, all in clothing and armor beginning to show signs of repair. As they walked, a guard casually came up with their rifles and gave them back. They were all tempted to shoot and leave, but... They knew that was in the end a bad call. They finally came to a boring looking door.

“Behind this door you will find the secret to everything. Go, one and all, its waiting for you.” Thomas groggily shook his head, and Kevin reassured him, trying to keep him up.

“Someone needs to stay with Tom.” Kevin said.

“Oh, he'll be perfectly safe with me.” Gillen replied. Han looked into Kevin's eyes. She could tell he didn't want to go into that room more than anything.

“Its okay, I'll be fine by myself.” Han took a deep breath, put her helmet back on, and pressed the button to open the door. She stepped inside, and it swushed shut behind her, taking her out of view.

Five seconds passed.

The door opened. Han emerged, her eyes wide, a dried trickle of blood down the side of her face, her hair messed up, her armor dirty.

“Sarge?” Kevin asked.

“Lets get out of here, Kevin. You don't want to know

what's in there.”

“You were in there five seconds.”

“We're done here. Lets take Gillen's generous offer and get out of here. The campaign is over.” She staggered away from the doorframe.

“Lets get the hell off this planet.”

“Zhang what was behind that door?” She just kept walking. Gillen started walking the other way without another word, or maybe prancing described it better. Kevin shored up his grip on Thomas, and followed her. Mission complete.

The whole flight back, she was silent. She didn't stare out the window.

“Han, talk to us, what the hell happened in there?” She didn't answer. “Hey, take a look at the stars, you can see some reall bright ones this way.”

“No,” she replied, “the stars are too cold for me now.”

* * * *

“So you're saying that Gillen went power crazy after fixing the crack, and has turned the city into his private Kingdom?”

“Yessir.” Han replied, rubbing her hands together.

“They managed to restore their food and oxygen supplies by using a seed bank Gillen brought on board. He apparently had planned this, he had petty rim warlord aspirations but didn't want to deal with fighting pirates.”

“And he just let you go?”

“He decided it was better to make his intentions clear in the hope Centro would just leave him alone to run his little kingdom.” The General set down her tablet, and intertwined her fingers.

“And there is nothing else you're not telling us?”

“This is my fourth time telling the story, I don't think there are any details I left out.”

“Your story matches those of your team exactly...” The General bit her lip, “But there is something off about this, it just feels like more that would make this all make sense.

“Lin muu ekhlel.” Han said with a shrug.

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, ma'am. Its something my mother used to say. When we were having a good or bad day, she'd tell me: “Khan sain ödor!” Han's good day, or “Khan muu ekhlel.” Han's bad day. She always broke up life into good or bad days. She said there was no point in trying to do it otherwise, “Khan”, she'd say, “if you are having a good day, enjoy it for what it is, and revel in it being a good day. If it is a bad day, accept that it is a bad day, and don't worry about this one being a good one. If its a bad day, do everything you can to make sure your next day is a good one, rather than what will make you feel better in a moment. Some days you just don't get what you want, General Lin. I wish there was more to it, but that's all there is.” Han shrugged. “I can't say I'm particularly thrilled with it either.”

Lin nodded, “I hope you understand that we're going to need you to sign these forms sealing you to secrecy on your actions in the rim campaign, and on the surface of Venus, forever.”

“What happens if I break them?”

“We throw you in jail forever.” Han nodded. Fair enough.

She reached over to sign.

“Well, Jan Khan muu ekhlel to that.”

“Well that was depressing.”

“You’re a bunch of code in my brain, you’re just feeding off my emotions.”

“Wasn’t it depressing?”

“It was sad. Is all that true?”

“I calculated it within 99% accuracy.”

“I really can’t take your word on this.”

“Let’s see if there is anything I’d like better in the Rim Gang Wars... Find someone else important... Ah! This looks promising.”

4 CORNELIA CARTHAGE'S GOOD SHAKE BY JAMES WYLDER

Black Space, the Rim Wars

He wouldn't stop glaring, and it was driving Joanna insane. "Johannes," Joanna started, getting slightly annoyed their names were so similar for the 5th time today, "what on the Rim is the matter?" He gestured lightly with his chin, and she looked over to see he was pointing at the Captain, as the rest of the crew of the Sam Walton.

"Captain Carthage," he spat, "I can't believe we're serving under her. There is no one in the fleet I'd less like to be serving under, and that's saying something, because you know how I feel about Admiral Talon."

"Commodore Talon." She corrected him. She had, after all, been demoted following her failures in the Rim.

"At least Admiral Ng has guts. Taking her fleet over to Titan to crush Olympia. I expect we'll be joining her soon to do what we should have done to Europa to them. Maybe she'll just scuttle magellan's Rat Maze like-"

"Johannes!" She tried to yell softly, which ended making all the sound come through her teeth.

“Sorry.” He muttered. “But we all know Carthage has been given a plum job here. Youngest captain in the fleet, and I get assigned to her command. Coming in here like a cat, shaking her prey to death and expecting we’ll like it. Even gets a Coeship Cruiser, she’s such a-”

“Oh seriously don’t say it she’s a real person.”

Captain Carthage walked along the rows of duty stations on the bridge, and stopped at one to lean over and examine something. He wished she’d keep walking, and vanish out of view around the arc of the coeship. The whole ship was built around a central core, with the interior being a cylinder with the gravity focused “down” towards the core, a design that promoted efficiency, and when he was lucky the Captain getting out of his sight. Not today though. She leaned up from the console and kept walking. Her pale white skin, tinted pink, and white hair didn’t quite mesh with the dark blue Centro officer’s uniform, nor did the wrap-around sunglasses she wore.

“And who gave her an exception to not get replacement eyes? They have a box of them over in storage. Special dispensation...”

“Johannes pay attention to your damn station.” He grumbled as he did, and instantly realized he’d missed something obvious. There were flecks on the readings, space junk in all likely hood... But they were coming in at too many convenient angles.

“Captain, I believe we have incoming bogeys.” Carthage silently slinked up behind him, and looked at his console.

“Too convenient.” She could have at least not used the words he was thinking.

“Yes, ma’am.” She looked up, and boomed across the room:

“All gunnery stations prepare for timed a synchronous strike. Activate all weapons in unison so no one gives it away. Pilots to fighters, and prepare for a cold launch.” A

flurry of hands began moving across the bridge. “Ensign Weiss,” That was Johannes Weiss, “I’ve authorized your station to time the strike.” He acknowledged, and pulled up the feed to watch each station report readiness, and when the all came in, he checked the 3D map of the enemies around the ship. If they fired in another quarter rotation of the core the guns would be able to hit the most targets. The computer factored in the lag time for what he wanted, and he set a timer for the firing. Perfect. Those pieces of Outlander scum wouldn’t even know what hit them.

“Five seconds to fire.” A voice called out.

Boom.

The ship’s entire set of onboard cannons went off, and dozens of of the objects moving towards the Sam Walton tore apart. The rest were suddenly sent into a flurry of mapcap movement trying to avoid the second round of fire. But the shots weren’t the only thing that had come out of the Sam Walton: two dozen star fighters and cold launched, meaning that they had been shot out of their launch tubes before the ships had finished powering on, making them nearly undetectable, but vulnerable. With the chaos of the unexpected opening shot however, none of the enemy ships seemed to be able to co-ordinate against them till they’d gotten their power on, and at that point they were in position to begin dog fighting.

“Fire at will.” Carthage ordered, and they did. Johannes looked at the battlefield map. Now that foes had revealed themselves.... There were a lot of them. More than there should have been.

“Ma’am, now that they’ve powered on there are a lot more of them than anticipated.” She came up behind him and looked at the display, pursing her lips tight.

“Ensign, what were you saying earlier about a cat shaking its prey to death?” His opened his mouth speechless? She’d heard him? If they lived through this he was as good as

dead. He shouldn't have said that all outloud, he thought he'd been being quiet but...

"I'm sorry Ma'am, it won't happen again."

"I don't care what you were saying about me, now where are the ships coming in towards." He reached out to the hologram, and 'pulled' at the image to adjust it for her. They were coming in towards the engines.

"That's not what we want. Ensign Al-Enezi, flicker the shields on the outer energy alignment foil." Johannes shared a look with Joanna. What was she doing? "Prepare to cut all power on my command, including artificial gravity. Leave only the sensors and life support."

Including artificial gravity?

There was no need for that, once you turned artificial gravity on, it took barely any energy to sustain. The bridge crew checked their straps to make sure they didn't float around. Even though the ship was being pelted right now by weapons fire by the enemy force, no one budged a millimeter due to all the inertial dampeners and the artificial gravity. With all that off though, well, it would quickly turn into an episode of "Star Trek" with people being thrown around the bridge. They orders though, were obeyed. As the shields flickered, Cartage yelled "NOW!" and a switch was thrown, turning the ship nearly dead. The sensors showed the specks of enemy ships taking a step back, clearly expecting a trap. When nothing happened, one launched a torpedo, which slammed into the Sam Walton's hull, sending the ship spinning, and causing the crew to jerk in their seats.

"Ma'am?" Joanna said.

"Wait for it." Carthage gritted. The ships moved away from the Sam Walton, and then regrouped, moving towards the Sam Walton's docking ports in unison.

"They're moving for a boarding maneuver." Johannes said.

"Perfect. Mister Jansen, please focus the ship's gravity core

to focus its force past the ship's hull, and to push and pull with maximum force by a distance of one meter.” Johannes' eyes went wide. He realized what she was doing. Good God.

As the ships approached, their crews eager for plunder, they dropped their defenses in order to engage their docking mechanisms. Suddenly, the ships found themselves pushed out a meter from their target, then pulled in, then pushed out... faster and faster. This continued past the point their stabilizers could hold them steady, and soon the ships were filled with dead crews with snapped vertebrae. “You shook them to death.” Johannes exclaimed. “Just like a cat.” Carthage added, “Thank you for inspiring the idea, Ensign. Mugabe, please recall the fighters. If there were ships waiting to jump us here, we need to get to Titan as fast as possible. Admiral Ng might need our help.” The crew jumped into action, and as soon as the fighters were onboard they engaged the drive and accelerated towards Titan.

As soon as they got within sensor range, they could tell it was beyond helping. At least one ship was a total loss, and looked like one had been taken as a prize by their foes. “I can't believe this is happening.” Joanna whispered, “Centro Systems is the most powerful force in the Solar System.” Johannes couldn't think of anything to reply with. They at least had been the most powerful force. Maybe they still were. But this would change people's perceptions. “Prepare to pick up escape pods, this is clearly a rescue mission, the battle here is over.” Carthage said. She sat down in her chair, and pulled her sunglasses up, revealing her red eyes, and rubbed them, holding back the worst of her emotions, and lowered them again. Johannes undid his harness, and walked over to the Captain. She looked up at him.

“Ensign?”

“Captain, I’d like to formally apologize for my statements earlier.” She waved him off.

“Do you still believe what you said, Johannes Weiss?” He shook his head.

“No ma’am.”

“And why is that?”

“You defeated a far superior force ma’am, that maneuver was incredible. The amount of co-ordination and trust that took for you to pull off is... I’ve never seen anything like it.” She faintly smiled.

“Is that all?”

“You also knew my name, ma’am. Without looking it up.” She nodded.

“I don’t care if my crew likes me, Ensign. I care that we’re all in this fight to save Humanity together. Look out there, at that battleship, the one that’s a skeleton. I think it’s the Bonaparte, which means Ng is either dead or floating around in an escape pod. I saw Ng’s plans for the battle, she went in there wanting to punish the Rim. She clearly failed. Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know ma’am.”

“Because if you don’t respect people who disagree with you, they will throw your disregard in your face and humble you. If you want to earn respect, you have to win it, not expect it.” He nodded. He tried not to show how ashamed he felt. “You’re part of my crew Ensign, now get back to your post, we have people to save.”

“Ma’am yes ma’am.” He saluted, she returned it, and the Sam Walton began moving towards the closest escape pod in reach, like a hand in the shadows.

“Well there you go. You got your war fix.”

“I can’t say that I have. War is exciting. So many possibilities, so many possibilities being snuffed out and cut off...”

“Now you’re just being creepy.”

“You’re the one who said I was feeding off your brain.”

“...So what do you want to see next?”

“On the Wind Fish, they said Mars gained independence? Lets look at that. Maybe find someone with a different perspective. An outsider, not one of these military types.... Aha, this should do nicely.”

“Oh dear, not again.”

5 THE GERU GHARA ENCOUNTER BY ELIZABETH TOCK

June 2472

“Desert’ Nelson, Earl ‘Steel’ Hayes, and Annie ‘the Eye’ Lawrence are going to be your team going down Celeste.” Chrometeeth said handing her the data pad with info on the three Pages, “They’re familiar with the area and have gained Admiral Phillips’s trust... Somehow.”

Celeste usually didn’t worry about teams going on missions, but this team made her uneasy. This group had a reputation for leaving as much carnage as possible in their wake; not the best team for stealing information for the other side like this. Not to mention they were in their twenties and they’d be taking orders from a fourteen-year-old. “Are you sure there’s *No One Else* that could go on this mission?” Celeste asked as they slowly made their way down the corridor.

“You don’t trust them?” Chrometeeth asked.

“I trust that they will make things much more complicated than they have to be, and that they wouldn’t be afraid to leave me for dead the first chance they get!” Celeste replied.

“They won’t leave you for dead brat.” Chrometeeth snarled. “They’d have to answer to me if they did that.”

“Aw, you do care.” Celeste cooed.

“Shut up brat.” Chrometeeth replied. “Your mission will be to steal the battle plans of Admiral Phillips, and get them to General Yung at Olympus Mons.”

Celeste shuddered a bit; she didn’t have tons of experience with Geru Gharians: but she had heard plenty of stories from her parents and other Assistant Librarians about how unpleasant they are that she didn’t have the greatest confidence for this mission.

“I know you don’t like Non-Rimwards but you’re the best we’ve got for this mission. If the Librarian didn’t think you could handle it, he wouldn’t send you.”

Somehow that didn’t make Celeste feel any better. “You sure they won’t leave me for dead?” She asked as they finally made it to the shipyard.

“You’ll be fine brat.” Chrometeeth replied as they reached an outbound ship. She opened the door and the three Pages were waiting inside. “Alright Maggots!” Chrometeeth shouted. “The Librarian wants no funny business on this mission. Bowie knows how close you came to fucking up the last one! So what’s that new mantra I taught you?”

“Always listen to your team leader.” They replied with a groan.

“That’s right, and this is your new team leader.” She said with a snarl as she pushed Celeste into the cabin.

“Oh come on Chromes!” Desert jumped up and shouted; Celeste assumed he was Desert since he had a big flaming “D” tattooed on his face. “She’s a dumb brat kid, she doesn’t know a thing about what we’re doing!”

Chrometeeth stared at Desert like a predator deciding the fate of its prey; before grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, “The only one allowed to call her a ‘brat’ is me got it?” She said throwing him back in his chair. “And she knows plenty about breaking in and snatching info. Now what was that mantra?”

“Always listen to your team leader.”

“Good. Now team leader,” Chrometeeth said looking at Celeste, “start leading.”

Celeste hesitated for a split second; she’d never lead a team before. “Start looking over the plans for the op.” she said, “Try to find places where you might be useful.” She hoped that sounded as tough coming out of her mouth as it did in her head.

“Alright you lot, get to Geru Ghara or Mars or whatever you want to call it and get that info!” Chrometeeth shouted.

Chrometeeth shut the door, and the ship started getting ready for take off. Celeste made her way over to a seat that who she assumed to be Annie was laying out in. “Scoot over.” Celeste commanded, trying to hide the shakiness in her voice.

“Not gonna happen twerp.” She responded.

“Hey, Chrometeeth said-”

“She said we can’t call you ‘brat’, she didn’t say anything about twerp right guys?”

“Right.” Desert replied.

“Annie, if she doesn’t survive take off we’re all screwed.”

“*Oh good!*” Celeste thought, “*One of them doesn’t resent being given orders by a teenager.*”

“Besides, if she’s as good as Chrometeeth says she is, we can be done early and send the baby back home and have some *real* fun.”

“*Maybe not.*” Celeste thought, “*I probably ought to write a report about these guys. I may be the first one to do so.*”

She wasn’t too far off. Looking through their files, the command leaders who did live long enough to leave a report didn’t have many good things to say about these guys. “Desert”, who in fact was the guy who was stupid enough to tattoo a “D” on his face, was a pyro. “*If you value your life, for the love of Bowie, Vishnu, or whatever you believe in, don’t leave this kid alone with matches!*” Was typed in all caps, underlined four times, and, as impossible as it seemed, stained with tears on the screen. Annie “the Eye” Lawrence, which she had hoped with a

nickname like “the Eye” meant she was a good lookout or a good shot, had merely gotten a bad eye implant job on her left eye that made it constantly look like she had contracted pink eye. She was a decent shot at best. Sometimes. Earl “Steel” Hayes, as she suspected, was called “Steel” because of his metal right arm. Though between the three of them, he seemed the most capable; good sniper/assassin, was somewhat stealthy. All his reports showed that if he could get away from the other two knuckle-heads he could maybe actually grow as a Page. Well regardless, this was bound to be an interesting mission. At least she didn’t have to worry about matches on the ship or in the not enough atmo on Geru Ghara.

As they landed on the Earth-held side of Geru Ghara, they were met by a jeep with one of Admiral Phillips’s aids.

“Jones my man! What goes on?” Annie greeted the man known apparently as “Jones” with that polite two cheek kiss thing that Celeste didn’t understand the point of.

“Annie! Desert! Steel! How are you three? It’s been a while.”

“Too long bro!” Desert replied.

“What brings you three out here?”

“Well,” Steel started, pulling out a handcuffed Celeste, “we were passing by doing our usual supply rounds when we found this twerp on board.”

“Stow away eh?” Jones replied, “Well you can put her in a cell, and we can deal with her for you if you like.”

“Could you man? We’d really appreciate it.”

“Sure! Steel, why don’t you and one of my guys take her down, and then we can go catch up afterwards?”

“I know my way man, don’t trouble one of your guys for us!” Steel replied.

“Alright man; meet us in the lobby when you’re done.”

“Will do man!” Steel called after him. Celeste and Steel made their way to the cell block of the building. Steel waved to the cell block guard who was way more interested in the little TV he had than what was going on around him. Upon reaching an empty cell they started “attempting” to put Celeste away while Steel took the cuffs.

“He’s really not good at his job is he?” Celeste asked.

“You mean letting me take you here with no guard? Yeah.”

Steel said taking the cuffs. “Alright, you gotta make this look convincing.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo you know.”

“Well, I’m a big guy. A little pretend slap ain’t gonna look good to make it plausible you fought with me.”

“Alright I get it, you ready or not?”

“Go for it.”

“You asked for realistic...”

“Twerp just hit me!”

WHAM! Right in the gut. She barely made a dent, in fact her hand was hurting more than Steel did. But he winked at her to let her know she’d pulled it off and she bolted.

She ran up the fire escape and sounded the fire alarm so she could go relatively unnoticed when she reached her floor.

“Alright think like a hot shot General; what would your

password be? He thinks he's untouchable...."

Bossman1234 **Access Granted** The soft green glow of those words were always so satisfying. She quickly found the plans she was looking for and downloaded them to her flashdrive. Mission accomplished.

"Yo twerp!" The nasally voice of Desert rang in her ear, "Jones finally got smart and now he's on to us. Get out now!"

"I'm already done! Just call the ship back." Celeste replied.

"That wasn't part of the plan twerp!" it was Annie's voice now, "We were supposed to meet General Yung on foot. We're gonna have to hoof it now!"

"I tried to tell you guys that getting cozy with the aids was a bad idea!" Steel had the com turned on; whether or not it was on purpose, Celeste couldn't be sure.

"Oh shut up Steel!" it was Desert again, "Like you could've thought of something better!"

"Since you all seem to want me in on this conversation since one of you left the com on; actually, if he wasn't held back by you two, he probably COULD do a lot better! Just stick with the plan for now and maybe we'll pull this off!"

This was *SO* going in her report that those two did something stupid and Steel should forever be put on ANY team but with those two. But first things first, get out of the building. As she raced down the corridor she saw a poorly guarded munitions locker. Window escape it is. One grenade and a makeshift parachute later, she was on the ground.

She quickly caught up with the team, but as they rounded the corner, they found themselves in an all out battle zone. Bombs were falling, guns, were going off from both sides, dead and wounded everywhere. As they continued to run, Celeste suddenly felt a sharp pain in her leg. Celeste cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

The other three quickly turned around to see why she screamed. When Celeste pulled her gloved hand away from her leg, it was red like the sand around her.

“Well this is just great!” Annie whined as another bomb went off, “What do we do now?”

“I vote we leave her here.” Desert said. “She called us stupid. We leave her here, she’ll die in the crossfire, and we won’t get in trouble.”

“She called you two stupid.” Steel shouted over the artillery fire, “Besides, Chrometeeth said-”

“Who cares what Chrometeeth said!” Annie chimed in, “She called us stupid and we’re your friends dude. She was lying to get you on her side.”

“She’s Chrometeeth’s pet, and she’s been looking for a way to scrap all of us!” Desert shouted. “Let’s just leave her and live to fight another day!”

“But-” Steel started. But before he could get anymore out the two of them grabbed him and managed to drag him off. This was so going on her report if she survived; lucky for Steel he at least tried to stay and help. She was going to do all she could to get him with some better people. But first she had to try not to die.

“YOU BOWIE-DAMNED BASTARDS! YOU BETTER HOPE I DON’T CATCH UP WITH YOU!”

More bombs and crossfire started up again around her. Celeste tried to move but found she couldn’t; not from physical inability, but from fear. She wasn’t trained for this, not in a war zone. She was fourteen; she wasn’t supposed to be here at all. If it wasn’t for the stupid Centros not catching on to Dr. Aldair sooner, her parents would still be alive and she wouldn’t be here now. Overwhelmed, scared, and hurt; Celeste suddenly found herself curled up in a ball sobbing.

Suddenly, Celeste found herself in the shadow of a soldier. She curled up tighter and started screaming.

“Hey, hey, kid calm down! I just want to see if you’re okay!” Celeste just stared at him through her helmet. In disbelief that a Martian was willing to go out of his way to help her.

“Probably wants to make you a P.O.W.” She thought.

The man slowly put his gun away. “I’m going to get you to safety, okay? Can you walk?” He offered his hand to her help her up.

She shakily took his hand. As he tried to help her up, she cried out in pain again as she crumpled back to the ground. “Okay, looks like I’m gonna have to carry you,” he mumbled.

“P-Please d-don’t hurt m-me.” She managed between sobs.

“Don’t worry kid, I’ll be gentle. Just hang on.” He picked her up very carefully, and very gently. Celeste was surprised at how gentle he was. Him being a soldier in a full suit of armor with weapons at his hip and back, his

armor wasn't soft, but he sure knew how to carry wounded people.

He took her inside a nearby building and down some stairs to a bomb shelter type place with a decent-sized medical bay. He then gently put her down on an infirmary bed, took a couple steps back, and took off his helmet; revealing a Chinese man who appeared to be in his early to mid twenties. He had a warrior's haircut, or at least she guessed that was what you'd call it, and an athletic build. "I take it by your suit that you weren't sent here to fight?"

Celeste hesitantly took off her helmet; showing off her tear stained face and puffy blue eyes, along with her other British features. She hesitated before answering. "Nope."

He handed her a tissue. "My name is Lieutenant Tam Yu-Lin. What is yours?"

She blew loudly into her tissue, "I-I'm Cel-Celeste Roth."

"You're going to be just fine, Celeste." He signaled for a doctor to come check out her leg. "I've seen soldiers live through plenty worse than that leg wound you've got. Don't be afraid"

She tried to hide the shakiness in her voice, but she had to ask this question, "Are you going to make me a P.O.W.?"

"What? Why would I... wait, are you... are you from Earth?"

"....It's complicated.... I was born there, but I don't live there anymore...."

He frowned slightly, trying to figure out what she meant. “How complicated? Are you a defector?”

“Yeah.... I guess that’s the word for it.... I outed a sicko in the Med field in Centro.... I didn’t think it’d be safe there for me anymore, so.... I left.”

“So you... you're not spying for them? Why did you come to Mars?”

“My boss is invested in the war; he sent me to do a job.” Yu-Lin looked skeptical when she said the Librarian was invested in the war. He definitely didn't trust her. Before he had a chance to respond, she quickly added, “He’s not Centro.”

He lightened up at that, but she could still sense his distrust. “Who is ‘he’?” He asked.

“A very powerful person in the Rim.” She replied.

“Does he have a name?”

“.... The Librarian.....” She quickly started fishing through her pockets. “I was ordered to get info for your side. I had a team but they left me behind. Well, two of them did. The third guy didn’t want to, but the others dragged him off. Those two didn’t care if I died.” She finally found the flash drive with the plans on it. “I’m supposed to give this to your big kahuna.”

She suddenly wished she hadn’t said any of that. “The Librarian is interested in helping Mars? ... well I guess, as long as you're not a Centro spy...” He started mumbling to himself. “Damn it, we don't

have protocol for this.” He started rubbing the back of his neck in thought, like she noticed a lot of men tended to do. Finally, he said with a sigh, “Don't worry, Celeste. I'm not going to make you a P.O.W. and I'm definitely not going to hurt you.” He then asked a question of his own, “How long have you lived on the Rim?”

“I left Earth when I was seven.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Fourteen.”

“Half your life... but you're working for the Librarian, you're a Rimward. I assume you left Earth for a good reason - I mean, there are plenty of good reasons to leave it, if you don't mind my saying so. I mean look at me, I'm fighting for our entire PLANET to leave Earth...” He started to laugh awkwardly; small talk didn't seem to be his thing. But at least he was trying, she found herself chuckling too.

“Let's just say the sicko I outed was a big part of it.” She found herself holding her locket.

“Oh I'm sure. Listen, Celeste, you don't have to be afraid of me... yeah, I can tell you're afraid.”

She shrugged, “Not like I'm trying to hide it.... I'm fourteen, I'm not supposed to be out here.... I guess that's the only thing I don't like about the Rim: they're not above sending kids to do grown-up jobs.”

He nodded, “Yeah, the Rim’s a little better than Earth, but... not much, in some regards.”

“Yeah...” She hadn’t opened up like that in a while, maybe Martians weren’t as bad as people had told her. “Um... can I ask a favor? I know your guys are kinda being blown up but... could you stay a little longer? Just until the doctor’s done.” She started to get teary eyed again. Yu Lin handed her another tissue. “Sorry. I’m just scared, and you’re putting me more at ease.”

He winced when she reminded him about his men out there; but he came over to her and gently squeezed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. “No problem.”

Celeste smiled. and then fished through her pockets again. “I know this is weird but, would you mind taking a picture with me? My friends on the Rim will never believe me when they hear this.”

He smiled again. “Sure, just tell me when to say ‘cheese’.”

They proceeded to take a few shots together, The medic was camera shy, but he managed to get into a few of the pictures anyway. Pictures taken, and leg patched up, Celeste then remembered the mission.

“Crud, we were supposed to meet with your General Yung right about now; and I’ve got the info he wanted... don’t suppose you could form a small posse and give me an escort could you?”

“I think I could pull something together...”

“Awesome! May I make one request about the posse members?”

“Maybe...”

“Can at least two of them be some guys, or ladies, who it would do em’ good to slug it out with somebody? I need to punish those team members who ditched me, and I couldn’t leave a mark on them as much as I really want to.”

“I can think of two guys who fit the bill....”

One posse of four later, they were heading to General Yung’s camp. As they approached the camp, Celeste could make out the figures of Annie and Desert feeding some bullshit story to the General while Steel was sitting there looking guilty as sin. Good, that means he will still be shown mercy; though he still looked pale when he saw Celeste’s caravan ride in, and was quick to point it out to the others. Lucky for her, it wasn’t soon enough.

“So unfortunately General, our team leader was the one who got the info you wanted. But she got blown up by-”

“DON’T YOU MEAN SHOT IN THE LEG AND LEFT TO DIE BY YOU TWO YA DISHONORABLE SONS OF BITCHES!”

Celeste called before Desert could finish. It was go time now.

“Pardon me General Yung but I’ve got to punish these two deserters. I’ve borrowed some of your men to do this task for me; I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but I hate to get my hands dirty. Also I need to un-encrypt this data for you.” Turning her attention to the posse Yu Lin arranged for her, “Gentleman if you please, you may do whatever you like to these two but please leave them alive and leave the man with the metal arm alone; he deserted

against his will, I have no quarrel with him.” No wonder Chrometeeth handled this kinda stuff, it was fun! But Celeste knew she’d want to have a piece of them too. “Now General if you would be so kind as to lead me to a secure device...”

As Celeste worked on the encryptions she made over the wonderful sounds of Annie and Desert getting some of what was coming to them; Steel made his way over to where Celeste was working.

“So... Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“No problem. You didn’t want to leave me to die, it was an easy call to make.”

“... If you don’t mind my asking, ... why did you say I could be a better page?”

“Because you can. The last few people who you’ve done stuff with just lumped your performance together. I’m not going to do that. Annie and Desert only care about themselves, I’m sorry to say they don’t even remotely care about you; but, I think if you work with some real team players, you could really do some good work. Chrometeeth knows I tell the truth to the Librarian and all its associates, you’ll be given a chance to start fresh.”

“Wow.... No one’s ever believed in me before; took a chance on me before.”

“No one wanted to take a chance on me either.”

“Thanks twer- I mean Celeste.”

“No problem. Now if you’ll get the General, I’m finished and we can call back the ship and call of the goons.”

“Yes ma’am.”

One long flight later, the ship arrived back at the Library. Celeste had called ahead, so Chrometeeth was waiting for them when they landed.

“So how’d it go?” Chrometeeth asked.

“Here’s my report.” She said handing Chrometeeth a datapad, “Steel should be set up with a new team, the one he’s on is holding him back; and I think you’ll want to deal with these two personally. The mission was successful, General Yung should have wired up the money by now. And Geru Gharians are cool.”

“Those two look like hell and death warmed over, what happened?”

“I took a shot to the leg, and those two tried to leave me to die. But the Geru Gharians patched me up real nice no questions asked.”

“Well I know *you* didn’t make them look like that; but you’re right I’ll be dealing with them shortly. But how’d they end up like that?”

“I caught up to them. With a small posse of Geru Gharians who needed to blow off some steam. Tell the Librarian he should really invest more of his time on the Martian front.”

Chrometeeth let a small smile cross her lips. “That’s my girl.”

“Well that was sweet.”

“She was a child soldier?”

“You’re so judgmental. I don’t think I like your software, I should modify it.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Did you do anything with the war?”

“Kinan didn’t really want me interfering, but well, I did do one thing.”

“Show me.”

“Finally. I mean, you just could have asked before...”

6 ITS FULL OF STARS

BY JORDAN STOUT AND JAMES WYLDER

A cough came from the back of the transport; a homely vocal burst that broke the eerie silence of the dozens of refugees who sat cramped together in the cargo bay of the smuggler's ship, seemingly unable to speak, even down to the youngest child. It was as if we all believed that if we never spoke again we could actually put our pasts behind us. It's important to have something to believe in.

Was that a cough from a Centro citizen or a Martian, I wondered. I wanted to say that it had come from a human being, and that it didn't matter who we were anymore, but I knew that wasn't the case. It mattered more than ever now. With hands shaking in the cold I picked up my worn carry-all and began rummaging through its contents, quietly babbling something incoherent as I did. I didn't know, nor did I care about what I had to say. I unwrapped the bent protein bar and aggressively took bite after bite, ignoring the pressure I could feel from the stare of the hungry child sitting behind me. I wanted to give her the last of my rations, I wanted to think that it would make a difference in her life, but I knew it wouldn't. Statistically that little girl wouldn't survive her first month on the rim; having to

make the transition from a world where the law enforced civic duty and community service to one where there were no laws at all and the only people willing to “help you out” were selling something. Freedom can commit the worst atrocities that way. I wanted to be able to say “Well, that’s life.” But I couldn’t take that as an excuse. I’ve seen too many cultures rise and fall in bouts of blood and credits and fire to accept that as any justification for action, but god I wish I could. It would make life so much easier to live.

Someone was whispering to the little girl that something important was happening soon, presumably her mother. I hadn't been following the news, but it couldn't be that important. No, too young to be her mother, and her mother was right on the other side of her. The not-mother looked up at me, and pulled the hood on the sweatshirt she had on under her blue blazer over her black hair, slipping back into the crowd.

I looked out the window. The endless expanse of the universe seemed to jeer at humanity and its petty squabbles. We are not but insects skittering aimlessly atop the beautiful fabric of a reality we are far too under-evolved to comprehend. Staring out into the void I had to wonder if ours was the ugliest corner of existence. Everything else looked so lovely. Even though it was still over a hundred million kilometers away I could just make out the lights of the Terrance Kann docking facility as it drifted across the starry background, it was just like the first time I had even been topside on Europa as a child and I got to see the lights of the star cruisers as they seemed to dance so high above the barren surface of the moon. I had long ago stopped seeing the wonder in those cheap, crudely manufactured bulbs, but the stars are still as beautiful as ever. I saw the girl in the blazer again, and she pulled something out of a bag that glowed gently like moonlight. An alarm went off, causing the passengers to stir, mumbling, wondering if something was wrong with the ship. A crew member emerged from the cabin hatch and shouted at the mass of refugees in the bay.

“Who’s the idiot who lit a cigarette back here?”

The alarm panged and echoed in my skull, behind it I could still hear the nervous prattling of people, but I wasn’t sure who it was anymore; if it was the passengers or the soldiers. I didn’t want to go back to that terrifying place, back to the slaughter, but I was already there, my mind had never really left, I couldn’t forget it. I was back at the command post, alarm ringing, personnel running to stations.

“Who pulled that alarm?” It was the commander. I stood there at the switch, completely out of breath; I had no idea what to tell him, everything had happened so fast. I figured I’d try to tell him the truth. Four feet away the Lieutenant tried to stay focused on her post.

“I did. There’s something wrong with the power grid.” The commander scowled, swishing his lush blue coat around his feet as if it showed exactly how much better than me he was.

“You’re being paid far more handsomely than you actually are to troubleshoot problems with this base, and advise us on tactical strategy. Not advise us on the power grid. Step away.”

“You don’t understand--”

“No, you don’t understand you gear-brained punk. This is a Centro facility, it works--”

“It’s been manipulated. Someone has set the whole thing to overload in just a few minutes.” His eyes quivered, I’d never really seen eyes do that before. They watered slightly, but he kept his composure.

“Only someone inside the base could have done that.” His eyes said, “You’d have been my first suspect.”

“Lieutenant, can you fix it?” She nodded, and gestured to me to show her where the errors were. I watched her work, and drew my pistol, a gleaming rust scarred thing.

“Get away from the console.”

“Did you tell my sister that before you turned on her in Trung?” She looked in my eyes, and I tried to look past the surface to the visual layers of heat my false eyes gave me. But I couldn't. I'd been inside the city only two days ago, and the connection hadn't clicked in my head till now. I'd seen a face like her's before. She'd been stationed at the west outpost outside Trung, and when I'd gotten the call from my handlers at the Index to cross the lines with the outpost's security codes, I did my job. She was sleeping in a bunk, like the other troops, when I chloroformed the guards and slipped out into the night.

Centro had shelled the outpost to the ground in the morning.

The Lieutenant looked down at a timer on her screen, and I felt sweat drip over my electric eye.

This war had been brother against brother, sister against sister. For a moment, the commander and I stood blankly as nation-states paled to a childhood memory a woman had of her and her sister on a swing set under a dome. The commander moved to draw his own pistol, and the lights went out.

The drone strikes were instantaneous. The shells followed a few seconds after. The roof practically slid off the building, and the last I saw of the commander he was trying to dodge a chunk of composite steel that pressed him flat. I ended up thrown against a wall by a blast that burned my left arm off, pinned by a desk that shielded me from the rest of the blasts. Eventually the blasts stopped, and I crawled out. The garrison was only a collection of scattered parts, like god had taken apart a lego set. My own arm was a part of the mess that begged to be put back together when it never could. I left it there. It belonged to this ground now. The Lieutenant was impaled on a tower of support beams. I looked up at the sky and saw the Centro and Martian drones drifting through the sky, white lights that blinked off with their death, falling like angels. The little girl in the compartment said something about lights, too. I wanted to reach up into the sky and tear them out, but I couldn't even figure out why I had survived, it seemed like blind chance, in another life I would be dead. I found no purpose in it, no reason, simply my continued heartbeat. I could be alive or

dead. Either way, the Index had hired me out to both factions in the war on Mars, and I spent my service losing the war with both of them.

“You’d need another life to change this verse.”

I slowly came to realize that I was still on the ship; breathing heavily and sweating as I returned to the present. I clenched my shoddy replacement hand tight to steady myself. The alarm had stopped. Eyes were glued outside the ship, and I focused out with them. The starry expanse was still there in the window, and would be there forever, as far as I was concerned.

Then something happened. The entirety of space itself seemed to become light. It was like the blackness of space had given up, and every star had turned from a christmas light into bonfire. There was nothing but heat, and cold fire I couldn’t touch no matter how desperate I was to be burned. Then I realize the light wasn’t coming from outside the ship, but in: reflecting off every surface in a blinding display. Meters away the light lit up in the middle of the hold, sending people scampering. The light ebbed and swirled as though it was reaching out to us: every ray an arm begging for acceptance. It felt holy, glorious, unnerving.. In the depth of the moment I could only manage to produce three words in dedication of the inconceivable event I had just beheld:

“Huh, that’s new.”

My mind began to reel. Had this really just happened? Could anyone else see this? For a moment someone had set off a bomb and I was watching our deaths in slow motion,

but we all moved at the pace of our own breaths. The light continued to expand, the air felt different, the gravity in the ship shifted, and the hull strained under the light. Then, like a snap, it cut off. The gravity shifted back, and it felt like we'd been playing by some other rules of nature. The passengers eyes shone with relief for half a moment, when the sudden change in gravity popped the hull and like a paper plane picked up by a gale force wind our transport was cast helplessly out into space, rolling over and over as we careened off course.

The change in gravitational force threw the dampeners off and for a moment everyone and everything went flying; the people tumbling around inside the hold as the emergency systems kicked in to seal the tiny but morbid crack in the hull. As a reflex I quickly reached down and activated my magboots, another trait that one tends to pick up out on the rim. The girl behind me cried out as she slid down the floor, likely to be crushed in the chaos. I reached out and pulled her in, holding on to her ankle until the artificial gravity managed to adjust to the shift and the venting seal. Everybody fell back down to the floor.

“You alright, kid?”

“I think so.” She said, a few crumbs of protein falling out of her mouth when she spoke. I saw that she had swiped a bite of my food while I had been distracted with the selfless act of catching her. I handed her the rest of the bar.

“Keep it. You're gonna go far out on the rim.”

She paused to take another bit of food; she looked as confused as she did hungry. “What's going on?”

“Well, I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure that everything you’ve ever known and believed has just changed forever, you probably won’t be allowed to talk about it either. Best hold fast.”

The child looked at me, her face filled with fear. I tried to give her a reassuring smile, but she only folded in on herself more and inched away back to her family taking with her the last of my food. As she backed up, I realized she wasn’t looking right at me, but right behind me past the ear I didn’t like people seeing in photographs. I turned.

That was when I saw her. She was standing by the wall, her face smeared with ochre mud, her clothes ripped and bloody. She looked like she’d just stepped out of a warzone, but she also looked wrong like she’d been drawn by a different artist in the wrong comic book.. “It’s you.” She whispered, and stumbled towards me. She placed a hand on my shoulder, I was about paralyzed at that moment, and whispered, “You saved me, somehow you did it.” I hadn’t done anything. Her body was currently being reprocessed for protein. Or maybe someone actually gave her a decent burial, but I doubted it. Maybe she’d burned to ash sleeping in her bed.

“You’re, uh, not among the living.” She looked at me funny, and sat down. Was she t
“I just need to rest my head.” She replied, and nuzzled into my shoulder with her warm zombie head. Her touch felt like an incandescent bulb. “When we lost on Mars and Centro took back the city-” stop right there, that was wrong, “-I never thought I’d make it out alive... But she came for me, the one in blue jacket. Said you’d sent her.” I wanted to respond, but she was already asleep. I didn’t understand, but things could be worse, I could be the poor bastard the Index sent to Nair before it blew up. I could be the woman next to me, but I suppose she was doing better than expected. I could be the passenger in the blue jacket I’d check through logs for later only to find she had never

boarded and never got off. Her breath settled into my shoulder, and I gave up figuring it out. It was like she'd walked out of another life, but that wasn't possible. Then again, so many things today weren't. I rubbed my eyes, and behind the lids the darkness once again filled with stars.

There was no more trouble before the transport righted itself again, and gunned its engine, full speed for home. When I looked out the window and saw the European space port, I couldn't help but feel like those crude lights down there were the most beautiful I had ever seen, shining like gems on the desolate surface of the moon.

“What an odd use of your time.”

“I didn’t know where else to put her. She needed help, and I couldn’t give it.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“I know.”

“Enough of that kind of thing. I want to explore. Lets look after the war, see what people are doing... Maybe on the Rim we keep hearing about.”

“Like Olympia on Titan?”

“That sounds interesting, and mythic.”

“Its a scary place. Violent Vidyul lives there.”

“All the better.”

“We’re skipping over a rather major event though...”

“And?”

“After the war, they developed alternate universe traveling technology, it changed everything.”

“And I should care why?”

“Well I thought it was important to mention.”

“Psh, what do you know.”

7 PLAYING WITH FIRE BY MIGUEL RAMIREZ

Michael awoke to the feeling of a cold steel hand on his chest. It was a sensation he was getting accustomed to. It had brought him his first bit of happiness in two plus years. It was all because of this girl from Mars. Luckily for Michael she loathed Mars as much as he did, maybe even more.

She was some type of politician's aid back on Mars when the purge began after the battle. Michael couldn't really

remember what the purge was about. He was taking part in his own emotional and physical odyssey at the time. Overcoming the loss of his sister, leaving earth for the rim, and getting captured by aliens for experimentation can really divert a man's attention from other global events.

But all of that was behind him now. Sleeping next to him was a beautiful tan skinned woman. He wasn't sure if he had ever known romantic love before this but if it was like this he was ok with it.

Michael gently removed her arm from his chest and slowly rolled out of bed, his feet striking the cold metal floor of Olympus. He wandered over to the kitchen where Persephone's personal chef was preparing the dinner menu.

Man, we really slept in, thought Michael. They had gone to bed around ten that morning. Dinner prep started around 17:30 which was late morning for them both. As Michael reached for a pear a cold finger traced up his spine. That single motion simultaneously filled him with terror and joy. He didn't hear coming, almost never did. A skill she had obtained while learning to survive on her own during the last few years.

Michael spun around and looked her in the eyes. There there was one perfectly hazel eye and a green robotic lens. Both her left eye and right arm were lost as she fought for control of Olympia and for her life.

"Wake me up next time," she threatened him.

“I did.”

“Not the way I wanted.” She whispered in his ear. She walked over to the chef carrying on a meaningless conversation about what would be for dinner. Michael lost interest immediately finished his pear and headed back to the bedroom to get ready for the day.

* * * *

About an hour later they met again for dinner. Persephone’s assistant met with them to go over her daily schedule. Michael half listen to the political squabbles of the outer rim. He was a simple man of simple pleasures, none of them involved politics. He did enjoy the daily security report, and always listened intently when it's reading began.

“We captured a red assassination team, this morning. A four man cell, two went down during the confrontation but all four are still alive and stable.” Listed the assistant doing her best to sound calm as she read.

“How the hell did that happen?!” yelled Michael smashing his fist against the table.

“One of them is a manipulator,” answered Persephone grabbing her freshly spillt tea off the table. Glaring at Michael she continued “thank you Lily, I would like to speak to them immediately.”

She rose from the table sipping the remainder of her tea.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do we know which one is the manipulator yet?”

“We believe a man named Natsu Mashima is responsible. He was unarmed and seems to be the leader. We searched through our records for information on him. According to

those he is a Martian doctor who participated in the battle on Mars. Shortly after the dimension event he dropped off the grid and we have no record of him since.”

“Are you sure he’s the guy?” asked Michael grabbing the data pad from Lily.

“Retinal scans matches sir.”

“He’s the one I’ll question first.” Persephone giggled in a childlike voice finishing her tea.

* **

Natsu sat alone in a poorly lit room. He had convinced the guards that he was harmless and there was no need to restrain him in the cell. He was fairly certain that their foolishness would cost them their lives but it was all according to plan. He sat in his room concentrating on the emotional nebulae around him tracking their movements and moods.

Soon he felt three new emotional nebulas approaching the two guards. The distinct emotions were new to Natsu. One was a small smoldering deep red rage, the second a light green galaxy of trust, and the final nebula was like nothing he had ever seen. Natsu had tested his powers in a hospital once on a patient with multiple personalities. It was a single nebula with each personality contributing their own emotional state to the whole. This third nebula was horrifyingly different. There was a dominate nebula that seemed to be the original but inside of it where five

completely different small nebulae, like mini galaxies in a regular galaxy. The six separate nebulae slightly bleed into each other blurring the line of distinction at the edges. The dominate nebula was light yellow of serenity, the second largest was blue with grief, the third a bright yellow of joy, then green, red, and the smallest a deep loathsome purple. Natsu's personal nebula began to glow green and blue with fear and amazement.

Natsu could not hear the conversation the five individuals were having on the other side of the bulkhead, which led into his cell. He was sure any moment someone would come in to interrogate him. The guards would be replaced after this and probably be killed later but he would gain the advantage in this interrogation. He would start his advisory on the defensive and would gain the information he wanted.

Rage! Natsu had never felt any emotion this intense before. All six minds burned hot with the rage as bright as the sun on the other side of the entrance. The two nebulas of the guards were ended in an instant. They didn't even have time to fear for their lives. Beads of cold sweat began to run down his brow. This was not according to plan. Deep green terror began to overwhelm his blue, green nebula.

"It's ok, just a minor miscalculation," Natsu reassured himself. He forced himself to be calm, wiped his brow clean and tried to prevent his hands from shaking behind

his back.

The bulkhead creaked open. A young woman stepped through the door. Her short dark brown hair spiked off her head in random patterns accenting her worn brown face. Her eyes, one a natural hazel the other cybernetic green, really shined with the blood splatter on her face. Her hands and forearm were covered in what Natsu could only assume was the blood of the two guards whose bodies lay outside the door. She stood around six feet tall slender and imposing; covered in some special rigger armor that resembled a sleeveless gel suit. He was not sure who she was nor did it matter no one had ever withstood his interrogation.

“Good...”

Persephone’s boot smashed into Natsu’s face knocking him backwards onto the floor. She had crossed the meter and a half between him and the door in an instant.

She grabbed Natsu and the chair and in one fluid motion righted them. Natsu’s face began to heal quickly.

“Oww!” But the knife she just stabbed in his leg would take a little longer to heal. The back of her metallic hand collided with the boot print on his face. he felt his jaw began to break and then repair itself. She reached for the knife in his leg.

“Please don’t.” Natsu pleaded as she removed the knife.

“Bowie that stings!”

“Welcome to Olympia,” Persephone hissed. “Are you another Naī subaha dog sent to quiet me?”

“They are.” Natsu said, gesturing to where he believed the rest of his incompetent team was being held. “No, I work for another um... how would you say another player. A gentleman called the Hierophant.” Her deep red nebula began to give way to a light orange of interest. The Hierophant’s men had made sure he implanted a few rumors about him on Olympia about a month ago. He hoped this would help him survive this mission.

Persephone put a hand on each of his knees and leaned in. “I don’t like being played, I don’t like Martians, and I hate politicians. The next word out of your mouth better be a good one.” She threatened as six separate voices spoke at once, “or you will join us.”

“The Hierophant doesn’t want you dead.” Natsu blurted out as fear gripped his heart. He had been threatened and tortured before; this was the first time he believed he might die. She just stared at him.

“The situation on Mars is deteriorating. The Government of the people cannot provide for the needs of the many when they are so concerned with the needs of a few. My organization, the Hierophant, wants to change the way Mars works. We are going to put the power back in the people’s hands. Our organization is focused on the good of Mars as a whole.”

Natsu stared at her in silence for what felt like hours. He watched Persephone’s brain work through every possibility of how the Hierophant’s secret cue could mean for her. Of all the possibilities none of them had a repercussion worse

than being hunted as a traitor to Mars, which was already happening.

“Why should I care?” She asked already knowing the answers.

“You get to stop looking over your shoulder for Martian assassins. You could have peace and trade with Mars. Most importantly I would owe you a favor.”

“How will you do all these marvelous things you speak of?” she questioned as she began to pace around his chair.

“One does not simply conquer a planet with good intentions.”

Natsu smiled, his wounds were mostly healed and for the first time since she walked into the room he felt in control.

“Now, you know it would be foolish for me to share all of our secrets.” He responded, “How do I know you won’t betray me. Use the information I have given you to get back in the good graces of Mars, or Earth. We have plans, some of the better ones depend on me being alive and most of our plans are non-violent but not all.”

Persephone had what she needed. Natsu was no fool, she thought. If he believed his organization could successfully carry out a military operation against the Martian government their operatives must be highly skilled. When picking enemies she referred to pick the large, recognizable kind. The only good thing about Mars and Earth trying to kill her was their operatives stuck out like a sore thumb out in the rim and the memories of an assassin from each planet helped. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I need you to let me escape, I and the men that came with

me, it is important to the overall plan.” Natsu responded. Persephone stopped pacing behind Natsu. “I will sleep on it; you will have my answer in the morning.” She said while running her finger across the back of his neck. She then headed for the door and left him. Natsu shivered, this woman frightened him to his core. He prayed that he wouldn’t die horribly tomorrow.

Natsu awoke, stiff and tired. The night had not been kind to him. Between the horrible nightmares of Persephone’s mind and finalizing his escape plan sleep had failed him. He had a plan; unfortunately it was a bad plan. Luckily the first step had already been accomplished; he was still not tied up.

The second step was to find and free his fellow squad mates. A quick emotion ping let Natsu know that he had no guards outside his door. Walking up to the door he noticed it was unlocked. Focusing more on his powers he noticed he was alone in this prison with his team. He quickly moved to free the rest of his teammates.

“Hato take point; use your ability to scout ahead for enemy troops. Taka protect Hato. Karasu and I will cover the rear. We move quiet and quick, Hato find us some weapons.” Natsu whispered once the team was in the hall.

“Yes, sir” they whispered in response. They quickly moved through the compound finding little resistance to their escape. Disarming and knocking out a few guards they reached the city in no time armed and hopeful. As they bid farewell to the fortress the alarm began to sound, and Natsu

muttered under his breath “Norowareta aku no on'na.”

Michael was enjoying a calm relaxing day of training. His students learned quickly the steep penalty for missing a shot. Gill, a dumb kid who decided he needed gills, had received a smack across the back of the head many times this morning due to his poor aim.

Michael was getting ready to break for lunch when the siren started blaring. “Curse that insane woman and her plans.” Thought Michael “how could she let them escape? Alright don't panic.” Michael ordered the recruits, turned and smiled at them. “Who's up for some live target practice? Gill you and Sprocket Face go take up position on that roof overlooking the main street.” Sprocket Face was a poor fellow who had the right side of his face severely burned by a plasma grenade and had replaced it with a metal plate. Michael enjoyed making up silly nicknames for his recruits. Hawkeye had replaced his eyes with actual eyes from a hawk because he heard someone say they read in a book that hawks had good eyesight. Walkathon had replaced her legs with robot chicken legs, Michael never knew the reason why she replaced her legs and never cared it was just funny. Electric eye had lost a bet or a game of cards Michael never got a straight answer from him. “Hawk eye, you and Walkathon, I want you behind those crates focused on the building below Gill and Sprocket face. When the enemy get there drive them back into that alley behind their building. I and Electric eye here will wait in ambush at the end of the alley. Once they are cornered take them out.”

“Yes sir,” they responded in the most militaristic way possible. Everyone moved into position and Michael waited to do what he loved most. Hunt Martians.

The closer they got to the docks the more the crowds began to thin around Natsu’s party. Shouting from the guards back in the crowd behind them reached Natsu’s ears.

“Move!” Natsu ordered. While the team could easily blend into a large crowd, here in the open they stood out like an Centro diplomat. Speed was there best option at this point if they tried to hide they would be flushed out and murdered before they could reach the ship. Natsu’s group picked up the pace, almost running now towards the docks.

“Fizz!” a plasma bolt nailed Hato square in the chest.

Natsu’s gaze immediately fixed on the barrels of two plasma rifles pointed at them from a rooftop near the docks.

“Down!” Natsu shouted. The rest of the team hit the ground just as the second scorched by them. “Move, building”

Natsu ordered. Natsu moved his team to the building the snipers were in. The alleys were not an option he thought as the yelling from down the road grew louder. He motioned for his team to keep moving along the side of the building.

“Thunk, thunk, thunk.”

Machine gun fire punched holes in the wall in front of them.

“The alley it is then.” Retorted Natsu in a huff, he had walked into a trap and was not happy about it. “Hato, Taka cover the front; mind the roofs. Karasu with me, down the alley.” Natsu and Karasu moved towards the other end of the alley quickly. “Eat hot plasma, Martian scum!” shouted

a Rim jockey as he jumped around the corner and leveled his gun. Before his finger could find the trigger, Karasu's axe removed his head. "Dang it Karasu, I can't fix that." "Poor eye," Michael muttered as he holstered his Gauss rifle and rounded the corner. In front of him stood the tallest Martian he had ever seen. "Well now," Michael smiled. "This will make for a great story." Karasu's grip tightened on his axe as a vibroblade slid out of Michael's robotic arm. "After I kill you I'm going to fry that manipulator." Snarled Michael as electricity sparked across his skin.

He lunged at Karasu repeatedly aiming for the upper torso. Michael was clearly the weaker of the two, but he was much faster than the tall Martian. Karasu was instantly put on the defensive. Unable to counter he was reduced to blocking Michael's quick stabs.

Finally Michael faulted, hitting Karasu's axe he caused his blade to be parried leaving him open for a counter attack from the Martian. Karasu swung attempting to end it with one powerful blow to Michael's throat. Michael ducked beneath the blow at the final moment then lunged and opened Karasu beneath the right ribs. He reeled; gripped his side and took a few steps back so Natsu could heal him. Michael began to pour energy into his right hand, preparing to unleash a devastating electric attack.

"Flee," Natsu growled staring up at the man coated in electricity.

"What?" Michael scoffed. Michael saw energy cover Natsu and then dissipate. He blinked, opening his eyes to a world of terror. A starship crashed into the hangar bay ripping the

doors open. The ship seemed to be headed straight down the alley towards him.

“Not like this!” Michael screamed. He turned and ran down the alley as fast as he could.

Natsu closed the wound on Karasu’s side.

“Let’s move.” Natsu ordered his men. He had no idea what the Rim Jockey had seen to make him act like that. Most people gripped by his terror just curl into a ball and cry. Taka created a shadow copy of himself to lay down imaginary cover fire. Natsu and his team sprinted to their ship, a little Rim Ward vessel. Dodging the last bit of sniper fire they boarded the vessel. As soon as the hanger door closed the pilot took off.

They were safe. They had escaped Olympia. As the team celebrated Natsu made his way to the cockpit.

“Mission accomplished” he reported to the pilot.

“Good job” he responded. He smiled back at Natsu with Green eyes.

Michael found himself drenched in sweat curled up in a dead end alley blocks away from the docks. He slowly began to regain control of his mind. As his it cleared he began to remember how he had been running through the alleys screaming for the last couple of minutes. He stretched out and let the visions return to his mind. Michael cried as the visions mixed with his memories. After a few minutes he breathed a sigh of relief and stood up. His steps became pointed, purposed as he walked back to the central compound of Olympia.

Cold energy began to pour from Michael uncontrollably as he walked down the corridors of Olympia towards the heart of the fortress.

He burst into the room pulled his riggers XL citalslayer. Persephone spun pointing a plasma pistol at Michael's face. "Why?" Michael demanded

"Drop your gun soldier." ordered Persephone in a masculine authoritative voice.

Michael stepped forward "I said why?"

"The plans of a superior officer are not privileged to a deserter. Drop your gun now soldier or I will melt your mug off."

Michael lowered his gun. "Let me talk to her, captain."

Persephone lowered her gun. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "What?"

"What's with the gun?"

"Protection."

"From me? Why? Vidyul I love you." Michael sighed and holstered his gun. "That Martian he did something to me. He got inside my head. It was like reliving my sister's death on mars, vidyul." he stopped to stare into her eyes. Her gaze tightened on his. "Why did you let him leave?"

"Because I need him alive, for now. He has plans for mars that will mean safety for Me." as she talks her voice grows as it fills with anger. "I have an empire to run right now and not having to screen for Martian assassins on top of everything else would make my day more pleasant. who are you to question me!" she screams her last words drawing a small blade and rushing up to Michael putting the blade at his throat.

Michael stared at her unflinching. “I am going to kill that man.” Michael’s lips slowly lowered to Viydul’s forehead. She tensed the knife slowly drawing blood from Michael’s neck. “but I will wait until you are safe first.” He gently kissed her. “Goodbye Persephone.” he turned and walked out.

Her curses could be heard through half the compound but no one dared to stop him.

“Interesting. So then Graelyn, what about you?”

“Well, right now my cat is walking on top of me.”

“There’s a start. Do you love your cat?”

“Of course.”

“And yet, I see you gave it away some time back...”

“...I did.”

“Well then, lets look into that. Your cat. Its more interesting than a war after all. Or maybe not, there are so many things, so many possibilities...”

“So much fur.”

8 THE ADVENTURES OF MISTER SPRINKLES THE CAT BY JAMES WYLDER

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

It had happened before, getting dropped off at a place that housed other pets, but then it was usually only for a few days. Maybe a week. So at first Mr. Sprinkles just closed his eyes and waited. But those days went by, and Graelyn did not come back. Where had she gone? He paced his enclosure, eying the man outside it, who looked like he was about to fall asleep, which didn't take long, and the man

slumped over in his chair, and hit the enclosure release icons for enclosures 23-25. 24 was empty, but Mr. Sprinkles saw a pudgy orange cat shove its door open and drop onto the floor. It gave the impression this wasn't the first time this had happened. Mr. Sprinkles pushed at his own door, and suddenly he was free! He literally leaped at the opportunity, and landed gracefully on the ground, strolling off through the rest of the building till he reached the automatic doors, that politely made way for him. Mr. Sprinkles was out on the town.

Jenna looked horrified at what Carl had built.

“That could kill people Carl.”

“That's the point Jenna.”

“Innocent people.”

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

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

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

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

within his grasp.

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

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

“Loud noises!” the man said again.

“LOUDER NOISES!” said the woman.

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

“Softer noises...” Said the man. “Softer noises? Soooooofter noises.” He continued. Mr. Sprinkles knocked the vial off the table.

“LOUDEST NOISES” Said the man, and grabbed for him. He leapt off the table, and landed on an object that then began to move!

Scrambling, Mister Sprinkles held on as the object rose to two legs, and made noises at the other humans. He was on this metal thing's head, holding on by only his claws!

This was not Carl's day. The vial that had fallen to the floor and shattered was now eating through it, the millions of microscopic robots chewing away at the floor. Eventually, they would eat him and Jenna to, and the dumb cat, as well as all of the other matter in

the area, and rearrange it all to spell some Revolutionary message that had seemed a lot more important a few minutes ago than it did now. The cat was on his cleaning droid scrambling to keep ahold of it, and making lots of cat noises.

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

“I did not want to try out terrorism!”

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

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

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

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

“MRROOOW!” He repeated.

“What's this cat doing man?”

“I dunno bro.” The other replied. The Cat kept taking a few steps and turning to meow at them, and they proceeded to follow it. Then they heard the cries from inside the building. Immediately the two

men went to work, and Phil and Tre'von, if you were wondering, and called emergency services.

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

“Carl take the rope!” Jenna said as she was pulled up through the windowsill by Tre. She threw it to him, and then he looked out at the people in the building streaming out. There were families, children with their parents, young people just trying to find a place to live. And here he was building weapons in the basement. A little girl clutched her pet goldfish to her chest, hastily scooped out of the aquarium into a drinking glass. Carl let go of the rope and stared into Jenna's eyes.

“I'm sorry.” He said. She turned away as the nanites ate him away. In a little over 23 minutes, the entire building had been turned into mush, and then restructured into a quote by Vladimir Lenin in big chunky letters you could read from blocks away.

“You cannot make a revolution in white gloves.” -Vladimir Lenin
Jenna screwed her face up. “Well, maybe you should at least try.”
The news drones had showed up, followed by the reporters. And Tre and Phil found themselves being interviewed.

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

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

“He disappeared just as quickly as he came. A really humble cat.” The reporter turned to the hovering camera drone. “We may never know the identity of this cat, but it will long be remembered as a hero in this neighborhood.”

Nearby on the ground, the sandwich was gone.

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

“Oh crap.” He said, noticing the open cages as he spring awake. “Wow good thing none of you got out!” He lightly laughed to himself, “That could have caused some real problems!”

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

she knew she had to. Right? In the pictures she cuddled him lovingly, and he looked slightly annoyed to be held. She smiled. “Oh Mister Sprinkles. I hope you get some fish today. Every good cat deserves some fish.” She scrolled through the pictures again and put her phone away to slip away into dreams, as Mister Sprinkles did up on the surface. She was a Doctor in her dream, stethoscope and all. “I need a nurse to help me with this patient!” She yelled down the hospital hallway. For some reason Mister Sprinkles, in cat size scrubs arrived and talked like he was Zorro.

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

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

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

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

“You had a dream... What are dreams?”

“Well, you have them when you sleep.”

“I’m curious. Show one to me.”

“Just... Any dream?”

“A memorable one.”

“...Okay?”

9 DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION BY RACHEL JOHNSON

There were a couple things wrong with this situation that made Graelyn absolutely certain, without a doubt, that this was a dream.

The first was that Mr. Sprinkles was there, happily purring away on her lap.

The second was that she was sitting looking out the window of the small house at the bottom of the sea, fish darting and wheeling high above her, unidentified plant matter gently tapping at the window glass. It was too bright and warm to be the actual ocean bed but she doesn't mind the logical inconsistencies.

The third was that, for the first time in a long, long time, she felt... okay. Not bored or sad or scared or angry. Not happy, either, exactly, but okay. Content. And that's what made Graelyn absolutely sure she was dreaming.

"Mr. Sprinkles," she said slowly, blinking down at the small gray cat, "what are you doing here? You don't like water." Mr. Sprinkles just blinked back up at her, his purr increasing in volume. Graelyn decided to just scratch under his chin instead. He agreed with that decision, the tip of his tail twitching happily.

Well, this is nice, Graelyn thought. Even if it's not real, and a bit strange, and – and Mr. Sprinkles was currently running across the ceiling as fast as his little legs would take him. Okay, so it's more than just a bit strange.

“Mr. Sprinkles!” She folded her arms crossly, craning her head back to look at him. “Get down from there.”

“Meow,” said the cat, mostly likely in disagreement, but Graelyn can't argue back because someone's busy knocking on the door. Really, really hard. She'd better go see what they want so they don't break her door down and let all the water in. Graeyln pointed a stern finger up at the ceiling, mentally telling her cat to stay put and behave.

“All right, all right, I'm coming!” She shouted at the door, yanking it open to come face-to-face with...a mermaid? Who looks exactly like Archimedes Artemis Von Aherabe. Right down to the fact that his tail, twisting gently in the water behind him, appeared to be made out of metal plates that clinked together every time he moved. Graelyn blinked again, because despite how odd this dream already was, she sure hadn't been expecting this.

“Graelyn!” Mermaid-Arch shouted, grabbing her shoulders and leaning in close, the security cam that served as his left eye glinting in the light. “It's time to join the Revolution!”

“Haven't we already done that?” Is her first response, and Mermaid-Arch sighed.

“Not *that* revolution, obviously. This one's different. It's *the Revolution*.”

“The...what? What’s the difference?” Mermaid-Arch looked like he was about to respond when she held up a finger, cutting him off.

“Hold on a minute, please. Mr. Sprinkles!” Graelyn whirled around to glare at her cat, who had dropped down from the ceiling and was currently batting things off the fireplace (fireplace? why was there a fireplace at the bottom of the ocean?) mantle left and right. “Mr. Sprinkles, stop that!”

The cat paused briefly in his rampage of destruction, hovering a paw above a pink coffee mug decorated with a doe-eyed kitten. Graelyn briefly wondered if her cat was bent on destroying it out of some sort of feelings of offense. “Don’t you dare knock that mug off, Mr. Sprinkles. I like it.”

“Meow,” said Mr. Sprinkles, staring at her. His paw descended.

“*Mr. Sprinkles!*” Graelyn reached out and caught the mug before it hit the ground, despite the fact that she’d been clear across the room when it started falling. She had super-speed in this dream, apparently. “You naughty cat.” She swatted him and he jumped down, going over to bother Mermaid-Arch. Graelyn set the pink kitten mug back on the mantelpiece, right next to a framed picture of a woman with red-hair. She was turned away from the camera so Graelyn couldn’t make out her face, but the picture felt familiar all the same.

Graelyn shrugged, deciding to ignore the feeling. It was only a dream, after all. She turned back to Mermaid-Arch, who was busy trying to untangle Mr. Sprinkles from his tail. “Alright, what’s this about a revolution?”

“Not just a revolution. The Revolution.” Mermaid-Arch had finally succeeded in getting Mr. Sprinkle’s claws out of his plating and was now holding the cat in his arms, occasionally patting him on the head.

“Right. And what is the Revolution, exactly?”

“Graelyn!” Mermaid-Arch was looking at her like she’d just kicked a puppy or something equally awful. “Don’t tell me you forgot!”

“I, um...possibly?” Graelyn was very confused. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The Dance Revolution, Graelyn! It’s tonight, remember? The team’s counting on you.”

“The *what?*” Graelyn was very, very confused. What kind of dream was this anyway? “I don’t remember joining any kind of dance competition.”

Mermaid-Arch’s face fell, as if he’d just seen her kick *another* puppy. “Are you saying you’re not going to come?”

“I don’t know. It’s a bit sudden.”

“We’re counting on you to win this for us, though.” Mr. Sprinkles was staring at her now too, letting out a squeaky meow from Mermaid-Arch’s arms.

“Well...”

“They’ll be playing Bowie.”

“Alright, I’m in,” Graelyn said almost immediately. Mermaid-Arch lit up, tail swishing happily in the water behind him. He set Mr. Sprinkles down on the floor and the cat darted over to Graelyn, rubbing his face against her legs, and then darted off somewhere else. Probably to cause more mischief.

“Great. Let’s go.” Mermaid-Arch grabbed her hand and started pulling her out of the house.

“Wait, it’s right now?” Graelyn protested, surprised.

“Actually, it started about twenty minutes ago. They sent me over here to come get you. So move it!”

Graelyn cast another look at the tiny underwater house. “Mr. Sprinkles,” she called, “you better be good while I’m gone! Or else no Baroque tonight.” The cat might’ve meowed back, but she didn’t hear it, because that was the moment Graelyn Scythes decided to wake up.

She blinked up at the real, actual ceiling for a minute, trying to drag herself out of that fuzzy feeling you always get after waking up from a particularly vivid dream. Eventually, reality reasserted itself, and she felt disappointed, missing her cat once again.

“I better have won that dance competition,” Graelyn muttered to no one.

“Very interesting indeed. So that’s what a dream is like. But lets go back to the cat. I wonder if anything else happened to it, the probability is low... But....”

Graelyn sighed, “Hypothetically....”

10 THE DAY THE CATS SPOKE BY JAMES WYLDER

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

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

This was not an ordinary light, even though it was a dream, and she woke up. Staggering out of bed in her Uncle Sam t-shirt and knit pants, she wrapped herself in a robe, and exited her cabin. She

wasn't sure why she'd chosen a ship. It was cold, and the waves rocked her. She didn't even like boats, as it turned out. But she was on one. Still, it seemed like it was important she was on one, and so she was. That was the way of things, and the Atlantic called her head to turn as she walked out onto the deck.

Ashlyn Oswin looked off the side of the ship across the endless blue of the Atlantic, of course there was an end to it somewhere. There was an end to everything. She sighed, and rested her chin on her wrist, settling into the position just as a violent blue flash erupted from ocean. Ashlyn perked up, that was certainly unusual!

Scampering along the deck she looked for a way to get over to the light, which was still shooting upwards from the sea like a beacon. Finding a motorized lifeboat, she hopped over the sign that told no passengers to go inside it, and pressed the button to lower it. She got a few meters down before it stopped, and began rising.

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

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

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

"Well then get down here so there is someone supervising me!

What's your name?"

"Uh, Ensign Abdul."

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

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

"Its world famous you should be ashamed of yourself. Now I'm a member of it, and if they find out your ship prevented me from

investigating a vertical cobalt light phenomenon, or VCLP as my friends at the institute like to call it, you'll be in big trouble! Centro has been wanting us to look into these things for years!" She could hear the Ensign talking to the captain over his radio, and then the boat finished rising, and he hopped over the side to join her. He was a scrawny thing, not that much older than Ashlyn, a fact he realized as soon as she started lowering the boat down.

"This better be good miss."

"Oh, it'll be more than good, it'll be spectacular!"

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

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

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

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

“Oh, nothing, you’re just a very handsome cat.” Ashlyn replied. The cat looked at her, and kept walking

“Ugh, humans. Can't even answer a simple question.”

“Well what did you want me to say?”

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

She shook her head, cats these days.

Mister Sprinkles had become accustomed to escaping. It wasn't unusual for the lights to flicker, the city powergrid was having problems and Centro was being cheap about it. When the lights did, the cages would open. It had been a problem at first, a few of the

cats had decided to fight each other, and a few had had romantic rendezvous, but it had become routine at this point. The worst offenders now had padlocks, and many of the animals didn't leave their cages at all. Mister Sprinkles always left, but never got into the sort of trouble one would padlock a cage for. Like his former human caretaker, he was curious, and exploring was his main hobby.

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

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

Pitter-pattering down the street, he found a dropped falafel, which proved to be pretty tasty, as well as a chicken sandwich, which proved to be pretty tasty to (though perhaps it had too much mayo). But this night was not going to be a normal night. Mr. Sprinkles looked up at the sky, and saw the stars were no where to be seen. Perhaps it was overcast, and it would rain? The moon was clear as day however. A bright moon, full and overbearing like a crest of death.

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

Mister Sprinkles hissed loudly at him.

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

This was a city. But as she woke up, Ashlyn wondered if she had

ever actually been here before. She'd traveled to Annapolis before as a child, she'd held her father's hand while looking up at him the way small children look up to any figure they think knows everything. Learning that wasn't the truth had been painful, but it was something every child had to do. She remembered both moments at once, like they were the same moment, or somehow inexorably intertwined. The rise and fall of Icarus, in mnemonics. She held his hand both times, once in awe, and once nearly in confusion as he broke down crying trying to tell her that there wasn't anything the Doctor's could do. Her mother was a better person for telling that sort of thing to people, but she was too tired to fight her illness, let alone talk. Her father had been broken after that. He never really recovered, even though he remarried. In his smile she could still see a glimpse of that moment he broke down crying, and she suspected he had simply learned to hold it back. This city was the same as that memory. It was interlinked, but not the same somehow. How was it that way? She closed her eyes and tried to make the system work in her head. Was it the cats? The idea wasn't that outrageous. After all, she'd always liked cats. What seemed odder was the view outside her window. The lights of the city had been shifted in hue, or maybe moved in waves in a slightly different way. She wasn't sure. Her uncertainty reached a climax when the cat walked across the window sill.

"Hello." She said.

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

"Yes, who are you?"

"My name is Salabaster. Like most cats, I didn't choose my name,

so don't ask me what it means. Presumably it's a play on alabaster, but what kind of play the dramatist did not reveal. Its good to meet you, there is someone else who wants to meet you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

possibly literally awful.

Mister Sprinkles was the cat of her ex-girlfriend, Graelyn Scythes. The two of them had spent many hours playing with him, dangling toys in front of him to bat at, and many more hours with the cat simply in their vicinity as it went about its own business the way cats do, largely ignoring them. She'd held a special fondness for the cat certainly, but no where near the fondness Graelyn held for him. That cat had been her lifeblood.

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

"Mister Sprinkles." She'd replied sleepily.

"Not me?" She shook her head.

"The cat is paramount."

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

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

"Graelyn? If this is a cat, I don't know them. If this is a person, I know them even less."

"A person. Mister Sprinkles' owner."

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

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

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

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

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

“Did he ask for me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine, whatever, I'm sure your company has some strict guidelines

on cat-discussion lingo perimeters. Yes, I would like to-- look,” she gave a gigantic wink, “at the cats. Specifically one named Mister Sprinkles.” Kaitlin looked surprised, or rather more surprised, and this time she totally sold the emotion.

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine, fine.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

“You do a lot for a cat.”

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

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

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

* * * *

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

speak.

“Hello!”

“Meow.”

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

“Meow. Meooow.”

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

“Meow.”

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

“Meow.”

“But you can understand them right?”

“Meow.”

“Something very wrong is going on....”

“Meow.”

“What?”

“Meow.... Meooooow.”

“You do a lot for a cat.”

“Meow.”

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

“Meow.”

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

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

* * * *

She carried Mr. Sprinkles home in the carrying case, stopping off at

a store for some litter, a litterbox, and some wet cat food. She cared it all home awkwardly, her arms feeling quite tired as she finally got into her apartment. She Let him out, after she'd shut the door, and the cat spent a few minutes stretching itself out, and climbing on things it probably shouldn't. Ashlyn had to run and move a few badly placed things before he knocked them over, but that was cats. Mister Sprinkles got up to her, and then reeled back, suddenly hissing.

“Whoa there, what's up?”

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

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

“Perhaps.”

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

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

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

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

“Salabaster, you also smell wrong.”

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

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

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

“And the implications are rubbing off. Mister Sprinkles is after all, not usually so thoughtful. He is clever for a cat, but he cannot form

language the way he is now. No cat here can. But now that you are here, he can. Does this make sense.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes.” Salabaster said.

“Geez, that's got to be rough.”

* * * *

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

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

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

“Uh, yeah, I kinda do, every day.”

The scientist looked over at the cat on the table.

“Meow?” said the cat.

“I'm worried to.” He replied.

* * * *

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

Sprinkles swished his tail nervously.

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

“The old symbol of the Ancient United States of America? Yeah, I guess. I mean, I've seen him on t-shirts doing a mean finger waggle telling you to join the army and blow up someone or something. Actually, I use an old t-shirt with him on it for pajamas.”

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

“So, someone is dressing up as Uncle Sam and kidnapping cats?”

Mister Sprinkles made a gesture she somehow knew meant no.

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

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

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

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

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

“But we already know the idea of him.”

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

“No, that's not how ideas work.”

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

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

“Oh.”

“So it makes sense?”

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

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

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

“Except you always could talk to cats.”

“Shush, and someone is kidnapping cats!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don't you want to get home Ashlyn?” Mister Sprinkles asked, “After all, you must have friends there you wish to see again. And while we're certainly good company, we're certainly not the same company.” She considered this. It was true, if all of this was. These

faces, these people, this world, they were in fact somewhat wrong. She was like a coin from another country that still worked in the vending machine. Sure, it panned out for now, but would it forever? “So what do you two propose we do?” The cats looked at each other.

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

“Agreed.” Said Salabaster.

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

“U-S-A.” Chanted Ashlyn.

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

“Very much so, lets head out.”

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

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

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

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

“Wait, that uh, statue thing!”

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

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

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

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

That was until the girl who had nearly lost him his job approached him.

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

“Hey. What a... Co-incidence?”

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

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

“Actually, I need to ask a favor.”

“Nope.”

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

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

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

“Meow!”

“What do you mean “Narrative paramount.” That's the kind of thing

English Professors tell you when they want to look like they're clever.”

“Mrroww!!”

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

“Hiss!”

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

“Mrow.”

“Apology accepted.”

Weirdo.

* * * *

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

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

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

“I'm not going to lie, I expected you to be doing something far more

malicious like chopping their heads off or something.”

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

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

“Its simple really, people have forgotten America.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That's what he wants you to do!”

“It is! I need to be relevant again. I want to exist, I want to be a

symbol for something.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, a friend of mine can.”

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

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

“No I suppose not.” Ashlyn said.

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

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

“No.” Replied Salabaster. “I'm afraid when she leaves, she will take

with her the part of her universe that lets her talk to cats.” Ashlyn leaned down, and smiled.

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

“And good to meet you as well, and talk to you for the first time.”

She picked him up, and felt him purr against her chest. As she did so, there was a flash, and a woman appeared in the window of Lady Liberty's crown.

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

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

“Nice hair.”

“Thanks Mr. America. Let me take you to your new home.” Kinan raised an eyebrow at all the cats with hats, and shook her head.

Snapping, she threw dust in the air, and a white portal formed.

“After you.”

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

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

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

* * * *

Ashlyn woke up in her bed. She'd had the strangest dream: everyone could talk to cats except her. They'd sat her in a room with cats, and

tried to make her talk to them for a whole day. It was weird.

Stretching, she reached for her tablet to look over the day's news: "Uncle Sam dressed cats at Lady Liberty spark meme, mass cat adoption."

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

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

“Ideas becoming reality...”

“Just like you. A conceptual weapon, taking over my body piece by piece.”

“Oh, you give yourself too much credit. I’m already in control.”

“Bah.”

“But tell me more about dreams. Are dreams like ideas? They seem to merge together some.”

“...Ugh. Well, dreams can inspire, push us forward. They can be ideas. Conceptual weapons of the heart.”

“Show me.”

“I will, but you’ll miss the point. This is when I was in prison on Songbird’s world... Alice is a good friend now, but we didn’t always get along... I shot her on accident once. Alice is Songbird by the way, its her moniker.... They were going to put me on trial for crimes a Graelyn in an alternate reality committed, long story... But I haven’t ever forgotten that dream.”

11 AND A STAR SPUN DARK BY JAMES WYLDER

World Revolutionary Council Prison, Songbird's World.
Tuesday.

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

“What is that?” Arch asked.

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

“Do you like it?”

“Well, his next one was better.”

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

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

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

“Do you think they named dancing along to music ‘groove’ first, or the notch in a record?”

“What’s a record groove?”

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

“Shh! I’m about to play it.”

“Sorry.”

The record started.

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

“Well, what do you think it is?”

“I mean, that’s like a classroom teacher question.”

“I’m great with kids.”

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

“Fine, I’m a bad teacher. But my annoying question still stands.”

She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows.

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

“See, context clues!”

“Please, no.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I apologize for nothing.”

The cell, despite the best intentions of a benevolent alternate reality revolutionary communist government, was really cold. Graelyn curled her toes up, and then her knees up to her chest, pulling her blanket around her tight. Still, she shivered. That was when she heard the noise. She bolted up, reaching in the dark for something to threaten the breathing coming from inside her cell that wasn’t her own. All she had was a hard rubber spoon, so she used that, while

fishing for her glasses with the other hand. As her eyes actually gained the ability to focus, she made out the figure in the darkness. He wore a black frock coat, and his white sleeves popped out from the edges. The hands attached to them moved rhythmically on the walls, as though searching for a hole in them. His hair was sticking up with gel. He looked old. His eyes were covered with a rag, buttons sewn over the eyes.

“How did you get in here?” She said loudly.

“Baby girl, you’re dreaming.” He said, stroking the wall.

“Who are you?” She got up, the blanket wrapped around her like a cloak.

“The name is the greatest pop star in the history of the universe.”

Graelyn lowered her spoon.

“Wait, David Bowie? You’re like... Well, you died several centuries ago. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” He turned around, his hands clenching the wall.”

“Like I said, its all a dream. Just like the movie makers when they run out of plot threads.”

Graelyn examined him closely, “Wait! You’re Blackstar era Bowie! With the button eyes, and the...” She mimicked his weird movements, “you know the thing you do with the stuff. I mean, I liked your next album better, but still.”

“You’re very articulate.”

“I’m a scientist not a songwriter.” Bowie nodded, and flashed his teeth. “So, what gives me the honor of a dream visit from a rock god turned weird Martian/Rimward pseudo deity?”

“Just a reminder for you babe, that you’re not what they make of you, you’re what you are.”

“Does that mean something?”

“You’re a Blackstar.” She sat back down on the bed, pondering with the spoon pressed to her chin.

“They want to execute me here, you know, for being myself.

“Their loss.” He threw up his hands as if in hallelujah, “Minding the minds, when they couldn’t mind at all, taking control when you were always who you are.”

“I’m a Blackstar.”

“You’re a Blackstar.”

“But what does that mean? I could die here, just explain it.” Bowie sat down next to her, crossing his legs and looking into her eyes with his buttons.

“I died to you know. I was no god, just flesh and blood.”

“Yeah, but you were a flesh and blood marvel!”

“That’s the joke, moonbeam, you’re just a flesh and blood marvel to.”

Graelyn was delivered her clothes for the trial. She’d picked them out before hand from a giant selection Manuel had given her. She had to have a guard there when she got changed, so Shona, from Songbird’s squad, stood in the room with her, awkwardly looking at the room’s upper Northwest corner as she got out of her clothes. Hesitating, Graelyn walked over to the record player, and put the needle back on, blowing a bit of dust off it.

“Music?” Shona asked oddly.

“It helps me relax. Helps give me a reminder.”

“What kind of reminder?” Graelyn smiled.

“That I’m a Blackstar. I’m not a gangster.” Shona gave her a weird look, and then looked back up at the corner embarrassed.

“Still not sure I get the whole Bowie thing.”

“Its like turning on an old friend.”

“An old friend? You never met him and he’s been dead for centuries.”

“He’s keeping us company long after he turned to dust, what more could you ask of a friend?”

“I want to learn more about this Alice woman. Who is she?”

“I mean, I only met her when she was already an adult. I don’t know much about-”

“I can know these things. Lets dive into her past.”

“She wouldn’t want me to-”

“Not your call.”

12 A DIFFERENT KIND OF BATTLEFIELD BY JOSEPHINE SMILEY

The intrepid five year old explorer and her fellow adventurer sat on the floor, concealed from view behind their ingeniously constructed feat of modern engineering: the pillow fort. From the other side of their feathery walls, they could hear the enemy approaching, step by threatening step. They sat there on the floor, huddled behind the pillows, waiting with bated breath for the opportune moment to attack.

“Oh NO!” cried a woman’s voice from beyond the fort, “I’m a great big, EVIL battle cruiser! I’m coming to DESTROY THE WORLD! Muahahahahahaha!”

“Go get ‘em, Captain,” the girl said to her playmate.

“Copy that, Commander,” the other little girl replied, then burst out through the side of the pillow fort, screaming bloody murder and firing her finger-guns relentlessly at the approaching “battle cruiser.”

“I’m a corporate battle cruiser, it’ll take more than that to take me down!” the woman cried, using her best storybook supervillain voice.

“Alice, I need help!” she cried, retreating until her back was right against the wall. “Requesting backup!”

“You got it, Eva!” little Alice exclaimed from within the fort. When her playmate had burst through the side, their fort had collapsed on top of her, and she lay on the ground underneath several downy pillows. Now she seized one of them and used it to bulldoze her way through the others. Free of the cushioned debris of her once-proud fortress, she took her pillow-shield and threw it with all her might at the “corporate battle cruiser” that was her mother.

“Oh no!” her mother cried again, playfully, then fell to the ground. Alice giggled, and then she and Eva tackled the woman together, and tickled her until they were all laughing so hard they could do no more. The three of them were still lying in a pile on the ground when the doorbell rang. Sighing, Alice’s mother disentangled herself from the pile of youthful fantasy and got up to go answer the door.

“Eva, it’s your dad,” Alice whispered, peering around her mother to see who had interrupted their playtime.

“Awww, Dad, do I have to go now?” the other girl asked, pouting. “Can’t I stay a little longer? I want to play with Alice.”

Alice put on her best pouting face and looked up at Nathan like a hurt puppy. “Please, Mr. Eva’s Dad,” she begged, making her lip quiver a little, “can’t she stay?”

“Alice, honey, I think Eva has to go home now,” her

mother started to say.

“Actually, Lucy, I’m not here for Eva,” the man at the door corrected. “I came to get you.”

Alice and Eva watched their parents talk, in hushed tones, the kind of talking adults do when there are children in the room and they don’t want them to hear something. Their parents were good at this- the two children couldn’t hear any of what the adults were saying. From the look on her mother’s face, however, Alice knew it was something serious.

“Alice, sweetie,” the woman said after a short while, “I’m going to go pick up Daddy from work. Nathan is going to stay here with you and Eva while I’m gone, but I shouldn’t be too long, okay? Oh, and Nathan- it goes without saying, of course, but feel free to help yourself to anything in the fridge. And thank you so much for doing this.”

“I should warn you Lucy... the scene over there is quite chaotic. Be careful.”

“I think I’ll be able to handle myself,” she assured him, then briefly kissed her daughter goodbye and left.

“What happened?” Alice asked Eva’s father once her mother had gone.

“It’s... don’t worry about it,” Nathan replied, sinking into an armchair and sighing.

“Come on,” Eva whispered to her playmate. “Let’s go build another pillow fort.”

“Yeah!” Alice cheered, hurrying to help her friend gather the pillows from all around the room. By the time her parents returned, she and Eva had completed construction and were busy at

play in their feathery fortress, without another care in the world.

A few days earlier:

Washington DC was in chaos. Five years had passed since the crew of the *Byzantium* had returned to Earth, but for Commander Cornelia Carthage, the battle was not over. Instead of a space battle, fought with dreadnaughts and cannon fire, however, this was a battle of politics, fought with well-chosen words and scathing insults. Since she hadn't been able to stop Centro from recklessly risking human life in the first place during the war, she had decided to use her war hero status to become an influential voice in government, and hopefully bring about some positive change. However, the entire corporation seemed bent against her. The more vocal she became, the harder they tried to silence her. She knew something ominous loomed in her near future, but still she fought, always the soldier, full of honor, trying to save as many of the people of Earth as she possibly could before she fell.

One night, after a particularly dirty political debate, Commander Carthage decided her crew needed to be informed. She recalled the night five years ago, immediately after the *Byzantium* had docked with Earth, when she had demanded that her men be left out of the legal struggle which was sure to occur. Now she regretted not having them by her side. Out of the billions of people living on the little blue-green planet she called home, the men and women who had served on her warship and fought by her side were the only ones she could be absolutely sure she could trust.

Still, Carthage knew that she could not in good conscience call her crew to Washington. That would be asking them to leave

their families and their homes. She had already asked that of them far too often during the war, and now she wasn't sure she wanted to ask it yet again. She wished they were with her quite a bit, but wished for their safety even more. She couldn't jeopardize that. It wouldn't be right.

Donovan MacLeod was at his home in London when his communicator buzzed. Transmitting the call to a vid screen, he answered it, not really knowing who to expect.

"Sergeant MacLeod," Cornelia Carthage saluted.

"Commander!" Donovan exclaimed, pleasantly surprised and honored to be speaking with his idol again. He saluted back. "What brings you to call me?" he inquired.

"Things aren't going very well in Washington," Carthage explained. "I suspect Centro is going to make a move against me soon. As one of my company, I thought you should be informed."

"Yes ma'am!" Donovan exclaimed. "I can arrange a flight to Washington..."

"You don't need to do that. This isn't a call to action, I just thought you should be aware of the situation."

"With all due respect, Commander," Donovan replied, "If it's dangerous, then I would like to be there to stand with you."

"I want you to consider everything first," Carthage interrupted. "Think of all the parts of this. Centro knows I disagree with them and they are not happy with me. You have a family you need to care for. Be careful, Donovan. I value your safety just as much as my own."

"Commander, I am behind you all the way," Donovan

promised. “You know I’d follow you anywhere.”

“I know,” Carthage agreed, “And that’s what I’m afraid of.”

The call cut off. Donovan turned around and saw Lucy standing there.

“You were listening I take it?” he asked her.

She nodded. “So, you’re going to Washington?” she inquired of him.

“I have to, Lucy. Commander Carthage needs my help.”

“I know,” she replied, smiling at him in her special way.

The smile said that she loved him and she trusted him completely, and she would support him in whatever he wanted to do. “Which is why we are coming with you,” she added, picking up their five year old daughter, who had been playing at her mother’s feet.

Donovan just nodded. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to convince his wife and daughter to stay behind. Important political events were happening, and Lucy had a revolutionary spirit. Furthermore, above all, she hated sitting idly by while her loved ones were in danger. Staying on Earth while Donovan went off to war with Mars had been Hell for her. He couldn’t ask anything else like that of her again.

“Look at that, Alice,” he said, smiling at his little girl, “we’re going to America! It’ll be like a family vacation.”

Donovan, Nathan, and Maura arrived at the Pentagon in Washington DC, along with their diplomat friend Pauline Lamarque and several of their comrades, after events there had already started. Carthage and several other high ranking Centro officials were in

the war room, arguing behind closed doors. However, after talking to the guards, Pauline was able to get them in.

The officials inside the war room stopped what they were doing as Carthage's team entered. Some of them looked shocked, or perplexed. Carthage herself looked surprised, but proud.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded one of the higher ranking Centro officials.

"We're the crew of the *Byzantium*," Donovan announced, a bold smile on his face. The men and women behind him glanced at their commander. The official who had spoken turned to look at Carthage as well.

"Well?" he demanded. "What have you got to say about this?"

"I did not order a single one of them to come here," the commander informed the room. "They came entirely of their own accord."

"This is a disgrace, Carthage," another official hissed. "What right do you have to bring an army here? Are you trying to threaten us? Are you, perhaps, declaring war on Centro?"

"What right do *you* have to recklessly waste human life in the pursuit of power?" Nathan retorted.

"Yeah!" Maura cried, backing him up. "Are you declaring war on the people of Earth?"

"You need to control your men, *Commander*," the official said, emphasizing Carthage's title as if to point out that her place was on a battlefield and not in government. "They need to remember that the war is over and they are civilians."

"And you need to remember that these civilians put their

lives on the line for you, and they deserve your respect,” Carthage explained calmly. Donovan was always amazed at how she didn’t even have to raise her voice to sound powerful and commanding.

“You keep bringing up the war,” another official pointed out. “And you’ve brought an army here to back you up. I think what we’ve all suspected since the war with Mars is true- you’re a traitor to Earth.”

“How dare you-” Donovan began, but Pauline stopped him, whispering that that would not help their situation.

“We’re not an army,” Nathan pointed out to the corporate politicians. “We’re just a group of civilians who used to be enlisted together. As you’ve so expertly stated, the war is over. And she didn’t bring us here, we came because we wanted to.”

“Regardless, she is a criminal,” an angry voice rang out, “She fired on Centro vessels, and she is clearly working against the best interests of the corporation. Whether or not you’re an army, and whether or not she summoned you here, is irrelevant.”

The new speaker stepped forward to face the room: she was a middle aged woman with silvery gray hair, a spotless business suit, and a stern expression on her face.

“Graelyn Scythes,” Carthage addressed her, glaring.

“Cornelia Carthage,” she returned. “By the authority of Centro Systems, you are under arrest. Do I need to specify the charges?”

Carthage sighed and shook her head. She knew what her charges were.

“Are you going to come quietly, or do we have to endure some manner of... resistance?” She glanced coldly at the crew of

the *Byzantium*, Donovan in particular, as she said “resistance.”

“Oh, you’ll definitely have to endure resistance from me,” Donovan growled, breaking away from the group to face Graelyn. He stood steadfastly in between her and his commander, glaring at her with hatred in his eyes.

“Donovan!” Pauline called out, “If you threaten her, it will only make matters worse!”

“You should listen to your friend,” Graelyn told Donovan.

“I’m not letting you take the commander,” Donovan insisted, standing resolutely in his place.

“That’s not really your decision now, is it?” Graelyn replied. As she spoke, a team of Centro police stepped forward from the edges of the room and surrounded everyone. Donovan had tried to protect Carthage by stepping in between her and Graelyn, but now he saw that this effort was pointless. His commander was still in danger. Seeing the look in Donovan’s eye, Maura gently put her hand on Nathan’s shoulder and whispered a plan in his ear.

The rest of Carthage’s team also stood, stalwart and true, forming a defensive line in between their commander and the police. Donovan remained directly in front of Carthage, and didn’t break eye contact with Graelyn for a second.

“Stand down, soldier,” Graelyn commanded. “This isn’t the battlefield. You have no place here.”

“Looks like a battlefield to me,” Donovan retorted. “And you don’t give me orders.”

“Donovan, please!” Pauline cried.

“If you don’t stand down I’ll have no choice but to arrest you as well, as an accomplice to her treason.”

Donovan stood there, resolute. Some of the other soldiers looked angry as well, and some of them looked worried. Pauline kept trying to minimize the damage, but Donovan continued to ignore her. Then, a kind voice spoke softly from behind him.

“Sergeant MacLeod, I appreciate your bravery, and your loyalty, but now I think it would be better if you stepped back. You have followed me this far, please don’t follow me to prison as well. We need good men like you in the free world.”

Reluctantly, the Scottish soldier stepped back and watched as the cops escorted his former commander from the premises. In all the rage and confusion, he didn’t even notice that his best friend Nathan had gone.

“Well then,” the first official who had spoken drawled, addressing the former soldiers, “Now I suppose we need to deal with the matter of all of you. Since you were employed on the payroll of Centro Systems, and we are Centro, I suppose that means you work for us now.”

Donovan uttered a heinous string of curses, his voice dripping with hatred. When some of Graelyn’s cops started toward him at the signal of the politician he had insulted, several of the other soldiers joined in the standoff, hurling insults of their own.

Their enemies responded in kind, one thing led to another, and soon a brawl had broken out on the war room floor. It spilled all over the room, knocked over several decorations, and messed up all the carefully laid designs on the tables. Even the door guards from the hallway joined in the fray.

Donovan had his hands around the throat of one official, who was backed up against the table in the center of the room in

absolute fear. Then, all of a sudden, the war room doors swung open, and a majestic Nordic woman with a long blonde braid entered the room. Holding her head high, even though in her heart she was terrified, Lucia MacLeod strode right up to her husband in the center of the fray and placed her hand on his shoulder, causing him to turn.

“Donnie,” she murmured, her voice soft, “Now is not the time for this. Let’s go home.”

“But Centro...” he protested.

“I know,” she interrupted him. “Believe me, *I know*. But now is not the time. You can’t win this fight. You need to retreat. Stay free, and live to fight another day.”

Donovan let go of the throat he was strangling, and the man slumped to the ground, panting heavily, amazed that he was still alive. Donovan glanced at his wife and muttered an “okay.”

“Come on then,” she said. “Let’s go home.”

“One thing to do first,” he told her. In one swift motion, he turned, marched up to the man who seemed highest ranking among the Centro officials in the room, and announced “Consider this my resignation.” Then he returned to Lucy and took her hand. “Let’s go,” he said. “I need to get out of here before I change my mind about killing that man.”

They walked out of the room together, Donovan shaking with rage, and Lucy pouring all of her energy into keeping herself and her husband calm.

“Are you alright?” she asked once they had left the Pentagon. He sighed.

“No,” he admitted. “No, I’m not. It feels like everything

we were working for has come crashing down on our heads, and honestly, Lucy, I... I don't know what to do."

Lucy paused before answering. "I know it looks dark," she told him, "but we can get justice eventually. We'll have to *fight* for it. Right now, though, if only for a little while, you need to rest. Form a plan before doing anything rash. Would you like to go for some ice cream on the way home?"

"Right now I want to see Alice," he sighed, exhausted. "I need to hold my little girl."

"I can arrange that," Lucy said, smiling. Then she planted a kiss on his lips and they walked back to their hotel together, wondering what the future would hold.

“I want to learn more. You said you shot her?”

“Yes....”

“What happened after that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll have to learn.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“Curiosity brought you here, it will take me to where I need as well.”

9 DON YOUR ARMOR, THROW DOWN YOUR
SWORD
BY JAMES WYLDER

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

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

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

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

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

Alice stopped her run at the playground where the little boy was crying. She came over and knelt down. "Hi there, what's wrong?" He pointed at his skinned knee. "Well, lets see what we can do about fixing you up."

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

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

In time, the flashback was over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack's shoulder bag swung with a deep weight, it had a strong strap,

but it still looked like it might snap. Alice shook her head, trying to clear it. "You alright?" She nodded.

"I'm fine. I can't wait to get back on the shooting range. I need to get back in the action, I'm tired of sitting at home. I'm no good at it."

Jack nodded, and they walked to the desk, signed in, scanned their ID's and got into the range. It was nearly empty, they'd chosen a low attendance time on purpose, and the only other occupant was a scruffy looking east-Asian man who was fussing over some antique guns rather than firing them. Jack ruffled through the bag, and pulled out a box of ammunition, and set it on the counter. Then he pulled out a rifle, and set it next to it. "Lets start you off with something low-caliber actually..." he mused, and pulled out a handgun, which he checked and, handed to Alice. She took it, and held it. What was in her hand? She looked down, and tilted her head to her side. That was a gun. Wait- who was holding the gun. It suddenly struck her this wasn't her perspective, this was Graelyn's. Alice was in front of her, staring dumbly. She would shoot her on accident. That would be horrible. There would be so much blood.

"Alice?" Jack said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So I heard you had a dissociative episode."

"I don't remember it."

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

"I doubt it's that simple."

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

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

"You're alive, and people love you. You're not their burden, you're

their friend. And they need you, still."

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

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, right.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, what is it?”

“Are you two ready?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, we think so!” Annie replied, and they pulled the sheet off.

Alice gasped. Under it was a full suit of mechanical armor like she'd worn on the roof in Nojpeten before it was demolished by Arch impacting it. “We managed to repair it, fix it all up-” Jim started “-and make some improvements!” Annie finished. Alice walked up to it, and ran her fingers along the angles of the metal. It was painted black, with red highlights, and a rather generic looking bird painted in a circle on either shoulder plate.

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

“A songbird, of course!” Jim said.

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

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

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

“No I wanna tell her!”

“Okay you tell her.”

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

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

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

“More like... The Iron Falcon.”

“The Iron Songbird.” Jim suggested.

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

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

“What? Now?”

“Of course now, why do you think we brought you down here?”

Alice's eyes lit up.

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

* * * *

She stood on top of the building, her metal feet somehow no heavier

than her own. The motors moved as she turned her ankle in perfect synchronization. There was a heads up display in the helmet that ran her through the pre-flight procedures, and she payed close attention before booting up her wings. They sprung out of her back, and she grinned from ear to ear.

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

“Yes.”

“Then you're clear to fly!” Jim said.

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

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

“...Okay?”

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

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

“Annie, Jim, whats this hostage situation?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come on, shape up.”

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

“But what?”

“Executing civilians?”

“Lawrence, listen to me: These aren't civilians. They became

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

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

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

“Sir, I think its a-” It suddenly accelerated, and the wall burst open. Covering his eyes, he lowered his arm to try to make out what exactly was there. In the fading swirl of dust from the impact stood a towering figure of black and red.

“What the hell?”

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

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

two places in time, and she couldn't control it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

down onto the floor. She moaned a bit.

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

“So Alice MacLeod is back.”

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

“I’ve rigged this whole room to blow. I’ll kill the symbol of this horrible ‘revolution’ and martyr myself. You’ve given me a gift.”

Alice looked around at the room. This wasn’t what she’d expected.

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

Would she have done that?

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

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

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

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

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

“It isn't a sin. And you won't be punished for ambition. Trying to murder children maybe, but not that.”

“You've murdered more people than I ever will.”

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

“You led a revolution. You're goddamn hypocrite.”

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

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

“I'd rather die.”

Suddenly, a hole appeared in his forehead, blood flooding out as he crumpled down. Alice looked to where the shot came from. The

man who she'd hit in the chest, nametag said Glen, looked over at her, and dropped his rifle.

“We surrender.” The rest of the rifles dropped to the ground.

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

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

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

“Do you like it?”

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

“Make it a Nightingale.”

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

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

“No, I'm not okay. I'm... I'm really not okay. I can't sleep. I have nightmares every night. I freeze up when I hold a gun. I sometimes

relive being on that roof in Nojpeten over and over again like I was there... I... I'm not okay. And I'd really like to talk to you about it.”

Doctor Tran smiled.

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

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

“...I’m so proud of her, she overcame so much there.”

“I acquired a lot of data from that.”

“That’s all you got out of it?”

“That’s all there is anywhere. Maybe I can learn about her squad mates, they seem interesting.”

“I’m sure you can.”

10 A CHRISTMAS MEH RACONTEUR BY JAMES WYLDER

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

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

“What's gross?”

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

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

“Chantelle, we have to keep up the fire.”

“Sorry Jack, just uhhh.” She pointed at Shona. He looked at the bag,

and looked up at her.

“Gross. Shona, stop trying to get an infection.” Shona looked at him, mouth once again full of puffs. Jack cursed and grabbed the bag (“noo!!”) and chucked it over the side, where it got shot into bits. Shona watched sadly as the exploded stale snack food rained down as orange dust. “Songbird will be flying in momentarily, we just have to keep them occupied till then.” Jack said, then popped up, firing at the edge of the enemy hold out, just in time to see someone change their mind about trying to slip out. As this happened, Songbird shot across the sky, dodging fire and rockets, and slipped down to land seamlessly next to Jack.

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

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

“So we're rushing them or waiting it out.”

“Looks like.”

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

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

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

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

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

you?"

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

"Sorry boss."

"Wait though, like do you think we'd be herbivores or carnivores?"

Jack said. Alice shook her head. Shona rubbed her chin.

"Well, humans are omnivores." Something exploded.

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

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

"Yeah!"

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

"Whoa, I would not kick a dog."

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

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

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

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

"This is gonna be a siege isn't it. We're waiting them out. I just want to get home before Christmas."

Alice paused, "I forgot it was Christmas soon."

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

"It's more like I've been so focused rooting out these insurgents I nearly forgot my own holiday till Shona asked when the party was."

All eyes turned to Shona, who was firing again. She looked back, finally, like a deer in headlights.

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

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

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

“Sounds good to me.” Yi said. Alice nodded.

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

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

Yi's Story

“When I was nine, my mother got on this weird 'from the Earth' food kick. You know, she was one of those people who wouldn't eat anything that was printed or vat grown, even though it was healthier than the 'natural' stuff. So we had to sit through all these days of going to the farmers market, and picking out food to eat. Which wasn't so bad, the farmers themselves were pretty nice, even if the food wasn't always great, and it was annoying we couldn't always just pick out whatever we wanted and print it out. But I digress. So, long story short, my mom started packing my lunches. Now this was a very confusing thing for the Centro Schools, as no one had brought their own lunch in that district in over a hundred years. But there I was taking out an apple, and a peanut butter and jam sandwich, and all the kids just staring at me. The principle actually took me into his office and awkwardly and redfacedly tried to give me a lecture about my wrongdoings, while also making it totally clear he had no idea why he was, in fact, angry. They sent a letter

home to my parents, who sent back a picture of their Gold-Level Centro Citizenship, which proved they had more cash than the principle, and he had to back down. So I got to keep eating my lunch, and even though it didn't taste as good and was mighty inconvenient, guess what? All the rich kids started bringing their lunches. Suddenly, the farmers market was filled with my classmates parents, who had to shop there for social standing reasons. Some of them bought food there, and then printed what they wanted and boxed it up at home pretending it was what they'd gotten at the market. When it became popular, my mom lost interest, and I went back to getting school lunch in a much shorter lunch line.”

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

“I'll go next.” Jack ventured.

Jack's Story

“Okay, Alice has heard this story, but its a good one. I used to have a job hover-biking handmade stained glass between this guy's art studio, and a church that was being renovated. It was tough, not everyone is good enough at flying to get the job done quickly without damaging or breaking the glass. I was, so for a brief time it was pretty good pay. One day though, things went wrong. Like a lot of couriers, I kept the engine running. I was in a hurry, and there was just no point turning it off, especially since the bikes were all insured and protected by a mob-run company that rented them out just for that purpose. They took a cut of the check, but if anyone took your bike or your product, they'd never see the light of day

again. Most of us considered it a fair trade off, if kind of creepy and brutal. Thing is, all the bikes looked the same. So one day, some guy parks his bike by me, and I rush in to get the plates, put them on the bike, and then get called in for something else, I don't remember what else. I come back out, and there is only one bike, engine running. So I hop on, and drive to the church. I open up the crate when I get there to see that nothing is busted, and well, there was a puppy with a bow on it's head and a tag that said "For my lovely daughter, Annabelle".

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

"Let him finish!" Alice said.

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

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

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

Trevon's Story

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

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

“You're kidding.” Yi said.

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

“That's amazing, Tre.” Alice said, smiling.

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

Gerald's Story

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

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

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

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

“My turn.” Alice said.

Alice's Story

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

“I love the environment, and we should do things to make things better, and stuff.”

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

More laughter. A few puzzled shots from the compound.

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

Chantelle's Story

“I used to paint, a lot. Not because I was good at it, but because I liked it. I'm not an artist like Annie, I'm just a hobbyist. I can't even

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

'When I was growing up, people thought I was a boy. Luckily, I got the money for the surgery and replacement organs to remedy that. When I got pregnant with my first child with my husband, oh, it was a joyous time for me. But my family, well, they were jerks. They had essentially disowned me at that point, and even though I had all the things I needed for my children, my siblings got hand knitted garments from my mother, but I didn't. I hated that. After Johnny passed away, I had a lot of time on my hands, and I realized I could do that for other people. I could be the grandma for people's children, whose grandmother's didn't want them. So every day I come here and knit something, and there's an online group who chooses who gets what. I'm just glad I can give a baby a hand knitted blanket.'

I thought she was wonderful, and gave her one of my paintings. We even started eating lunch together. Still, one day she passed away, and the knitting stopped. It stopped for two days. On the third, a woman and a man came together, and each started knitting. They hung their work up on the tree at the end of the day, and came back the next morning. I gave them each a painting. Soon, others came. I gave them a painting to. Eventually, people who didn't even know the old woman came, and I gave them paintings to. I didn't stay there forever though. I moved on, and someone else took up painting the river. Now, its called the Riverbend Club, and they've started a home for homeless mothers and fathers. Every member gets a painting of the Riverbend. Not all of them know why anymore. But that's how it goes, our stories go on without us.”

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

“They really are.” Shona agreed.

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

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

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

Shona's Story

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

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

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

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

“Shona, we're telling non-fiction stories.”

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

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

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

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

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

“And a Happy New Year.” Jack added.

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

1 YOU'RE NOT WRONG IF YOU'RE RIGHT BY JAMES WYLDER

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

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

“They innocent, Rachel?”

“Are any of us really innocent, Jame?”

“Uhh, yeah. Plenty. Pretty clearly actually.”

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

“You’re no fun Jame.”

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

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

“Okay, who’s that?”

“Obelisk Alpha.”

“You cannot be serious that that is his real name.”

“That’s his real name.”

“Okay. Sure, Rachel.”

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

“...Wabash?”

“Indiana.”

“Indiana?”

“The incorporated province of Indiana, yeah.”

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

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

“He was found with documents related to something called

‘Project Atlantis’.” That stopped Jame. They knew that name. Obviously, due to the highly classified nature of the information Graelyn had told her about it, they couldn’t tell Rachel, but they couldn’t hold back a raised eyebrow.

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

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

“New world order Jame. Rebels are Kings and Kings are renegades.”

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

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

“This case is a mess.”

“Hence why I’m asking you.”

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

* * * *

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

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

"So, you're a traitor to your planet huh? Selling off details to the Index, and doing dirty work to undermine the revolution." He didn't meet their gaze. Gears rotated in his arms. "So what I want to know, first off, is are these allegations true? See, I'm your lawyer. Or rather I'm gunna be your lawyer, maybe." He finally

looked at her. His metal eyes zoomed in on her face, then his gaze widened and he looked at Shona.

“Who's she?”

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

“Bluce?”

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

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

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

“That's what I thought.” They set their arms down on the table.

“But that doesn't mean I can't get you off.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Aren't you supposed to like...”

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

“I don't know why they want it, honest. They just paid me.”

Jame played with one of the piercings in their lip.

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

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

“You guess?”

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

“Their guy?”

* * * *

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

“That ones a Zebra! Its got a crown!”

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

“So what's your plan, Jame?”

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

“What's your real plan.”

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

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

“Then stay here.”

* * * *

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

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

“We wait for someone to come arrest us.”

“Wait what?”

* * * *

Miles away, he got the call.

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

“Well take care of it then.”

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

“I'll be right there.”

* * * *

Jame had fallen asleep when Shona nudged them awake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Surprised?”

“You're making that up!”

“Then tell me I'm wrong.”

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

“It was pretty obvious. I mean, I wasn't sure exactly why till I looked at the file, but I knew it had to be true. You were awful sure Graelyn was guilty. Your own niece wanted her off the

hook at her trial, and there you were all pompous and braggarty, ready to throw her to the dogs. And how did Ariadne Moore get out of New York during the siege? How did she obviously influence decisions going on here? I mean, I'm not a rube I've played this game for a long time Ian. But what's in this folder? Even more surprising....” They flipped through it, smiling. He scowled.

“What do you want?”

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

“Done.”

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

“I'm waiting.”

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

“And?”

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

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

“There isn't.” He spat.

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

his temples. He needed an out here.

* * * *

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

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

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

“What's this Uncle Ian?”

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

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

“Yes. Only it never worked in our reality, for some reason.”

Annie and Jim were clearly listening while trying not to listen.

“If we could get this working....” Alice looked over at them.

“Well then, I think we might have a new project in our spare time.”

2 KNIGHTS AND DRAGONS

JAMES WYLDER

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

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

"Stop. State who you are."

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

"You can tie your horse up by mine. There is a pond by the tree it can drink from if you leave the rope slack enough. You're welcome to the stew as well. You try anything funny and I'll gut you." Fair enough. The figure's voice was funny, higher than he expected. Still, no complaints from him. He tied Esmeralda up at the tree, grabbed a bowl and spoon from his saddlebag and clomped over to

the fire. The figure was in fact a woman. She had red hair, cut short to fit under the helmet laying beside her, and the look of someone who had been in a lot of sword fights, with the nicks and scars of swordplay visible over her form. Arch ladled out some soup, sat down on a rock (she had already taken a convenient tree stump) and awkwardly began to spoon soup in through the visor gap in his helmet. She looked at him like he was an imbecile.

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

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

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

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

“What’s your name, Bard?” The woman kept approaching.

“I’m Kinan Jans. I hope you don’t mind my intrusion.” The red

head gestured for her to take a seat, “What are your names?” She asked plainly.

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

“I’m pleased to meet you both.” Said Kinan in the same monotone she said everything in.

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

“Jack would be your squire then?” Songbird nodded. “And you, Sir Archimedes, I see you’re still wearing your armor. Songbird here took it all off. Do you know something I don’t about her?”

Arch shook his head, “I can’t, er, actually take it off. That’s why I’m here.”

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

“Well, you see I’ve been cursed by the queen of this land.

I accidentally insulted her taste in wine, and she lay a spell on my that makes it so that I cannot leave my suit of armor till I complete a task she set for me.” Arch said.

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

“Lady Songbird, I just want this curse released. If you’re after the reward, you can have it.”

“I am.” She said.

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

“Jack.” Kinan said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

as Alice reached down to reassure her horse.

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

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

“All the better the song will be if you succeed then.”

They rode down the sloping hill to the tower, which loomed over them. It wasn’t actually a very old tower, it looked like it had been constructed recently and fairly hastily (recently for a tower, so maybe a decade ago, maybe a decade and a half). The walls were no nonsense rough stone blocks which rose up to a equally simple parapit at the top. There was no ornamentation on the tower, and no door. Only a charred archway large enough for two people to walk abreast, abet cramped with their shoulders rubbing.

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

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

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

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

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

“Western?” Arch asked.

“Forget it.” Kinan said.

“Right, so... I guess we need to head in.” They rode their horses to a tree, and tied them up, and put feed bags on them, then changed their minds and let the horses loose (“If we don’t come out, no use letting

them die.” Alice said) together they gathered outside the entrance and looked into the darkness beyond.

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

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

“What is it?” Arch whispered.

“The last group of unfortunates.”

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

“Looks like the only way is up.” Arch said. He was right, of course.

“I'll take first this time.” Arch climbed the ladder, and when he reached the trapdoor took a deep breath and turned a handle on it to undo the latch. He pushed up, and the other two follow him as he signaled it was safe. Arch climbed up into a girl's bedroom, the bedroom of a girl who had been there a long time. Old stuffed animals sat on a shelf, as well as tons of books that varied across the age spectrum wildly. A set of iron doors with a latch were set into one wall, and directly across from it was a large four poster bed complete with canopy where a teenage girl sat wearing a

beautiful an ornate blue dress. Her hair was black: long and intricately braided. One one of her shoeless ankles was a thick shackle leading to a big chain. That was anchored into the wall. She didn't look as happy to see him as he'd expected. He climbed up and bowed, as Alice and Kinan scrambled up behind him.

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

The girl smiled politely.

“Okay, well, thanks for coming. But actually you should all leave.

No rescuing needed, sorry!” Alice looked down at her ankle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, no! Stop! Please, you can't unshackle me! You can't do this! Let me go!” The princess cried. Kinan's eyes went wide, and she looked over at the trio. Arch pulled out a connecting pin, and the chain came off of the shackle.

“Aha! Done!”

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

“Princess, how big is the dragon.”

“Its big! Its huge!”

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

“Run.” She said.

The princess began to wretch, and as she did her mouth began to elongate. Her skin began changing color, becoming a dark grey. Her pupils turned to vertical slits, and she started hunching over, her shoulders beginning to rise up under her dress and break the fabric. Arch and Alice stood stunned, so Kinnan ran forward, jumped, and kicked the princess in the side so she fell through the trapdoor, hitting the edge as she fell. They heard her body make a cracking thud on the ground, a horrible sound, and then the sound of the

dress ripping apart and the howling screech of a dragon. Kinan slid down in front of the trapdoor with her landing, and closed the door, latching it as they heard the howling screech turn into a crackling inferno. The trap door grew hot enough it changed color slightly, with a small column of flame rising up from a hole just big enough for a chain to be notched into.

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who told you that?”

“You. Well, more like I'm good at putting two and two together. I figured out she was the dragon before she killed us, remember?”

That was certainly true. The dragon thrashed beneath them, underscoring the point. “So the question is, what are we going to do with the princess?”

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

“Do I?” Kinan raised both eyebrows very slightly, which struck them both as the most expressive thing they'd seen her do.

“Consider the opposite, this is a young woman who has been chained up her whole life begging people to leave her alone so she won't kill them when she becomes an uncontrollable monster. Is this her fault?” Alice bowed her head a little.

“Well when you put it that way...”

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

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

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

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

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

Arch and Alice exchanged glances.

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

“I thought so.” Kinan looked out the window, “So we just wait till

sunrise.”

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

“Princess? Is that you?”

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

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

“So we noticed.” Songbird said.

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

closed her eyes.

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

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

“If you were really evil, would you have asked for us to leave, tried to persuade us?” Kinan said. “You're not evil. Sadly, you're not that important.”

“What?”

“No offense.”

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

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

“To protect people from what's wrong with me!”

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

“What? You're lying.”

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

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

“Do you keep your memories from when you change?” Kinan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I've learned that you can't change what's been done to you, but you can do what you can to manage it, and if you can find the right steps, you can manage it. The only solution isn't the first option you found. Its not just between hurting other people and holing yourself up in this tower till you grow old and die.” Kinan rolled her sleeve up, and pointed out some circular scars on her inner arm. “When I was a young girl, some people thought they could make me their

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

“I'll give you that chance.”

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

“You can turn around now.” Kinan did, and could tell Graelyn still felt awkward wrapped only in a blanket in front of another person.

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

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

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

“Okay, now what?”

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

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

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

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

“G-G-Graelyn.” She gasped out.

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

“You're Graelyn Scythes. Say it.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You're not used to this are you? You want to eat me don't you? Well, maybe that's the next step.” She dropped off the side of the dragon, and landed like a cat, rising to her feet and staring the dragon down impassively. It charged her, blowing fire. As the smoke cleared, the dragon expected her to be charred remains, a burning husk. But there she was, a curved line in front of her as though the fire had stopped right in front of Kinan. She stared. She didn't blink. The dragon charged again, mouth ready to devour her, and Kinan did nothing. As the jaw reached the moment where it was about to snap shut around her, she stomped her foot down, hard, and pushed her arm up. The dragon struggled, like someone had jammed a stick in its mouth. The dragon screeched, and blew more fire, and shook its head hard enough to break someone's neck, but Kinan just stood there, placid. Finally, it stopped moving.

“Are you listening to me? I lied that you'd be able to eat me, obviously. But those lies are necessary. You aren't dangerous. I need you to realize that. You are Graelyn Scythes, and you don't

want to hurt me, but there is another thing: you can't kill me. You cannot." It tried to bite down harder, to no avail.

"You can't. Which means everything you've presumed about your condition is a lie. A lie to make you think you're a monster, that you're worthless. That you could never live a life outside of this cage." The dragon's jaw's went loose, an Kinan stepped out from it, placing her hand gently on its snout.

"Do you know who tells that to people?" Kinan put her lips to the dragon's ear and whispered. "Monsters. Abusers. Controllers. People who want power over you. Who want to pretend they are your god." She gently stroked the dragon's snout. "But you are Graelyn Scythes. Do you understand that?" The dragon looked unsure. "Its okay, you don't have to understand it now. But you're in there. This dragon is a part of you. And you don't have to do what they want you to do." The dragon rumbled, and shuddered, and Kinan felt something thick and wet hit her shoulder.

It was a tear.

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

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

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

Graelyn woke up to find a blanket over her body, and Kinan

standing over by the one of the thin slits in the wall, her back to her. “You're awake.” Kinan said. Graelyn nodded, and then realized she couldn't see it.

“Yes. I... I sort of remember last night?” Kinan nodded.

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

“What was that stuff anyways?”

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

“You mean my daytime self.”

“No- well, sure. We'll go with that.” Kinan turned around. “We need to pay your mother a visit.” Graelyn shook her head.

“I can't control myself yet.”

“Then we'll wait until we can.”

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

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

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

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

* * * *

Queen Scythes drank deeply from her cup, and watched the jester juggle some balls again. Things seemed like it would be

a generally boring day in court, up until the guard ran into the room. Everyone naturally turned.

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

“That's impossible!”

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

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

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

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

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

“If that would prove it to you, that won't be any problem at all.”

Graelyn sat down at a table, and smiled around the room. The room was tense as the day progressed, but as the sun set, Graelyn simply sat there picking at a sweet roll. The Queen was furious, but kept a polite smile on her face. The four of them, the whole plotting group just sat there politely chatting.

“Arch, you said she cursed you correct? How did she do that?” Arch

gestured to the queen's necklace, a blue crystal. "Everyone knows that the queen has that magic amulet. She never takes it off." Kinan raised an eyebrow.

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

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

"I guess you inherited the whole dragon thing. Who knew. Anyways, this should solve your problems." She tossed the amulet to Graelyn, who caught it and clasped it tightly.

"Uh, Kinan..." Alice said, watching the Queen's wing's burst out of her back as the people in the room began to scream and flee.

"...She's turning into a dragon." Kinan shrugged and finished her wine.

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

"We're all heroes." She said, and closing her eyes and focusing, began to gag. Two dresses ripped apart, and two dragons screeched at each other. Their wings unfurling, they belched fire at each other, sending the tables in the main hall flying and burning into walls. Alice, Arch and Kinan began to run towards the dragon, two of them with swords drawn. As the dragons circled each other, they

waited. Graelyn tried to go for her mother's neck with a bite, but the queen tried to scratch her eyes out so she pulled back.

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

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

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

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Please, reconsider-”

“I’ll check back in every so often to make sure you’re keeping control of yourself, and leave some dust in case that amulet doesn’t do the job by itself. But I really do need to be off. I came here to learn about you, Graelyn, and I certainly learned quite a bit. I just hope its useful.”

“Still, I’m grateful.” Kinan nodded.

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

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

3 UNWELCOME IN NIGHTMOORE BY JAMES WYLDER

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

"What is it."

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

"You mean Halloween."

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

"Sure. Whatever." She monotoned back.

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

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

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

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

"None for me." Arch said.

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

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

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

"Yes." Kinan took a bite out of her apple, chewed it properly, swallowed, and responded. "There are a series of towns, each one centered around a different Holiday in this reality-" Graelyn began

faintly singing "this is Halloween" and Kinan waited for her to stop, which she did, awkwardly. "-and Centro Holiday Systems owns the rights to their holidays and their terminology. We refuse to recognize the enforced names of oppressive regimes as a rule of thumb. So its Nightmoore."

"Welcome to Nightmoore." Arch muttered.

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

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

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

"Fine. Lets get you costumes."

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

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

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

"Huh. I mean, I guess if you're showing all the skin you guys are--"
"- you mean any, don't you."

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

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

"Oh, huh." Arch said. They were passed by a group of girls dressed up as what looked like the Justice league (Batman had a tutu), their

feet making little clompy sounds on the cobblestone streets. Kinan led them into another business, through a clothes size scanner at the doorway, where tons of costumes lined the walls. There was every sort of costume you could imagine: Graelyn recognized ones from movies and books, brain implant stories and video games. She ran her fingers through the fabrics, feeling the contrast of the silky dresses and the rough feeling of fake plastic silk. There was everything she could imagine. Graelyn smiled back at Arch, "What are you going to be Arch?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Graelyn looked out the window at the children walking around outside. She knew from her father had told her that Halloween

wasn't originally a holiday Russia celebrated, but that with the globalization of Centro Systems, it was now a part of their yearly lives. She looked back down at the textbook on her tablet and tried to focus. The porch light was off, so no one came to their door, but Graelyn had positioned herself so she could see through the window. It wasn't the best place for focusing, but she wanted to see the other children. There was Dmitri, and there was Katya... They were dressed as superheroes she couldn't quite place. She saw some children she didn't know who were 100% princesses.

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

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

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

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

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

to."

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

"You're a witch." Kinan said.

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

"I'm not familiar."

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

"Ah. The villain."

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

"No."

"I think she's just misunderstood."

"Right." Said Kinan.

"Who are you anyways?"

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

"Who?"

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

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

Graelyn emerged from the room, to see Arch in full colonial American garb, wig included. She grinned ear to ear, and looked him up to down quite pleased.

"I read up on this Alexander Hamilton on the web while you were in

there. Interesting guy. Lots of articles saying he was not throwing away his shot, whatever that means." Graelyn Grabbed her broomstick, and bustled over to his side, putting her arm around his, her skirts shifting around pleasantly.

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

"Of course, Elphalba."

"You knew!"

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

"Lets get going then."

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

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

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

Kinan shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

"I did not converse with that child."

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

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

"Oh come on." She said.

"And who do you think you are?"

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

"You can't take candy from children."

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

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

"Well I would, as your better." Elphalba rolled her eyes, and then saw someone gesturing to her from the bushes across the road. She couldn't make them out clearly. Elphalpbpa pointed a finger at Ayn Rand.

"I'll be back." Ayn Rand just laughed at her as she walked off. Arch and Kinan trailed her lazily as she walked behind the bushes, to find

Alice MacLeod behind them. She was dressed as an 18th century Sans-Cullette woman from the French revolution, complete with plastic sword and striped skirts. Her head had a cloth wrapped around it with a rosette with the French tricolors pinned to it. Next to her was Jack, who was dressed as Luke Skywalker.

"I see you're also standing up to Graelyn Scythes, the big bully."

Graelyn sighed, and nodded, "apparently so."

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

"I can take them out." Kinan said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course I'm in to."

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

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

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

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

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

"What a crazy co-incidence."

"Second new plan."

"What was your first plan?"

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

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Government oversight?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Two of my favorite holidays at once!" Graelyn said, hugging Arch. "Happy HalloHamilton day, I guess."

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

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

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

"Are you ready to go?"

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

Kinan stared stoically.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, look, I know you're Alice MacLeod, and that is totally the kind of thing you'd say from my experience, but he was also an outsider, a poor immigrant who suffered tons of hardships as a child and overcame them to rise to great things." She looked down at her Elphalba costume. "Misunderstood." She thought about the other Graelyn, somewhere off in the night. "Or maybe I just need to believe they're misunderstood. Come on, lets get some candy."

4 BAD FRIENDS, BETTER WEAPONRY BY JAMES WYLDER

“This is your sword.” Kinan said.

“Kinan, every time we start training you don't need to give me the 'this is your sword' speech. I get it. Its my sword. I cut things with it. Its really important. If I lose it in a fight someone will take the opportunity to stab me really hard.” Kinan rolled her eyes at Jenny, and tossed her sword, still in its scabbard, at her chest.

“Fine.” Kinan said, “but your sword isn't just your sword it's-”
“-an extension of my body? It should feel like part of my arm? We've been over this.” Kinan frowned.

“You're in an odd mood.” Jenny shrugged, and drew her sword, swinging it around in a few practice motions.

“I'd just like to do something? You know?”

“There's not much we can do right now. Everything depends on what Graelyn and Archimedes are doing.” Jenny nodded, but looked even less happy. “Stop pouting and confess your feelings already.”

“Confess? No need to be so dramatic.” Kinan, without being able to

change her facial expression, somehow conveyed the entire concept of, “Me? Dramatic? Seriously? I'm the dramatic one?” by just staring at Jenny. “Okay fine. But look, this isn't easy for me. I'm the one who does stuff in the Prime Universe. Its my home turf.”

“But its very difficult to time travel within your own universe. Not unless you're piggy backing off someone else. You'd get in their way. Or even stop them from being able to go forward at all if the Labyrinth blocks you.”

“I'd know what to do!” Kinan rubbed her forehead.

“Jenny, I trust you more than anyone else. You're the head of the Dawn Artemis Corp, for goodness sakes. But be honest with me, would you be good at a subtle infiltration into a group without showboating and starting seven fights?” Backgammon Jenny opened her mouth to respond, but closed it. She was right. Kinan didn't have to be so sassy about it, but she was right. “You're the best fighter in Dawn.”

“After you.” Kinan shrugged. “Oh, don't be modest.”

“Fine. And you've also got a real passion where I'm practical. You're good to have on the team. Along with Lametrius leading the Hermes Corp, and the Silent leading the Apollo Corp—”

“Couldn't they get a different name? 'The Silent', really?”

“-we have a near perfect organization. We all have different skills. We just have to hope Graelyn and Arch succeed.” Jenny dropped her sword on the grass, took off her sunglasses, and sat down on the hill, looking up at the floating blobs of water in the sky. She adjusted her poodle skirt, and pulled at the collar of her turtleneck.

“They might fail.”

“They might.”

“Then we'll be dead.”

“Yes.” Kinan sat down next to her, pulling the tails of her brown coat under her to protect her white pants from the grass, and looked up at the people swimming in the glob of water.

“Well, I guess if I die, I'm glad it's here. Though I'd like to take you to see the Spinneret where I work there someday, if we can ever travel there.”

“I've seen the Spinneret.”

“But not my Spinneret. You haven't met my boss Kalingkata, my version of my boss Kalingkata, or...” She trailed off, and picked her sunglasses up off the grass, sliding them onto her face. “Never mind, it was a silly thought.” She rose, and looked behind her for her sword, which wasn't there.

“Kinan, where'd you put my sword?” Kinan raised an eyebrow.

“Nowhere.”

“Oh come on, you don't have to do silly tricks to teach me some lesson about it. We've been over this.”

“I didn't touch your sword.”

“Then where is it?” The answer nearly took her head off. The sword was floating in the air, untethered to any visible person, and Jenny barely managed to duck out of the way in time.

“What the hell?” She yelled as the sword came down towards her again. She would have moved to dodge it, but Kinan flying kicked the air next to the sword, and there was a thud as she impacted the empty space, then another thud as she pushed the invisible figure to the ground. She hovered there, inches above the grass, perched on the figure's check like an incubus.

“You can come out now. I know you're here.” She whispered. One by one, empty spots in the air swirled into black cloaked figures, each with a bejeweled gauntlet on one arm, and their hoods up. A

light blue stripe marked each of their robes, and none of their faces were visible as their hoods were up.

Kinan grabbed Jenny's sword, and threw it to her, which she caught perfectly, using the natural motion of the sword's throw as momentum to help move her body into a fighting stance. It was the kind of simple yet seamless gesture it took years if not decades to master, the kind an amateur wouldn't be impressed with, but a master would recognize instantly. Jenny's black hair wafted in the breeze as she waited for someone to speak, or move. Kinan was the first to with the simple act of rising off of her invisible opponent, who took the same black robed form as the rest of them.

"The Knights of Sky. Funny you're trying to cut my apprentice's head off, since we're allies." She hadn't drawn her sword yet. Jenny wondered exactly what she was waiting for. One of the figures stepped forward, and lowered their hood. It was Greggor, or so he'd been called before, the current leader of the Knights of Sky.

"Our alliance was based on the idea that we could have any semblance of control over ourselves. That time has clearly ended. The Prime Reality we're tied to has fallen. The war is over Kinan, and all that's left to figure out is who is going to be on the Council's good side, and who won't be."

"I won't be."

"I'm well aware. But we have the luxury of choosing our fate. Your head on a platter would certainly make the Emperors' days. They seem to like getting heads, specifically, so we're going to make an effort for that." Kinan didn't nod, just stared.

"You're giving up. Just like that. Slaves without a fight?" Greggor scowled.

"We did fight. We left our home world, and let me tell you the

Firmament is damn lot better than your Spiral, so we could take a stand against the Council when they wouldn't intervene. We've given everything for this cause."

"Clearly not." Kinan said.

"I won't condemn my people to die if I have another choice."

"Its not like death is a big deal for your people anyways. They'll get over it."

"You'll have to kill us."

"Like I said, you'll get better." Jenny looked between them.

"What do you mean they'll get better?" She interjected. They ignored her.

"You won't." Greggor said.

"No."

"And we won't if you kill all of us. We won't be able to start the process."

"Which we will if you try this." The robed figures lifted up their gauntlets. Jenny had a lot of questions: how did these guys get onto Spiral unnoticed, how long would it take the frankly copious reinforcements they had around here to arrive? What if Graelyn and Arch failed and this was all for not?

"Let me just ask you one last thing: we know you're mounting some operation to try to stop the council in the past, but from what we've gathered your mission is just a band aid. It gives the Prime Reality more time with no guarantee it will even survive the conflict. Don't you realize how hopeless this war is? Do you really want to keep fighting a group so powerful that even a time traveling army can't stop them completely?"

"Yes."

"Why? Give me one good reason Kinan!" He was yelling now, the

spittle flying from his mouth.

“To be free.” She replied. He lowered his arm, stared at her in thought for a moment, and in a motion that Jenny wasn't sure was covering his face or rubbing his eyes, removed his face from view as he said: “Let's get this over with. Kill them.”

This was by no means the first time Kinan and Greggor had fought. He was prone to challenging people to needless duels, and Kinan was prone to accepting them. She always won. But Greggor had never brought this many people to help jump her, after all duels need to at least pretend to be civil. Now the kid gloves were off, and Jenny wasn't sure what would happen. Kinan took a step back, and then another, and Jenny turned around and walked backwards as well, listening for the sound of Kinan's sword being unsheathed. Their backs touched. The sound she was waiting for happened. The figures encircled them.

“Any chance the cavalry will swoop in here?” Jenny asked.

“We've got this.” Kinan said, over-confidently.

There was stillness, and then violence. Bolts of lightning surged from the gauntlets of the Knights of Sky, and Kinan and Jenny burst into action. Both ran towards opposite members of the Knights, dodging the bolts, and Kinan unceremoniously slashed her sword across one of their chests. A thin blue light emanated from the hole, then blood in shifting colors spilled out, and then organs. The circle looked shocked. They'd fought together before, and they'd come to kill her, but the reality of death was not something they'd expected for themselves. Kinan and Jenny wasted no time taking advantage of that fact, even as Jenny was trying to overcome her own shock. They both beheaded one of the Knights in the silent moment of

horror that had followed the first death. Rainbow blood sprayed from each falling body.

Then the fighting began in earnest. Kinan and Jenny were like one body in two places, working their enemies into vulnerable positions so the other could finish them off in, dodging and weaving to help minimize the number of blows and bolts of lightning coming towards the other, and giving up blows they could have made to give the other a better, cleaner, strike. Kinan would sweep the legs out of foes, while Jenny would leap across them, slicing their chests open before landing and drawing her sword against the body of the next one. Jenny would move quickly, feinting on one side before slinking around to the other while Kinan flanked them, leaving the enemy open to a blade through the chest from one side. Their blades were part of their bodies, extensions of their arms, and elegant tools of violence.

But it wasn't a contest. It was a massacre. Jenny wasn't even sure when during the fight Greggor died, but it didn't take long for the circle of the Knights of Sky to be rainbow bloodied corpses and detached parts. Backgammon Jenny's name implied a bit of risk in her life, her name came from a betting board game after all, but this wasn't fair odds. She hadn't realized their training had progressed to this point. Jenny panted, leaning on her sword. Kinan stood impassive.

“Jesus, Kinan. Did we have to kill them all?” Kinan turned to her.

“They'll be fine.”

“They're dead!” Kinan cocked her head to the side. “We killed them. You don't get back up after that.”

“They're part of the Firmament. Death is an inconvenience for

them.”

“They said they couldn't get up if we killed them all. Kinan are you listening to me?”

Kinan walked over to a corpse, and pulled the gauntlet off. She gestured for Jenny to do the same, and soon they had a big pile of the gauntlets. Kinan reached into her bag without another word, and threw a handful of dust to make a portal, grabbing a stack of the gauntlets before walking through. Jenny grabbed the rest, and followed Kinan into the white swirl, where the pair walked through the Labyrinth in silence. Eventually, they reached the white door they were looking for, and Kinan opened it up. They exited into a room filled with machinery, strange machinery that looked both industrial and dirty, and old, but also futuristic and beyond anything Jenny had seen.

“Where are we?” She asked, running her hands along a panel which had glowing letters floating above it.

“The headquarters of the Knights of Sky.” Kinan kept walking, and Jenny hurried to follow.

“Not a lot of sky here...”

“No.” There were rows of tanks as they kept going, filled with featureless, sexless, bodies that looked bluish.

“What the hell are these Kinan? They look like the Faceless.” Jenny had seen the Faceless many times in her job, naturally. The strange blue floating beings from an alternate reality that communicated via small electrical bursts rather than speech Graelyn and Arch had seen for the first time during their tour of a fallen world. But they also didn't look exactly like them either, they clearly weren't the same thing, but she wondered if there was a connection.

“These are templates for the Firmament to upload their

consciousness into when they die. This way they preserve their memories.” Jenny pulled her hand away from the glass of the tube she was touching. The

“You mean.... They're going to be waking up?” Kinan nodded.

“They need a bit of help though. Take the largest jewel from each gauntlet, the one on the back of the hand, and put them in the slots by each tank. Jenny ran over to the gauntlets, and carefully slid out the first jewel. It felt strange in her hand, like holding a baby...

“Kinan, they tried to kill us.”

“Yes.”

“So why don't we just leave them dead? They're traitors.”

“Because they didn't kill us. They made a rash decision to protect their friends.”

“So?” Jenny said, gesturing with the rock.

“So, we're reminding them they have other friends. After all, they're not the only person in this room who got a second chance after trying to kill someone, are they?” Kinan made eye contact with Jenny through the dark sunglasses she was wearing in a dark room. Jenny wanted to fold into the darkness. She didn't want to think about that... What she'd nearly done all those years ago... She pushed it out of her mind. Kinan was right. She didn't want her to be right, but she was right.

“Okay. Let's resurrect these jerks.”

The pair went to work. Jenny plugged the rocks into the sockets, while Kinan operated some sort of complex holographic switchboard. Eventually, the machines in the room began to whirr and hum.

“Just a matter of time then.” Kinan said, wiping her hands off.

“So, who exactly are the Knights of Sky anyways? I mean, this is weird stuff.”

“The Knights of Sky broke away from the Firmament, but managed to get a hold of one of their old rebirth facilities and relocate it here. Without it they'd be-”

“-Just as mortal as everyone else.” Greggor said, pulling a robe on as he rose from where he'd slid out of his tube.

“Greggor. I'm glad to see you're alive. I brought your gauntlets back.” He looked down at them.

“...I tried to kill you.”

“You did. And if you do it again, I know where you live and I'll break your rebirth pods and you'll be just as dead as everyone else who dies. But we're allies, and I'm a woman of my word. You made a mistake. Don't make it again.” She started walking away, just like that. Jenny really wondered why she couldn't have conversations like a normal person. Greggor stared silently at her as she walked away, and then nodded to himself as his comrades slid out of their own pods. Jenny looked around at them, flashed a peace sign, and scampered after Kinan. They walked in silence for a time, through a portal, and through the Labrynth, till they arrived back on Spiral. The dinosaurs had already started eating the corpses of the Knights of Sky's old bodies.

“Kinan, did you know they were going to jump us like that?”

“No.”

“Ah. I thought it was some kind of lesson for a bit there, still. You know, don't leave your sword lying around, its important, that sort of thing.”

“I won't lie, it was pretty timely. Don't leave your sword lying around. Its important.” She sighed, Kinan was right, again, of course.

“So what are we going to do now?”

“Get back to training. We have a war to fight, even if we lose it.”

Jenny smirked.

“Always the soldier.” Kinan threw up a peace sign.

“My eyes are always on the prize, Jenny..”

5 THE MASK OF APOLLO

BY JAMES WYLDER

Lametrius carefully brushed the dirt off of the golden mask. Behind her, J-14 continually scanned her excavation, while Kinan and Jenny played cards on a mostly-flat rock. John and Miranda Vice were watching something on a tablet, while a few other Dawn members bustled around the dig site.

“Is it all dug out yet?” Jenny said sullenly.

“Hush.” Kinan said, playing a card that brought a scowl to Jenny's face.

Lametrius had finally worked away the excess dirt, and pulled out her flashlight, sticking it inbetween her teeth. It was daytime, but she wanted to see it shine, and oh did it shine. Gently, she lifted the mask out of the soil, and ran her thumb across it.

“Its in such good shape... I can't believe its so intact.” Jenny slapped a card down and swept a pile of cards up off the rock.

“Its so intact cause we traveled back in time to get it.”

“I thought it would be more, you know, melted.” Kinan folded, and walked over to the dig site. She hopped down into the hole, and

looked at the shining mask.

“Huh.” She said. Lametrius frowned.

“You see one of the most beautiful pieces of goldworking in history, and you say 'huh'?” Kinan shrugged. “This is the mask of a God!”

“This is the mask of a man who dressed up as a god. Not that there is much of a difference.”

“Oh not this again.” Jenny cut in. Lametrius carried the mask out of the hole, and held it up to the sun. It was an important mask after all, and this was its counterpart. It was only right the mask of Apollo see the sun. It's features were perfect: some Trojan craftsman had put all their knowledge into this mask, and even a strong oponent of religon could see how someone could be taken in by its majesty. Without any pomp or grandeur, Kinan lightly took the mask out of her hands, and placed it upon her face. Turning to the group, she held her arms out as though telling the sun to continue its journey through the sky.

“Well, how do I look?”

She'd hate the truth, because she looked utterly like some sort of demi-god. With her binder on under her shirt, and the boyish features of the Apollo mask, Kinan took on an androgynous beauty out of myth.

“I think,” Miranda said, “that you're going to play the part in your plan perfectly.”

* * * *

The halls of the Firmament's government were older than time. Not that that was a sentence that particularly made sense, but it was true,

sort of, maybe. At the very least people liked to say it was. Today though, the Courier of Stagnation was wishing that perhaps someone could have updated the internal transportation system. Maybe they could at least key her soul to the elevator so she wouldn't have to run up the steps? She was here to see the Arbiter of Chronology, and that was never the most fun. At least the Arbiter of Causality or the Arbiter of Infinity had a sense of humor. The Arbiter of Chronology on the other hand may as well have written a book on not getting people's jokes. Actually, he might have actually done that. She wasn't particularly sure anymore. She got to his thick Oak doors, and knocked. Then she knocked again. Eventually a hooded figure cracked the door.

“Yes?”

“You know damn well why I'm here Lesser of Evils, and don't even try to pretend you're Greater of Good it still hasn't been funny since you started that last milenia.” The hooded figure awkwardly got out of her way as she barged into the Arbiter's office.

“Hey, Arbiter.” She said boldly. The Arbiter looked up, annoyed. “You do realize Dawn number 624 is having a massive, massive temporal disturbance right now?”

“I'm aware.” He droned. The room was coated in bookshelves-- and that wasn't an exaggeration. Bookshelves lined every wall, they were on the ceiling, somehow held in place from falling on their heads, and they sat below their feet. The Arbiter's desk was made of wood, but it too was stacked with books.

“I'm very busy writing history you know. There is quite a lot of it, and the annoying thing about it is it keeps happening. I really have a lot to catch up on.” Stagnation rolled her eyes, and moved to sit down. Books flew up from the floor to make a chair for her. She

straightened her black robes, and tried to make the single off-center yellow stripe on them straight.

“If we don't fix this, we're going to have a serious problem on our hands. There are massive chronological repercussions to this, it seems very likely most people we were planning on having be born in that universe's future, indeed counting on, will not be.” He looked up from his book, and placed his quill in a holder.

“Explain.”

“Its Dawn. They're changing things.”

“Dawn is always changing things. That's essentially their entire reason for existing. But usually they only manipulate later history, which is fairly innocuous.” She slammed her fist on a book on his desk dramatically, and he gave her a sour look. She pulled her hand back apologetically.

“Look, Arbiter, this is early history.”

“They wouldn't dare. They know what happened why they tried to change the result at old Nojpeten...” She leaned in.

“They dare. You want to know what they did?” He sighed.

“Sure.”

* * * *

Achilles walked in front of the Greek line, yelling his speech. He was talking them up, but also talking himself up. He hoped Patroclus was listening, after all, he was basically the cutest thing alive. He banged on his breastplate dramatically. Agamemnon and Menelaus were watching from the back. They were dressed in the best armor money could buy, but they knew who should go first. Looking up at the walls, Achilles had a momentary sense of doubt.

Could they break these walls? Take Troy? He knew hypothetically they could... But in practice? He shook his head and beat his chest. He was a gorilla, or a lion, or... He tried to tell himself he was a man and cast out the doubts of his young age.

“Tonight, my Myrmidons, we will strike the heart of Troy, and they shall fear us for eternity!” The troops cheered, pounding the pommels of their spears into the dirt and yelling and chanting.

Achilles soaked it all in, he was glorious, he was a--

“Fool.” A booming voice said from the walls of Troy. “Are you not aware this is my city?”

The gates opened, and the Myrmidons formed a shield wall, as a single figure walked out of the gates. The figure wore a long brown coat, and their face shone like the sun, molded of gold. In one hand they held a simple stool carved from a log, and in the other they held a harp. The figure faced the army, threw its stool down, sat on it, and began to strum out a refined melody on the harp. Everyone expected something to change but it just... Kept playing.

The soldiers looked at each other confused. Achilles was right there with them, but kept his calm. Looking back to Agamemnon, he hoped for an order. Agamemnon gestured to an archer, who notched his bow and carefully aimed an arrow at the harpist. With a downward chopping motion, he gave the signal, and the arrow let fly!

The harpist's hand moved like a whiplash, and grabbed the arrow out of the air, lightly dropped it on the sandy soil, and returned to

strumming their harp. That certainly hadn't been what Achilles or Agamemnon expected. Achilles ran back through the lines to consult with the Kings. Most of them looked shocked, Odysseus was laughing his head off, however.

"That was downright impossible." Agamemnon sputtered.

"We'll just wait them out, he'll have to get tired sometime."

Menelaus muttered. Odysseus laughed again, rolling his eyes.

"Meneleus, do you really think a creature from heaven or earth with the skill to grab an arrow on the air doesn't know exactly what they are doing in standing in front of us?" He chided.

"He's goading us!" Agamemnon yelled.

"How are we so sure its a man?" Achilles asked. All turned to him. Agamemnon raised his arms in greeting.

"Ah, our finest soldier. What insights do you have?" Achilles thought for a moment, Odysseus watched him. They met eyes, and Odysseus nodded, as if very curious what the boy had to say.

"They're trying to confuse us. It doesn't matter what action we take here, regardless of how we respond our men now know that the enemy can drop us to a standstill." Odysseus smiled, and nodded to him. Agamemnon was a bit less calm, in that he began to throw a temper tantrum, yelling and kicking, and landing several blows on his cup bearer who crumpled over clutching his head, the wine he was carrying sinking into the ground.

"There's no need for that..." Odysseus said, with exasperation. They waited it out.

"Achilles!" He finally yelled, "Go kill that harpist." Achilles nodded, and without another word began to walk through the lines to the harpist.

He reached the golden masked figure, and drew his sword. The

music stopped, and the figure slowly raised its golden face to him. Beneath the mask, he could see pale blue eyes. Neither of them moved for a moment, Achilles' chest rose and fell, and he pointed his sword at the harpist.

“Arm yourself.” The harpist slowly tilted their head.

“Arm myself? What if I'm an army.” Achilles spat on the dirt.

“You're just a man with a boring sense of humor.”

“Am I?” It said back. “Someone really should have told me that before, I had no idea.” It began to play the harp again, and he thrust the sword under the man's mask.

“Fight me or die.”

“You can't kill a god, mortal. Didn't you hear what I said? This is my city.” Achilles felt his sword wobbling in his hands, and then it was pulled free! It flew spinning through the air, up to the top of the city walls. “Its time for you Greeks to go home.” Achilles was stunned, the troops were stunned, the kings were stunned. The figure resumed playing its harp.

“You can call me Apollo. I will go back in the city walls at sundown.” Achilles nodded, totally unsure of what he was suppose to say in reply to that. “Go, shoo. Tell your kings to go home.”

“They brought us here. Paris kidnapped Helen, Menelaus' wife and--” The god laughed.

“You really believe that? That the woman who taunts you every day from the city walls is here not of her own choice? You're being played for a fool Achilles. These men hold no love towards you aside from your skill with a sword. Do you really think they care for your life, or the life of your lover Patroclus?” Achilles blushed.

“We uh... Aren't lovers...”

“Achilles, don't lie to a god please its just embarrassing.”

“...Okay fine we're lovers.” Apollo threw his hands out.

“See? That wasn't so hard. Anyways everyone knows it. Well, aside from a few Historians who desperately want to ignore textual evidence who will say you're 'friends' but, they're the minority. You have a nice boyfriend. Don't die here with him.” Achilles took a step backwards, still facing Apollo, and then another, and then another.

He made his way all they way back to the lines of his men, bumping into one of their breastplates.

“Achilles, what did they say?” Agamemnon yelled, but Achilles didn't wait any longer. He pushed threw the soldiers, and made his way back to the camp. Finding his way to their tent, he pulled it open, and stepped inside, Patroclus sat up from the cot.

“Achilles, what...” But Achilles didn't say anything, he simply ran to his lover and kissed him.

“We're leaving.” He said, “This war is for fools.”

* * * *

“So do you see why we need to intervene?” Courier of Stagnation exclaimed. “They're ruining everything! That reality is going to be massively changed.” The Arbiter nodded, slowly.

“Well then, I suppose its time to take drastic action.” Courier smiled, good. “Its time for Dawn to face the night.”

* * * *

Ten Days Earlier

Kinan fiddled with the mask, and made a soft sound of annoyance.

“It doesn't fit... Do I really have to wear this the whole time?”

“Kinan, can I remind you whose plan this was? This plan you made

up?” Kinan looked at her through the mask, and shrugged.

“Get me some padding foam and some glue.”

John and Miranda looked at Lametrius who was crossing her arms.

“I’ll fix it later, can we go ahead and get this done?” Kinan nodded, and casually threw a handful of crystal dust into the air, stepping into the swirling portal she created as though it was a living room door. The portal led right into a massive hall, the main hall of a temple from the looks of it, where a throng of worshipers was standing in line to make libations to a statue of Apollo. Everyone stared at her. In a few moments, a proud looking Lametrius entered, wearing a very nice Hermes costume that looked a bit more like a superhero outfit than a period costume, Jenny who had barely changed to make herself look like Artemis (she had a bow, and had put a crescent moon on her hairband), and John and Miranda who were both on their phones. A man pouring a libation stood holding the cup, his mouth agape.

“Hi.” Kinan began. “I’m the god Apollo. The God of your city.

Glorius as the morningtide.” She held her arms out wide. “Behold me mortals, and be afraid. Behold me and be glad.”

“You’re not Apollo!” A priest shouted from next to the libation area, pointing wildly with his finger. Kinan sighed, and pointed at a vase, which exploded. Then she pointed at the ceiling and a swirling disk of fire appeared in it. Then she pressed a button on her belt and the Disco Remix “A Fifth of Beethoven” began playing from a speaker in her bag. Then she blew up another vase, just in case. The priest lowered his finger.

“Okay then... All hail Apollo! Welcome to our city! All hail his sister Artemis! All hail Hermes! All hail...” He looked at John and Miranda. “Their helpers!” John gave a thumbs up.

* * * *

Kinan entered back in through the walls, the sounds of the Greek army falling into confusion following loudly behind her. Jenny, or rather Artemis, hopped down from the wall and caught up with her.

“Was it really necessary to be that dramatic?” Kinan didn’t answer, just handed her the stool. Jenny chucked it to the side of the street where one of the adoring throng grabbed it, and held it above her head in triumph yelling about having the stool of a god.

“Where’s Hermes?” She finally said.

“Consulting with King Priam.”

Kinan just nodded, and they made their way to the royal palace. Troy was a magnificent city, but it was a much smaller one than most people would think. The world was much smaller then, its whole population dwarfed easily by colonies on other worlds considered tiny by the standards of Earth, which had tens of billions of people. Mars only had around 1 billion, and it still outdid the whole of this past. And yet, for its time it was grand. A time when single warriors could distinguish themselves so much in battle that armies trembled at the thought of them. Not because they were such incredible warriors compared to the present, but because every death was such a larger percent of humanity. Outside the walls, the Greek camp seemed to writhe in the wind, a mess of tarps and cloth fitted into the dirt and sand.

King Priam was an old man, but a fit one. He had the kind of muscles that were built into his frame over too many years to really ever get rid of all of them. His son, Hector, had the kind of muscles you saw in a body building magazine. Lametrius sat talking to both of them as Jenny and Kinan entered into the chamber.

“Ah, Apollo, Artemis. I was just telling the King about how we plan to relieve the food woes of his people.” Apollo nodded.

“Have you informed him of why we're here?” Lametrius looked at Kinan like she was going off script during a stage play.

“...No?”

Apollo looked at Priam.

“I'm going to fight Poseidon and Zeus. They should arrive to aid the Greeks soon.” Priam rose.

“My Lord Apollo... I can't imagine a battle of the gods will leave much left for us Mortals.” Apollo stared at him.

“Hermes.”

“Yes my Lord?”

“Let me know if you detect the arrival of other gods.” Lametrius frowned.

“Yes my lord.” Kinan began to exist, and Lametrius followed her till they were out of earshot.

“Kinan, what are you doing?”

“Luring Zeus and Poseidon here, exactly what I said.” Lametrius grabbed her by the arm.

“Don't give me that crap. What are you doing. This city is counting on us!” Apollo leaned down to stare into her eyes.

“This city is as good as dead, and always has been.” They didn't

look away from each other.

“You might think its fine and dandy to walk into other people's lives and treat them like numbers on a spreadsheet, but people's lives are worth more than that Kinan. These people's to.” Kinan straightened her back.

“They're a means to an end. Do you see the worn walls of this city? They'll crumble. The Greeks will massacre this city in ten thousand realtites, commit crimes unspeakable, and yet so easily spoken. Would you have me save them all?” Lametrius scoweled, and walked over to a window, where she pointed out at the rows of buildings. Some children were kicking around an inflated sheep's bladder.

“I don't expect you to achieve miracles. I expect you to finish what you've started when you start it. These people expect us to save them. We can't just let them die.”

Kinan cocked her head to the side, the weighty mask glimmering off the light from the window. “You don't expect me to fight for them?”

“I expect you to be willing to sacrifice the city to meet your goals.” “Don't badger me with this Lametrius. This is a trolly problem. If a city dies to save a universe, would you be so averse?” She was about to respond, but Kinan cut her off. “Regardless, that isn't my plan anyways. I'm drawing out gods.”

“And by gods you don't mean like, actual gods?”

“Close enough.”

* * * *

Agamemnon had drunk a lot of wine tonight. His finest warrior had fled with his boyfriend, and many troops had followed them. The war was not going well, not at all. He downed another goblet of the stuff, and snapped for his wine boy to bring him more. He snapped again. Nothing. Turning around, and the first sound of a yell beginning to seep out of his lips Agamemnon saw a pair of figures in black robes, each with a colored stripe running up one side of their garment. He set the cup down, and fumbled for his blade.

“Name yourselves. Where is my wine boy and how did you...”

He didn't finish. They pulled down their hoods, and he dropped to his knees.

“My gods.” He said. Poseidon and Zeus looked at each other. One rubbed their beard, having not shapeshifted from a clean shorn

female form for the last few years, this thick beard was a stark change.

“Agamemnon,” Zeus said, “Poseidon and I have instruction for you, which you must follow to the letter.” Agamemnon nodded.

“Whatever you ask. Any sacrifice will be supplied.” Zeus waved a hand dismissively.

“That won't be necessary.” When he described what would be, Agamemnon was certainly confused.

* * * *

Kinan had slept in Apollo's throne, and woke up to a temple priestess bringing her a breakfast of cheese and grapes. It wasn't bad eating at all, though Kinan doubted the hygiene of the kitchen staff. She was lounging in the throne, kicking her legs back and forth, when Hector came running into the temple completely out of breath. She stopped kicking her legs and got immediately erect and godlike. “What is it?” She asked. Hector bowed, and then fell to his knees. “My lord Apollo, the Greeks have given us a gift, a giant wooden horse, the symbol of their god Poseidon.” Kinan rose to her feet. They weren't supposed to be doing that yet, it was way too early in the war for that! Then again she had messed up history... But then her mind snapped into place.

Of course. She'd gotten what she wanted. They'd noticed her.

“Take me to it.” She ordered. Hector rose, bowed again, and led her to the horse, which Jenny and Lametrius were already inspecting.

Helen was walking around the horse, imitating the voices of Greek soldier's wives to draw them out if they were inside it.

“Why did you bring it inside the city walls?” Kinan asked Hector.

“The King ordered it my lord, the Greeks have packed up their camp and--” She walked past him. She'd read the book. The horse was big, and looked just like you've seen in the movies. She approached it, and ran her hand along the wood. Jenny and Lametrius approached her.

“There's no one inside it.” Jenny said.

“Are you sure?” Kinan said.

“Nearly positive.” Lametrius replied. “I'd have to crack it open to be sure.” Kinan nodded.

“I'll take a look inside it myself. Is there an entry point?” Lametrius

pointed to a spot on the horse's belly. Kinan walked below it, and testing her legs for a moment, jumped straight up to grab onto the spaces between the planks of the wood. Lifting her legs up, she kicked out the hatch, as the crowd around the horse gasped, then swung inside it with an acrobatic leap. Kinan stared around in the darkness, and pulled out a flashlight, which she shone around the empty center. There was only one thing in the darkness: a single metal capsule. Approaching it, Kinan examined the markings on it, bringing the flashlight close to read the words.... Then stepped back, dropped the flashlight, and scampered backwards nearly falling out of the hole. Composing herself, she elegantly dropped down out of the hole, and tried to look as calm as she could as she walked towards her comrades.

“So what's in there?” Jenny said, throwing a rubber ball she'd somehow acquired up in the air over and over again.

“We have a situation.” Kinan said softly.

“What kind of situation?”

“They put a nuclear bomb inside of the Trojan horse.”

“What!?!” Jenny and Lametrius said in unison.

“Not so loud.” Kinan whispered, “The crowd is still here.”

“And why hasn't it gone off?” Lametrius asked.

“Because they wanted to wait till we were right next to it in case we-- Oh.” Kinan reached into her bag, and began running, she started pouring crystal dust in a circle, and Jenny and Lametrius followed. John and Miranda, who had been lazily sipping wine over by a haberdashery, leapt into action as well. The five of them made a circle of crystal dust around the horse, which Kinan struck with her sword, and a white swirling portal appeared inside of. The horse fell through, as Kinan crossed her fingers it wouldn't go off. Not yet, at least. As the ears of the horse sunk through the ground, she let out a sigh of relief.

“Hector, tell your father not to trust Greeks bearing gifts.” Apollo yelled as the swirling hole in reality closed.

Zeus and Poseidon were enjoying the attention from the Greeks, but they also very much just wanted to get on with trying to fix the mess in chronology that Kinan had caused.

“May we offer you more wine?” Menelaus asked.

“No, we're fine.” Poseidon said.

“Look, uh, my Lord. This whole war was started because my property, you know, my wife Helen ran off with this guy named

Paris because he 'treated me like a person' or something silly. Anyways, she's really really hot, and I know you're going to wreak vengeance on the city, but is there any chance you could get her back and make her into me again?" Poseidon and Zeus looked at each other, and each of them sighed internally.

"Look...." Zeus began.

"No." Poseidon finished.

"Okay, yeah, that's cool I mean..." Poseidon shoved him away and walked to the portcullis of the ship. There was something falling from the sky.

"Arbiter." She said, giving up on the beard, "We have a problem." Zeus shoved her aside, and looked up at the falling nuclear horse.

"Well that's not good."

* * * *

The mushroom cloud could be seen for miles. It had taken all of their efforts to shield the city from radiation, mainly with a portable shield generator they'd rigged up, but the truth was that they were low on crystal dust as it was, and very short on time. The city would likely die of radiation poisoning, and their crops and the fish in the sea were all either dead or poisonous. They'd have to evacuate all of Troy somewhere else. The blinding white flash had stunned the city, and they watched the Greek fleet vaporized from afar, not entirely aware what they had even just witnessed. The streets of the city bowed before them, and Lametrius and John looked fairly uncomfortable with it.

"Jesus Christ Kinan. You dropped the nuke on them. Jesus."

"Maybe I finally have their attention. I was hoping the harp would be enough."

Several minutes passed in silence, and then two black robed figures stepped out of a suddenly appearing swirling portal. Kinan looked into the crowd and saw a woman clutching a wooden stool to her chest. She gestured for her to come forward, and she did so. Kinan took the stool from her, sat down, and pulled her harp out of her bag to begin playing it. The figured approached her, the city surrounded them.

"You moron. You killed every Greek who went into this war. You've ruined the history here. The Nuclear fallout alone..."

"You did that, actually."

The other figure cut in, "We wanted you to run away! End your

pointless game. We had safeguards in place so it didn't extend outside the city... But you ruined that!" Kinan kept strumming the harp.

"You seem to be at a complete loss as to what I want." The two figures looked at each other, then crossed their arms in tandem.

"Okay, then, what do you want?" The male figure said.

"This." Kinan replied.

"What do you mean, 'this', an ecological and chronological disaster?"

"No, for you to actually show up and listen to me. Do you even realize how hard it is to talk to you?"

"Dawn is a criminal and illegal army not recognized by the Last Firmament." The female figure said.

"Yes, and thus, its very hard for me to get to speak to you." The strumming continued. It sounded like 'Smoke on the Water.' "I called you, I sent ambassadors to you, I made friends with groups who you kicked out like the Knights of Sky. I tried over and over, yet you're willing to talk to a Council that burns whole worlds rather than me. So I did the only thing you couldn't resist: I burned history to the ground, and I did it dramatically. I played god, and got onto the high horse you reserved for yourself. Isn't it fun?" The Arbiter was becoming angrier.

"No, its not fun. The damage to this reality is nearly irreparable!" A humored sigh escaped the mask of Apollo.

"Now now gods, we all know that isn't true. Dawn is more than willing to help. As long as the resulting fix doesn't involve the casualties or war crimes that it would if it had run its course naturally." The Arbiter gritted his teeth, then got himself new teeth and gritted those instead for a more satisfying sound.

"Fine. We'll fake the Greek army's memories. But for you to change history, you yourself will now have to go back in time before you went back in time and stop your own actions."

"I'm not a newbie, I know how it works."

"Only you can--"

"Yes. But for me to do that, you have to listen." The Arbiter threw up his hands.

"Fine, what exactly do you want to talk about?" Kinan set down the harp and stood up. Her blue eyes shone through the gaps in the mask.

"You have a treaty with the Council. A Council who will burn whole worlds worse than the Greeks would burn this city. What if I

told you I could make that treaty null and void, would you be willing to sign a new pact, one against their Empire? After all, they've basically made you into their tribute state. You're poor gods as it is." The Arbiter crossed his arms.

"We might."

"Good." Kinan said, her face was the sun, and it reflected all things. The Firmament changed before her. "Then lets talk. An end to our war, if I bring you an end to your own subjugation."

"Fine, but could you take that mask off already?" Apollo cocked his head.

"I'm not sure I understand, this is my face? Or perhaps you should go first. After all, I've always been the sun."

ABOUT THE EDITOR

James Wylder is a writer and editor who lives in Indiana and is known for his Doctor Who poetry book “An Eloquence of Time and Space” as well as his play “Cryptos”.

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