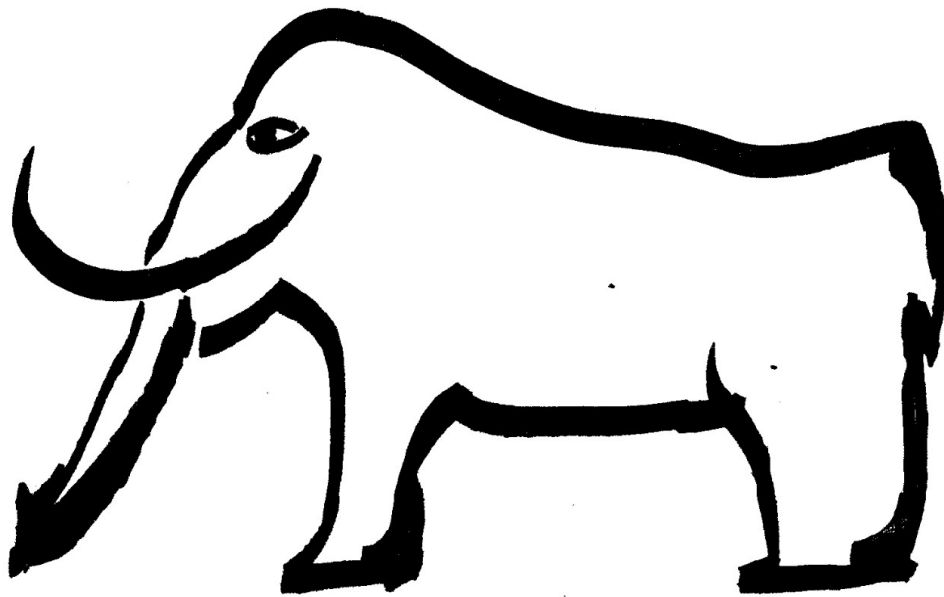


A 10,000 DAWNS CHRISTMAS



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1. The Dawn Before Christmas

by Trevor Allen

Twas the Dawn before Christmas, when all throughout mars,
Not a Martian was fretting, they dreamt of the stars.
Their rifles were cleaned and racked with such care,
In hopes that their freedom soon would be there.
The rebels were nestled all snug in their beds;
While visions of democracy danced in their heads;
And Zhang in her study, report on her desk
Had just settled her brain for a long winter's rest
When out on the street there arose such a clatter,
she sprang from her chair to see what was the matter.
Away to the window she flew like a flash,
Tore open the curtains and threw up the sash.
The moons' light on the glass dome aglow
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,
When what to her wondering eyes did appear,
but a small crowd of people spreading holiday cheer,
they all carried candles, lit at the wick,
Voices raised in song, the melody thick
Sonorous as angels, the carolers came,
young and old ran out laughing, and joined just the same.
"Tomorrow for freedom, we might march for our home,
but tonight sing together under the dome.
From Titan to Venus to the planets all,
We raise our voices so they'll hear our call!"
Like a herd of great beasts the carolers went,
Left Zhang all alone, her mood malcontent.
So off to the doorway, Zhang almost flew
As she struggled with haste to put on her shoe.
The building was silent, its walls all aloof
not knowing the joy of which the singing was proof.
As she opened the door and turned to the sound
of the carolers' voices and their feet on the ground.
She made off in haste to catch up to the crowd,

she would march with her people, their heads all unbowed.
She joined in the chorus, she did not look back
they welcomed her in to become one of the pack..
Their eyes—how they twinkled! Their smiles, how merry!
Not one face concerned, not even one wary.
Zhang sang along and let her worries all go
she knew that soon enough they would only grow;
This one night at least, she would share in the peace,
she wouldn't let worry put her brow in a crease.
They walked on for hours until their voices were sore
they walked on until they could not sing any more.
as Zhang looked on to their numbers quite ample
the last of her sadness she was able to trample.
With a smile on her lips, and a glint in her eye
she looked to the heavens and took in the sky.
She thought of her office, what was left of her work,
she thought of responsibilities she just could not shirk.
Thinking all this finally she knew,
tonight there was only one thing to do.
she climbed up a pole and gave a great shout,
to all those who were still there milling about
because working any more this day would not be right--
“Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

Holiday Heist, by Bri Crozier

Erin stared down at the platter balanced on her palm. She had never seen sweets that looked like this before. She thought they were chocolates since that's what they smelled like, but they looked like some kind of gemstone, geometric and deep maroon with gold flecks sprinkled in. They had a strange translucent quality that made her question if they really were chocolates. If she hadn't seen someone chomp into one, she wouldn't have believed they were candy at all.

Someone in a Centro Military uniform walked by, swiping a Gemstone chocolate off the platter. Erin watched the officer go, ducking under floating Christmas decorations as they went. They walked out the penthouse' open glass doors onto the deck overlooking the Shanghai skyline. Erin went back to scanning the crowd. She hadn't seen her mark yet, so she had time to wonder at the side of earth she had never seen. The party was held in an extravagant suite, high ceilings with floating chandeliers coated in tinsel and ornaments, like something out of a fantasy novel. Classical holiday music played softly as she weaved through the crowd of people who she was quite sure would turn a gun on her if they had even a suspicion she was Martian.

Lots of people wanting to kill Erin was nothing new at this point. She had survived 3 months alone on earth and a Christmas party was not going to be the thing that ended her. That job would go to Evelyn whenever Erin got back to Mars. She sighed, thinking about her wife. They had only been married two months before Erin had been sent to Earth for a diplomatic mission. It wasn't really a diplomatic mission, of course, no more than Erin was a diplomat. It wasn't even supposed to be a complicated mission. Get in, steal as much Centro Military information as possible under the guise of a diplomatic mission, get out. Everything went to hell when the Blockade had gone into effect. The rest of the diplomatic party, including an actual diplomat, had been taken into custody as prisoners of war. A few others had tried to escape with her, but Erin had been the only one to make it out alive.

Since then, she had no contact with any other Martians up until a week ago. Zavian Chor, a high rank Martian Intelligence Agent had sent a ping to her com. He had a mission he was sure could help end the blockade and he needed a Spec Ops agent. She was hesitant, she had been trying her com for months with no response. Why was there one now? An MIA com could have been commandeered by Centro, a trap to see if they could find any other Martians. After great consideration, she pinged asking for his ID code. He had responded correctly and Erin didn't have any other options and if it was what it seemed like, it could get Erin home. She pinged back.

Spec Operative Erin Waasanode, requesting briefing

A few days later she was in a small bar in Shanghai, Zavian Chor smiling with smug determination across from her in a booth in the back.

"Pleasure to meet you, Agent Waasanode" He held out a hand to shake hers.

"Ditto" She mumbled back before sitting down, ignoring the hand.

“Alright” He cleared his throat and pulled his hand back. “How many missions have you done like this?”

“Several”

“Ah. Well, this mission should be pretty simple then.” Zavian said as he pulled a small tablet out of his bag. He fiddled with it for a moment before handing it to Erin. She took it and glanced through the documents he had open. She wasn’t sure what she was meant to be seeing, it was all business receipts centering around one Centro bureaucrat, Zhou Wen. Nothing of major note, but eventually Erin saw something unusual and raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a lot of money he’s trying to hide. What did he buy with it?”

Zavian took the tablet back, frowning “That, is an excellent question. I’m not sure actually, but it’s got to be something of the utmost importance. My best guess? It’s either a weapon or some incredibly useful information. Either way, we don’t want it in Centro’s hands”

Zavian flipped through some more documents on the tablet impatiently before handing it back to Erin. He seemed like he was used to having all the answers and not having them was incredibly frustrating.

“How about wait staffing? Have you ever done that before?”

“No” Erin said curtly. “Why?”

“Mr. Zhou is having a Christmas party at his penthouse in Shanghai. Several high-ranking Centro officers will be there, I bet he’s going to reveal what he’s found to them at the party. While I can’t figure out what it is, I do know he’s keeping it at his house”

Erin frowned at that. “Why would he keep something so important at his residence? That doesn’t seem like something Centro would allow.”

Zavian nodded “You’re right, it’s not. He’s probably trying to use it as leverage for a class promotion.”

It made sense in a way, but it felt a bit off to Erin.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“First” Zavian smiled, he had been waiting for that question. “Find the mark”

Erin continued the length of the suite, eyes scanning for Mr. Zhou. Eventually she spotted him, a pudgy man with receding salt and pepper hair. He was having a discussion with some other men, one a balding man with thin gray hair and a skin tone like Erin’s, the other blond, blue eyed, and wearing a pure white suit and matching cane. The conversation seemed to mostly consist of Mr. Zhou bragging to the other men.

“My daughter Yufei was just accepted to Zhukov Academy at only 10 years old. We are extremely proud. She plans to be a historian with a focus in turn of the millennia technology. She finds it

incredibly fascinating. My wife and I have done everything to support her. It's important work, Tech Historians, don't you think, Admiral Grayson?"

"Ah, well we do need more of those" Grayson muttered into his champagne.

"Honestly the technology of the era is so rare these days, especially ones that function properly. It's difficult to study, I commend her for her interest. Tell me, has she been to the Technological Museum of Shanghai? We just donated a rather large sum to help them with their collection and restoration of home consoles," the man with the cane said as he swiped a candy off Erin's tray.

Erin walked around them, offering candies to anyone who passed by. She glanced down at Mr. Zhou's jacket, trying to see which pocket the key card was in.

"Oh, that was you, was it? My daughter has been talking about it nonstop since they announced it. She can't wait to see the exhibit."

"Do you know what pieces they intend to exhibit, Director St. John?" Grayson asked quietly, seeming genuinely interested.

"Head Director, actually Admiral."

"Ah, well, my apologies" Grayson went back to intently studying his champagne.

Erin noticed a slight bulge in the right-hand pocket. Slowly, she slipped her hand in. Her deft fingers found what she was looking for and quickly slid them out. She pulled her closed hand behind her back and held the tray out to the group. None of them took anything, so she continued on, slipping the key card into her own pocket.

"I have the key," Erin whispered into her Com once she was far enough out of range of the three men.

"Fantastic. Starting the distraction... Now! You may want to step to the edge of the room."

Before Erin could ask what that meant, she heard the sound of glass shattering and a startled scream. One of the chandeliers was starting to lose height, tilting at an odd angle. A couple of ornaments had come loose and crashed to the ground. Erin's eyes widened and she started hurrying towards the door. Nobody paid much attention to her, their eyes glued to the chandelier.

Mr. Zhou and some of the other staffers ran to the chandelier grav controls, trying to get them all back in place. Erin was halfway to the door when the whole thing came crashing down. That's when people really started screaming. Erin bolted for the door, as the crowd started running in different directions to get out from under the other chandeliers. Elbows and knees dug into Erin as she ran, tripping her up, but she managed to keep her balance. She made it to the door, quietly slipping out, she hoped, with no one having noticed.

Erin checked her com, the map of the penthouse coming up. She just needed to get down two hallways and she would be golden.

Erin dashed down the first hallway, dumping her tray behind an actual, live Christmas tree. She hadn't ever seen a real pine tree used as a Christmas tree before. On Mars, most people used plastic ones, dolled-up Olive trees, or even just holograms. She wondered if Evelyn had gotten a plastic tree this year to replace their holographic one. It had been their plan to get a physical one once they were married, a way to celebrate their first Christmas together as wives. But of course, Erin was here, running past real Christmas trees and floating chandeliers. Her throat felt tight at the thought of Evelyn putting up their decorations alone.

She didn't hear the footsteps as she rounded the corner, crashing directly into a woman in a Centro military uniform. The woman yelped as she and Erin fell into a decorative table, a glass bowl of ornaments shattering to the floor. Erin sat up quickly, wincing as she sliced her hand on glass. She hissed from the sting, trying to put pressure on her palm when she noticed the guard had recovered, gun pulled and trained on Erin.

"Freeze! Hands in the air!"

The guard's hair was disheveled from the fall, a cut across her cheek leaking blood onto her once crisp uniform. She looked pissed. Erin drew her hand across the ground, a large shard of glass slipping between her fingers. She raised her hands slowly and began standing up.

"STOP! I did NOT say you could stand up! What are you doing here?"

"Sorry. I panicked, ran out of the penthouse after the chandelier crashed."

"Why did you go this way? There is not an exit this way"

Erin shrugged "Like I said. Panicked"

The guard hesitated, gun still pointed at Erin. She seemed angry enough to just shoot Erin for the inconvenience of messing up her hair and uniform. Eventually, she lowered her gun and reached for Erin's arm.

"We are going back to the Party, where you will continue your job"

Erin instinctually grabbed the guard's arm, ducking under and swiftly twisting it behind her back. She pulled up, putting more pressure than she had intended as the guard screamed in pain.

"Shit" Erin cursed under her breath as she heard more shouting and footsteps from the down the hall. While Erin was distracted, the guard had managed to pull her gun hand up and fire a shot point blank. The plasma grazed Erin's cheek, burning her skin. Erin hissed again, loosening her grip on the guard enough for her to break free. Erin ducked behind the fallen table, as the guard fired off a few more shots before reloading. Erin took the opportunity, grabbing the table and throwing it at the guard.

She didn't even stop to see if it hit, just kept running down the hall to the room marked on her com. She blipped the key card and the doors opened instantly. She ran in just as the gunfire started again. Erin found the keypad on her side of the door, asking for a passcode to confirm the door close.

What a dumb security measure, Erin thought, a passcode to close a door.

Erin didn't have much time to deal with it, instead rearing back with the shard of glass and smashing it hard into the touchpad. It made a distressed buzz before the door slid closed. Erin sighed with relief, though she knew the doors wouldn't hold long. She honestly probably hadn't done much of anything to stop them, other than inconvenience Mr. Zhou by breaking his door.

"I'm in the office. What exactly am I looking for?" She said into her com as she started walking further into the room.

"It should be in a lock box, fairly small and light. There's a desk, right? Try looking through the drawers"

She rolled her eyes, then surveyed the room. It wasn't a particularly interesting room, just a normal office. The lights were dim, only a few show lights on the shelves displaying an assortment of items, mostly trophies, antiques, and pictures of Mr. Zhou and his family. The ceiling was much lower than the penthouse, but it still had wall high windows opposite the door she had just walked in through. The desk was just in front of the windows, a holographic computer open to an idle screen and a photo of a young girl in what appeared to be a museum full of early 2000's tech. Erin assumed this was Mr. Zhou's daughter.

Erin heard shouting at the door as the guards began trying to break in. She mumbled another curse, but she was glad her impromptu lock smashing had actually worked out in her favor. She began throwing open drawers and scanning for the lock box as quickly as she could. Finally, she spotted it, a lock box about the size of a shoebox.

"I've got it," She yelled into her com over the noise outside.

"Great! I've got a veetol waiting for you on the fire escape on the next floor down, I'll send you the loca-"

The door burst open and guards poured in. Erin ducked just as a shot passed over her head, weakening the window behind her.

"Not happening. Get to my location now" Erin yelled in her com, before grabbing the large office chair and smashing the already weakened window.

"Freeze!" Someone yelled.

Erin did not freeze. She leapt out the window.

Erin had been in free fall many times since she joined the military and she never once got used to it. She wasn't sure if she enjoyed it or hated it, but it made her feel something she wasn't used to. Luckily, she wasn't in free fall for long, falling through the open door of the veetol.

"You know, it hadn't been my intention for you to jump out a window" Zavian said as they sped off over the city scape.

“Me neither”

Erin stood, moving to the passenger seat next to Zavian.

He sighed, before nodding his head to the lock box. “Did you find the key for the lock?”

“Didn’t really have time to look. Guards broke in as soon as I got it.”

“Hmm. We can figure something out, maybe a mini EMP or... I know someone who might be able to hack it”

“My bag in here?” Erin gestured to the back of the veetol.

“Yes, it should be behind you. Do you have something that can open it?” he sounded surprised.

“Something like that.” She said, pulling out her plasma pistol.

Zavians eyes widened,

“No, no no no, do NOT shoot that in h-”

Erin shot the lock, smoke and sparks spitting out as the lights blinked in dismay. The lid unceremoniously popped open.

“Second lock I broke today” she snorted.

“Congratulations” Zavian sighed. “Did it open at least? What’s in it?”

Erin pulled the lid all the way open, revealing packaging foam to keep whatever it was safe. She pulled it out carefully, wary of whatever she had just risked her life for. Her fingers shook as she unwrapped the packaging, she wasn’t sure if it was from her injuries or from fear. Or maybe even hope.

“Careful. We don’t know what it is, it could be volatile” He sounded as nervous as Erin felt.

She nodded, continuing to carefully open the packaging. This was it, her ticket home, her ticket back to Evelyn. She just wanted to hold her wife again, to see her smile, hear her voice. Finally, she had pulled away the last of the packaging and stared at the object she held in disbelief.

“What is it? It is a weapon? A hard drive?” Zavian was not even pretending to be looking where he was driving, leaning over to see what was in the lock box.

“Uh, no. It appears to be a piece of late 1900’s technology. Probably a children’s toy.”

“What?!”

She held the item up for Zavian to see. It was a small light gray box, meant to be handheld. Half of it

was taken up with a light green screen surrounded by a deeper gray border. Below, a black cross shaped button on one side and two red buttons on the other, then two more oblong buttons in between. A name was once written below the screen, but now it was faded, only a few letters still remaining.

“That... Would explain the amount of money Zhou spent.” Zavian deflated, his confident exterior fading in disappointment. He didn’t look determined or ambitious or smug, he just looked tired. Erin felt the same, slumping in her seat. The realization she was still stuck here, millions of miles from home, crashed down on her. She had been riding on the hope that this would be it, the end to her three long, lonely months on Earth. Instead, she had risked her life to steal a toy from a little girl. Her throat tightening in frustration and longing. She just wanted to go home and share Christmas with Evelyn.

She stared down at the toy, letting out a shaky sigh. It didn’t have to be a shitty christmas for everyone. She swallowed down her longing, her exhaustion, trying to loosen her tight throat before she spoke. Her voice was still strained as she said

“We have a new mission now”

* * *

Zhou could feel sweat pooling in his suit in uncomfortable places. This was absolutely NOT his night. First the chandelier had crashed during the party, then some hooligan had broken into his house, and now he finds out what they’ve stolen. Just when he thought it couldn’t get any worse.

Across from him at the dinner table, Yifei emphatically kicked her legs under her chair.

“I KNOW Santa got it for me this year, I just KNOW it! I can’t wait to play it! I hope he didn't forget the battery converter. That would suck. What game do you think I should play first, Daddy?” Yifei didn’t leave him a chance to answer before she continued her excited chattering.

She had been begging for a real, original Gameboy for years and it had taken him that long to track one down. This wasn’t the first one he had found, but it was the first one that worked. He had finalized the deal a week ago, and now someone had stolen it from his home on Christmas EVE, He swallowed nervously as Yifei kept talking, trying to find a way to let her down for the 3rd Christmas in a row.

“Now, Honey, you have to remember, Santa can’t always get us exactly what we want”

She pushed her food around on her plate, her excitement quickly draining. “I know Daddy. But I’ve been so good this year. It’s what I want most!”

Zhou sighed, hating to see her so deflated. He loved his bouncy, excited little girl. He had almost literally gone to the moon and back to get her what she wanted, and now he wouldn’t get to see the look on her face when she opened it up the next morning.

He pushed his chair back and stood up,

“Alright, well we'll find out tomorrow. Do you want to go leave the milk and cookies out for Santa?”

She nodded excitedly, her spark coming back quickly at the suggestion.

They gathered the treats before heading to the living room, which was still a slight disaster after the party. The help had luckily cleaned up the fallen chandelier, so they didn't have to worry about broken glass. As they headed over to the Christmas tree, Yifei stopped dead in her tracks. Zhou stopped too, trying to figure out what had happened. Then he saw it. Sitting there under the tree with a little red and green bow was the Gameboy. Yifei squealed and ran over to the tree, dropping to her knees as she pulled the handheld out from under it.

“Daddy, Daddy look! Look! Santa did it he brought me my Gameboy!”

Zhou stared in disbelief, before he noticed the note. He stepped around Yifei, who was hugging the Gameboy, and picked it up. Zhou watched his daughter excitedly check over the Gameboy when something caught his eye. He looked out the window to see a light trailing off over the cityscape and into the Christmas Eve night sky.

3. Spirited to Stay, by Charles Whitt

Blanche stared at the walls of the cell she was in, on a planet called Phansa. The floor was solid dirt, and her hair had gotten dusty from when she had been thrown on the floor by the guards. She had nearly thrown the soldiers across the room in retaliation, but the quantum-teleport barriers meant that she couldn't take a step outside, or she'd be transported instantly back to the ground. Normally, Lady Aesc was around to figure a way out...but Aesc had abandoned Blanche to a cell. This wasn't the first time she had done that to Blanche, but it was the first time it had been done in the freezing cold. Something about this entire adventure worried Blanche. It started when Lady Aesc even mentioned it. Usually Lady Aesc appeared in front of Blanche with a mischievous grin, and slyly suggesting that there was fun to be had. Some madcap idea that involved saving some innocents and stopping evildoers. Blanche would say no, and then Aesc would slowly seduce her with stories of how fun it'd be, and Blanche would agree, willingly in that unwilling way. But this time, Aesc hadn't even asked her. Blanche had awakened to find Lady Aesc staring at the wall, looking forlorn. Her blue frock coat was on the side, as the woman was pacing around, muttering to herself.

"Are you alright?" asked Blanche.

"Am I alright? Well, no. It depends. No, definitely not," said Aesc. "I've been asked to do something that I don't want to do."

"Then don't do it," said Blanche plainly.

"Normally, I would just tell them to go stick themselves with a rusty spork. Have you ever tried to eat with a rusty spork? It's terrible, just terrible," said Aesc.

"I have never seen a spork in my life," said Blanche. "Did you just make up that word?"

"Must show you one. I think I saw one in a Martian shop over in a galaxy," Aesc pointed her finger off into the distance, as if trying to remember "...that way."

"What were you asked to do?" asked Blanche.

"To retrieve someone. Not a hard task, but it's a bit difficult for my free spirit, actually having to follow orders," said Aesc.

"I've never seen you follow orders."

"There's a lot of me you haven't seen," said Aesc. Tapping her nose, she said "Well, I'm off. Got a job to do."

"Wait," said Blanche. She crossed her arms. "Not even going to invite me."

The Lady smiled. "Should I? Aren't you tired of my trips now?"

To be fair, getting chased by a rabid cyborg-dragon on her last trip had almost taken the sheen from the whole adventuring thing. But yet, it also excited Blanche, the unpredictability of it all. Without it, there was just...silence. Boredom. And that meant thinking about Dusk.

"Not yet," said Blanche, refusing to give Aesc the satisfaction of smiling back. "And maybe I can make the trip less of a drag for you."

Aesc's eyes twinkled. "Yeah, you probably can. Actually, I could use your help."

Apparently, help involved getting thrown into a jail cell on a random planet. On a utterly freezing planet. This particular place wasn't anywhere in particular—a random colony sphere, with a society that had a somewhat advanced level of technology, but a straight up feudalistic society. There was a king and a queen of each sector of the planet, along with a higher "planet authority leader" that no one

had ever met. The sector that Blanche and Aesc had landed on was currently in the throes of a royal ritual, some sort of Christmas festival. Blanche didn't have much fun at festivals—it always felt like people were papering over their yearly screwups by getting together on 1 day of merriment. No, she wasn't fun at parties, why did you ask?

Somehow, Lady Aesc had swiped some festival costumes, and after some resistance (“No Aesc. No. Don't you dare bring that red frilly thing to me--!”), both Aesc and Blanche had been dancing in the royal ballroom. A whole random crowd was gathered here, all looking rather rich. Blanche kinda hated them already. It felt off, though maybe she wasn't used to the crowd. Aesc, of course, was perfectly comfortable. The queen and king had been overlooking the party, smiling appreciatively. The king was a young blonde man, his clothes a clean white linen cloth, encrusted with purple rings. The queen had long red hair, with a circular face, and red clothes, with the same purple rings on her, as well as some on her ears. Her bright green eyes darted around the floor, and it took a second for Blanche to realize the queen was looking at her. Blanche bowed, and the queen nodded, and turned to look at something else.

Giant robots. Small aviooid creatures, scurrying about. Flying goblin pets. They were all mingling freely here. It was fun. So why was Blanche upset?

That's when Aesc changed the jukebox to belt out some odd tune about raining men, which:

A) Destroyed their element of surprise.

B) Created a fiasco that ended with her in prison.

Only now, as the king walked into her prison cell, did Blanche realized she wasn't sure why she was here. Aesc had actually never told her the goal of this entire mission. Usually, Aesc was an over-sharer, so why had she forgotten this detail--

“Who are you?” asked the king. His browless eyes peered into hers in an attempt to be threatening.

“Who are you?” asked Blanche.

“Me? I'm the King of Ariadne. My name is Atlun. And you just appeared at my court with no warning, and attacked my guards.”

“Yeah. They were a little aggressive, so I was aggressive back,” said Blanche. She stretched herself against the chains holding her to the floor.

“You defeated men twice your size,” said Atlun. He actually looked scared.

“Your men may have size, but I'm not sure they could win a bar fight,” said Blanche. His eyes widened, and it occurred to her that perhaps scaring the man in charge of the sector was a bad plan. “I don't have anything against your sector. It seems lovely.”

“Sure. But my queen has never seen you before. Says you're new. So, where did you come from? Are you a Christmas spirit?”

“What?” asked Blanche.

“Our legends have records of spirits showing up before, on the solstice. And your hair...it's so unusual,” said Atlun. He was pointing at her bright white fluff of hair.

A series of responses flew through her head. One was bafflement, the other was laughing at his stupidity, one was screaming at the universe. But, looking at his naive foolish face, another thought occurred to her.

“Yes. I am a spirit. I am Blanche. My other...fellow spirit is here, as well. We're watching you, Atlun. To see if you're worthy,” said Blanche, adding emphasis on the last word.

“And if I'm worthy?” he asked, frowning. “What do I get?”

She leaned over, and gave a small smile, the sort that Aesc would have given. “You already know.”

It was a pure non-answer, meant to play on his own preconceptions. It worked. He looked, quite frankly, like she was a deity reborn.

So many trees. Not that Lady Aesc minded trees—she'd met some very nice ones. Even the ones that didn't talk tended to be very charming. But, these trees had gotten in her way. She had been skipping along a path, looking for the item that the Firmament had told her to look for, when the branches started to make her trip. How rude. Yet, she continued on the path, and then a branch walloped her on the face. Repeatedly. Finally, she jumped over the offending branch, and could just start to see a hint of silver in the distance, that hinted that she was close...

And then the roots sprang out of the trees, wrapped around her frock, and dragged her up into the sky. Aesc found herself hanging upside down, unable to move. She hoped Blanche was having a better time of it.

A woman came down the path. She was a redhead, with a spherical face, and pale skin. Blue eyes looked up at Aesc, with a glance of almost anger.

"Hello. My name is Lady Aesculapius. Or just Lady Aesc. I've gotten a bit tangled up," said Aesc.

The woman frowned. Pursing her lips, she said "Why are you here? On my planet?"

"Just passing through. Looking for an item," said Aesc. "It's like a metal pod."

"You're not from around here," said the woman. "Not this sector. Or this planet."

"Right on all counts," said Aesc, trying to twist out from the branches. If only she had brought her shears.... "Now, mind helping me down?"

"Did the Firmament send you?" asked the woman.

Aesc stopped struggling. The woman saw Aesc's look of surprise, and shook her head.

"So, it's you. You're the Rainapelios--," said Aesc.

"I prefer Raina," said Raina curtly. "I knew you'd come eventually, or some form of agent. I thought I'd have more time, though."

Raina started walking away.

"Um, help here?" called out Aesc. Raina didn't stop.

Drat.

Not in all her life, had she ever been treated so nicely. Servants gathered around her, ministering to her every need. If she was thirsty, several glasses of water would be given to her. If she was hungry, a whole feast was brought to her. King Atlun was very much intending to stay in the favor of the spirits, and Blanche didn't mind helping him. Of course, while enjoying this comfort, she continued her search for Aesc, who was nowhere to be found.

Raina, the queen, was the only one who didn't seem convinced by Blanche's assigned "spirithood." She never actually said any actual disagreement, but Blanche could read a dark undercurrent in Raina's eyes. Raina would smile and laugh whenever Atlun extolled the virtues of how the spirit of Myrddin had finally blessed him, and yet...

One day, while Blanche was brushing her white hair, she noticed Raina watching her from the distance.

"Hello, spirit," said Raina. Her bright blue eyes peered into Blanche, and somehow it worried Blanche more than it should.

"Hello, Queen Raina. Why'd you come here?"

Raina didn't say anything. She picked up a recorder from Blanche's desk, and started playing it. That recorder was an ancient device—why was she so comfortable with it. "You know, the first spirit to come here was supposedly an old man. He waited, and waited, and waited, and brung the people across the stars to this planet."

Blanche had heard the stories of the spirits many times, from Atlun. "So?"

"My husband is a fool. I love him, but he is a fool," said Raina. Fixing her gaze onto Blanche, she slammed the recorder on the desk, and snarled "I am not. You should leave. I know what you and Aesc

want, but I am not going to let it happen. The Firmament will not get what they want.”

“Wait. You know who Aesc is? Do you know where she is?”

“Where she is? I left her next to my pod. I expect she escaped my defense systems by now.”

“If you knew I wasn’t a spirit--”

“To see how much you knew. When it became apparent you knew nothing, I decided that it was time for you to go. Let’s not make a fuss—I don’t want my husband getting worried,” said Raina.

What? How much did this woman know, and why was she—wait, the Firmament?

“What do the Firmament want with you--”

“Out,” said Raina. “This is me being nice. As the queen, I can have you sent to the dungeon, forever.”

“I don’t do well with threats,” retorted Blanche, who regretted that when, a few minutes later, a group of soldiers with lances were escorting her down the hall. These soldiers were wearing heavy-duty armor, too hard for Blanche to kick through. Apparently the queen had learned from the last time Blanche

Fortunately, at that exact moment, Aesc crashed through the ceiling.

“Hello, I am Lady Aesc. I’m here for your queen,” said Aesc, her hands on her hips in a dramatic hero-pose. Her mouth formed into a cute grin upon seeing Blanche, and she giggled. “Blanche! Was starting to miss you. I see you’ve made friends.”

“These aren’t my friends. They’re my jailers.”

“Ahh. Good. Run.”

Blanche immediately ran down the hall, with Aesc following. Aesc threw her Foc up in the air, letting it hang, before it started to grow slightly. She grabbed the expanding ball, and grasped Blanche’s hand, as they both floated up into the air. The FoC hit the window with a crash, and the 2 began to soar across the field.

“We’re nearly out of here. Just need to get past the--”

An arrow whooshed past Lady Aesc, and she went off-balance, causing them to crash onto the field.

“Did you think this through?” hissed Blanche, as she could hear more arrows being cocked.

“I thought most of this through,” said Aesc. She looked up at the rows of guards lined up against them, and frowned. “Outrunning that is gonna be...difficult. Raina, I wish to talk to you.”

“Wait!” cried out Atlun. He emerged in front of the guards, and stared at Blanche in confusion. “What’s going on?”

Aesc tried to speak, but Blanche cut her off. “My great king, this is my fellow spirit, Aesc. There was some confusion once she arrived, but it has all been dealt with now.”

“It has? Why did the queen order your arrest, then?”

Blanche was lost for words. What could she explain without getting herself s

“What happens between the queen and the spirits is not for you to know,” said Aesc dramatically.

Waving her hands in the air, she said “The queen and us must discuss a group known as the Firmament. There was a confusion along the way, leading to an arrest. Do not interfere further, lest we deliver great malice upon you!”

Atlun looked confused. “The Firmament?”

“Your queen would rather we talk about it in private. You can ask her if you’d like?”

“Or you can arrest us. And then you’ll have to deal with--”

“Great malice. I know,” said the king.

Aesc crossed her arms at being cut off for the second time today.

“My dear,” said Raina, who had just arrived, “why aren’t these prisoners in a cell?”

“They say they’ll deliver great malice if we do so,” said Atlun.

“So will I, if they aren’t arrested,” said Raina angrily. “They aren’t spirits.”

Atlun stared at Blanche. She shrugged back.

“Guards, arrest them,” said Atlun. “We’ll force the truth out of them.”

“Indeed. I’ll confess.,” announced Aesc. “I LOVE confessing! Especially about the birthing pod in the back, and the Firmament--”

“Be quiet, or I’ll have you--” started the queen.

“And all the Firmament soldiers who will be here if I don’t come back--”

“Stop,” said Raina to the guards. She gave Blanche and Aesc the most bloodthirsty glance Blanche had seen in a while. She whispered to the king, who frowned, and shook his head. Smiling, she kissed him on the cheek tenderly, and then beckoned her and Aesc to follow her. The king followed them with his eyes, but said nothing. The cheer she had seen the last few days from him was gone, and Blanche started to feel guilty.

As the queen led them out into who-knows-where, Blanche wondered why it had been so easy to manipulate him. It hadn’t even been a concern—manipulate for an objective, namely survival.

But...surely people were supposed to at least question themselves? After having seen her future evil self (now nullified future), Blanche wondered how moral she really was. It had never been a concern before, but now that she traveled with Aesc, every moral failing she had caused her worry.

The queen led them to a ring of trees. Within them were several paintings. A faded one of an old man with white long hair, a more vibrant one of a young man, with a tone slightly lighter than Aesc’s chocolate cheeks, and one of Queen Raina, looking slightly younger, with short hair. A man was sitting in a chair, painting something else. Raina nodded to him.

“That’s my private painter,” said Raina. Sitting down on a tree stump, she said “Alright, spirits. This is going to be complicated. What do the Firmament want from me?”

“The Firmament want you to return to the fold. For the sake of the universe,” said Aesc. Blanche noted her normal smile was gone from her face.

“‘For the sake of the universe.’ How old are you? Which generation? Hope they didn’t send a youngling to grab me,” said Raina. Her Scottish accent had gone way up suddenly.

“Hold on. Which gener--” started Blanche.

“I’m not that young. She’s human,” said Aesc.

“She a pet?” asked Raina.

“Is your king a pet?” asked Aesc.

“No. So, is she your lover?” asked Raina, smirking.

Blanche felt her cheeks burn.

“That’s not relevant. Stop changing the subject,” said Aesc.

Raina was looking at Blanche, though. Raina’s smile grew wider, as she roamed her eyes over Blanche.

“You have no idea what’s going on, do you?”

Blanche remained tight-lipped.

“Let me make it clearer. I am Rainakelipsioda, Arbiter of Community. Born long before you when the great forgetting was still memory, to good marks. I have travelled on many planets, and I work to promote community wherever I go. From kingdoms, to collective hive-minds, to kids teaming up in play-spaces, it’s all rooted in me.”

“So, you’re not actually even from this planet?”

“I was the first,” said Raina proudly. She gestured to the picture of an old man in the corner. “I looked like that, back then. This was actually an accidental stop along the way.”

“To where?” asked Blanche.

“To my festering, stagnant, place I called my homeworld,” spat Raina. “They needed me there to promote their galactic objectives. I was supposed to report back.”

“But you didn’t. The Firmament suddenly lost track of you. You’ve been AWOL for millenia,” said

Aesc.

“Everywhere I go, a community follows. It’s in my blood, my essence. If I stay anywhere, soon 1 person, then 3 people, then a whole group. Whole cities have been built around me.”

“And so has this whole sector?” asked Aesc.

“The whole planet’s population. Each drawn here by my presence,” said Raina. “I’ve watched it grow, and grow, and grow.”

“So, you just don’t want to leave because you’re used to being here?” asked Blanche.

“No. Not just that,” asked Raina. “All those groups, all of those people—whenever I leave, they disperse. Spats come up, disagreements, or just boredom—any and all of those are how they slowly break apart. It’s inevitable.”

The painter continued to work, as Raina stared out into the distance.

“And so you don’t want to break up this planet’s civilization,” said Blanche.

Raina nodded.

“Absolutely absurd,” said Aesc. She shook her head. “And irresponsible.”

“Irresponsible?” asked Blanche.

“Utterly. Right now, the galactic community is on a precipice. Control over Mars is still being negotiated. People are going off to the stars, meeting new cultures, new people, mingling in all sorts of ways. And, if they are going to survive, they need community. They need to learn to see past the differences, and to bond together. You are the Arbiter of Community. You are necessary if any of it is going to work. And you can’t do that if you’ve decided to shack up on 1 planet. A waste of your potential.”

“How dare you talk to me about potential?” asked Raina. “Do you know how old I am? I remember when humans were still barely scraping by, and when the premiere Terran race before them were crowing about how they were unbeatable!”

“What race before humans? There’s no record of--”

“They were deleted from Firmament records. There’s a lot of things that aren’t mentioned in the Firmament records. Try asking about those ridiculous jellyfish sometime, and see how your Academy professors react,” said Raina. “I’ve lived. And you know what I saw?”

“I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me.”

“Pain. Fighting. Disharmony. I tried my very best to give community. And every time a new group spread, they just oppressed another group. Romans hate the British. British hate Irish. Then they come together, and hate non-whites. Then they came together, and hated cyborgs. Then they started hating non-Terrans. Every group, just hating each other. Every community, hating another.”

“People are more than that. They come together, eventually--”

“Oh yes. But they always hate. No matter what I do. The Firmament thinks I’ll help bring them together? It never works. It’s never enough.”

“You’re just being petulant,” said Aesc.

“You’re just being naive. I suppose I couldn’t expect more from a Firmament stooge.”

“How dare you?” snarled Aesc. “I am--”

Blanche grabbed Aesc’s arm. “Let’s have a quick side-chat.”

Aesc let herself dragged away, but called back “Raina, get ready to leave. No matter what you think, you’re done here.”

Lady Aesc didn’t know what to think. She had been hoping for a simple snatch-and-retrieve mission. Not some argument with a whiny Firmament. And especially not an annoying one.

Blanche was staring at Aesc now. She could tell the human was mad about something. Possibly the arrest and being left in this place. Aesc could feel Blanche still healing from some cuts and bruises

from the struggle with the guards earlier, and she surreptitiously quickened Blanche's healing, kickstarting the blood cells' clotting and knitting. Blanche would have been annoyed at the help, with a "I'm good, no thanks", but Aesc liked helping her companion.

"Raina has a point," said Blanche.

"About what?" asked Aesc.

"About...why does she have to return to the Firmament?" asked Blanche.

"Without her, the space-faring community will go into chaos," said Aesc.

"It's already in chaos. Dawn, The Great Assimilation, they're all quarrelling with each other," said Blanche. "It's the natural state of things. I doubt some alien returning to your Firmament group will fix that.

Aesc sighed. Blanche couldn't understand. "Blanche, Firmaments aren't just aliens. We're sort of interfaces for universal properties. If Raina decides to leave her position, it affects all of history. In countless universes. People may never come together again. Life will become more solitary for everyone. That just won't do."

"So, what? She just has to sit back and take up some throne?" asked Blanche. "Life's already shitty. Even with all that "community-building", people are terrible to each other. Should we take away her freedom, and maybe even destroy this whole planet's people, for the sake of some lost cause?"

"Yes!" shouted Aesc. Her forcefulness surprised both herself and Blanche.

"Why?"

These questions reminded her of the sort of thing she would have asked her teachers, in school. It annoyed Aesc to think she was turning into her teachers. Aesc sighed, and composing herself, said "Because what you humans never get is that no matter how bad things get, they could much worse." Blanche opened her mouth, but Aesc cut her off: "I don't like playing as an agent for the Firmament. Trust me, I'd rather just ignore them, and normally I'd help Raina hide. But this is different. Worlds are at stake here."

"So is this one," said Blanche.

"If I don't bring Raina back, then the Firmament will send others. And they won't be so nice."

Blanche looked to the distance, her nose crinkled in thinking. "Then we need to ensure that this place will survive her leaving."

"I don't know how to do that," admitted Aesc.

"Well...maybe she should just bring them with her?" asked Blanche.

"Wha—oh. That can't work," said Aesc. "Wait. That can work. Oh, you're a genius!"

Atlun frowned. He looked at Raina, who was nodding appreciatively. Then he turned back to Aesc, and said "We're all emigrating to a planet?"

"Yes. The spirits say so. Giant planetary collapse. So you're going on a thing called the Foc. It belongs to Raina. It's a moving spaceship thingie. It'll keep your people together."

Blanche nodded. "It'll let you stay close to your queen while she...communes with spirits. For the sake of the universe."

Atlun stayed silent for a moment. Then he said "And if we say no?"

"That may not be an option," said Raina. "Aesc...came up with a compromise to work between me and the spirits. The alternatives may be perilous."

Shaking his head, Atlun said "If you say so."

"Wonderful!" said Aesc.

Blanche wasn't so sure. It didn't feel right. She had never liked the idea of a set fate, even before her future evil self. For her, the future, whenever it was certain, was never good. Forcing Raina to take up

her “rightful place” struck a bad note in her gut.

Only half the residents of Raina’s planet left on her Foc. The rest were too scared, too set in their ways, or just too physically weak to leave. It had hurt Raina to leave anyone behind, and it only made Blanche question herself more.

“Raina’s people will stay together now,” said Aesc. “I love a happy compromise.”

“Is it happy?” asked Blanche.

Aesc gave an enigmatic smile. It made Blanche shiver.

“We’ve just helped the future, Blanche,” said Aesc.

“Aesc, if it was you in Raina’s place--”

“I never would have left. But I’m a fool,” said Aesc. She started a song on the Lirian jukebox, which she had swiped, and started to move her body to the beat. Blanche rolled her eyes, but joined in.

On Phansa, there’s a legend. Every 100 years, on a random hill, if you wait till the first rain, a redheaded woman will appear. She’ll just walk into town, and observe. She won’t say a word. Some people say she matches the face of a woman who left during the migration, but that’s obviously impossible.

She usually leaves within a few days. But, the legend says, if you were to stop and ask her why she’s here, she’d say:

“To see if they stayed together, after all.”

4. Merry Christmas, Mr. Nixon by James Wylder

The dog was barking, the grandchildren were asleep, and Richard Milhous Nixon was eating the cookie's they'd left for Santa Claus. He'd told his kids they could have them, but who cared. He slumped a little in his wing chair and watched the fire burn. That's where he'd gone wrong, he hadn't burned enough things while he had the chance. He took a sip from the milk the grand kids had left, paused, and grabbed the whiskey. First he drank a little, then he drank a little more, then gave up on the pretense he was doing anything other than stewing in his memories tonight.

The dog was barking. He startled, sloshing some of his drink onto his nightgown as a crystal orb flew out from the fireplace, and whizzed around the room. It shimmered, like something out of a fairy tale, and from it two women dropped. One of them was a brown skinned woman, Nixon's internal thoughts used a not-nice term for her we will skip here, who was wearing a blue peacoat, a gray scarf with hedgehogs on it, and a slouch cap over her curly hair. The other was a white woman wearing black combat armor, like something out of a sci-fi movie, with long straight white hair. He knew them both. He didn't want to see either of them. The one with the scarf was Lady Aesculapius, who was cheerful and annoying. The other was, to his surprise, Blanche Combine, who had tried to kill him once.

He didn't have time to say anything before Lady Aesc started shouting, but he did get in a scowl.

"Merry Christmas Mr. Nixon!" Lady Aesculapius said, "Ho ho ho! Jingle bells! Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer! Mistletoe! Donkey Kong! Chestnuts Roasting On an Open Fire!"

"Leave," he yelled back.

"Ho ho ho!" she replied, "that's no way to be in the Christmas spirit mister Nixon! Why, I brought you a special present. Isn't that right, Blanche?"

There was a silence.

"I said, isn't that right, BLANCHE?"

"Right, yes," Blanche answered, "Um, yes, I have a thing to say."

Nixon just stared at her.

"Yeah, so...I used to be part of an intra-universal terrorist cult, which I started in the future and recruited myself for--"

"Too much backstory," Aesc cut in.

"Sorry. Anyways, I'm not doing that anymore, or in the future, so I'd like to..." she let out a deep sigh, "apologize for trying to murder you and everyone else at the concert venue I was going to blow up to kill you in it."

Nixon got up, glass in hand, and got close enough he could give her a good look in the eyes, "No," he said.

Blanche's eyes started watering, "No?"

"What do you mean, 'No'?" Lady Aesc said, her fist clenching.

"I mean, no. I don't forgive you."

"It's Christmas! Happy times! Miracles! Good things! Can't you just find it your heart to--"

Blanche cut her off, “No, no that’s fair. I did a lot of bad things. I put so many people at risk, I could have killed hundreds of people there and--”

“I don’t care about them, you could have killed me. And you could have told me about Watergate. That would have been a real Christmas present. An eye for an eye, a gift for a gift. That’s how this world works. I did things you can’t even imagine, and I didn’t bat an eye. Look at you, you’re a mess and you couldn’t even pull the trigger.”

“Wow, okay,” Blanche said, “Uh, I retract my apology.”

Aesc nodded, “Fair. Well, that’s disappointing. I see you’re just not a very nice guy Mr. Nixon, so uh, we won’t be giving you your Christmas present which was in fact to let you fix some of the things you regret, but it’s clear all you regret was getting caught so...” she did finger guns at him and winked, “bye Felicia.”

“Who the hell is Felicia? Is she...” he squinted at them, “you two are...”

Aesculapius sighed, and pulled Blanch aside quickly, “I need to ask a favor.”

Blanch nodded, ready for a mission, “I’m ready.”

“We need to make out. Platonically. I want to kiss you platonically. For no other reason than to piss of Nixon,” Aesc lied, pointing up at the mistletoe above them.

“Okay. I think I can manage that. That’s not something I’ve thought about before, repeatedly. As long as we’re just making out as friends,” Blanche lied.

“So that’s okay?”

“Totally. Let’s get started,” Blanche said, then toned down her enthusiasm, “I accept the mission.”

“I can still hear you,” Nixon said.

Aesc pulled Blanche close to her, pushed her white hair back, letting her fingers linger through the strands, and kissed her. Blanche wrapped her arms around her.

Nixon made a noise, and the pair of them both freed a hand to flick him off, as the Factory of Crystal swept by, vanishing them both away to the sound of sleigh-bells.

There was only silence, and a lonely old man with his whiskey. He took another sip, and noticed that his stocking on the fireplace was no longer empty. He got up, a little wobbly, and looked into it.

“Coal,” he sighed, “of course.”

5. No Holidays, Please by Rachel Johnson

Aya Rodriguez is having a terrible day.

It's not that anything particular has happened to make it terrible. It's a day like any other, but when you live on the Magellan, better known as the Rat Maze – that wretched hive of scum and villainy – every day by default is terrible.

"I'm just saying," Aya complains. "I thought our first paying job would be a bit more, y'know... glamorous."

"Glamor doesn't pay the bills," Josie remarks mildly from next to her. The two of them are perched on a catwalk across from a bar they've been scoping out for a while now. Josie's got a pair of binoculars pressed firmly to her face, peering intently through the bar's windows. The binoculars are the old-fashioned type, like the kind you'd see on Earth in the 21st century. Josie claimed she'd swiped them from a traveling history exhibit, and Aya's inclined to believe her. Josie might look sweet and innocent, but she's an incorrigible filch. Not that she's one to talk, she supposes – Aya's own specialty is breaking into places she's definitely not supposed to be breaking into.

"Anything interesting yet?" Aya watches a group of scruffy men enter the bar, trying to stave off her mounting boredom. One of the men has three arms, which is the most exciting thing she's seen in hours.

"She's still at the bar. Looks like she's waiting for someone, maybe? Oh, wait." Josie lowers the binoculars a bit and pulls a face. "She's on her *fifth* root beer."

"Five?" Aya asks incredulously. "How is she affording that? Lemme have a look." She holds out her hand for the binoculars and Josie pulls away with low whine. "Oh, c'mon. You've been hogging those things for ages."

"Oh, fine." Josie hands them over, a bit unwillingly.

"You're cute when you pout." Aya raises the binoculars to her own face. It takes her a bit to refocus them on their targets and for a moment she panics, thinking she's lost them. Then the face of the woman they're after fills the lenses and she relaxes. She's a strange one, that's for sure. Dark skin, dark hair, bright green eyes. She's wearing a scarf with little horned animals Aya doesn't recognize on it and a tall conical hat with a pompom on the end of it. According to Josie, she's been pulling various objects that couldn't have possibly fit out of her coat pockets all night. Aya watches as she proceeds to just that, offering what looks to be like a long string of tinsel to the woman sitting next to her, who shakes her head. This one looks a lot more like the typical Rat Maze denizen. She's wearing beat up black combat armor, her white hair cropped short. She's glancing around the bar, seemingly casual, but Aya recognizes the look in her eyes. Cold, practical. It's the look of someone always on edge. The woman turns her head, and for a moment it seems like she's looking directly at her. Aya jerks back, startled. There's a sudden *ping!* and Aya glances at Josie. "Your butt's beeping," she says with half a smirk. "It's probably Ze." Josie scrambles to pull her communicator out of her back pocket. "She's been sending me pictures." She presses a button and a grainy, glitchy holophoto of their friend posing in front of a menorah flickers into life in the air. The text below the holo reads *MISS YOU GUYS* with multiple exclamation points.

“At least someone’s having fun.” Aya raises the binoculars again, a fond smile playing on her lips. A flash of movement catches her eye and she swings them over to the bar’s back exit just in time to see three men dressed in black enter. A sudden wave of pure ice sweeps over her, dread filling her stomach. “Oh, *hell*.”

“What?” Josie reaches out for the binoculars and Aya hands them over wordlessly, hands shaking. She feels sick. Josie takes a look, and Aya can hear her breath hitch. “Oh no. Oh no, no, what are they doing here?” “I don’t know! I don’t-“ Aya can feel herself start to panic and she sucks in a huge breath.

“Okay. Okay, let’s just keep calm. We don’t know what they’re here for, right? It doesn’t involve us.”

“I think it does,” Josie says grimly, handing the binoculars back over. “Wha-“ Aya shoves them to her face so fast she’s surprised she doesn’t give herself a black eye. She sees the white-haired woman lean over to her companion, gesturing to the Men in Black. They’re just standing in the corner, staring, and Aya has to suppress a shudder. The woman in the hat nods, shoves the tinsel back into her pocket, stands up, and the pair head to the back exit. The Men in Black follow after them.

Aya sits back, a little stunned. Josie takes the binoculars back from her and slips them into her coat pocket. “Guess we found out who they were waiting for.” She chews on her lip for a moment. “I think we should go warn them. The ones we were watching, I mean.”

“Are you nuts?” Aya hisses. “Do you remember what happened last time we ran into one of those guys? We almost died!” “Yeah, which is why I think we should warn them! I don’t want any innocent people getting killed!”

“We don’t know they’re innocent,” Aya mutters, and Josie shoots her a look. Aya lets out a long, exasperated sigh, fighting the urge to scream. “Okay, *fine*. What do we got, weapon-wise?” She reaches into her own pocket as she asks, fingers closing around her raygun. It’s small, and it jams half the time, and it took her entire savings to get it, but it’s better than nothing. “I’ve got...” Josie rummages for a bit. “A couple of smoke bombs and – oh hey! Stun grenade!” She pulls it out. “Forgot I had that. Dunno if it still works, though.”

“Great,” Aya says glumly. “A bunch of prank toys and two weapons that might not even work against three genetically-altered super soldiers.” She takes another deep breath. “Well, let’s get going if we’re going.” Josie nods and puts the grenade back into her pocket carefully. “If we go that way,” she points at a catwalk above their heads, “we can get around to the alley behind the bar.”

“Super. Gimme a lift.” Josie does and Aya squirms onto the catwalk, them metal creaking ominously beneath her. “This thing’s rusted all to hell,” she puffs as she hauls Josie up beside her.

“What else is new,” Josie says, and Aya lets out a small laugh as they edge their way along the catwalk. She can hear voices up ahead, but they’re still too far away yet for her to make out the words. “I’m sure we can sort this all out peacefully, don’t you think?” Someone says as they come to the end of the catwalk. Aya drops flat and pulls Josie down beside her, peering out at the alley some thirty feet below. The woman in the hat is holding her hands up in a calming matter, one of them hovering in front of her companion, who has a gun trained on the men in black. The men in black are for their part standing completely still. Aya doesn’t think they’re even breathing.

“I don’t think peace talks are on the table here,” the white-haired woman says, and the other woman frowns at her.

“Don’t be silly, Blanche. Peace talks are always on my table, along with toast, popcorn, jellybeans...” She trails off. “Now I’m hungry. Give me the gun, Blanche.” She holds out her hand. Blanche hesitates, and she raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, alright. You better know what you’re doing.” Blanche mutters as she relinquishes the weapon.

“I almost never know what I’m doing,” the woman in the hat says confidently, and turns to face the Men in Black. Aya can barely believe what’s happening. This woman has to be either crazy, or suicidal, or both.

“What is she doing?” Josie hisses in her ear.

“I don’t know. You think we should step in?”

“Let’s see how this plays out,” Josie responds, and Aya nods.

The Men in Black all extend their right hand in unison, and she tenses. “The Factory,” they say, voices filtered and distorted. “Give it to us.” The woman in the hat pulls a face. “I don’t think so.”

“We are not asking.” The Men in Black take a step forward, and then several things happen all in a jumble.

First, Blanche pulls another gun from seemingly out of nowhere. Second, Aya finds herself yelling something that sounds like AIM FOR THEIR HEADS, which causes Blanche to startle and instead aim the gun at her and Josie. Three, Aya shifts her weight backward to get out of the scope of the gun and the catwalk chooses that exact moment to crumble in a scream of twisted metal, sending her and Josie plummeting to the hard ground below. And four, the woman in the hat pulls something out of her pocket and tosses it in the air, and everything goes white.

Aya finds herself facedown on a hard surface and groans, doing a mental inspection of her body. First, she’s alive, which is always a good thing, and second, she doesn’t appear to have any broken bones. Or any injuries at all, really, which is odd considering she’d been heading for the floor of the Rat Maze at top speed.

She sits up with a groan and freezes when she finds herself staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Blanche. None of that.” Aya spots the woman in the hat out of the corner of her eye, her tone disapproving. “Where’d you even get that gun from anyway? I thought I took it.”

“These are the girls that were following us, Aesc,” Blanche says, ignoring the question.

“Yes, I know.”

“Who are you?” Aya blurts out suddenly. She’s feeling reasonably confident that Blanche won’t shoot her. Hopefully. “Lady Aesculapius.” She gives Aya a wink. “My friends – like Blanche here, who is going to put down that gun, thank you Blanche – call me Aesc.” She holds out a hand and when Aya takes it, hauls her to her feet with so much force Aya almost goes flying. She then does the same to Josie. Aya takes a moment to look around. They’re standing on a flat surface made out of what looks like blue crystal, stretching as far she can see. In the distance there are what looks like buildings and cities, made out of the same material. Aya’s never been anywhere like this before. She was born surrounded by metal, and she’s spent her entire life surrounded by metal. This is the first time she’s ever seen anything else.

She turns her attention back to Lady Aesc when the woman claps her hands suddenly. “Well!” She says cheerfully. “That was quite a pickle we got ourselves out of, don’t you think?” Lady Aesc then proceeds to take the hat off her head, fold it up, stick it in her pocket, and pull out a different hat, putting the new one back on. Aya watches, a bit stupefied.

“Hold it!” She says, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. “I have questions I need answered.”

“Me too,” Josie says from where she’s hunched over on the ground, busy trying to pry a bit of crystal free.

“Well, naturally!” Lady Aesc folds her hands in front of her. “Just answer me one first. Why were you following us?”

Aya and Josie exchange glances. “Well,” Aya starts awkwardly, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “Me and are bounty hunters. Or trying to be, anyway. We just started. Our first job was to track you down.”

“Me?” Lady Aesc looks confused. “Who would possibly want to track *me*?” Blanche snorts, and Lady Aesc shoots her a hurt look. “Lots of people,” Blanche says. “Those Men in Black, for one.”

“That’s an entirely different kettle of worms.” Lady Aesc waves her hand dismissively.

“Fish.”

“No Blanche, they definitely were not fish. Genetically-enhanced super soldiers, if I had to guess.

“No, I-“ Blanche snaps her mouth shut, obviously deciding it wasn’t worth the effort.

“So tell me, who wanted you to find me?” Lady Aesc fixes her eye on them.

“Local trader,” Josie cuts in. She does finger quotes. He said, and I quote, ‘this weird lookin’ woman and her bloomin’ great big ship came outta nowhere and squashed my trade stall, that’s my entire livelihood, y’know, and I want her to apologize!’” She shrugs. “So I told him we’d find you and try to get you to fix it.”

“Oops.” Lady Aesc looks guilty.

“I told you you hit something,” Blanche says. Lady Aesc just elbows her in the ribs.

“This is the ship he was talking about, isn’t it.” Josie says suddenly. Aya notices she’s managed to free the crystal she was working on and watches her sneak it into a pocket. “You pulled something out of your pocket before we fell, and now we’re here. It’s gotta be size-shifting. That’s high tech.”

“Nailed it.” Lady Aesc shoots Josie a delighted grin. “It’s a Factory of Crystal. The Firmament makes them.”

“The what-ament?” Aya furrows her brow. This is all getting to be a bit much for her. Scrapping and fighting in order to survive, she understands. Size-shifting crystal ships and their weird pilots she doesn’t quite get.

“*Firmament*. They’re kind of like my...” Lady Aesc scrounges for a word. “Family, I suppose. They’re the ones who sent me to the Magellan.”

“Not a great family if they send you to the Rat Maze.” Aya raises an eyebrow. “What were you even doing there?”

“Spreading holiday cheer, of course!” She spreads her arms with a big grin, dropping both when she’s met with a trio of stony faces. “Okay, well, that was secondary. Those Men in Black have been sniffing around other Firmament members, and they wanted me to see what they’re up to. I don’t know what they want with the Factories, but it can’t be anything good.” Lady Aesc makes a face, sticking her tongue out a bit, then shrugs. “Anyway, I’ll get back to that after I drop you two off back home.”

“Home?” It feels like a stone’s been dropped into Aya’s stomach, and she suddenly realizes how much she does *not* want to go back to the Rat Maze. “No, wait – you said this was a ship, right? So you can take us somewhere else!” She knows she’s starting to babble, but she can’t stop it. She needs *off* that godforsaken hellhole. Josie’s eying her strangely, and Aya shoots her a look that says ‘roll with it’.

“Yes, I could.” Lady Aesc says slowly – dubiously? Aya can’t tell.

“We know about the Men in Black,” Aya says desperately. “We’ve run into them before. We can tell you all about them in exchange!”

“Woah, calm down!” Lady Aesc raises her hands.

“I think she’s telling the truth.” Blanche leans over. “She said to aim for their heads, earlier.”

“Hm.” Lady Aesc looks at Aya with her sharp green eyes and Aya resists the urge to squirm under her gaze. “I think there’s more to you than it appears. Oh!” She suddenly slaps her forehead. “I just remembered, I never got your name.”

“I’m Aya.” She holds out her hand and Lady Aesc shakes it so heartily her hat threatens to fall off.

“I’m Josie,” Josie says. She doesn’t hold out her hand but Lady Aesc takes it anyway, then pulls the crystal Josie had squirreled away earlier out of her pocket and sticks it behind her own ear. Josie looks nonplussed, but Aya can tell she’s a bit disappointed at losing her treasure.

“Pleased to meet you both. And yes, I’ll fly you somewhere else. In exchange for one thing.”

“What?” Aya asks a bit nervously. She hopes it’s not money; she and Josie barely have two cents to rub together.

“I want...” Lady Aesc starts ominously, pointing at Aya. “...you to smile,” she finishes.

“Excuse me?” Aya sputters. She definitely hadn’t been expecting that.

“Smile! You’ve done nothing but look miserably this entire time, and it’s the holidays!” “I don’t do...”

holidays.” She says with difficulty. Josie gives her hand a sympathetic squeeze. She knows.

“Seriously? Not even one of them?” Lady Aesc’s eyebrows shoot up.

“No, I-“ Why is her throat burning so bad all of a sudden. “My sister died, last year. My twin.” Aya blinks quickly and gives Lady Aesc, who’s looking stricken, a weak smile. “It doesn’t feel right to celebrate without her.”

“Oh.” Lady Aesc goes quiet, and Blanche is giving Aya a look she doesn’t think she likes. “I’m sorry. I know...I know how much losing people hurts.”

“Yeah.” Aya gives another weak smile, smaller this time. “Well.”

“Well.” Lady Aesc shuffles a bit, then brightens. “Guess I’ll just have to deal with my own Grinch.” She throws an arm around Blanche.

“I am not...I don’t even know what a Grinch is.” Blanche says, deadpan. Lady Aesc pulls what looks like mistletoe out of her pocket and dangles it over her head, grinning. Blanche rolls her eyes and turns away, her face slightly pink. Lady Aesc shrugs, then crams the mistletoe into her mouth. Josie makes a yuck! sound.

“Okay, then.” Lady Aesc says after she’s finished munching. “How about I take you somewhere in exchange for you two telling me your story? I do love a good story.”

“Sounds good to me,” Josie says, and Aya nods.

“Great!” Lady Aesc claps. “I’ll whip us up some tea. Just gotta build the tearoom first. By the way – where do you want to go?”

Aya and Josie look at each other. The entire universe was out there for them. They could go anywhere, absolutely anywhere, and the prospect, was dizzying.

“You pick,” Josie says. “I’m happy anywhere as long as I’m with you.”

Aya smiles and resists the urge to bounce on her toes like a child. She wants to go somewhere where she’s free of having to sleep with one eye open, where she can breathe fresh air, where she can explore a million different possibilities.

“Let’s go to Mars.”

6. I Saw Three Ships (that Passed in the Night) by Tycho McPhee Letts

Once upon an ice age, arctic winter was let loose from its prison at the poles and allowed to creep across the whole of Earth, accompanied by its levelling breath, the frigid North Wind; by its upward-reaching shadow, the unending arctic night; and by homogeneity. For as snow smothered the globe, land and ocean slowly stopped being all that different, became unifyingly solid from surface to substratum. And life continued.

I

A nightly battle was being waged in the atmosphere of Graelyn Scythes' bedroom, the one casualty her sleep. The snug warmth of several blanket layers against the all-permeating stench of frozen salt; the soothing trickle of Beethoven's 11th Symphony versus malignant memories of mistakes made in an old home on the other side of the world. A standstill, until the forces of awakesness received reinforcement from the other room of her house. Graelyn gradually noticed, rising between empty beats, the continuous bump of something soft against a plane of glass, and she knew that her beloved pet was looking for midnight attention. So the war was won and all the warriors withdrew, save the salty smell.

A minute later, Graelyn walked across the wooden floor in her nightcoat, gaining alertness with each slipped step. She reached the tank before fumbling her glasses on, so when the world came into focus she was greeted by an expectant face, ash grey with peppered spots of silver, whiskers twitching and mouth--wide, toothless, and dopey--opening and closing like an excitedly confused baby. Miss Sparkles the catfish was happy to see her owner.

"What is it, Sparks?" She dipped her hand into the naturally-warmed water and began rubbing smooth, scaly skin along from gills to fin. Miss Sparkles responded by once again tapping her head against the edge of her tank. "Oh," Graelyn whispered with an understanding exasperation that reached no ears but her own. Sparkles bumped the glass again, then raised her gaping catfish face just above the surface of the water in a very hopeful manner, then puckered in such a way to gently squirt Graelyn's chin. Graelyn considered her options for a moment and decided that sleep was overrated. "Ok then, time for a walk."

After putting an outside coat over her nightcoat, Graelyn reached into the water once more to harness a leash around Sparkles' fins, pulling it tight but comfortably against scale and bone. She reached in farther, grasped the entire toddler-sized creature from its underbelly, and lifted it out into the cool air. Carefully carrying the slippery Miss Sparkles, trying to go quickly to not let too much water drip on the floor, Graelyn unlocked and shoved open her front door.

In an instant, the small home stopped being an independent space and was absorbed into the greater outside--no biting wind, no blinding flurry, just a moment's influx of pure cold that stole the warmth from every inside inch. It tried to assimilate Graelyn too, burrowed all the way into her lungs and tried to crystallize, but only managed to destroy her final shreds of drowsiness.

With a determined heave, she threw her wonderful catfish through the front door, down towards cold, hard ice. In most other universes, this would kill a catfish (and in most other universes hurting animals was exactly the sort of thing Graelyn Scytheses this age were doing), but Miss Sparkles was an electric

catfish, hyper-charged by reality-exclusive evolution. Sparkles curled her whiskers mid-flight into a loop, and when the tips touched they formed a closed circuit, a short circuit that sparked and glowed a warm yellow within milliseconds. When a catfish of another world would be pulverised against a solid surface, Sparkles landed with a small splash into perfectly warmed water. Graelyn followed, leash in hand, and the midnight walk began.

The city was built like a downwards branching corkscrew of oxygen, carved into the surface of the Pacific Ice Sheet by the last lingering pioneers who were thrilled to colonise even farther west. They named it after the most prosperous of the Yukon mining towns. They tamed lone fish that wandered near the surface to provide power. They set up furnished shacks along all the spiralling tunnel-streets, and invited the whole world in.

Graelyn and her fish travelled on incompatible levels of reality, connected by the water-proof, shock-resistant, unmeltable leash. Sparkles looped and leaped in the ground beneath her human anchor's feet; Graelyn was sort of ungracefully pulled forward, sometimes stumbling to keep up. There were little metal spikes at the bottom of her shoes to ground each step into the ice, and she still wasn't used to the extra milliseconds they added to a gait.

House after wooden house they passed (some decorated with tinsel and fir branches for the holidays), most dark inside but all billowing with life. The misty condensation formed clouds against the high iced ceiling, a gravity-defying river of loose water molecules that drifted up towards the opening of the city's entrance and dispersed under the large transparent dome that shielded the entire tunnel-settlement from being filled in by hail and snow. Another force rumbled in the opposite direction: a distant echoing surface-howl from the ghosts of long-dead waves.

Deeper and deeper, the catfish weaved trails of water like knots around the edge of the narrowing tunnel. She was the primary light source now, tinkling about like a golden whiskered fairy, like a dancing torchflame in an infinite cavern. The surrounding ice was crystal clear down here, so Graelyn could see beneath herself an endless darkness that was either an imperciably giant vanishing point or the place that once been an ocean floor. Like walking on an inverted night sky guided by a scaly star, further and further.

And suddenly they had walked to the absolute end of the city and had only the cold solid sea in front of them. Finally, they both stopped.

A silent salty emptiness

Without borders

Without warmth

Without life.

...

A distant pinprick point said otherwise.

Graelyn squinted to be sure, for such a thing was unknown and unheard of. A gaggle of lights were shining in the far-off depths: a rainbow of bioluminescence glowing all the unearthly shades that humanity never got around to naming: a swimming cloud of colours in its own hazy pocket of liquid: a mass of living pixels escaped from an early 2000s screensaver.

Amid the rusty greens, chilled lavenders, and nebulaic sapphires there were streaks of gold identical to Sparkles' hide. And sticking out from that gold were rows of tendrillish whiskers, bright as lightbulb filaments, illuminating dark fishy eyes slightly above. Graelyn felt a soft yearning tug of the leash, and knew this school of lights were family. This, evidently, was what her catfish friend had been so excited to see.

The marvellous shape came nearer, passing deep below the city and painting the drab underfloors of houses with splotches of ephesence. Miss Sparkles wagged her fins and tail watching it all, staying

close to the space under Graelyn's feet.

The two waited to be bathed in the strange luminosity when the school came directly beneath them, but it never happened. Instead, at the moment of convergence a shadow was cast from something trapped in the ice between and they were momentarily plunged in sudden darkness. Graelyn stared at the heart of this eclipse and saw the most improbable thing of the night: a perfectly unmoving human figure, metres upon hundreds of metres deep embedded in the ice. She saw the shape of each individual silhouette finger and the subtle folds of a long coat projected through the ice, tinged at the edges by glowing patina.

It was over in seconds.

The multi-coloured underwater sun meandered forward to the opposite underwater horizon, briefly extending backwards a small corona of golden fish that wasn't bright enough to catch that figure's shadow again. Then night returned, enveloping Graelyn and her pet in empty cold. It would be a while until she took the first step back towards home.

Graelyn returned to that spot the next day, and the next, and the next... She taught herself to use the sort of seismic technology that could detect things deep below the surface, and found nothing. She became a leader and personally oversaw an expedition into those neptunian depths, and still found nothing. She kept searching until the day the city caved in, but it was as if that frozen figure had never existed, or somehow escaped.

II

Snowflakes are similar to universes in that no two are exactly alike; dissimilar in that 10,000 snowflakes are much more manageable than 10,000 universes. Archimedes Von Ahnerabe was getting to grips with his role in the 10,000 Dawns, but he had no way of dealing with well over 100,000,000,000,000,000,000 snowflakes, compressed into a glacier larger than all Earth's land continents put together.

He could see for miles, yet couldn't move an inch, for there wasn't so much as an atom of air between his outermost polymer casing and the ice. His metals limbs were far stronger than anything of the fleshy variety, but couldn't do squat against the weight of a sea. So he waited, frozen in hope.

Archimedes had gotten here four hours ago, the result of a last minute escape route from some adventure that was drastic enough that he thought it would be more preferable to be stranded within the ice-ocean of an obscure universe, but not interesting enough you need to hear about it.

If it were almost any other reality, Arch would have been back at Spiral within minutes, sipping hot chocolate on a grassy hill with his best friend Graelyn, but the interdimensional doorways of Dawn didn't work that great in solid matter. There was simply too much ice in every direction! So he needed to be rescued twice, first from the confines of the open sea and then from the confines of this bubble of existence.

There was a sort of city far above Arch's head, a twisting tangle of hollow tentacles filled with air and lined to one side with dark structures spaced like suction cups. Earlier, he tried in vain to catch the attention of some potential rescuer up there using his light-up skin -- became not a message in a bottle, but a body in a message -- but after less than minimal success gave up to preserve his ever dwindling power.

Yes, electricity was rather a problem. Cyborgs have twice as many ways to starve to death. It was rather grim thought, but Archimedes had only his mind to keep himself occupied and nobody can entirely choose which avenues of possibility imagination might choose to explore.

It was in a sudden, subtle shift that an event invaded the uneventfulness. Like many who think they're

near-death, Archimedes saw a distant light at the end of a metaphorical tunnel, and it was for him a genuine metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel, a tiny ray of hope shining all the bioluminescent colours that humanity never got around to naming.

You can guess what this incoming mass was composed of, but you'd probably be slightly wrong. As it approached, Arch was pleasantly surprised that each individual coloured node was a living, glowing fish. This thing was busy and beautiful and **big**. And as it got nearer and nearer, he noticed that each and every fish had something harnessed to their frames: a harness. All the hundreds of organisms that made up this school melting its way through the Pacific, they were tethered and leashed to something in the dead centre!

It was skimming so close beneath Arch now, the area of temporarily melted water ended just metres away. Still, he could not move a motorised muscle. And this near, he saw for the briefest moments the man-made thing that lay at the heart. He saw rows of bolts. He saw sheets of brass. He saw a window, and someone on the other side saw him; it was hard to tell who was more surprised.

Under these many layers of fish there lay a real nautilus of a nucleus, harnessing the power of the animals to travel beyond the reach of any purely human technology. This submarine in a shining sentient shell continued floating forward, but within a minute a clump of fish detached at the back, tied to a smaller vessel. So Arch's saviour came riding in on an underwater chariot pulled by catfish with skin like the Sun, and he basked in its coming aura.

For the first time in ages, he began feeling the ability to bend his knees, turn his neck, and wiggle his fingers. The fish came close, and he became entirely physically free. He was swimming now! The person inside the tiny vessel gestured at the fish, indicating for Arch to grab on one, so he did. It was soft and slippery.

Into the heart of the school they went, the brass eye of the auroral storm. The submarine structure was surprisingly large, and in all its windows there were people watching Archimedes' arrival. The vessel docked in a hollow opening and the tethers of its leashes slid from grooves in its hull onto the outside of the larger ship. Archimedes let go of the fish and in three strokes swam to the opening. Once he was inside, doors closed behind and the newly walled room began draining of water.

When the process completed, his rescuer began opening the door of the tiny vessel and he went over to very, very, very profusely thank them. But before he could, a click followed by a voice sounded from behind his back, "Welcome, strangest of strangers, to Project Hyperborea."

The phrase "snowflakes are a bit like universes in that no two are exactly alike" has a paradox at its core, as the existence of multiple universes precludes the uniqueness of snowflakes. No two universes are exactly alike, but they're all made from the same history. In an infinite multiverse, the exact same intersections of possibility that create a snowflake that is utterly unique in its own universe occur infinite times. And it happens with more than just snowflakes, of course. When Archimedes turned around to address the welcomer, he was greeted by a face he'd seen many times before in similar contexts in other realities, the face of John Aril.

III

Aril was emotionally dead to begin with, there's absolutely no doubt about that. It'd been confirmed by the head dimensional physicist, the sub-atomic nuclear welder, and all the 45 other people within a cubic kilometre radius. Aril had brought a small, specialised crew into frozen depths beyond civilisation, and they didn't need to be the super-geniuses to realise something was very wrong with their boss announcing a 12 day break for Christmas.

He'd practically given up, shutting down all operations for nearly two weeks.

There were, in retrospect, very little scientific benefits to coming down here other than the total isolation, and that could instead be considered a detriment. The surrounding fishy lights were at first

quite soothing, but eventually became just another monotonous feature of the confined space. And no wife! All these factors wouldn't mean as much if the Project was going well, but there hadn't been any breakthroughs in years, so it was all quite horrible for mental health.

What Aril needed was just a single pebble to send ripples through his stagnant pond, something impossible, more impossible than a time-travelling ghost, and life gave him a reality-travelling cyborg. Although he was the last to be informed, Aril was the first and only person to greet the newcomer. In a single welcome, he took in the stranger's smooth artificial skin and single wedjat-ish eye. And the stranger said with a wave, "Hi, Mr. Aril! Wasn't expecting to see you here."

"You still have the advantage over me. I've got no idea who you are."

"Archimedes," the word cordially echoed with potential across the room, "I'm a... traveller. Thank you so much for picking me up from that dilemma."

"Well Archimedes the traveller, I think there's much we can discuss."

A line of crackling blue light slashed through the air directly behind Archimedes' back, forming two rectangles of electricity that parted like elevator doors to reveal the space between reality, and a young woman.

"Oh there you are Arch, we've been trying to find you for ages!"

"And I've been waiting for ages! You wouldn't believe what I've just been through. It's been, actually, kinda déjà vu. Thanks again," he said to Aril, "and bye."

The cyborg stepped through the doorway, his trenchcoat still dripping ocean salt, and the portal fizzed into nothing.

It was over before it could begin. That was it? Damn unsatisfying, but... in an invigorating, inspirational way.

When Aril walked into the next room over, where his employees were eagerly waiting to see the impossible frozen man, they were at first disappointed to see that the stranger had vanished, but with a single sentence Aril surprised them all and revealed that things were once again as they should be.

"Christmas is cancelled, we've got work to do."

Once upon an ice age, arctic winter engulfed the Earth, at first accompanied by its most unpleasant attributes. But as the snow fell on, the nicer aspects of the arctic started to show through, among them shimmering aurora, reincarnated in piscine form, and potentiality. The potentiality for cities to be built atop solid water, for a snowflake to tumble into a snowball. The smallest actions echo farther in utter desolation. Life continued, for now.

7. The Sun in the Sunken City by Samuel Maleski

The Convoy crept across the infinite ice.

That was their world. It had been for as long as they could remember – an ocean of frozen darkness. No dawn. Not even a day. Just the embrace of the night, its blackness only broken by the blinding white of a lightning bolt, or the red agony of satellites collapsing into the corrupted atmosphere.

There had been a war, once, see. A long, long time ago. A bunch of rich men, and the people they had oppressed, rising up, the force of their songs of protest shattering the very fabric of an unfair society. But, as brave as these kalashnikov-carrying knights in feathery armors were, the dragons they intended to slay were too greedy, too full of spite – and, from their piles of bloody gold, preferred sacrificing the world rather than yielding it, a last offering to their dark and hungry god.

And so, the winter had crept in, and century after century, the world faded in absolute darkness. Ignored by everything and everyone, an orphan drifting on current of stardust in the empty immensities of the multiverse.

People lived relatively normal lives, at first. Grasping onto the remains of civilization with both hands. And then they didn't. Settlements grew smaller and smaller. Some disappeared entirely, leaving their population to die or wonder the wasteland. Humanity slowly died away – not in a bang but a whisper, the cold, quiet, almost beautiful death of a man drowning in arctic waters.

Of course, every passing has death throes.

That was the Convoy. It was more than people hurrying towards their destination: it was a line of light that cut the dark, the last bloodstream of the human race, leaving red dots on the ice as they were desperately looking for a heart to inhabit.

Kept warm only by their flickering torches; by the stories and prayers they whispered; and by hope, invincibly dim.

It had all started with the woman who walked at the head of the column, before the huffing-and-puffing trucks and the ice beasts dragging carriages across the desert. She probably had a name, but no one knew it – no one asked. She did not need it. Some people can live on even after their mortal life has withered around them, after all: ideas in the shape of man, with an existence of their own. Names, then, matter far less than what they stand for, the ideal they inspire, the words they whisper. And, of course, the shape these form, in the end. That particular shape was the Grandmother. An affectionate nickname for someone who had travelled across the frozen world for hundreds of years, by now, rescuing settlements, and offering them to either remain in an sanctuary of deathly quiet, or to join her in a great travel. They would probably die trying, she said, but everything would be better than extinction

endured passively. Just like their ancestors had fought against the Board, they would fight their fate.

The Sun would shine again. That was her promise.

It sustained her, through all the years and hardships. Not on its own, of course – the cybernetics she had acquired in the days of old were invaluable, even in their current state, rusty, frozen, and sticking out of her skin and bone like metallic rugged spikes. But there's only so much technology can do: will, now that remains intact through the snows and acid rains. Like a songbird's canto echoing through the steppes.

It opened the way for the others, and into that breach they went, searching for dawn.

After months, their strength had started to dwindle. But they kept going, in spite of pain and disease. What other choice was there? The universe was cold, and uncaring, and full of powers that could crush them in an instant: and in such a situation, the only thing to do was to walk, ahead, forever forwards. To prove they could change their destiny.

And one day, they did prove it – as much as “day” and “night” still had value in such a forsaken recess of the galaxy.

They saw it coming, in the air and in the ice. They had stepped away from land, and onto what had once been sea, deep and blue. The ground was treacherous, liable to crack under the feet. But they had planned for the situation, and slowly unpacked the necessary supplies from their vehicles.

They wouldn't be coming back.

-

Grandmother was gazing at the vast open land in front of her, when someone caught up to her. She recognized his face – Adam, yes, that was his name. A good kid. Born in the darkness, but craving light: not just the one of the sun, no, but illumination, knowledge, belief. He had a beautiful mind. Not unlike her own, so many, many years ago: inquisitive, sharper than a glacier's edge. A wonder of nature.

“They're ready.”

She smiled. Faintly. “Good. Are you?”

“I've never been more eager.” Childlike enthusiasm passed through his face. He couldn't be old. Twenty years? Eighteen? Maybe less. But not a kid – there was no place for childhood, happy or sad, on this world. Whatever lives were lived here were lacunar odd things, a strange, mangled mutation of human society rather than a reproduction. “But ...”

“Yes?”

“Are ... Are you? The trip has taken a toll on all of us, and ...”

“I’m old and frail.” He recoiled, about to say something in his defense. “No, don’t argue, it’s only the truth! It’s true. I have been dying for longer than I was alive, and I don’t think this” – a gesture at the technological implants protruding from her limbs – “is going to keep me going for much longer. But it doesn’t matter. As long we reach our destination, everything will be fine. We will all be fine.”

A noise pierced the darkness.

She grabbed the young soldier’s hand. “Look!” she said, pointing at the ice in front of them.

Lights were shining under the ice. Bright fires – orange, green, purple, shining their way across the silent still waters. She could feel Adams’s hand tensing, anticipating a threat, but she knew better. Soon they had reached her feet, and she could see, underneath the frozen surface, a small gilled face looking right at her.

She coughed with laughter. “Fishes. Feeding on the chemicals. It makes them go funny. Reminds me of when I had an aquarium in my bedroom ...”

The boy seemed mesmerized. “It’s beautiful. The lights ...”

“Well, I suppose some beauty is bound to come off even the most destructive of our actions. Causality, my dear. It works in strange ways ... Different versions of the same event, different outcomes, are woven inside each of our actions. Maybe our attempts at survival only exist to allow for the rise of an empire of sea basses. Who the hell knows.”

He seemed rather lost.

“Never mind”, she smiled. “I’m babbling. At my age, it’s to be expected. But,” she continued as the fishes danced under her, a ring of alien, angelic colours, “it does mean we’re on the right track. It must be close.”

“Our destination?”

“Yes, dear. Atlantis. The Sunken City.”

-

A bad name, really, all in all. It hadn’t vanished beneath the waves. Rather, they had trapped it. A jewel of steel encased in ice, like the skeleton of a neoliberal mammoth. It had been a place of learning once, but only now stood as a grim warning concerning men’s deep ignorance. They had been blind way before the neverending night came.

And now, the men, women and other humans of the Convoy were opening the eyes of the world, pickaxe swing after pickaxe swing, tearing the station away from the cold embrace of the depths. Adam had been the first attacking it, while Grandmother, shaking, feeling her inner fire faltering, watched with fearful approval.

Hours passed. A day, maybe? Time was hard to measure, all the more in the rush and excitement of a convict about to break his prison bars. But finally, they were able to make their way to a door, and slowly, very slowly, forced the circular crank to pivot once more, allowing them passage in the cold corridors of the laboratory.

There, the air was heavy with ghosts, unchecked memories roaming the rooms, teeth and claws bared. The specters of a world gone by, but still so real, living within the regrets and the myths, the tearful recollections around the campfire.

Grandmother led the way. She knew where to look. Her previous fatigue had turned to a frantic rush. So, so very close now.

Through the narrow alleys, filled with ice that had split in forests of fanciful stalactites, she led them into some kind of hall – empty, save for the old bones of dead men, scribbled messages on the walls, and an impressive amount of technological equipment.

She walked upon to the consoles, a crowd slowly constituting behind her. Fear – would it still work? After all this time. It had too. She wanted it to. They would make a difference, their will would allow them passage to ... Yes!

A shower of sparks flew from the controls, but the room was illuminated by a dim blue light. The central device, some kind of gateway, a portal, or now, rather a circle of ice, hummed.

Good. Now, the difficult part.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. The last of her strength burning up, for an energy rush, straight to her brain – the old calculations, the equations she used to glance at during her breaks, it all came back, in new and original forms. She was shaping her past into an arrow, and firing it through the fabric of reality. Only breaking her concentration to gaze at Adam's face, full of expectations. For a bit of inspiration; to borrow a bit of his youthful courage.

Behind the circle, something was appearing. Another vista. Another world. A gateway. It was working. Freedom was at hand.

Not for her, though. She knew her fate was tied to that world. She had walked its surface for so long she had become part of it – turning into the very embodiment of the dead planet's beauty and mysteries and pain to help its children. Woven her blood and skin and dreams with the corrupted crust of Earth. There was no escaping it. But, still, a last kindness, before the end ...

Adam raised his pickaxe, a circular blow under the vaulted ceiling of Aril's technological dreamscape.

And the inch-thick barrier of glass separating one dimension from another broke. On the other side,

something else – the warmth of a family, the songs of a distant celebration. A destiny, an actual purpose, one made of solid dreams.

The boldest of the Convoy already rushed through, not taking the time to savor the moment. Like a man dying of thirst and stumbling in his stupor on an oasis.

Adam was looking at her. Waiting for a sign. She nodded, and he faded into the future.

She remained there, sitting in the icy calm. Waiting for all her protégés to depart. And then, she walked up to the portal, and sat in front of it, quietly, staring at the chasm between worlds.

A sunray – the first in centuries – hit her forehead.

And Graelyn Scythes died.

8. Winter's View by Jacob Black

Winter fell over the omniverse as a hushed shadow, creeping its chill down the quantum strands of creation. The clusters of multiverses raced and ricocheted down the laced web and realities shivered as their biospheres frosted over, their life inside huddling with loved ones. Roasting shades of sunset orange, the color of space and time merging over the void, shuddered into swathes of winter colors. The omniverse cooled into iced blues and freezing whites of solstices, harvests, and century-long curses of ice and slush.

From the View, the omniverse moved across the horizon fields as a slow shift towards infinity, and the cooling of reality was at once blinding and intoxicating. Even now, with the View filling to its brim with every delegate, celebrity, and socialite with an invitation, all eyes were to the dimensional aboves and belows. Temporal pathways and time corridors from all over the omniverse lead to the View's portholes, all crowded with lifeforms and sentients, many from universes and multiverses that would never meet, much less communicate, and all looked at the shifting colors. Even the High Society, its energy ribbon wrapped tight around the Dreamscape, had to stop the flight of its Planet Freighters and Solar System Cruisers, the pilots too awed to pay attention to where they were going.

The View's name hadn't been chosen for nothing, after all.

"You know what I think is funny?" Max said, chewing the inside of his cheek as he fished for a cigarette. Jet DuBlanc looked at her partner, still trying to get used to his choice of body for the week. A transparent shimmer of something humanoid but animalistic, glossy fur and shifting fractals, his interior workings visible like the ticking innards of a living clock. His leather jacket clashed in a way he made work.

"Mm?" she responded, flicking her lighter and letting him breathe in the neon flame, bringing his cigarette to life with an nasty cloud of smoke. The grey pooled in his crystal lungs, a visible haze underneath the layers of twisting mathematics he called skin and fur.

"Right now, you have Solstices and Winter Celebrations happening everywhere. Around us, above us, below us. Everyone here, at the View, ready to rub shoulders and celebrate. Literally every example from every possible form of life in the entire span of creation, every possible reality. You couldn't even count the number of religions and traditions on display here. All gathering just for the idea of a winter celebration. Every possible holiday."

“And?”

“There’s still going to be someone who gets pissy if I try to say ‘Happy Holidays.’”

“Well of course. There’s a war on, y’know.”

He rolled his eyes and did his best impression of a long-dead orange and megalomaniac capitalist. “*The war on Christmas!*”

The View was an impossible sphere, built in seven dimensions, anchored into a fragment of an early universe. It embraced impossibility of itself, drifting safely in arm’s reach of the final strand of omniversal existence. From within, the scope of everything was on full display, a beautiful sight of each and every universe and dimensional tangent strung together by the web filaments of the omniverse’s pulsating heart.

No one knew who first constructed a restaurant and nightclub in the View, but no one could say it had been a bad idea.

“Hope the band’s nice tonight,” Max grumbled, finishing his cigarette as they entered the *No Smoking Please* energy field. He looked at Jet and smiled through his shimmering. “You look really pretty tonight. Trying to woo one of our clients?”

She rolled her eyes. “Our clients don’t really understand or appreciate biological beauty. In my experience, it puts them on edge, makes them anxious.”

His grin turned naughty. “I think you could have shown up as anything biological and make them anxious. They’re only really comfortable around their computer terminals and loom plinths.”

She chuckled. “You know their looms don’t *actually* look like fabric looms, right?” She slid her jacket off, noting a few eyes catching the glint of her gown. Red satin, a touch of diamonds here and there, matching her lipstick. Her blue hair was striking against the dress, or at least it had been the last she checked.

“My hair’s still blue, right?”

Max tilted his head and squinted his eyes. “Yeah, but I think you’re going a bit aqua around the temples.”

“Shit. Doesn’t clash with the dress too much, does it?”

“As I said. You look beautiful.” He took her hand. “Meant professionally, of course.”

They had a table waiting for them, their two clients already seated and shiftily sipping their cocktails. Jet was honestly surprised the pair were so inconspicuous, both in rather dull and dark business suits. She knew their race tended to be a bit on the side of ostentatious, silk robes and ridiculous collars, often with bronzed servitors or drones rolling out a soft carpet for them to walk on.

One of the clients was a gaunt figure of tight skin and bone, most of his face dominated by a hawk-like nose. The other was shorter, doing his best to hide overt plumpness in his baggy suit, with enormous ears that seemed to twitch with each and every clack of Jet’s high-heels. She thought of them as the Nose and the Ears, respectively. They had given her their real names, but they were long and twisted things that she couldn’t pronounce.

The two claimed to be representatives of their people (though Jet believed they were operating to their own agenda and doubted the pair had any real power), a race of aristocratic “chronarchs” from a particularly infamous multiverse several dimension hops from the View. They were not a popular species, often accused of being temporal colonizers and time imperialists. According to the rumors, their own Architects had actually created the very concept of History for their home universe, a fractal-based perception of Time based on their own laws of physics. This “invention” murdered untold trillions of lives and was such a devastating blow that it actually affected their universe’s multiverse cluster, spreading like an impossible wave of imperious temporality.

Many of the multiverses outside the home of these entitled “Lords,” who had watched this ordered chaos with absolute horror, were now gathered at the View. They were considered Higher Evolutionaires of the omniverse, true masters of their home multiverse, and therefore invited to every View Holiday Party as part of polite and professional courtesy, but they were not exactly *wanted*.

“We trust your venture was a useful one,” the Ears said. “We trust you gleaned useful information.” Jet didn’t like his voice. Too shrill for such a rounded body.

“I think we did,” Jet said, setting a hologram display on the table. An image flickered above it, a simple solar system, orbiting a yellow star. “As you know, my partner and I investigated the universe designated as ‘10K Dawn,’ as per your instruction. Both of us integrated ourselves into the dimensional

fabric from the start of your given timeframe to the year the system discovers the ability to traverse to other dimensions. We successfully investigated the entire scope of 10,000 Dawns.”

“We regrouped once finished, detached ourselves, and compiled our experiences and thoughts,” Max added, focusing his gaze on the space between the Nose and the Ears. He had trouble actually looking at them. They had safe and cozy three-dimensional bodies but existed on higher levels, at the very least possessing silver tendrils of quantum anchors in the fifth dimension. Looking at them too long gave him a headache.

The Nose sniffed. “Any thoughts you would like to share?” His voice poured like a cheap champagne.

“We’ve compiled all our information in this drive,” Jet said, gesturing to the hologram display. The system from which 10,000 Dawns was birthed shuddered, as if shy. “It is our professional opinion, however, that 10,000 Dawns has more than earned its right to exist.”

The Ears grumbled something while the Nose merely raised an eyebrow.

Mas and Jet were transtemporal investigators. Two of the best in the entire business, famous through the entire omniverse. They investigated everything, stopping crimes occurring on multiversal levels, exposing scandals that had built entire dimensions, solving mysteries millennia old. They inserted themselves into universal narratives, building lives, bodies and even entire family histories to experience, observe, and investigate.

The Nose and the Ears had hired the two of them to investigate the universe of 10,000 Dawns officially in the name of cold scientific curiosity, but it was crystal clear the pair feared the rival universe. Not many of their people seemed to agree (Jet had once heard the phrase “backwater” used), but something important or dangerous existed in the universe of 10,000 Dawns that scared these two lesser bureaucrats. They condescending pair made their wishes clear. Jet and Max were to investigate for a reason why 10,000 Dawns deserved to continue existing. Their race knew how to summon terrible and powerful things that swam in the omniverse’s gaps and voids, things hungry for divergent timelines and independent universes. Jet knew that, if the Ear and Nose were scared enough, they’d find a means of drawing something awful and deadly into 10,000 Dawns’ existence.

The Nose set his cocktail down and sniffed again, a thick and wet sound. “You assert in the universe’s favor. Why?”

Max spoke this time, still very clearly not looking at the pair. “We both lived so many lives. Important lives, unimportant. Politicians, space pilots, soldiers, bankers, hell, even farmers. We scoped the entire history of 10,000 Dawns, from before it diverged from other Earth timelines, right up to when they

make dimension jumps and ally themselves with the Empress of the Needle.”

The Ears choked on his drink at that, but said nothing. The Nose showed no reaction.

“The reason, gentlemen, that we think the universe should live,” Jet continued, “is because of what it represents.”

“Hope,” Max nodded.

The Nose huffed. “Hope?”

“Look around you,” Jet said. “Everyone here, from all corners of the omniverse, are here to celebrate their winter holidays. Every single one. Every single person here has their own version. Do you know why?”

No response.

“Winter holidays are a celebration of hope. A time of light and joy in the middle of the darkness. The cold, the freeze. A celebration that they’re surviving. They’re surviving together, they gather together. They party, they dance, they embrace what warmth they can find. They celebrate that they’re surviving the darkness and hardship.”

“10,000 Dawns does not have an easy start,” Max admitted. “It doesn’t have an easy life. It’s war, and it’s cruelty, and it’s shame and selfishness.”

“But it’s kind. It’s hopeful. It survives its failings and sins. It branches out beyond its own stars and finds a way to become something special. It escapes the empty cold of its own darkness.”

“This is positively ridiculous,” the Ears spluttered but the Nose silenced him with a glare.

“We have right to fear 10,000 Dawns just as much as we fear any enemy,” the Nose said. “The people of Earth and the possible civilizations that spring from her biosphere are a recurrent element in our home multiverse. But my colleague and I, we fear the potential enemy *this* version of humanity will become.”

“We know that,” Jet said. “My colleague and I find that potential beautiful. We find it hopeful.”

“Something of a Christmas miracle!” Max said with a smirk.

“I suppose that still scares me,” the Nose admitted, lips thin. “Our people don’t have hope. We have prediction. We have reliability, we have-”

“Stagnancy,” Max said.

Both Lords shot him a look that could kill. Max dutifully continued to look at the space between them.

“Stagnancy is just a dissenter’s word for a civilization that has given all it has to offer and is comfortable in its position,” the Nose growled.

Jet shrugged. “Then respectfully, sir, maybe 10K isn’t the narrative that needs to be overwritten. Sounds like yours has gone stale.”

The Ears’ ears burned scarlet and a vein pulsed in rage. The Nose said nothing.

“You can take our gathered notes,” Max said. “Our opinions are our own. We did our job.”

The Nose grabbed the data file and stood to leave. “We have already made up our own minds, as you can imagine. We would have the universe’s foundational threads plucked without a moment’s hesitation. But even in time of war, there is democracy. My colleague and I cannot make a decision. Thank you for your service. We plan to use your experiences the next we have the council floor.” He slid a payment chip across the table towards them, and then he and the Ears bundled away from the table and vanished in the continuing growing crowd of the View.

The pair watched them leave, Max turning back to their empty drinks. “Those assholes left us with their bill.”

Jet picked up the payment chip with a sigh. “Not like we weren’t going to drink most of this away anyway.”

“I admittedly love that we both resigned ourselves to pissing them off even if it cost us our check,”

Max said, flashing another naughty grin to Jet. She returned it. “Think they’ll actually get a case going on their world in the next epoch?”

“They’ve made dusted republic convention an artform. It will take them several relative centuries to even get their case discussed. And even then, it doesn’t matter. Sickly sweet optimism aside, I mean what I say. I think 10,000 Dawns is going to reach something really special. Maybe if they do manage to get a destruction plan going, 10K will be too powerful to just erase like they want.”

Max nodded and leaned back, waving at a waitress, before squinting at the sky of universes above them. “Huh. Jet, look. 10K.”

She looked up and sure enough, just visible through the freeze of time and space, through a violet fog, was a familiar yellow sun, its past and future circled tight and warm in bands of gold.

“A Christmas miracle, huh?” Jet teased.

“Happy Holidays to you too.”

The Gendar Conspiracy

by James Wylder

**Featuring characters and ideas created by Simon Bucher-Jones and Jacob Black
For Anarchic**

Vo'lach Prime, a long time ago.

It's rocketing down through the atmosphere, the resistance making a bright glow against its front. It looks like you could make a wish on it, if you were standing down below. Which the Sergeant-Instructor was, though he'd long ago given up on wishes. Ten feet from the ground, the object stops. It cools, the light drizzle hissing off it as it stabilizes, and then there is another wonder. The figure appears tiny, a speck, then grows to the size of a toy, then a full grown woman. She dusts off her dark blue robes, and waves at the Sergeant-Instructor, only her mouth visible from under her beak-pointed hood. He has no time for wonders either.

"Are you the Arbiter of Knives, of the Firmament?" He yells, the wind isn't particularly conducive to chatter, but his orders were to meet the Emissary of the Firmament on neutral ground, and Vo'lach Prime is about as neutral as it gets today.

"I am, Sergeant-Instructor? Of the--" there's a gust of wind, and the end of the sentence is cut off, but he knows what she meant. He gestures for her to follow, and they head for the offending site.

The Vo'lach he met with are already there, huddling around the pit. There are two corpses in it. The Vo'lach make room, their six-foot wide frames bustling aside, lightning reflecting off their shiny colorful fur as they shuffle.

"It's one of yours," he says evenly.

The Firmament slides down into the pit, and examines the bodies, the orb she rode in on shining a light down onto them, "Well one is, anyway, sort of. They're a member of the Knights of Sky, who splintered from--"

"They're from your universes," he spat back, "you know there's not supposed to be any interference in our affairs." He couldn't believe he was having to lecture this backwater representative. The 10,000 Dawns were the most blighted piece of inter-universal real estate he could imagine. And yet, they kept getting in everyone's business.

She looked back up at him, then to the Vo'lach, "There were three more of them I see. I'm assuming they took something?"

"Stole," he corrected.

One of the Vo'lach quivered, "A relic we received from Gendar, supposedly, an ancient urn."

She frowned, and snapped her fingers. The orb seemed to shrink and absorb the body.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"You're duty-bound to come with me to Gendar, and see if we can find the thieves."

She sighed, "If that's my diplomatic duty, then sure. Could you give me a hand--" he walked

away towards his ship, and heard the zing as the orb zipped right next to him, and she dropped out again, “I don’t know where Gendar is, I’m not from here you know.”

“Then follow close behind.”

* * *

Gendar was the 17th most interesting archaeological site in it’s home universe. This doesn’t sound too impressive, until you remember that 17th out of a couple trillion is actually a pretty good score. At that point, it’s all the kids who somehow have higher-than-perfect grade point averages competing for who gets to get in the group photo at the end of the year. And sure, Gendar is in the third row off to the left, but it made the picture.

Why Gendar is so interesting, is that there should be no life on Gendar. Completely inhospitable to life, bombarded constantly with radiation from it’s three suns, and coated entirely in sand with no water, Gendar has somehow developed life that is completely native to the planet, while being boringly indistinct from life anywhere else in the universe. Fossil records show that this life developed on Gendar, while every moment of those creature’s existences should have been impossible. That a sapient species who happened to look exactly like ordinary people who happened to have their hair and eyes dyed purple had also developed there, completely independently, was the final straw that drove many an archaeologist into a seething rage. At least fourteen Universities’ archaeology departments had banned discussion on Gendar entirely, and another twenty-eight had declared that they didn’t believe it was real.

This didn’t stop them from visting the planet, however. All across Gendar, roving gangs of archaeologists, anthropologists, and other scientists roamed the deserts, trying to find the secrets to the planet’s existence. There were three main schools of thought: 1. Gendar had a perfectly reasonable explanation for it’s seeming nonsense, and through patience and hard work it can be revealed! 2. Gendar is not real, has never been real, and the real question is how is the illusion of it being real so good, and how can it be uncovered and unmasked. And 3., Aliens.

Drezen Hael was part of the second group, and had been searching the planet for the last three months trying to find proof of it’s non-existence. However, after paying for a few too many over priced bottles of water from the locals to cope with the extreme heat, he was beginning to have suspicions it was real and the whole thing was a tourist trap. He kept these thoughts from the group however, as his funding from the “Gender Is Fake Trust” (nicely acronymed as GIFT) revolved around sticking to the goals of their society, so he rationalized the water as some sort of paid DLC in a massive interactive hologram for the time being. He had just began to work out how the hologram could take the cash he’d brought with him and not just his credit card info, when the man who would kill him approached.

His long blue robes billowed in the wind, it had a beaked hood and the edges were all lined in a fine patterned cloth. One one arm was a messy looking gauntlet, cobbled together to hold crystals in varying sizes over it’s surface. The man didn’t say hello.

“Hello!” Drezen said, “You don’t look like a local, so I’m guessing you’re from another archaeological dig? This site is ours, mind you. We have a permit from the planetary governor--”

Closer, he could see the man was bleeding.

“Do...do you need help? We have a lot of doctors here, but no one who is that kind of doctor, if you catch my drift...” he gave an awkward chuckle. The man stopped, and pulling a hand from where it was supporting the bloody wound on his chest, banged on his gauntlet. “Goddamn thing,” he said. Then looked up at Drezen. His face was bloody too. “You, you’re from this universe right?”

This wasn’t a normal question, even for a space archaeologist. This left Drezen with two possible conclusions to continue from: 1. This man was from another universe. 2. This man was crazy.

Upon further thought, he added 3. This man is a bad script in the holographic simulation of Gendar, but he only listed that contractually. “Yes, uh, are you?” the rest of the dig was getting curious, and were beginning to mill slowly towards the visitor.

The man thought for a moment, and then, seemingly coming to resolution, surged forward and grabbed Drezen’s chest with his gauntleted hand. One of the crystals on it glowed, and Drezen frantically tried to pull away from the man’s grip as he felt his life draining from his body. The wound began closing on the man, and started opening up on his own body. The wear and tear of the desert faded from the man, his complexion bolstered, his muscled surged, and Drezen’s corpse dropped to the ground, drained dry as the rest of his team fled. The man looked ahead, and saw his destination. It was easy to see, it was as tall as the sky.

The statue of the goddess.

Where he’d find everything he’d sacrificed for.

With renewed strength, he continued his walk.

* * *

“Well, it’s certainly big,” the Arbiter of Knives said.

“It’s one of the most remarkable feats of engineering in this universe, built using technology that should have been incapable of it’s construction,” Littlejohn replied.

“So, you’re one of those crazy people who think that humans couldn’t have built the pyramids and stuff?” she probed.

“No, they’re just racists. Any idiot who has even a mild sense of people who look different than them having skills can tell the pyramids are obviously built by humans. What I mean is that this statue’s construction doesn’t line up with the archaeological records here at all. Nothing does. There’s not way life developed here, but it did.”

Knives looked at him, her lips pursed and bunching up at the corners.

“What?”

“So, time travelers?”

“We’d know if it was time travelers?”

She scrunched her eyes up, and held both hand up, “Would you?”

He kept walking.

At this time of day, the statue was filthy with tourists. All mulling about, taking pictures and holograms and molecular scans of themselves and any thing that could or would be interesting. Of course, a lot of them weren’t here for the sights to enjoy them, they were trying to glean secrets to prove whether or not the planet was real or some sort of elaborate hoax.

“And over here,” a tour guide said, “you can see the elaborate relief drawings of the Goddess, the God, and that other one, who--” a tourist lept forward, molecular scanner in hand, held out like a ray-gun, and a flat triangle of light scrolled over the engraving.

“It’s period...” she said dejectedly.

“Yes it is,” the tour guide sighed, “now, if you look at the details--”

Littlejohn didn’t need to flash any information, the staff seemed to know who he was, and he and Knives were directed through the throng by a woman in a grey poncho and goggles, her purple hair in a long braid.

“Sorry for the tourists,” she said as they reached the door, “it’s always like this. At least no one tried to deface anything today.”

Littlejohn gave a faint smile, Knives shrugged.

“We’re here about the urn you gifted to Vo’lach prime.”

The woman blinked, "Oh! Oh yes, I'd nearly forgotten, that was ages ago wasn't it?" She winked, "But I suppose not a big deal for you."

It was Littlejohn's turn to shrug, "Do you know if there was any special significance to the urn?"

The woman gave a stuttering laugh, "Uh, let's go to my office! That's a cool place. Do you like offices?"

"No," Knives said.

"Great! Well, we're going anyway, uh..."

Once inside, things were a lot nicer. Modern lighting seemed to have been part of the original plan of the building, either that or there had been some odd architectural quirk that had meant all of it could be fitted in without looking out of place. Their guide led them to a cozy office, with wood paneling halfway up the wall, and the upper half and ceiling painted to look like the sky, where she promptly flipped a picture on the desk over as they entered. "Not every day we get visitors from two such noble groups as your own...I know Littlejohn, of course, but I don't know you I'm afraid?" She pulled up her goggles, revealing her purple eyes, and slid into the desk. Behind her was a portrait of a quartet of musicians playing string instruments. Littlejohn and Knives slid into chairs in front of her.

"I'm the Arbiter of Knives," she answered.

"I'm Virtuoso, I'm in charge of the Historic Preservation Society."

"Again? I thought you'd retired?" Littlejohn asked.

She laughed awkwardly, "Whaaaat? Um..." she shuffled some papers on her desk, "Yeah, they brought me back, after the incident where that empire of cyborg thingies tried to conquer us they decided they needed my experience again."

"...For the Historic Preservation Society," Knives deadpanned.

"That's the name of the planetary government here," Littlejohn clarified.

"So, the urn," Knives said, impatiently.

"Yeah, uh, so that urn. I gave it to the Vo'lach cause we're pals!"

"And?" Littlejohn turned his palm up.

"...Uh, turns out it's actually a secret key to a sealed off area of the temple statue thing!"

Littlejohn stared her down.

"Which I didn't know."

Continued eye contact.

"Maybe I knew!"

An eyebrow raised.

"I knew okay! I just wanted it off the planet," she spun around in her chair, "It's not as easy running a planet as it looks okay. It was an eyesore, for one, and for two it worried me."

"So you put the Vo'lach in danger."

Her smile slowly pulled into an overly wide view of her teeth.

"You're not going to...investigate me, right?"

Littlejohn pursed his lips.

Virtuoso probably would have said something else unintentionally incriminating, but it was at that point that the man reached the statue of the goddess, and people began dying.

* * *

There was a line. He tried to keep his patience. Certainly, he could wait. He'd waited longer. But the desert had sucked away his patience, and the betrayal he'd suffered had put him on a knife's

edge. They'd gone into this together, and now she and Artillo had thought they could remove the excess members of their conspiracy. And, well, they had, nearly. But he knew where they'd be going next. Gendar was always the next stop. And it was a goddamn tourist trap.

"These shirts are cheaper than the gift shop, get em before it's too late! Supplies are limited! You want one sir?"

He didn't. He tried to avoid the man's gaze. He tried to keep his temper under control. These idiots. These idiots! His hand shook, the gauntlet rattled. He had to keep control. The vendor held the shirt up to him. On the shirt was a close up of the face of the Statue of the Goddess.

He looked at that face.

He knew that face.

And his temper broke.

He didn't really remember what he did, getting through to the door. Streams of red danced around him as he pulled on life, strung it out and cut life from bodies, carving a path to the door, and then blasting it down with a shot of white light from his gauntlet.

He stepped into the temple, and charged through anyone in his way.

He knew where he was going. And it was probably too late.

* * *

"Ma'am! An attacker has entered the temple!" a guard yelled, throwing the door to the office open. Virtuoso sprung out of her chair, and her guests followed as they ran out, following the guard as he briefed them on the casualties, and Virtuoso yelled orders into a communicator.

"Where are we going?" Littlejohn yelled.

"Where the urn goes!" she replied.

The urn was there when they arrived, placed into an indentation into a relief, which had swung open to reveal a small storage space containing a small pile of papers, and one paper taped to the back of the space that said "Sorry!" with a smiley face drawn under it. Holding one piece of paper was a man in a long cloak, a gauntlet on one hand. He was shaking with anger.

"I know what you're here for," he said, "but I have to ask you read this before you do anything."

Knives gingerly took the paper from his outstretched hand, and she and Littlejohn read:

The Goddess shook her empty glass at one of her thousand servants, and it was promptly refilled, and given a new little umbrella.

"It's going pretty well, isn't it?" The God said, lounging back in his designer shorts. She'd finally gotten him to stop wearing a suit while they were sunbathing after a hundred years, but she could tell he was itching to put one back on when they got inside. He'd becoming such a fop since his last body died, and he became a boy again.

"It really is, I think they really have captured your likeness," Virtuoso replied, and continued sketching the construction.

The statue was the size of a skyscraper, and was being constructed far enough away from the metropolis they'd built here that no one would obscure the view. It was, in fact, the spitting image of The Goddess, who adjusted her sunglasses to gaze at it.

"I was hoping they could get my nose looking a little better, I never really liked this nose," she slid back in her lounge chair with a sigh, and one of her servants carefully steadied her glass so it

wouldn't drip.

"Well, I've about seen enough for today. How about we get a nap in?"

"My goddess," their High Priest said with a cough, "will you be skipping tonight's veneration?"

The Goddess let out a long moan, "No, I'll let everyone adore me." Being a goddess was such a slog sometimes.

"Thank you, Goddess of Gendar. May you--"

She stopped paying attention and pulled out a notebook, she was here for a reason after all. The whole goddess thing was just her day job.

"See?" he yelled.

Knives and Littlejohn looked up from the paper, met each other's gaze, and shrugged.

"It's even in her handwriting! She wrote that! About herself!"

"Um," Knives said, "who?"

"THE GODDESS OF GENDAR!"

"She enjoys a nice drink with umbrella personally I find that relateable."

"She's a CON ARTIST you absolute imbecile. This whole planet is a billion year con-job!"

Virtuoso coughed, "Clearly, you're uh, losing your mind and--"

"You're NAMED IN THE DAMN DOCUMENT!" he said, an accusatory finger pointing at Virtuoso.

Virtuoso waved both hands frantically, "No look, look, if hypothetically a friend built a whole planet up somebody had to stay there and run it or the socioeconomic--"

"SHUT UP! She's already left. Her and Artillo," he clenched a fist, and started chuckling to himself, "it's too late then, I suppose."

"It is," Knives replied, "you've murdered people, let alone your unlawful interference in this universe's business. You're coming back with me. In the name of the First and Final Firmament, I demand you turn yourself in."

He looked at Littlejohn, "I meant it's too late for something else. Our larger plan. And for that, well, I'm not actually sorry, but you have my sympathy."

Littlejohn shook his head, "Enough, are you turning yourself in or not?"

"Do you know what happens to us Firmament when we die, Sergeant-Instructor?"

"You live again, like my people."

"Not quite. If I die here, this far from home, by the time I make it back my soul, if you would call it that, will lose all memories. I'll be reborn a blank slate. A white c...well, you get the picture." He didn't meet anyone's gaze, "So I guess this is where it ends for me."

He swung the gauntlet out, and a blast of white light sent his foes scattering, but as Knives lept out of the way, she clung to the wall with her feet, and ran along it like it was the floor. She drew long crystal knife from her sleeve.

A second white blast came, and turned the wall ahead of Knives to rubble, dropping her back to the proper floor.

Littlejohn walked forward, no fear in his eyes, no agility in his step. Slowly and surely. White blasts came at him, but they seemed to be timed wrong, blazing past his cheeks in perfect near misses. The man screamed, and grabbed him, and sucked the life from him, and his eyes surged with red lines.

He fell to the floor, cold and wet. Skin covered his eyes, it had to be cut away so he could see, at least on the first body...but this was so long ago. So very long ago.

"So this is how you were born, out a simple cloning tank? I heard the 10,000 Dawns were backwaters, but I expected something nicer than this?"

“What the hell is inside you?” he coughed.
“You didn’t guess? Time.”

He let go, and stumbled back, still coughing up fluid from the birthing tank, Virtuoso and Littlejohn staring at him. He got his composure back, straightened his back, and a quick slash went along his chest. He looked down at the cut, it wasn’t fatal, up at the Arbiter of Knives, and snatched at the hand holding the knife, and sucked at her life.

And he fell to the floor, bleeding from everywhere.

“You didn’t think about what’s inside me, did you? I’m the Arbiter of Knives. Put it together.”

He didn’t say anything else before he passed on.

Littlejohn checked his pockets, and then looked at the papers, “A lot of historical records...a few notes about some sort of heist but no details...no ideas where they could have gone next from here I’m afraid.”

Virtuoso ran a hand over her hair, “I need to go see to the medical needs of the guests, and then the damage he did to the temple wall...will you excuse me?”

Littlejohn gestured, and she scampered off. “Weird, but she does her job well.

Knives nodded. “She’s absolutely a Firmament, you know. I can get ready to extradite her immediately.”

Littlejohn laughed, loud and hard, “Of course Virtuoso is. She has the worst poker face I’ve ever seen. I don’t really mind her being her, so I’ve let it slide.” He looked at Knives, and nodded, “Looks like we’re all done here.”

Knives looked down at the body, “I’ll bring him back to the Firmament. I’m sorry the trail went cold.”

“These things tend to come back around. I’ll let you know if anything comes from it all.”

Knives didn’t expect there’d be much. How serious could this whole plot be anyway? “I’ll see you around then, Littlejohn.”

“I’ll let you know if I need some cutlery.”

She smirked, and grabbing the body, vanished into a crystal orb. It zoomed through the temple, out the doors and past the medical crews, up into the sky, and ever so briefly became a star.

* * *

The Firmament, later

He fell to the floor, cold and wet. It was dark.

“You’re alright, I just haven’t cut your eyes open yet. Don’t struggle. I’m the Arbiter of Resurrection, and welcome to life. Now come on, we’ve got to get you up there’s paperwork to fill out.”

He wasn’t sure, after all he had only just come into the world, but as he was helped off the ground he couldn’t help but feel like he’d been here before.

White Canvas

by James Wylder

Featuring characters and concepts created by and used with permission from: Jacob Black, Nate Bumber, Niki Haringsma, Simon Bucher-Jones, Lance Parkin, Alan Bednar, Elizabeth Tock, David Koon, and Jo Smiley. Special thanks to Stuart Douglas.

Chapter 1: Art Therapy

The white canvas was taunting her, because after three hours it was still a white canvas. Miss Auteur had left the room to get them lunch, and told Graelyn to put her feelings on the canvas while she was out after two hours of waiting. She'd been gone an hour, and Graelyn still couldn't make it happen. She had to get something done, so she dipped her paint brush in the blue acrylic paint and started coloring in the sky. Not that the sky was blue, but she dreamed it was blue sometimes. Dreams that felt so real it was like they were memories. Still, they were just silly.

She looked down at her toy Mammoth, sitting next to her, wearing its own paint smock Miss Auteur had made herself. "What do you think, Taranis? Is it too fantastical?"

The toy sat silently.

"Yeah, I thought so too. Miss Auteur won't be pleased about it. But I've already started, haven't I?" Miss Auteur would be mad she was still talking to Taranis too, she was ten years old after all. She continued painting the sky in, and was about to paint the sun in, but decided that was probably a step too far, so she painted the silver *Diosca Eitilte* that hung above the city in the sky instead. She decided to keep painting her dream, but didn't get that much farther before Miss Auteur came back in, carrying a bag of sandwiches in one hand, drinks in the other, and two cookies by their plastic wrappers with her teeth.

She dropped it all on her desk and turned back to Graelyn, plastering a big grin on her face, framed by her red hair in a lulu cut. "There, we have lunch. And I see someone made a breakthrough while I was gone!"

Graelyn gave a faint smile back. "I'm sorry it took me so long, Miss Auteur."

Her art therapist put a hand on her shoulder, "You have nothing to apologize for, Graelyn. Now how about you take a break, and you tell me about your painting while we eat? I'm starving honestly." She took off the big metal gauntlet she always wore on one hand, and sat down in her big leather chair while Graelyn pulled up a smaller one to the front of her desk.

"Desolation makes the best club sandwiches in the city, don't you agree?"

Graelyn nodded. "They're very good. Is there another sandwich shop, though? Mister Desolation doesn't have a lot of competition."

Auteur shrugged. "Well, they're still very good. Oh, I got crisps too."

Graelyn took a bag, and popped them open. "You know, it's silly, but I've always called them chips. Like potato chips."

Miss Auteur laughed. "Imagine that, where'd you get that from?"

Graelyn shrugged. "My imagination I guess."

“The same place you got that blue sky?”

Graelyn nodded, and Auteur leaned in.

“That’s from your dream, isn’t it?”

Graelyn nodded.

“Who else is in the picture with you?”

Graelyn blushed. “Oh, that’s...Archimedes from the movies. The cyborg hero. I really like him.”

Auteur raised an eyebrow. “You’re blushing.”

“Not like that!” Graelyn said too loudly. “I just mean...I mean I feel like he’d be a good friend.”

“Better than just a stuffed Mammoth?”

“None of the kids here want to hang out with me. I’ve...” she looked to the side. “I tried, like you asked me to. They just laughed at me.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Graelyn looked at Auteur’s bookshelf. All sorts of classics. *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Head of State*, *Dracula*...

“Graelyn, why do you think that is?”

“Cause I don’t have a mask!” Graelyn spat out.

Auteur’s eyes went wide behind her own mask, and she stuttered, stumbling over her own words in surprise till she came up with, “Maybe your mother and father could get one for you?”

And then she realized her mistake.

“I...don’t have a mother and father,” Graelyn replied.

She tried not to grimace too hard, and shifted it to another question: “Doesn’t it ever bother you you don’t have a mother or father?”

“No, no one I know has a mother or father after all.” She cocked her head to the side, “do you, Miss Auteur?”

Auteur stumbled over her words for moment before getting out, “well, no, I suppose I don’t either.”

“Why do so many books have mothers and fathers? So many don’t seem to be fantasies, but then they pretend the world doesn’t end when you leave the city.”

“Fantasy is a popular genre.”

“I was thinking of writing a poem about the end of the city, where the white starts.”

“You’re no good at poetry, Graelyn. We tried that, remember?”

She nodded hard, her glasses jostling on her face. “I know, Miss Auteur, but I’d still like to try.”

Auteur slumped in her chair dramatically and gave a flourish of her hand. “Oh fine, but I actually have another idea. You’ve had a lot of interesting dreams the last few weeks, haven’t you, Graelyn?”

She nodded. “Yes Miss Auteur. I didn’t used to dream like this.”

“No you didn’t, and I’m worried about it. I’d like you to start keeping a dream journal. Do you think you can do that for me? I want you to write down what you dream, and we’ll review it at our next session. How does that sound?”

“I can do that, sure,” she replied, taking a sip from her tea.

“Great,” Auteur said, “now, I’d say we’re done for the day. You can stop by later to walk F.I.D.O if you want.”

Her eyes lit up. “Thank you, Miss Auteur!”

She gave a dismissive wave. “Just make sure you keep up your journals.”

* * *

Graelyn walked up to the counter and rung the bell. When no one sprung immediately to her service, she dinged it again, and then a few times more in rapid succession.

“Alright, alright. Hold your proverbial horses, I’m coming.” The shopkeep came out of the back, tying his apron around his waist, and smiled under the cut of his mask.

“Graelyn, what can I do for you today?”

Graelyn looked down at her list, and carefully read off the two items on it.

“I need...a notebook, and a mask.”

The shopkeep frowned, “I can get you the notebook, but why do you want a mask? You’ve never wanted one before.”

She leaned in, scrunching her shoulders close. “Mister Shopkeep, everyone has a mask. All the other kids have them. All the grownups too. I’m the only person without one. You have to have some here, you run the store.”

He nodded. “I do run the store, but we don’t have any masks in stock. No one has asked for one before.”

“Then where do people get their masks!?! They don’t just...come with them.”

He bit his lip, pulling the skin back tight over his lower teeth. “Right...well...I can get you the notebook now, but I’ll have to see if I can get you a mask somewhere.”

She smiled back at him. “Thank you, Mister Shopkeep.”

She walked out of the store, notebook in her bag. She passed the playground, where the other kids were playing. There weren’t that many kids in the town, or at least it felt like there weren’t. This was the town, it was the whole world, and it felt like there *should* be more. There were a lot of younger ones, but more people closer to her age had moved in over the years. This was the primary thing that made Graelyn think adults were lying to her, naturally. You didn’t just spin children out of looms, there were organic bodily processes for these things. They couldn’t just spring up here. And she heard them talk, usually behind her back, but often when they thought she wasn’t listening they spoke of places they’d lived before. Places from storybooks. She’d asked about it one day in class.

The Teacher, the only teacher, answered her raised hand.

“Sir, where is London?”

The class didn’t snicker, they looked scared.

“London, uh, well it’s a storybook place.”

“But Sir, your coat says it was made in London.”

All eyes fell on her, and after a deeply uncomfortable pause he replied, “Don’t ask silly questions. Now, we’ll be covering how to make your own summoning circle today.”

Today, as she walked past the playground, the other kids did snicker though. Most of them anyways. She took note of the ones who weren’t there.

Arriving home, Graelyn went straight to her bed, pulled Taranis from her bag, and threw herself down, shutting her eyes and squeezing the plush Mammoth tight. Sometimes it felt like the world was made for her to be alone. She couldn’t stay in bed forever though, she was hungry. She reached for her satchel and pulled out her clutch, sifting through the money inside. She only had twelve abominations and fifty-seven horror left, which meant that if she wanted to still see the new Archimedes movie, she’d need to cook her own dinner tonight. Groaning, she got up, carrying Taranis with her, and set him on the countertop as she sifted through the fridge.

Graelyn sometimes dreamed of a world where nearly no one cooked, where food just came out of machines that built it for you from base parts. But that was a fantasy. She got out her purple whisk, and began to whisk together some eggs. She probably shouldn’t use a whisk, all the recipe books seemed to think it was only good for some things, but Graelyn found she could do most things in the kitchen with it, recipe books be damned. She just liked whisking things, maybe.

She sat across from the stuffed toy and ate her omelette. The *Diosca Eitilte* above gave the daily call of, “Uh, hello citizens. I guess it’s going to get dark in a few hours. Unless you need a little more light? Or hours? You know, just call me if you need that. Maybe talk for a bit. No pressure or anything.” Graelyn had only met Cinnabar a few times, he wasn’t allowed to leave the *Diosca Eitilte* often, but she felt a kindred spirit with him. Not that she had time to talk to him tonight, F.I.D.O needed walkies.

* * *

F.I.D.O was already bounding up to the gate by the time she got there, metal legs whirring, his tail making a squeaking sound as it battered back and forth.

Graelyn unlatched the gate and slipped inside. “F.I.D.O, your tail needs some oil. Has Miss Auteur not been doing maintenance on you?”

She knelt down and scratched behind the two ear-shaped microphones on his head.

“Mistress Auteur does many things, wondrous things, dark things, and secret things. I am but content to sit at her feet,” the robot dog said.

“You are a good boy!” she said, and rubbed her hands over his smooth head.

“Incorrect. I am a bad boy, Mistress Graelyn.”

“Is that why you wear sunglasses everywhere? Because you’re a bad boy?”

“Correct. Mistress Auteur thought the leather jacket was too much, which I have deemed an unfortunate appraisal.”

Graelyn nodded and went over to the shed, grabbed the oil, and lubricated F.I.D.O’s joints. “Better?”

“You have done me a great service. Long shall it be remembered.”

“Wanna go for a...”

His head turned to the side, one ear perking up.

“WALK?!?”

F.I.D.O leapt ten feet vertically in joy. “WALK. WALK. WALK. MISTRESS IS TAKING F.I.D.O FOR WALKIES. EXCITEMENT TANGIBLE.”

She waited for him to calm down and snapped the leash to his collar. The leash wasn’t made of normal material, it was dark and nearly see-through, its edges cloudy. Still, it let her hold onto Miss Auteur’s dog despite his strength, so she didn’t question it much. He still tugged hard as they left Miss Auteur’s back yard, heading down the street. The residents of the town were going about their usual business: a young couple was on a date doing a blood sacrifice over a storm drain (“Not for dogs!” Graelyn said, pulling F.I.D.O away), the bakers commune was having a debate about working hours in the shop, while one of the members lackadaisically pulled memories from the group to put into tomorrow’s bread (the memories had to chill in the fridge overnight, after all). A group of parents were fussing over their children, the family’s three fathers and two mothers trying to get the ice cream off their kids’ faces, none of whom appeared to be cleanly eaters.

This was her town, and she wondered if it would ever let her go, and if it did, where she could go from here. As Graelyn and F.I.D.O reached the end of main street, she kept going. F.I.D.O wasn’t going to complain about a longer walk, so he might not catch on to what she was thinking. He mostly wanted to talk about Foucault anyway.

“So Foucault wrote that madness, in the 18th Century AD, and I refuse to use CE mind you, we have to have some continuity of tradition in our naming conventions, where was I? Right, madness was often used to stigmatize those who were unwanted by society. Poor, sick, and those whose own thoughts fell outside the social norms.” F.I.D.O ran a laser scanner over a flower, and a screen on his

backside displayed a full chemical analysis, which he was very pleased about. “So knowledge in itself isn’t a pure virtue, because knowledge is shaped by the existing powers who control it to gain more p— Mistress?”

Graelyn was running towards the edge of the town, towards the sea of white. Her high-tops pushed off the pavement, her arms pumped, her eyes kept on the prize. If it was a prize. If it was anything. She grabbed a stone as she passed it and chucked it ahead. It landed on the white.

“MISTRESS! HALT!”

She plunged on, and her foot left the crumbling edge of the pavement and dropped down onto...something soft. She ran on it, leaning down and letting her fingers glide across it. It felt like silk, soft to the touch but firm enough to hold her. She kept running, kept straight. She had to maintain the same direction or she’d get lost. And what did that mean here? She ran. And ran. And there was nothing. She stopped, panting, and looked back. She couldn’t see the town. Had there been a slope? She didn’t know. She turned around and ran till she tired, then walked. There was only white. Only nothing. She crossed her arms and hunched her shoulders. A mistake, certainly. She should have laid a string behind her, in hindsight. She uncrossed her arms and went to reach into her back, but her hand slipped right through it. She held them up: they were vanishing.

She stumbled, her feet sinking into the white, merging with it.

“F.I.D.O!” she yelled, “F.I.D.O! Help!”

Her feet were now part of the white. No matter how hard she tried to pull up, they kept sinking, her ankles, her calves. She lost her knees next, and decided this experiment was in fact a failure and did not meet her standards for proper experimentation. She thrashed, her glasses falling off onto the white.

Mother would be so disappointed in me, she thought, which was a weird thought for someone without parents.

Her chest began sinking in, and with a breath out, she resigned herself to the end. It wasn’t so bad. There were so many worse things than death. A grey blur appeared.

“Mistress!” she heard the blur say, “grab onto me.” She flailed her arms out and found F.I.D.O’s metal hide, grabbing hold of him. He pulled. His gears ground and his motors revved.

“I’m not moving.”

“Hold tight, Mistress.”

F.I.D.O’s leg’s crouched, and she heard his power core charge. Then he sprung. She was yanked out of the white, into the air, the metal dog soaring a hundred feet into the air. She prepared for the rough landing, but from F.I.D.O’s back two glider wings sprung, and they coasted to the ground, the real ground at the edge of town. Graelyn collapsed, her heart pounding. She tried to slow her breathing and get her heart rate under control.

“Good...dog...F.I.D.O,” she rasped.

“Correct. I have Mistress Graelyn’s glasses.”

She managed to sit up, and saw that F.I.D.O was holding her glasses in his mouth. She pulled them out, careful to avoid his razor-blade teeth, and put them back on.

“You saved my life, F.I.D.O. Thank you.”

“Mistress Graelyn, you knew very well that the empty lands are forbidden.”

“I needed to know what was beyond them.”

“Now you know,” he replied, “nothing exists beyond them, and nothing can exist in them.”

She nodded and looked back out at it. “You won’t tell Miss Auteur, will you?”

F.I.D.O examined her for a moment. “I shall keep your secret, young one. But I won’t save you again if you venture outside the town.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“Now,” F.I.D.O continued, “what was I saying about Foucault?”

Chapter 2: Dreams

Graelyn presented the dream journal to Auteur, who had never seen Graelyn in this kind of mood before.

“Graelyn, you’re very on edge, excited, nervous, it’s hard to tell.”

She gave Auteur a bad attempt at a smile. “I just had very interesting dreams last night.”

Raising an eyebrow, Auteur adjusted her white robe, the light from the *Diosca Eitilte* making the red and gold edging and designs on them stand out pleasingly, and opened Graelyn’s journal.

Dream Journal Entry 1:

Graelyn stirred the coffee,

Auteur’s Office

“That’s your opening?” Auteur snapped. “That’s barely a first line.”

Graelyn frowned. “I thought you said you wouldn’t be judging my dream journals on their artistic merit.”

Auteur forced a smile. “Yes, of course. But uh, give me a moment.” Auteur took Graelyn’s journal back to her desk, and spent the next hour rewriting it on a notepad while Graelyn sat awkwardly and watched.

“There, now I think that’s ready for us to read together. You didn’t even need the whole opening, setup is overrated. Come sit with me on the couch, Graelyn.”

Graelyn squirmed. “Um, Miss Auteur, if we’re supposed to be analyzing my dreams, does it really help if you rewrote them?”

She scoffed. “Nonsense. I just massively improved the quality of the prose. Well, maybe added a few embellishments. Have you ever read “The Dark Tower”?”

Graelyn shook her head.

“Oh, great. Then you’re going to love this first line.”

Dream Journal, Entry 1

The green-robed man fled across the rooftops, and Archimedes followed. Arch’s mechanical legs, mechanical like most of their body, were making it a certainty they’d overtake the green-robed man given enough time. He leapt off a rooftop, the city rushing beneath him, and as he landed he could hear the pistons of his pursuer. The man looked back, stumbling on a piece of grating, and then panicked as he realized the roof was running out. He’d lost his momentum, and he couldn’t make the next leap. He hesitated, just a moment, but that was enough. Large hands grasped him under the armpits, lifting him up like a child. Then, he really felt fear: the hands threw him up into the air in a corkscrew, and he came down back into those hands, only facing the other direction.

“Hi,” Archimedes said, “did you realize you’re in a lot of trouble or am I the first one to inform you of that?”

The green-robed man looked down into the near-blank mask that Archimedes had for a face, with only one eye on its right-hand side. It was made of some sort of very tough screen that could display images, and the whole rest of their body was coated in it as well, though some of it was covered by a long trench coat and a blue fez that said “Centro Children’s Hospital Fun Gang!” on it.

"I know," he replied.

Arch sighed and looked at the man's left arm, which was covered up to the elbow in an elaborate, bejeweled golden gauntlet. They'd seen a lot of gauntlets, the Knights of Sky used them all the time after all in order to channel energy from other realities or something like that, but this one was different. Usually the gauntlets had a slapped-together look, with different parts being added on whenever the owner realized it needed one. This was sleek, bespoke, and more than a bit gaudy. Arch sighed a second time.

"Put down the gauntlet, please. I'm not in the mood to deal with this today."

The green-robed man was sweating up a storm. He glanced at the gauntlet.

"I know what it does, and don't you dare. My reaction times are miles beyond yours."

There were three labored breaths, and the gauntlet slid off and clattered to the ground, just as the access door to the roof swung open, revealing Arch's comrade, Graelyn Scythes, who pointed at the captive man, began to speak, then hunched over, hand on her knees, panting.

"You alright, Grae?" Arch asked.

She nodded, and raised one hand to point as she heaved in breaths, "Got...you!"

"You can really take your time, we're not in a-"

"-Dawn...is here...to-" she pulled in several deep breaths.

"Breathe in slow, out fast."

"You guys had to do the whole parkour on rooftops thing? Really?"

"Parkour?" Arch asked.

"It's French for jumping off rooftops like you're in a holoflick," Grae replied, straightening her back and regaining her composure like nothing weird had ever happened to her, ever. "As I was saying, Mr. Knight of Sky, we know you took the...oh, it's on the ground."

"Yeah, I got that," Arch replied.

"Could you please set me down?" the man replied.

Graelyn picked up the gauntlet, and after fiddling with it for a moment, slid it on her own arm as Arch tried to say, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"It fits!"

"It fits everyone," the man replied.

"What's it do?" Graelyn asked.

"No idea," Arch replied, setting the man down, whose face instantly reddened.

"You said you knew what it did!"

Arch shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Artillo Brinzo."

"So what's it do? We know you stole it."

Artillo scoffed, "How could you know that?"

* * *

3 Hours Earlier.

Kinan Jans, leader of Dawn, walked towards where Arch and Graelyn were reading "Fun knitting patterns" and "Clique Mechanics" respectively.

"Hi, this is an Emissary from an alternate reality Firmament, some guy from The Knights of Sky stole their gauntlet."

"We'd like it back," the robed figure with a funny collar said. Then after a pause, "Please."

* * *

"Okay so maybe I stole it, but I didn't steal it by myself, I was hired by-"

There was a flash, and a statue of a painted warrior was there, its stone arm around Artillo's neck, and then both of them disappeared.

Graelyn and Arch stared at the air.

"Agreed that that wasn't good?" she said.

"Yep," they replied.

"Can you trace him?"

A flood of question marks filled the screen of Arch's face. "How...do you think I could do that?"

"You're a cyborg?"

"What does that mean?"

"I mean you're constantly revealing you have new gizmos in your body that do neat things. Like the kitten holder."

"Kittens need to be comfy."

"And the missile launcher."

"To be fair, I didn't know that was there myself."

"So can you track him?"

Arch shook his head. "Afraid not. I've never seen a teleporting painted statue before."

Graelyn flexed her hand, "I do wonder what this does, though." She snapped her fingers. Nothing happened.

"We can figure that out later, after we report back to Kinan. This is..." In front of them on the rooftop was another painted statue of a warrior, its noble jaw pointed in defiance.

"Uh," Graelyn said, "That wasn't there before?"

"Maybe they can only move when we're not looking at them?" Arch posited.

"That's ridiculous!" Graelyn replied, "But then again, teleporting statues are ridiculous..." she squinted, "How do they work?" They stared at them. They didn't move.

"Alright, so, maybe we should test this theory. We close our eyes, er, you turn off your cameras on the count of three and then we open them. Right?"

Arch nodded. "That sounds dangerous and stupid, but I'm in."

She grinned. "I love field research. Three, two, one..."

There was a moment of darkness, and then there was a painted statue, closer, face filled with rage, sword drawn, charging at them.

"Alright cool, so, how about we get out of here then?" Graelyn said.

"Any suggestions on how to do that without death?"

Graelyn nudged him. "Trust fall. Huh, yeah?"

"Stop having fun."

"Sorry."

"But yeah, that works."

They backed up to the edge of the building, keeping their eyes on the statue, and then leaned backward. They tumbled off, Graelyn reaching into her side-bag and pulling out a handful of Crystal dust with her gauntleted hand. The gauntlet hummed with energy upon contact, and Graelyn threw the dust down in a curve, the sparkling crystals forming into a circle of white light, and then a disk, and they fell into it as the disk closed.

Auteur's Office

Auteur paused, looking down at the ending to the journal's story as though she hadn't read it already and rewritten it personally. "Well, that is a curious dream."

"I liked the part with Archimedes at the Children's hospital you cut out. He was giving the kids candy and toys, it was really kind and cute."

Auteur scoffed. "It was just fluff. You should always trim down your stories to just what you need. Every line should serve the narrative."

Graelyn frowned. "But I always like the details, I like when stories explore things."

"A waste of the reader's time, so I fixed it. But I think this story says a lot about you. You put my gauntlet into it, didn't you, Graelyn?"

She nodded, "I did, I don't know what that means."

"I think it means you're searching for something. You are searching for something, aren't you?"

Graelyn looked at her feet, "Maybe."

"You can tell me, it's okay."

Graelyn turned her head away. "...I...I still don't have any friends. Not one." Her voice choked up, "I've tried, Miss Auteur, but they all hate me. They think I'm stupid, or they yell at me and blame me."

Auteur closed the journal, and pulled a loose strand of red hair behind her ear. "What on Earth could they blame you for?"

"What's Earth?"

"Nevermind, what do they blame you for, Graelyn?"

"Tyraniss said his mom and mom wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me."

Auteur shook her head, "He's being a bully."

"But there's nowhere to go! You can't go beyond the white."

"Of course you can't. He meant his parents don't work on the *Diosca Eitilte* anymore, they used to. Cinnabar wasn't always the voice up there, do you remember that?"

Graelyn's face scrunched up. "Sort of."

"It was a long time ago. Now Graelyn, you're a smart girl with a keen, curious mind. You excel in most of your classes—"

"Not blood magic."

"Yes, well, nobody is perfect. But you can make friends," she gave the girl a smile. "Maybe you're just going about it the wrong way. But I'm afraid we're out of time. I've got another appointment. So we'll pick this up next session. Alright?"

The girl nodded, and grabbed her satchel, "See you next time, Miss Auteur."

"Don't forget to walk F.I.D.O!"

She smiled, a real smile this time. "I won't, promise."

* * *

Holding a silver cane, and dressed in a suit so fine it made the rest of the room look underdressed, Gideon entered. Auteur rose to meet him, and the pair shook hands, then hugged.

"I'm so glad to see you, Gideon, running this whole town for another year has been misery."

They sat down in plush chairs, usually meant for her sessions, and she poured each of them a glass of bourbon. "Misery it may be, but you've been at this a long time. How long is the girl now?"

"Ten," Auteur answered, "just last month. She had a birthday party all alone. I watched it from the nanny cam. Set up her little stuffed Mammoth and blew out the candles with him."

“Terribly sad.”

“Oh don’t look at me like that, of course I stopped by and gave her a present. Some science book I kept falling asleep to. She loved it though.” Auteur rolled her eyes hard. “I’ve been letting her walk F.I.D.O as well. I think she’s more of a cat person, but it’s working out.”

Gideon nodded, “And how close are you to making a breakthrough with her?”

Auteur gave a faint smile, “I’ve been making small breakthroughs in our therapy sessions.”

Gideon took a sip of the bourbon. “This is fantastic,” he took a second sip, “faint memories of...did we kill the distiller?”

“Yes, a bit of a mistake. He really made the best bourbon.” She took her mask off so Gideon could see her whole face, the clean white features with artful freckles, her green eyes staring into him. “So I’m taking my time on this one. I’m not going to make that kind of mistake again.”

Chapter 3: Popcorn

Graelyn knew she still had another growth spurt in her, or she'd better have one, because she still felt too short at the movie theatre counter. Not peering-over-on-her-tiptoes anymore at least, but still. This wasn't the way she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

"One ticket for 'Archimedes: Skymetal' please?"

"Would you...like any popcorn, candy, drinks, or the dying...gasps of unloved birds?" the attendant, a hulking thing of machine and clay they called "Hole," asked.

"I'll do the popcorn and drink combo please."

Hole filled the bag, and turned some of its eyeholes back to her, slowly, jerking like stop-motion animation. Tiny flecks of clay fell amidst the popcorn. "Buttery T-Topping?" it asked her.

"No thank you!"

"E-Enjoy the show, Theater 8, to...your left," Hole said, a limb jerking left and right in windshield-wiper-like wave.

Graelyn balanced the bag of popcorn and the drink, which were supposedly 'small' but did not seem small at all, and meandered her way towards Theater 8, when she heard a few things from around the corner. So naturally, she stopped to listen, back flat against the wall and peeking around cautiously.

"Just tell her how you feel," a woman said to her friend. He shook his head.

"You know she won't understand! It's not going to go well." He banged his head against the wall. "I just want one reminder of home, that's all."

"And that's not too much to ask, is it?"

He let out a breath and shook his head.

"So, the next time you see her...you'll..."

"I'll ask her."

She grinned, "Fantastic. Now come on, don't want to miss the previews."

Curious, certainly, but also Graelyn had no context for the conversation. Still, she filed it away. She slipped into the theater, found her seat, and waited for the lights to go down. She was wearing her Archimedes t-shirt, which had the cyborg hero sitting crosslegged, covered in kittens, arms in the air in acceptance of the situation.

Arch was the best.

The previews were mostly movies Graelyn was already planning to see: Songbird 3: The Fall of Kings, Coloth Adventures 4: The Patron of Doom, Aladdin: Kid Hacker!, and a few that didn't really interest her, like a drama about how some fictional space admiral uncovered a secret plot to start a war while sitting in a desk job. She munched on her popcorn and watched the theatre fill up. The other kids from school were here for the premiere, actually, all the kids in her class, filtering in in bursts. She avoided most of the other kids' eyes, but noticed Citizen 176 was sitting alone near the back. At least Graelyn wasn't the only kid here alone.

Finally, the previews ended, and the movie began.

Like all Archimedes movies, it began with the usual intro, where a whole ton of images from the Archimedes cinematic universe flashed, and the camera panned out to reveal the images were being projected on his screen-like chest all along. Then, the adventure began.

Scene: It's supposed to be a science-fiction setting, but we can tell they just shot it on an ordinary space station. They've added things over the ordinary bits, and tried to give the holograms and displays a bit more of a "Futuristic" look. But really, you can tell that the ocean outside the windows isn't really there and is just CGI over the vastness of space. Sure, we'll all be living in underwater cities in the future, but you'd think with how big the budget is they'd do better. We see a man in robes, setting a bomb on a bulkhead. Skidding around the corner comes ARCHIMEDES VON AHNERABE, played under the heavy armor costume and coat by Brad Pitt, and his assistant, his trusted companion for so many years, CELESTE ROTH, played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who has long brown hair to match the character. She's got a bit of a punk vibe, but nothing that would deter families from going to see this PG-13 rated flick.

ARCHIMEDES

Hi, I noticed you're trying to blow up this underwater city, would you like some help with that?

The figure turns, he is a member of THE FIRMAMENT, the evil cult! Pulling his hood down, he points at Archimedes and reveals he is played by Brendan Fraser, an amazing piece of miscasting that is instantly obvious because we all kinda like the villain.

FIRMAMENT

Did you really think you could stop us?

CELESTE

We already did, actually.

FLASHBACK: We see the earlier scene where the Firmament shoved Celeste off the bridge (only for her to fix her rocket-boots mid fall and survive). She pulls a bit from the bomb as she drops, we cut back to the present. The bomb has a convenient screen that says: ERROR.

FIRMAMENT

Why did I put that screen there anyways?

CELESTE

We don't want to hurt you, so go on then, give yourself up and tell us—

"DOWN IN FRONT!" someone yelled.

The Hollow Childe had risen into the air, blocking the screen partially, the walls began to whisper secrets not heard since the first being dared to pull itself from the ocean on a weak and daring limb, and Hole came lumbering in with the sound of rusting gears, and hurled the lasso the theater had for these occasions up, nabbing her ankle, and pulling her from the theater like a balloon. Theatergoers hurled popcorn at her as she was escorted out, this wasn't the first time. Graelyn slid down in her seat, as though they'd notice her too.

"I can't believe we're stuck here with these brats," the same voice said quieter, but not quiet enough.

"Keep it down," their friend said, then said something too quiet for Graelyn to hear.

SCENE: Archimedes and Celeste have managed to get onto the surf boards, and are sliding down the lava flow, now that the volcano has erupted (natch).

CELESTE

Arch, the kittens!

She's right, the transparent orb with the kittens is bouncing down the side of the volcano above the lava flow...HEADING RIGHT TOWARDS IT! Arch turns his surfboard, an arc of lava splashing up towards the camera (in 3-D), and angles right for the orb.

CLOSE UP: the kittens, they are babies and very cute. They are making little mewling noises, and walking all over each other in the bubble. Arch gets his surfboard parallel with the rolling ball.

ARCHIMEDES

Come on little guys, I got you...

The ball rolls off, it looks like it's going towards Arch's hands—but it hits a bump and the angle changes. and Archimedes catches it!

The audience roars their applause, and Graelyn takes a big sip from her pop. These movies were great. The finale had maybe a bit too much CGI, but that was okay. As she left the theater Graelyn was already daydreaming about the adventures of Arch, and how to build a surfboard that could ride a lava flow (realistically, the lava flow would be too slow for that, but hypothetically anyway). She'd almost reached the exit when Graelyn remembered the most important thing about leaving the movie theater. When she had forgotten before, it had haunted her for days. She wouldn't fail this time. So she turned around, and went to go get a free popcorn refill with her membership card.

On most days, this would have been a completely innocuous action (after how expensive the popcorn was, who wouldn't get the refill?) but today, it put Graelyn in the position of hearing part 2 of the conversation she'd overheard earlier. During the course of it, Graelyn would go from the counter, to the wall, to covering her mouth against the wall with her eyes wide. You can insert these motions into the below dialogue at moments you feel appropriate.

"Mayor Auteur!" the man yelled.

She sighed. "I'm not the mayor. Don't...I'm...don't call me that!"

"But you're in charge?" the woman replied.

She sighed louder. "Fine, what is it?"

"We were wondering if we could have a simple request? You know, with the holidays coming up and all."

Auteur grimaced and crossed her arms.

"...We were wondering if you could show my favorite movie here at the movie theater?"

"Your favorite movie?"

"Yes!"

"You do understand why we're all here, right? Why this town is here?"

The woman coughed. "It has been a bit of time..."

"Fine, what's the movie?"

The man smiled, and his posture loosened. "Oh, it's a perfect movie for the winter: 'Ice Age 2'!"

Auteur stared at him. "You can't be serious."

The woman looked back and forth between them nervously. "It's just a fun fi-

“It’s an artistic travesty! The first ‘Ice Age’ movie was bad enough, but then they had the nerve to cash in on a sequel?”

“...there are a few sequels actually and—”

“And that god-forsaken squirrel! Who thought that was a good idea!”

“...I love the squirrel.”

“And most of all,” she bared her teeth, “it has Manny the Mammoth. And you know that pisses me off, so how about you show one lick of artistic taste. I mean, it’s commercial tripe but at least something by Pixar! ‘Ice Age 2,’ I mean—” she threw her arm with the gauntlet out, and they looked at something Graelyn couldn’t see. They stared at it, “Oh uh, well. That’s awkward.”

The man and woman backed away from Auteur.

“So uh, I’ll go clean that up, and you go get some artistic taste. Sound good?”

They stuttered out a “Yes, Auteur,” before scrambling away.

When Graelyn returned home she whisked her dinner together, and looked at Tiranis, who watched her from the counter. “Well, we should both be glad I didn’t name you Manny, huh?”

The plush toy didn’t respond, but Graelyn pointed with the whisk like he had anyway. “Yeah, so count your blessings.”

Dream Journal, Entry 2

The pair popped out of a different white disk, tumbling out onto green grass under a blue sky where the clouds were floating bubbles of water. Their home, the home of Dawn: Spiral. They didn’t stop to rest, however. Graelyn and Arch got to their feet and started sprinting toward their leader, Kinan Jans, a lanky person in a long gray coat, the left side of their head shaved so their blond hair fell on the other. They were chatting with the Emissary from the other reality. “What’s wrong?” Kinan said in her slurred monotone.

“Big problems, actually! A painted stone statue showed up and kidnapped our target!” Graelyn ejaculated.

The Emissary looked down at her arm. “You retrieved the gauntlet, however, and that was our main concern. We can chase criminals forever, but if that fell into the wrong hands, there could be horrible consequences.”

“Great, but, really, why is a painted stone statue kidnapping anyone? It’s a statue.”

Kinan cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know of anything from the 10,000 Dawns that does that. Are you sure it was a real statue?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“And it teleports,” Arch said.

All eyes turned the Emissary. “That sounds like it could be a few things from where I’m from. I can’t be sure, though, without traveling all the way back homeward. I can’t be sure without looking.”

Kinan turned to her. “I hate to impose, but if you can assist us.”

The Emissary scratched her face. “Well, I suppose I could...no, no I’m afraid I can’t. My orders were very clear to go straight back when I’d acquired the artifact. Could I have it back, please?”

Graelyn moved to take it off her arm, but didn’t budge. “Uh. Sorry, a bit stuck.” She pulled on it more, and then felt around for a latch. “Arch, it came off the green guy so easily...”

Arch tried to tug it off, but it didn’t move a millimeter.

The Emissary stepped up and examined the gauntlet. “It looks like I don’t have a choice in staying, the artifact has initiated a danger lock. Whatever those statues are, it thinks they’re a big

enough threat to your universes that it won't detach till the situation is resolved." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Alright, let's go back and investigate."

Kinan raised an arm and opened a portal up, and the four walked through the swirling white light.

They arrived in Times Square, New York, to absolute silence. The streets were empty, aside from a few automated cars that were going to their predetermined destinations.

"Did you choose a weird year? Maybe there's a reason for this," Arch asked.

"No," Kinan replied, "this is Christmas Eve, 2460. The streets should be packed."

Graelyn spun around looking for something out of the ordinary, till her eyes landed on a painted statue. "Kinan, Arch, Emissary, look."

They did, and the Emissary cursed. "That's a Painted Warrior. I'm not entirely familiar with them, but they're servants of our enemies."

Arch took a step towards it. "Hi there, Painted Warrior, I'm Archimedes. I don't know why you're here, but we'd love to talk about this."

"Arch, I love your peace-mongering, but you're literally talking to a statue," Grae replied.

"She's right," The Emissary said.

"Where are the Firmament? They're supposed to be handling something like this," Kinan said.

From beneath a pile of trash, a voice answered her, "The Firmament has fallen." A woman popped up from the pile, pulling a hamburger wrapper out of her hair. Arch kept his eyes on the statue. "I've been trying to find anyone else who made it, who escaped." She held up a whisk. "Thanks to the Quantum Whisk I was able to find you, though, at least I think it helped me find you. Honestly, it might just be a whisk."

"Lady Aesculapius," Graelyn said, "you're serious?"

"You know her?" the Emissary asked.

"Traveled with her for a bit," Arch answered, staring at the statue.

"Lady Aesc for short, and for easy spelling," she pulled a blue slouch cap over her curly hair and scrambled out of the trash heap, dusting her blue pea coat off as she ran to the group. "I've been trying to track down information on them, but they've already done quite a lot to get rid of it. Before they nicked my ride, I did notice they'd nicked something—"

"There's another," Kinan noted, and indeed, there was. Her eyes focused on it.

"-every copy of one specific book, it got marked stolen by the computers-"

"Another one," Graelyn said, and stared.

"-It's called 'The Book of the Enemy'."

"If they scrubbed this reality, we can find it in mine! The Plume Coterie would have it!" The Emissary yelled.

"We're leaving, now," Kinan said, and threw her arm out, the light swirling into a new portal. But there were more Painted Warriors appearing, whenever a gap in their sight came up. The Emissary ran through first, then Graelyn, then Lady Aesc.

"Go," Arch said.

"No," Kinan replied, and Arch ran through. And then, there were too few eyes, and Kinan Jans felt a hand on her shoulder of cold painted Marble.

Auteur shut the book and looked at Graelyn, "That was quite the writing you did this week."

Graelyn smiled, faintly. "Thank you, Miss Auteur."

Auteur scooted her chair closer to Graelyn. “Now, Graelyn...I think it’s time we talk about some of the underlying things you keep putting into your writing. In this story, you’re friends with fictional characters. It’s a fanfic, isn’t it?”

Graelyn blushed. “Oh, I mean, it’s a dream, just...”

Auteur gave a calming smile. “You misunderstand me. I wrote lots of fanfiction at your age, and between us,” she winked, “I still might.”

The girl perked up a little. “Really, Miss Auteur?”

“Oh absolutely. But here’s the thing, Graelyn, fanfic is wonderful to write, but this is you writing down your dreams. Now, dreams can just be dreams, they don’t need to be anything, but if there are patterns they can mean something. Do you follow me?”

Graelyn nodded.

“You’ve told me a lot of your dreams, from before we started this dream journal project, and do you know what they have in common?”

“...They’re fanfic?”

“Quite right. There’s no friends or family in them. No one except you and the characters you latch onto.”

Graelyn bowed her head.

“And I think we both know why that is?”

“Because I don’t have any friends.”

“Now, these characters like Archimedes, you feel like they are friends you could have had, don’t you? You feel like Archimedes and his assistant Celeste are your friends right now?”

Graelyn shook her head. “I don’t feel that way about Celeste, she’s...I don’t feel like I’ve met her?”

“You’ve never met Archimedes, though.”

Graelyn shrugged. “I suppose not...”

“But you want to be friends with him, you would if you could?”

The girl nodded. “He’s everything I’d want in a friend. Kind, nice even, but brave and not afraid to stand up to people doing things he doesn’t think are right. And he bring joy into other people’s lives.”

“Do you want to see those things in yourself?”

There was a long pause, Auteur felt she was calculating the answer, before she replied, “Perhaps.”

“Now Grae...there’s another troubling element in these stories. One of these friends of yours, Kinan, she just vanished and was pulled out of the story by these,” Auteur checked the journal theatrically, “Painted Warriors. Do you not like her?”

“No, I think Kinan is wonderful.”

“Then why do you think she vanished, why do you think you’re putting all your characters in danger of vanishing too?”

“I don’t know, Miss Auteur.”

“It’s because you’re being pushed towards a choice, Graelyn, a choice that’s been coming a long time: are you going to stay with them, or not?”

Graelyn paused. “I can’t let go of my characters, I don’t have anyone—”

Auteur tsked. “Of course you don’t have anyone. You only have your fictions, no one to laugh with. I know you talk to your stuffed animal when I’m not looking.”

Graelyn hid her face.

“You plot everything you do. You act like other people are a game you can play, and then you take your ball and go home like that makes you better than them. But it doesn’t make you better, do you know what that makes you?”

She shook her head, collapsing in on herself.

“It just makes you disgustingly alone!” Auteur stood up and towered over her. “Where can you even go from here, you’ve tried it all, haven’t you?”

Graelyn began to cry.

“I bet you feel like you don’t belong here, like you’re a burden on everyone else around you, don’t you?”

Nodding, Graelyn began to sob.

“Then make it final, write down in your journal what you want. That you want to be with your characters. Make it real with ink. Go on then. Who else do you have?”

She shoved the journal in Graelyn’s face, and the girl uncurled, her face sloppy with tears, and she took the journal. Auteur rammed a pen in between her shaking hands.

“It’s what you want. Write it down. You’re so alone. But you don’t have to be. It can all be okay. Just admit what you want. Who do you have that cares about you, who do you have that looks after you, Graelyn? Write it down! Who do you have?”

Graelyn started to write, started to pen the words, her lips trembling. Then she stopped. She looked up at Auteur, in sudden understanding.

“I have you, miss Auteur.”

Auteur nearly tripped backwards in horror, “I, n...I—”

“You...” Graelyn started crying again, but it was different this time, “You’ve always been there on my birthday, and on Christmas, even when no one else was there, when I was so alone. And-and you let me walk F.I.D.O, and feed him. And sometimes you bring me nice lunches, and we just...” she rushed forward and grabbed hold of her around the legs, sobbing into her robes, “Oh Miss Auteur, I thought I was alone and no one loved me! But I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Auteur patted her on the head, trying to figure out what to say. Her face went through a dozen panicked expressions. “...Y...Yes. That. Yes of course, of, of course, Graelyn.” Why did she say that. Shit. No, that was not what she was supposed to say, but she was being so damn earnest!

“Can...can I spend Christmas with you this year?”

“Of course,” she replied, biting her cheek till she tasted blood.

Graelyn pulled away from her, wiping tears from her face, and looked at the clock. “Oh! I need to go, I’m so late but...” she looked up at Auteur, who tried to smile politely. “I...I thought you were being mean, but...you’re right, I can make friends. I’ll see you when I get F.I.D.O later.” She scrambled towards the door, and then stopped halfway through, turned back, and smiled at her. “Thank you!”

Auteur waved goodbye, and as the door closed she stood in the center of the room in silence, listening for Graelyn’s footsteps to grow silent. Then she stood a while longer, staring at the wall, before she screamed, knocking over the chair and kicking the side of her table. She pulled books off the shelves and threw them on the floor, and curled up in the pile of rubble she’d made holding her head. How had she lost control of that? How had that moment she’d prepared for gone so wrong?

She let out a moan, and then a curse word not suited for family audiences, and thought about what the hell she was going to tell Gideon.

Chapter 4: The Plan

“Nietzsche is massively overrated, it’s not just that his ideals were co-opted by edgelords, but really his ideas were never particularly interesting to me in the first place. Is that because I am a dog? Perhaps but—Miss Graelyn, you look deep in thought, but distant. I presume it’s not a rebuttal?”

“No F.I.D.O, I’m just trying to figure something out.”

“I am a good listener, or can be.”

Graelyn stepped over the dead chickens and beer cans from someone’s late night blood ritual. “I don’t know...I just don’t have any friends, you know? You’re great, but dogs always love people.”

F.I.D.O looked off into the distance, his ears wagging a little in a sudden breeze. “Not this dog, sweetheart.” He looked back up at her. “But I understand your point. Perhaps you’re just trying to be friends with the wrong people?”

Graelyn thought about it, the dog might have a point.

* * *

Graelyn knocked at the door, her heart beating hard in her chest. Citizen 176 opened the door and, seeing Graelyn, moved to close it, but Graelyn shoved the cookies she’d baked into the gap.

“I made these for you. ’Cause I want to be friends.”

Citizen 176 looked down at the cookies. “Material goods aren’t the key to endearing camaraderie.”

Without a hint of emotion, Graelyn replied, “I made them with love.”

“Well that’s okay then. Um,” Citizen 176 leaned in, “do you want to have a sleepover tonight? I used to have them. But...I haven’t in a while.” She looked down at the simple dress she wore, and adjusted the old hat on her head.

That was a thing friends did, so Graelyn saw this as a positive improvement. “I would love to have a sleepover. Should we invite anyone else?”

Citizen 176 thought a moment. “I don’t really want that creepy creepy-eyed boy here. Plus, no boys allowed. Girls and enbies only. Um...we could invite the Hollow Childe?”

Graelyn kept her face blank. “The one who says she has demons in her blood?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know. You knocked here because I’m a weirdo too, right?”

Graelyn looked at her feet. “Yeah. I guess. So we should all stick together then. I get that. Um, should I invite her then?”

Citizen 176 shrugged. “It’s your idea.”

* * *

Graelyn knocked on the Hollow Childe’s door, which was a four-story Gothic mansion.

“Hello? It’s Graelyn from school?”

The door creaked open, revealing a living room filled with dust and cobwebs, much darker than it should be for this time of the day. Graelyn stepped inside and pulled Taranis from her bag. She felt silly for clutching at the stuffed Mammoth (“It’s an emotional crutch you need to get over,” she could hear Miss Auteur saying) but the place seemed engineered to be creepy. A ceiling tile broke, and three bats flew out—swooping down, missing Graelyn’s head as she ducked them, and flying out the door.

Holding the mammoth in front of her like a holy talisman, she made her way across the room, and opened the door into the next one.

A piano with no player tapped out a tuneless melody. Dark stains lined the walls and the checkerboard floor. In the corner, a girl stood, swaying from side to side, her long hair moving with her like a pendulum. She made small noises of laughter in bursts that didn't align with anything.

"Hi, the Hollow Childe?"

"You shouldn't have come here," a little girl's voice said, overlaid with a thick and low voice that sounded hungry.

"Oh, well, I can go then," Graelyn replied.

"Go?" The Hollow Child turned, her eyes leaking black fluid from under her mask, her mouth wet with blood. "We're just getting started."

"Well, Citizen 176 and I are throwing a sleepover, and we thought we'd invite you? It'll just be over at her house tonight. Oh, and I brought cookies." Graelyn pulled out another box of cookies and held them out.

The Hollow Childe stopped laughing and stared at Graelyn. "You're having a sleepover?"

"Yep!"

"And I'm invited?"

"Still yep."

"And you brought me cookies?"

Graelyn pushed her arm out further. The Hollow Childe took them. She pulled one out and took a bite of it.

"These are pretty good...I didn't know you baked."

"I'm still learning."

The Hollow Childe turned around again and pulled up her mask, rubbing her eyes.

"Are...you okay?"

"I'm...fine. I'll see you at the sleepover, Graelyn..."

She was clearly starting to sob, so Graelyn thought about what the correct reaction to that would be, and asked if she needed to talk about things.

The Hollow Child then just cried harder and threw herself on Graelyn, crying onto her nice sweater. The tears weren't as much of a big deal as the blood and black stuff all over her face. But Graelyn patted her on the back, and told her it would be okay. The Hollow Childe pulled away.

"I'll uh, see you tonight. And don't um, don't tell anyone I did that or I'll rip your intestines out."

Graelyn forced a smile. "It'll be our secret."

The Hollow Childe's mouth dropped, and she scampered up the stairs to her bedroom.

Well, at least Miss Auteur couldn't say she wasn't trying to make friends anymore.

* * *

Citizen 176 had a very nice place, which she said was modeled after the Palace at Versailles, which Graelyn had read a few stories about. The Hollow Childe and Graelyn had both showed up slightly early, and stood on the doorstep awkwardly, till Citizen 176 cracked the door open and told them to "come in already it's getting weird." Which they did. 176 had gathered together some snacks: popcorn, candy, pop, fully roasted Cornish hens, pizza, and something called "Pain au Chocolat" which she told them repeatedly to not call "Chocolatine" despite neither of them ever having heard of the chocolatey bread before. Graelyn brought more cookies, and the Hollow Childe brought milk and a bunch of cocoa. With far too much food, the three of them got into their pajamas, put on a movie, and

started snarfing it down together as they lounged on the floor in front of the TV with plenty of blankets and pillows.

Scene: A burned-out ancient city. We're seeing it from a birds-eye view, the charred ruins still smoking; something terrible happened here. Into frame come dragonflies, giant ones. On their backs ride ALICE THE SONGBIRD and her freedom fighters against the Kingdom of Centro. They swoop down, and we cut to them landing, dismounting from their dragonflies. Her intrepid squire JACK leans down and rubs some of the ash between his fingers.

JACK

This can't be real. I thought the legends were false.

ALICE

Can you think of any other explanation?

JACK

I...I can't.

Awkwardly falling from his dragonfly saddle, we meet ALADDIN, who somehow drops five books to the ground, shoving his glasses back up his nose.

ALADDIN

But those were just leg—

ALICE

We're looking at something awful, boys.

We can visibly perceive the actress steady herself to say the next few lines. She's been practicing them in the mirror, hoping they sound at least decent.

ALICE

We're looking at the rise of something new, or something old. We're looking at—

Smash cut to our title card:

SONGBIRD KNIGHT 2: DRAGONS RISING

"Boooooorriing," Citizen 176 said, "of course they did dragons in the sequel." She stretched herself out, and looked over at Grae and Hollow. "How about we tell stories? Like spooky ones? Or...personal ones! Get to know each other!"

The Hollow Childe tilted her head to the side at an odd angle. "Most of my personal stories are spooky, I think.

"Well, then you're a shoe-in!" Graelyn said, "start us off."

The Hollow Childe looked nervous, but Graelyn and 176 waited patiently for her to start. "Right, well, it was a dark and stormy night..."

The Hollow Childe's story

Gideon walked over the finely dressed corpses, trying hard to keep his Italian leather shoes free from the puddles of bodily fluids mingling on the floor of the mansion. He passed the (childish) arcane symbols, and tut-tutted the (painfully) sloppy Latin written over the gold-leaf stenciling on the walls. He was tempted to correct it, but it wasn't worth his time. He was on the clock, so to speak. Pushing a married couple who'd gouged each other's eyes out away from the final door with his silver cane, Gideon shoved it open and stepped into the building's great hall. It was a spacious room, with chandeliers and a high ceiling, but it was difficult to make out the details because the center of the room was dominated by a pyramid of corpses. Atop that, hovering in the air six inches above the massacre, was a little girl. Her head hung down, black hair veiling her face, a shoulder or leg violently twitching every so often.

"YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE COME HERE."

He held his arm up and dropped his wrist. "Oh psh." He began a circle of the pyramid, seeing the edges of a magic circle under the bodies at some points. Of course.

"YOU THINK YOU WILL FIND POWER HERE, BUT THERE IS ONLY THE ENDLESS SHADOW AT THE END OF ALL THINGS. A WHISPER IN THE DARK."

Popping his cane over his shoulder, Gideon gave the child his full attention. "You're the one from the prophecy, right? That's what this whole mess was about, you're half demon, or what these people think of as demons at least, half human. A husk with an insatiable appetite for death. The Hollow Childe. How does that prophecy go? The Hollow—"

They spoke it in unison.

"The Hollow Childe Will Stand at the End of the Universe, Laughing Amidst the Tears."

Gideon nodded. "Yes, that's right. You have a promising memory."

"AND THAT IS ALL YOU SHALL BE." The Hollow Childe's limbs snapped forward towards Gideon, a rush of darkness sweeping over him. A void of pure loneliness, a crushing darkness, enough to tear anyone's mind to pieces. Gideon let it wash over him, twirled his cane, and checked his pocket watch.

"Well, that's quite impressive, actually. I've met a few potential Antichrists in my life, but I've got to say, you're really an early bloomer. I'm guessing these people all sacrificed themselves to unlock your power?"

There was an awkward silence. "...NO."

"Oh, come on, you've clearly only just learned to fly. You're on top of that pyramid of corpses because you can only fly six inches off the ground. Am I wrong?"

There was a second, longer more awkward silence. "...MAYBE."

Gideon sighed, "You haven't even killed anyone yet, I'm guessing. Now get down from there, my name is Gideon, and I work for some people who can unlock your full potential."

There was a third, longest silence, and she floated down (6 inches off the closest corpse the whole way) and came to land next to Gideon on the tiled floor. She pulled her hair away from her eyes, and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "I didn't want them to do it, Mr. Gideon."

"Oh hush, that's no way for a herald of the endtimes to talk. Now come, take my hand— no. wait." Gideon stopped and put a pair of silk gloves on. "Okay, now take my hand. We're going somewhere I think you'll like quite a bit."

* * *

“And then he took me here. Said it was a place I could prepare for when I would destroy the universe, he hasn’t really...visited, though. Just left some training books, ‘the Apocalypse for Dummies’ and ‘So, you’re destined to bring on the apocalypse: A Beginners guide with pictures,’ but neither of them has been super helpful...”

“You said he brought you here,” Graelyn ventured, “from where?”

176’s face blanched, and Hollow laughed, “Oh, come on, 176, like Graelyn hasn’t already had suspicions? There’s another place, outside here. It’s where everyone came from, including you, Graelyn.”

Graelyn shook her head. “I don’t remember anything but this town.”

176 frowned. “You must have been very young when you were brought here. Maybe even when Auteur founded the town!”

Graelyn furrowed her brow. “She founded it?”

Hollow nodded, her body lurching rhythmically with it. “We’re all here for her project, whatever it is. The grownups know, but they won’t tell us anything. Think we can’t keep a secret.”

Citizen 176 shrugged. “Well, I hope you get to destroy the universe, I guess?”

Hollow shrugged. “I guess.”

Graelyn paused. “The only good story I have is a weird dream I had the other night, but you’ll probably think I’m making part of it up.”

176 shrugged. “Well, go at it then.”

Graelyn’s Story

The planet they arrived on seemed too barren to support life, but there were several major cities, and one metropolis. Graelyn complained the whole way towards their destination, as Lady Aesculapius had parked far enough away from their destination that they had to walk through blowing sands to get there. At least Aesc provided her with goggles. Archimedes was blissfully unbothered, the only effect of the wind to billow his coat and make him look heroic. Their destination was a temple, a towering building that had been carved into the shape of a goddess, her arm stretched out in the act of creation. Millenia of winds had erased the details from the stone, and there were birds’ nests in its open mouth, but the gates in the feet were well cared for, and when Aesc slammed her fist on them a few times they slid open quickly.

Shaking the sand off, they were greeted by a few people in long layered garments, goggles on their own foreheads, and a man in imposing black robes. The place was well-lit, with modern lights running along the walls, which seemed decidedly off brand for a spooky temple, but made more sense when they noticed all the signs to direct tourists around the place.

“Lady Aesculapius, I presume?” the man asked in a surly voice.

“Yes, Sergeant-Instructor I take it? Here with my pals, if that isn’t a bother.”

“Only if they’re better at puns than me. Follow. It’s down this way.”

They descended a long set of stairs, until they reached a neat pile of bricks and a hole in the wall.

“There was a break-in not too long ago, and the thieves damaged this wall. During the repairs, the Gendar here discovered the secret room behind it.”

Lady Aesc peered her head inside, and then pulled out the Quantum Whisk and poked it inside.

“I don’t think that whisk does anything,” Graelyn whispered to Arch, who displayed a nodding face on his hand in reply. Aesculapius stepped in and the rest followed. The walls were scrawled over completely in writing, messy scrawls in dozens of languages, but only a few hands.

“These are previously unknown prophecies of the rogue oracles, who came here in ancient times.”

Aesculapius ran her hands along one of them. “A few have been carved up, almost looks like tusk marks.”

“Yes, presumably by beings who didn’t want those prophecies read. But that’s not why we’re here. My people can read all of the existing scripts, all but one.” He gestured to the far wall, where there was an intricate carving of the same goddess the statue had been made in veneration of. But what really drew the eye was a circular inlay of crystal that glittered with a white-blue light. “That crystal isn’t from our universe. It’s Firmament technology, and it’s old.”

Graelyn frowned. “I take it you’re not happy that’s there.”

He looked at her, face blank. “Furious, but we’d rather know what it says.”

Lady Aesc reached out to the crystal and gently pressed her hand against it. The room was illuminated, the crystal brilliant, and Aesc’s eyes gained the same glow. From her mouth came a different voice, from a different time:

“From the White Canvas, she will never escape. Only from flickers will angelic skin return. The Hollow Childe Will Stand at the End of the Universe, Laughing Amidst the Tears.”

The light faded, and Aesc stumbled back, breathing hard.

“What does that mean?” the Sergeant-Instructor asked.

Aesc, Arch, and Graelyn shrugged in near-unison. “Heck if I know,” Aesc said.

* * *

“Oh that’s not too unbelievable, I’ve heard that prophecy about Hollow dozens of times, it’s common knowledge around here. You probably just heard it and forgot you did. Pretty creative, the other parts. I like that you put Lady Aesculapius in there, her TV show is pretty good.”

“I like all the monsters in it!” Hollow added.

“You’re a big fan of monsters, Hollow?” Graelyn asked.

There was a beat of silence. “Well...I’m one.”

176 and Grae both launched into a chorus of “Noooo!”s, “You’re wonderful!”s, “Would a monster have hair that nice?”s and “I will absolutely fight and kill the next person who says that about you!”s which made her smile.

“I get what you’re saying though,” Graelyn added, “I feel like a monster too sometime. Like I’m a cold person destined to hurt other people or something.”

The other two launched into the same thing about Graelyn, which also made her smile, and then Graelyn and Hollow turned the praise onto 176 just to make sure she wasn’t left out.

“Well, my story isn’t as good as either of yours,” protestations followed this statement, “but I’ll tell it anyways!”

Citizen 176’s Story

The guillotine slid down again, and Louise finally felt comfortable using Monsieur LeFoy’s notebook and pencil. He couldn’t scold her for using it now anyway. She began sketching the chopping machine and the operator. She could give him the drawing before it was her turn, that would be nice.

“That’s quite good, surprisingly good,” a voice said from behind her.

She looked back to see a red-haired woman peering over her shoulder. Blushing, Louise tried to hide the drawings, but the woman stopped her with a firm hand.

“You’re a little young for the guillotine. Not that you wouldn’t be the first. Your crime?”

"I helped the Marquis and his wife escape, ma'am. They didn't make it very far, though."

The woman grabbed the notebook from her hands. "Your understanding of light sources and perspective is extraordinary for your age. It's an absolute waste to kill you. What'd you do for the Marquis?"

"I was a chambermaid, Mademoiselle. I mostly took care of the chamberpots."

"Gross. Well, come on then," she snapped. "You're coming with me."

She shook her head. "It's too late for me, I..." then she noticed the silence, the birds hanging in the air. The frozen crowd, mouths open in mid-holler. The woman looked impatient.

"Yes, I froze time, everyone can do that, it's not that impressive."

"Are you...an angel, Mademoiselle?"

She laughed, "My name is Auteur, and I'm better than an angel, I'm an artist. Now, are you coming or not?"

Louise clambered over the bench and followed Auteur into the crowd. She looked down to see she looked different, and looked back to see herself sitting in the bench as the crowd snapped back into motion. "It's magic!"

Auteur winked. "It's art."

* * *

"See, that was still a good story," Graelyn affirmed.

176 shrugged, "I think Auteur thinks I'm going to become some sort of artistic spirit of vengeance. She gives me painting classes, and tells me how to kill people."

Graelyn furrowed her brow. "So...we're all here because we're being trained for something?"

"Must be," 176 concluded.

"I don't know what I'd be being trained for though? Miss Auteur just has me write my dreams down, or paint them."

Hollow and 176 looked at each other with a knowing grin.

"What? What is it?"

"Isn't it obvious? Your dreams are special! You're an oracle or something!" Hollow said.

Graelyn slumped a little. "I want to be a scientist though."

"Well, lucky for you, dreaming is pretty easy, as long as you're not an insomniac or whatever," 176 said, grabbing another slice of pizza.

"Can..." the Hollow Child took a deep breath, then several breaths, her face turning red.

Graelyn and 176 each reached out for one of her hands. "You're okay," Graelyn said.

"You can tell us, we won't judge you," 176 said.

"Can we all be friends?"

The pair blinked at Hollow, then broke into grins.

"You know what Hollow, I think we already are," Graelyn said.

* * *

"Lady Auteur, you have to know at this point that people back in the Empire aren't happy with how things are going here." Gideon was swirling his glass of whiskey dramatically, letting the light from the window glint off of it just right.

Auteur gave him a polite smile. "I admit it's taken longer than I expected..."

"It's been ten years, Auteur."

“Oh don’t act like years matter to you. You’ve probably checked in on me every year during the same day back home. You haven’t even changed your shirt.”

He swirled the glass slower. “It doesn’t matter to me, but you’ve still used ten years of resources. Dedicated hundreds of our people to making this town function so you could finish one ritual.

Auteur snapped forward, finger waving in the air. “You know how important this ritual is. We’ve almost done it, and when we do we’ll win the war. The whole war. Not the major players. Us.”

Gideon downed his entire glass of whiskey, and set it down on her desk. “How?”

“The sheer narrative weight of it all!”

He nodded. “Then why not just cut your losses and run, you have enough as it is.”

She stood up and walked over to her bookshelf, letting Gideon watch her. She flitted along the spines. She didn’t actually need to — she knew exactly where the book was — and stopped pointedly at one as though she’d finally found it, letting out an “Aha!” Pulling it down, she handed it to Gideon.

“Cranford?”

“It’s Jane Austen’s last book that she never finished. Does it inspire curiosity from that fact? Of course. Have people tried to finish it? Definitely. Have there been film adaptations of it? Naturally. But tell me, Gideon, did you even know it was a Jane Austen book? If I’d thrown “Pride and Prejudice” at you, would you have just read the title back to me?”

He handed the book back to her. “I’ll let everyone know you need more time.”

* * *

On Christmas morning, Auteur bit into the cookie Graelyn had made. It was essentially perfect. The little chemist was relentless with her baking precision. “It’s quite good!” she said before she could stop herself.

Graelyn’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, Miss Auteur!”

She waved her off, and then pushed F.I.D.O’s muzzle away who was angling to try to get one of the cookies. “Stop it, F.I.D.O, you don’t even have a stomach.”

“Then fix my programming fixation on treats,” he countered, “if a being’s nature is insurmountable to its—”

“Oh fine, just don’t give me a lecture.” She threw a cookie at him, and he chewed it up happily, the entire cookie’s crummy remains ending up in a pile on the carpet. Graelyn laughed. Auteur found herself laughing too, and stopped herself. She stared at the girl, in the bad Christmas sweater she was wearing, watching as she shook the present she’d pulled from under the tree. Auteur had failed, and she knew it. She’d been too kind. She had stalled for time with Gideon but...it hit her suddenly, watching the girl look back at her with real affection. She’d gone about it the wrong way this whole time. The real solution was simple, and all she had to do was lean into her own mistakes.

She’d announce the moratorium on having children within the town was over.

She’d let everyone get attached to the town.

The horror that was going to follow, well...

Gideon would understand the change, and what it would mean for everyone here. When she got results, who would care, after all? You had to break a few eggs to make cookies,

“Can I open the presents, Miss Auteur?”

She smiled. “Of course, go wild.”

“Did you see the one I got for you?”

She hadn’t. She looked at it under the tree, and as Graelyn carefully removed the wrapping paper from her present (a microscope), Auteur ripped open her own present, and stared down at the

perfect set of brushes. They were her favorite kind, made from the hair of an animal on Vo'lach prime. She hadn't seen a set of these in decades.

"How did you know?" she said, legitimately stunned.

"I asked the shopkeep for help! He asked Mister Gideon, and they found a set of them somewhere. They made me promise to tell you that, actually."

Her stomach churned. "Merry Christmas, Graelyn."

"Merry Christmas, Miss Auteur!"

Interlude: Auteur

Auteur walks into her office, and sits down in her chair, letting the chair spin from the force. She drops her gauntlet onto the desk, letting the metal clunk reverberate. A slow sigh comes from her lips and she closes her eyes. Pulling the mask off her face, she rubs them and opens them, looking right at us.

"Oh shit. Uh, hi there. I didn't realize you were reading this. How's it going? What day is it for you, Thursday? I can't really tell, but I hope it's a Thursday. I like Thursdays." She reaches into her desk and pulls out a styled decanter and two glasses. She pours something fizzy and purple into both of them. "Would you like some? Er, wait, you can't reach it from here. Sorry. It's...difficult to tell how you can interact with me. I suppose this means it's working? I'm breaking through?"

She wipes her brow and downs one of the two glasses, "Relax, it's just grape pop. I hope you don't think too badly of me, with what I've been doing. Wait—has that been revealed to you? Or is the story structured so it's not clear yet?" She squints. "Sorry, you're still faint. Look," she gestures broadly, "no matter what happens here, this isn't going to impact you. You're safe reading this. Maybe you're worried about that little girl, Graelyn, but she's not so little. Not really. Not in the future. No one is a child forever and she's so artistically...dull."

She steepled her fingers and smiles vaguely in your direction.

"This is all going well. So when this is all over, I think you'll be grateful."

She downs the other glass.

"So cheers. Thanks for stopping in."

Chapter 5: A Flicker

FIVE YEARS LATER

Cá Bậy Mầu was far far past tipsy, despite his protestations to the contrary, which meant that as the youngest member of their group it was Axastyakis's job to keep an eye on him while Mullion stewed in her own thoughts. He was trying to flirt with everyone, in a way that somehow managed to stay charming in its content even though it was annoying in its repetition.

"I'm cutting you off," Axastyakis hissed.

He downed the rest of his drink in defiance, but still acquiesced as Axastyakis began to pull him to the door. Mullion only gave them a disapproving glance as they left.

"Do you need help, Mister Axastyakis?"

He turned his head slightly, to see Graelyn there, loosely holding F.I.D.O's leash. He smiled, showing his needle-sharp teeth. "Always awaiting aid, but never asking for it." She returned the smile, and dropped F.I.D.O's leash to help stabilize Cá Bậy Mầu as they walked him home.

"I hope that we'll still continue the usual route upon completion of your neighborliness, Miss Scythes," F.I.D.O said, taking a scan of a dead bird.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, F.I.D.O, I assume you have much more to tell me about Sandifer."

"I do think Neoreaction a Basilisk is an important work."

She looked back at Axastyakis. "He does."

Two other girls called at Graelyn, and she waved, keeping her other hand under Cá Bậy Mầu as they came closer.

"Are you coming with us to the premiere tonight, Graelyn?" one of the girls, dressed in 1700's French clothing, said.

"Like I'd miss an Archimedes film. I have to do my session with Auteur first, but I'll be there."

They kept walking and reached Cá Bậy Mầu's abode. Axastyakis started rifling through his pockets for the keys, but F.I.D.O picked the lock with a laser, which wasn't exactly how any laser actually worked, but Axastyakis wasn't really complaining.

"Thank you for the assistance," he said, "I will finish his care."

Cá Bậy Mầu managed a wink and a sort of salute at Graelyn, which was still somehow charming even though he couldn't support himself.

"Welcome, always good to get to know the new arrivals a bit. I'm Graelyn Scythes by the way, I'm a student at the school."

"Oh, we know who you are, you're practically...celebrity," Cá Bậy Mầu crooned.

"He's drunk, and is called Cá Bậy Mầu. I am Axastyakis. You may see our comrades Hole and Mullion around."

"Oh! You know Hole? I wasn't sure if Hole was...alive fully or not."

Axastyakis shrugged. "See you, young one."

The girl and her dog kept walking.

"Glad to have some new neighbors around here, isn't it F.I.D.O?"

"They seem alright, of a larger concern however is Sandifer's influence on pop culture criticism in the 2000's."

* * *

Graelyn knocked on Auteur's door, but was already opening it as she did so. Auteur was busy painting, and didn't even notice Graelyn at first. The canvas was filled with a picture of a child in a field, sitting on a grassy hill looking up at the sky. There was no one else in sight.

"Miss Auteur?"

She startled, and held a hand to her chest in mock fright. "Ah, Graelyn! I see you let yourself in."

"I brought a cake for us to share?"

Auteur eyed it. It was a nice cake. The girl's baking skills were quite incredible. Graelyn's eyes were on the painting, though. "Curious?"

"She looks like a lonely child, whoever you're painting."

She rose from the easel and took off her smock. "That's me, actually. I was a fairly solitary child, not by choice even. There just...weren't other children around. You might even say it was an experiment for me to be a child there at all."

Graelyn looked at the girl. She looked nothing like Auteur.

"You think it's a bad likeness?"

"Honestly?"

Auteur posed the same way as the child, and then laughed. "I haven't always had the same face, or gender, or a lot of other things. When you live as long as I have, you want to have a few options after all. I didn't even like most of them, but different can be enough."

Graelyn's brow furrowed. "How old are you?"

Auteur winked. "Enough secrets for today. So what brings you in? We didn't have a meeting scheduled for today, therapy or otherwise." They'd long ago moved beyond a therapist / patient relationship into something mildly guardian-like. Auteur still wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"I...have something for you that's surprising."

Auteur nodded. "I'm curious."

"...It's a...dream."

Auteur sprung up, and snatched the journal from Graelyn's hands as soon as it had come out of her handbag.

Dream Journal Entry 3

Everyone tumbled out of the portal in a heap on the floor of a massive library. Archimedes, unfortunately, was the last one through, and the massive cyborg apologized profusely as he climbed off of the group. The Emissary sat up, holding her stomach, trying not to retch, as Graelyn felt around for her glasses, which Arch handed to her. Lady Aesc stood up dizzy, stumbling, and felt someone steady her arm. "Oh thank you," she said to a young man who looked exactly like Harry Styles from the band One Direction, wearing a suit and a badge that said, "How can I help you today :)?"

He looked the group over. "Did you check in at the front desk when you came in?"

"Sorry, we arrived via crystalline incision portal."

He nodded. "I'd rather not learn about that at all, but sure."

Graelyn squinted at him. "Alright, I hit my head too hard."

He looked down at himself, reached into his own chest, and disappeared instantly, in that same awkwardly quick way people vanish in silent films. In his place was what seemed to be empty air. Then he became a cactus-person, then vanished, then finally a massive, writhing ball of tentacles. "I'm sorry, is this a more pleasing look?"

They all just stared.

“It’s fine,” the Emissary said, “we’re here to look at a book?”

The tentacle mass pointed to the left. “I’ll lead you to the desk, we can help you there. Come on then!”

They walked along rows of bookshelves, the lines of them going on as far as the eye could see.

“So uh, are you a Plume Coterie then?” Arch asked.

“A Bookkeeper, me? No, my name is Coloth. I’m an Ulk-Ra. I work here, which is a long story that could be a book in itself. The Plume Coterie run this place, though, one of several places that claim to be the biggest library in the Universe.”

“Is it the biggest?” Graelyn asked.

“I’m contractually obligated to say yes!” he replied.

The Emissary wagged her hand up and down and scrunched her face up.

Graelyn ran her fingers along some of the spines. “I could live here. Imagine the knowledge you could learn.”

Coloth squirmed his tentacles in an emotion none of them could read. “Er, sure. Anyways, here’s the front desk. Marissa! We have some people looking for a book!”

Marissa, a girl wearing robes, screwed her face up upon the sight of them. “Coloth, could you chose any other form? Literally, any other form?”

He vanished, and then reappeared as a wild-west cowboy. “Better?”

“Perfect, so you’re looking for a book? What’s the title?”

“The Book of the Enemy,” Arch replied, as Graelyn rested her gauntleted hand down on the desk.

Marissa looked disapprovingly at the gauntlet before reaching under the desk, and pulling out a card catalog, which apparently was a catalog of which card catalog she needed to look in next. She pulled out another drawer and flipped through it, pulling out a glowing card. “This is a fairly dangerous book, as far as books go. I’d be careful. Coloth, could you take them to it?”

Coloth the cowboy took the card, and led them far into the shelves, where he pulled the book down and handed it to Graelyn, who handed it to Arch, who opened it to page one, and then put up a live video feed of the book on his body so everyone could read it. It wasn’t long before they reached a chapter in the book called “Cobweb and Ivory” that detailed an incident with the Painted Warriors...and revealed who their masters were.

Graelyn crossed her arms and stuck her lips out. Lady Aesc nodded, a bit puzzled. The Emissary raised an eyebrow.

“So...” Graelyn began, “they work for Mammoths?”

“Not just any Mammoths, the Original Mammoths. They’re a powerful force, if an old one,” the Emissary said. “I don’t know why they’d invade the 10,000 Dawns, though.”

“What does that even mean,” Graelyn asked dryly, “Original Mammoths?”

“It means,” the Emissary replied, “they have a spaceship.”

“What would a Mammoth want?” Lady Aesc pondered, stroking her chin. “Anime?”

“The Mammoth’s didn’t invade the 10kd for anime,” The Emissary growled.

“I mean, are you sure you have it in this universe?”

“Yes! Now the question is, what are we going to do?”

Graelyn shrugged. “We have to confront them. They have Kinan, and, well...everyone. I know I’ve dealt with dangers like this before but...the scale of this is just so hard to fathom.”

“She’s right,” Arch added, “we know who they are, our course is set. But this didn’t give us a lot of hints on how to stop them.”

“If we had an incentive we could give them to leave...hell, if we had an army. But we just have the four of us.”

“I get off in five minutes, and an Ulk-Ra lives on bravery,” Coloth added.

“Five of us.” She gave him a smile. “Thank you.”

“Is it too much to hope they’ll listen to reason?” Arch asked. “Maybe this is just a misunderstanding.”

“A mighty big misunderstanding. They kidnapped everyone we care about, Arch. You really think this is just an awkward whoopsie?” Graelyn said, her eyes narrowing. “They invaded our home, Arch. Spiral, Dawn, you, it’s all I have. I can’t lose it. I can’t.”

Arch got up and put a hand gently on her shoulder. “I think whether it is a mix-up or not, we don’t have the resources to do anything else. We can talk to them, and make a quick exit if it goes badly.”

“Alright, problem!” Lady Aesc said, raising her hand. “We don’t know where they are.”

Graelyn’s eyes lit up. “We don’t need to. The Quantum Whisk, you said it can help you find things?”

Lady Aesc pulled it out, looked at it, and shrugged. “Maybe? Honestly it might just be a whisk, I’ve never been able to find anything special about it.”

“Well it’s our best bet. If I can make a portal while holding the whisk, maybe it will guide us through the tear, through the void, and to where the Original Mammoths are.”

Arch looked down at the whisk. “I hate to be the skeptical one here, Grae, but that really just looks like a whisk.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Graelyn said, throwing her arms up.

“I don’t,” he admitted.

“Do any of the rest of you? Please, I want you to have a better idea.”

There was silence, and Graelyn looked between each of their faces. “If you don’t want to go, that’s fine. I understand. You don’t have the kind of stake in this I do. I get that. But-”

“I’m with you,” The Emissary said, “I’m actually not supposed to do anything to interfere in other people’s affairs but...well, sod it, let’s be naughty.”

“I’m in, of course,” Arch said.

“Me too,” Lady Aesculapius said, “let’s save the 10,000 Dawns from space Mammoths.”

“I’m not sure what I’m agreeing to, but I’m in as well,” Coloth finished.

Lady Aesc handed Graelyn the whisk, and Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out a handful of crystal dust. She steadied herself, standing equidistant from the shelves to her left and right, and held the whisk out in her gauntleted hand. It felt like there was a circuit between her hands, an energy running between one hand and the other, flowing into the crystals...though honestly, she couldn't tell if it was the gauntlet or the whisk that was doing it. It really could be just a whisk. But that was a distraction, she needed to focus. She pictured the Mammoths as she'd seen them described in the "Book of the Enemy," pictured their stone servants, and pictured a path from here to there.

Usually, she did the hand motions quickly, and by rote. It didn't matter if they were imperfect, it just had to be close enough if you knew where you were going well enough. But this was different. She was diving into black water, and she didn't know what dwelled in these seas. She moved both hands in the motions, twirled both arms, felt the circuit connect, felt her body channeling the energy, and she spun the dust in the air and felt the small crackles between each tiny mote, moving her hands through them, adjusting their path in the air slightly. The dust spun for a moment, a hollow circle crackling with tendrils of white lightning, and then Graelyn took a deep breath and shoved the whisk and the gauntlet into the middle of the circle.

She stared up at the mammoth skeleton, and her father put a hand on her shoulder. "It's big, isn't it?" she nodded. She wanted to see one for real, alive, but here were its bones, and it was so close to being real.

"We'd better keep moving, I need to get you back to your mother by seven—"
He'd left. Everyone always left.

The white light exploded out, throwing books off the shelves and pushing Graelyn back, her heels digging into the carpet, but she held firm.

Great beasts, lifting their trunks high in the air, in a room of clockwork and bone, surrounded by painted stone bodies. Their furs are rich and long, their tusks sharp. They trumpet a call of victory, their bones rattle inside them from the depths of history.

Mammoths.

Painted Warriors.

Kinan Jans.

Mammoths. Painted Warriors. Kinan Jans.

MAMMOTHSPAINTEDWARRIORSKINAN—

The light became blinding, and the world was nothing but a white and empty void, and then it faded, and a perfect white portal stood in the middle of the library. Graelyn fell to her knees, panting, a thin layer of sweat over her body.

"I..." she said, panting, "I think I did it?"

“What the heck is going on over there?” they heard Marissa yell, and Graelyn scampered up and hopped into the portal, followed in a clump by the others. The portal hovered in the air, crackling, and vanished as Marissa came around the corner.

“Coloth?” She looked around at the mess of unshelved books and sighed. Library patrons were the worst.

* * *

“So, that was...interesting, to say the least.”

Graelyn nodded. “It picked up where my last dream like this was five years ago, I checked my journals, both the originals and your rewrites of them. There’s nothing off between this one and the last one, and I’d...practically forgotten about these dream journals. We stopped doing them-”

“-Cause they got boring, yes.” Auteur steepled her fingers, “So the question is, why are they back?”

Graelyn shook her head. “They’re just dreams. Dreams don’t mean anything.”

Auteur couldn’t help but chuckle, the girl had been growing up among ritual magicians for years, and still she had the mind of a skeptic deep down. “So then, what does that tell you about these dreams?”

Graelyn’s eyes lost focus, but she was intent in concentration. A moment passed. “It means...these dreams either do mean something, they’re not dreams, or they’re not normal dreams.”

“And which do you think it is?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“Of course. In my opinion, they aren’t normal dreams.”

The girl’s eyes went from unfocused to hyperfocused. “Explain.”

“You have to know by this point that there are parts of the world that don’t function by normal laws.”

“Like the white canvas?”

Auteur scrunched her face up. “The what?”

“The endless white outside the town. It looks like it’s ready to be painted on, to have something pop out of it created and alive.”

“An interesting description. We need to think on all of this. Are you going to the movie tonight?”

Graelyn nodded. “I’m so looking forward to it. Archimedes movies are always my favorites.”

“Then you should go have fun with your friends this evening, and we’ll talk more about this once you’ve had time to let it sink in. Sound good?”

Graelyn picked up her bag, and took the journal back from Auteur. “I’ll let you know if it was good or not.

* * *

176 and Hollow were already outside the theater when Graelyn arrived, Hollow dressed up like a Goth princess, 176 in casual clothes, though casual for the 1700's. Graelyn was decked out in Archimedes swag, from her Arch satchel to her Arch shirt, to her earrings in the shape of his eyes.

"Well aren't you fancy, back in my day—"

"They would have guillotined me for that, yes, I know, 176." Graelyn wasn't sure 176 to this day understood the intricacies of the French Revolution, but you weren't going to argue with someone who was almost executed about nuances.

"You should tell your girlfriend that," Graelyn said.

Hollow and 176 suddenly tensed, eyes askance, hands claspings.

"Oh, sorry, uh...I thought since you guys made out that..."

"Nooo we're just best friends!" Hollow said.

"Who made out for three hours so I couldn't leave the party last weekend," Graelyn monotoned. 176 scratched her temple. "Let's uh, go into the movie huh?"

Graelyn was not convinced, but she let it slide for now.

They got their snacks from Hole: 1. A big tub of popcorn to share, 2. 1 pop [Graelyn], 3. 1 slushy [Hollow] and 4. 1 tankard of mulled wine flavored with the lost memories of dreams that you feel like you could remember upon awakening, but which slip from your mind the more you focus on them [176]. They also got some Red Vines (5).

Going to the theater with friends was so much nicer than going alone. Even when the other teens were jerks, the three of them were together, and they could laugh at the same things, and whisper to each other at the good bits. Having friends was such a wonderful thing, though Hollow and 176 were spending more time just with each other recently. Graelyn was both happy for them and worried that she would become first their third wheel, and then forgotten. She's thought, last week, when she rolled her eyes and gave up all pretense with a "Just kiss already, Jesus," and they did in fact just kiss already that the problem was solved. But no, the two of them were still dancing around whether they liked each other. The trailers began, and Graelyn watched Hollow's pinky edge towards 176's, which twitched a little closer too.

Come on.

They nearly touched and then—they both pulled away, and Graelyn let out an audible sigh. She really didn't care that they knew she knew at this point.

Finally after a trailer for the Lady Aesculapius movie, which Graelyn really wasn't sure was going to work (It was really better suited for TV?), the titles for the Archimedes movie began, like they always did, pulling out to reveal that everything was being projected on Arch's chest. Classic.

Scene: Arch is being held captive in an underground facility, there is a man with a bad German accent, a monocle, and a big scar on his face who has tied him up in a way that the director clearly didn't think was provocative, but also clearly hadn't looked up anything on the internet since 2006.

DR. VON BADGUY II

Now, Archimedes, you will tell me the secret to Dawn, or...

The lighting darkens and the camera zooms in a little bit.

DR. VON BADGUY II

...You die.

ARCHIMEDES

You'll never get me to...Wait. What do you want, specifically, Dawn is a lot of things—

THERE IS AN EXPLOSION! And CELESTE ROTH comes charging in with CANADIAN, BRITISH AND AMERICAN SPECIAL FORCES! It's now clear that this is supposed to be set in World War II.

CELESTE ROTH

Arch, are you okay? What did you do to him, Dr. Von Badguy?

AN EVIL LAB ASSISTANT

The second.

CELESTE ROTH

The second!

ARCHIMEDES

I'm okay, Just get me out of these—

Graelyn lost the rest of the dialogue. She remembered this. She remembered...Arch was taken, they had been on...on...a moon, a dark cold moon. They'd been chasing something, been on a mission, and...he'd been taken. She'd searched for him, and found him in the past.

She'd had a cat named Mr. Sprinkles. She'd lived underwater, there were fish...She remembered her mother beating her. She remembered....she had a mother? She...Archimedes. She knew him. She knew Archimedes.

She rose up, barely aware she was rising, reaching a hand out towards the screen.

"Arch?" she said.

"Oh geez, you're way too into the fandom, come on sit down," 176 muttered.

On the screen, there was an awkward pause.

CELESTE ROTH

Arch? Did you hear me?

ARCHIMEDES

Graelyn?

CELESTE ROTH

No, Arch, I'm Celeste, your best friend—

“ARCHIMEDES!” Graelyn yelled, “I'M HERE!”

He looked out of the screen at her,

ARCHIMEDES

Grae, what's going on—

The projector shut down, and a worried attendant ran to the front. “Sorry everyone, looks like there was some sort of projector error—

“PUT IT BACK!” Graelyn screamed. “What aren't you telling me?”

The theater was silent. Then the sound of footsteps grew. Auteur entered, followed by F.I.D.O.

“I heard there was an issue, what exactly is the problem, it's just a—”

She came into view from the entryway and saw Graelyn, saw the look on her face. Saw the silent crowd.

“Everyone, get out. Except you, Graelyn.”

There was a slow move to start getting up, and Auteur snapped her arm out, her gauntlet pointing at the attendant. And then, there was no attendant, and there was the sound of something small but heavy hitting the floor like a dropped book.

Then it was pandemonium.

Graelyn didn't stand still. She vaulted over seats, vaulted over the side of the stairs next to the entryway, and dropped behind Auteur, her knees hurting, but kept moving. Auteur yelled something, and F.I.D.O followed, the crowd too. The whole building fleeing, shoving Auteur out of the way even as they tried to get away from her. Graelyn pushed past people, F.I.D.O edging through the crowd.

“Mistress Graelyn, please, I am only following the order to catch you, I shall not hurt you.”

Graelyn had reached the doors of the theater, people streaming around her. Her heart was pounding. F.I.D.O sat. Hollow and 176 caught up, and then so did Auteur.

“Graelyn, you don't need to be afraid,” Auteur said.

Graelyn's face was red, her eyes watering. “You think I haven't known something was going on here? Something weird. Something that didn't make sense. What just happened, Auteur? What aren't you telling me?”

Auteur gave her a sad smile. “You have to have figured out that Hollow and 176 are both projects for the cult, correct?”

Graelyn nodded.

“Of course, you are too. And there’s parts of that that...would be hard to tell you about.”

Graelyn shook her head. “No, I’m not an experiment, I’m not!”

“Of course you aren’t!” Auteur crooned. “You aren’t anymore, at least.”

They held each other’s gaze. Hollow and 176 stood to the side frozen like Painted Warriors.

“Then tell me what’s going on,” Graelyn said.

Auteur’s lip quivered. “I’m trying to win a war.”

“Using me?” Graelyn asked.

“Yes.”

Graelyn broke her gaze and looked at the floor. She stared at the skull pattern for a moment before bolting out the door, her two friends following, melding into the darkness.

As the theatergoers fled into the distance, Mullion stared at the chaos till Auteur came out of its glass doors. Under her mask, she scowled.

Auteur waved excitedly upon seeing her, and Mullion walked away.

Graelyn, Hollow, and 176 tumbled into Graelyn’s house, which wasn’t the nicest, just the closest, and locked the door behind them. Not that locking the door would stop anyone hell bent on grabbing them, but it made them feel a little safer.

Graelyn dropped into a chair and stared at her hands. She remembered things. Things she shouldn’t remember. Things she had dreamed. But it was hazy, not all there.

176 was crying, and Hollow was holding her.

“He was there and just...gone! What did she do to him?”

“I don’t know,” Hollow replied, and they looked in each other’s eyes, “but you’ll be safe. I’ll keep you safe. I’m the antichrist, and I can fight back and...I love you.”

“I...love you too, Hollow.”

And they kissed.

And this time, Graelyn knew it was something different than last time.

* * *

Gideon threw the pictures of the smiling girls on the table. “Do you—do you...” he had to steady himself, he had never been so furious at Auteur. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

She nodded. “I had to modify the plan, like I told you.”

“You can’t break everyone else’s toys just because you think yours are nicer. You’ve...you’ve ruined the antichrist! She’s supposed to-”

“Stand at the end of the universe and laugh amidst the tears or whatever, I know. I wrote a lot of prophecies myself, you know.”

“You wrote short stories about how people you didn’t like had bad things happen to them. It annoyed everyone back home.”

“Same difference.”

“Don’t be so glib about this, the Hollow Childe was a coup for me. And now she has friends, and she’s...drinking milkshakes and going to movies. Not to mention what you’ve done to the rest of the members here.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Oh?”

“You’ve domesticated them! You had to build playgrounds because they’re having kids. I checked in on an orgy last night where they decided to end early because they had to get up in the morning. We’re a death cult! Or we’re supposed to be! This is...” Gideon threw his arms up.

“The new plan,” Auteur said.

He looked at her. “You’re serious.”

She nodded. “And oh, my good friend, what terrors await.”

Chapter 6: The Screening

TWO YEARS LATER

“Are they going to set up a college for us to go to or not?” 176 moaned.

Graelyn shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it depends on if Auteur thinks us getting an education matters to whatever her plan is.”

Hollow and 176 didn’t reply, but the silence was the answer, really.

“I want to go to college,” Hollow said, “it looks like it would be fun.”

Graelyn tried not to think about her old memories, to try to reach in and see if she had gone to college. Maybe she had. But how did she have those memories? How did she know Archimedes, who was in a movie? How had he spoken to her? She was seventeen now, and the questions didn’t have answers. She’d looked into reincarnation, it seemed possible given the circumstances, but it also didn’t seem to be the correct answer.

“Do you think Auteur will make me destroy the universe?” Hollow asked, her voice cracking.

176 shook her head and cuddled her closer. “Don’t think like that, you don’t have to destroy anything.”

“We can’t just ignore these questions every time they come up, 176! We’re all here for a reason.”

Graelyn booped Taranis. At 17, Hollow and 176 were the only people who didn’t make fun of her for keeping the Mammoth Toy in her bag at all times. “I wish I knew the answers, Hollow. But we just don’t know enough...”

* * *

Mullion had been waiting for ten minutes for the rest of the group to arrive, which was putting a damper on her plan to storm into Auteur’s office like she’d power-walked right over here. Auteur had seen her through the window by this point and asked if she wanted some tea, which had only made her more incensed when she had to politely say no. She couldn’t let it out yet. The proper place, the proper time. Hole had arrived first, which made her only madder at Cá Bãy Mầu and Axastyakis.

“Well, did you all sleep in?”

“If we are being honest...” Axastyakis began.

“We really don’t want to do this meeting at all, and we’d rather be sleeping in,” Cá Bãy Mầu finished.

Hole just stood there. It creaked.

“You’re coming with me to this meeting—”

“Did you think we just showed up to tell you we weren’t doing it? I’d have stayed in bed,” Cá Báy Mầu cut in.

Mullion didn’t have a retort, so she spun on her armored heel and pushed the door open to Auteur’s office. Auteur had made tea, and put out a nice tray of biscuits. She waved cheerfully.

“Hello everyone! Tea? I made four different kinds, I’m not sure what everyone likes. I put some broken dreams in them for flavor...” She squirmed her lips to the side. “I take it this isn’t a friendly visit about the Christmas Eve festivities tonight?”

“We’re here,” Mullion said forcefully, “to demand you let us go back to the Empire.”

Auteur looked her in the eyes, and cocked her head to the side. “No.” She went back to the tea.

“This isn’t a request.” Mullion charged up to the desk. “I come from the same people as you, and you may be able to tell these lesser people that—”

“Please stop this is very awkward.”

“—they have to stay here at your whim, but we are leaving. Now.”

Auteur poured the tea, and handed cups to everyone but Mullion.

“We came here together, and you had the gall, the sheer gall to bring Hole here five years before the rest of us—five years! We didn’t agree to that.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to, luckily,” she said, eating a biscuit.

“And I was willing to let that slide, willing, but we’ve been here two years and I’ve got to be honest, I’m not sure you’re even a member of our group. I think you just found out you joined later and you’re using us because you know Gideon to—”

Auteur tapped out a pattern on her desk. It was the heartbeat of their people. She kept tapping it. Mullion was thrown off her rant. Auteur looked at her companions, “Do you share her grievance?”

Hole creaked, and the other two shook their heads.

Auteur smiled. “Just you and me then. So you think we’re equals?”

“We are—”

Auteur twisted her wrist, and Mullion was swallowed up by the floor, the carpet breaking as white goo surrounded her and pulled her away.

Little Mullion, how cute. You think you know me?

Mullion was crawling the grass, she was a child. The sky was the same color as the town’s, Auteur’s little hint of home. Auteur was in front of her on a hill. Standing by her parents.

“You think you have any control?”

She fell forever. And then after falling forever, she fell for a day, and there was Auteur’s face huge as a mountain, opening her mouth and—

She was in the Empire—surrounded by everyone she knew in their little death cult. One by one they removed their masks. Auteur after Auteur was revealed. “You think you’re my equal?”

She was on a pillar of white, surrounded by white, the goo entrapping the bone armor around her. Auteur walked up to her, white goo rising to each of her footfalls.

“So then, Little Mullion...”

“I’m not ‘Little’.”

“You shouldn’t be so rude. You shouldn’t say things, or make accusations like you did,” she grinned, and a swirl of rainbow color rose up from the white, and stroked her cheek. “Even if maybe they’re true? After all, I want the best for all of us. So, if you’re right and I’m not a member, think of me as family. As... Your Godmother! After all, if you call me that and I’m not a member, it isn’t even copyright infringement!”

Mullion’s eyes went wide. “There’s something wrong with you.”

The color wrapped around her neck as a rainbow noose. “Say it. Say you’re sorry.”

The noose tightened.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Who are you saying it to?”

“I’m sorry... Godmother Auteur.”

“That’s better.”

She was back in the office. Her companions were staring at her.

“Did I adequately address your complaint? Sticking around?”

Mullion nodded, grabbed a biscuit, and walked out.

* * *

Graelyn Scythes awoke in a cold sweat. She was still in her room, still in the town. The dream was vivid. So vivid that even though she took a minute to steady herself, staring at her cat pattern pajamas, she still remembered every detail. She scrawled it down, and when she finished, she knew that this would be the final dream journal she ever did. For better or for worse. She re-read it. She stared at Taranis on her nightstand. She re-read it. She fell back on her bed and rubbed her eyes. She re-read it. She knew what she had to do. Or rather, she knew that it was time to do something. The details eluded her. But she had to begin. She got dressed, despite it still being dark out. The *Diosca Eitilte* in the sky no longer held her fast by its cycles. It was time to see Hollow and 176.

* * *

Her friends read her dream journal, and then spent the next ten minutes freaking out.

“This all makes so much sense!” 176 yelled.

“Be quiet! What if someone is listening!” Hollow countered.

“Then they’re listening! Whatever! Graelyn, do you know what this means?”

Graelyn nodded. “I wish I didn’t.” She picked at the upholstery on the couch.

“So what are we going to do?” Hollow asked.

“What Alice MacLeod did in ‘Songbird IV: Revolution Rising’: confront it.”

176 slumped in her chair. “You’re right, but...”

Graelyn threw her hands up. “But what? We’ve been waiting years for this.”

176 leaned in. “We were going to tell you later when we met up, you know, not before breakfast.”

“I brought my whisk so I could make pancakes,” Grae noted.

“Okay, that’s good cause I’m starving, but Hollow and I learned about a secret movie screening.”

Grae narrowed her eyes. “Okay, I’m interested.”

* * *

The showing was a secret, and Skinflint needed to keep it that way. Getting the film had taken years of work, trying to get a message out at all from the town was nearly impossible. Yet he had done it. By sheer force of will, he’d brought the film back into existence. Throughout the town, the whispers had carried long and far. But, as far as he knew, never to Auteur. And so the screening went on as planned. He was nervous and excited, and so were Graelyn and her friends as they snuck in.

“Okay, but if they do build a college,” 176 said, “this is absolutely going against our applications.”

“176,” Hollow said, “sweetie, do you really think they have enough people to turn anybody away who’d want to be there?”

Graelyn raised her eyebrows and waited for 176 to reply.

“Alright, fair, but I don’t think that really matters anymore.”

Everyone in the theater itself looked fearful of everyone else in it, like it was a roomful of snitches. Skinflint came to the front, to say a few words before it started.

“Thank you all for taking the risk to come here. I hope you all enjoy the movie it’s taken me years to smuggle in here, a masterpiece of winter cinema we know of as “Ice Age 2”.”

There was scattered applause.

And the movie started. It was decent enough, there was a mammoth, and a squirrel, and a screaming Auteur who blasted the doors to the theater open with a flick of her gauntlet.

““Ice Age 2”. You brought in “Ice Age 2”!” she yelled, and from the ground, white tendrils broke through the carpet, wrapping around Skinflint. “You never should have told Mullion, Skinflint, you little artistically dead rat.”

The theater, for the second time in Graelyn’s life, ran for the exits. Auteur only had eyes for Skinflint and his conspirators, though, and Graelyn, Hollow, and 176 followed through on their plan and slipped into the bathroom. Not that they’d thought the movie would get raided, but it worked out either way. The screams died down, and they heard Auteur cursing as she left the theater.

“Don’t tell me I was too harsh, F.I.D.O, you can’t tell me that I reacted too hard to someone showing my town “Ice Age 2”, so—” and then the door shut behind her. They waited a while longer

and slipped out. 176 and Hollow went to the projection room and sorted through the film cans. When they found it, they put the reel into the projector.

Graelyn went to the theater. And as the projector flickered on, Archimedes' opening logos appeared. She walked to the light.

* * *

"Come in!" Auteur said, and Graelyn slipped in the doorway.

She pouted her lips. "Well, you look like you're having a bad day. Come in, I'll make us some tea. F.I.D.O?"

The dog poked its head in the door.

"Grab the kettle if you wouldn't mind."

"Mission acquired," he replied.

"There's a good boy. Now, Graelyn, what's going on?"

Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out the dream journal. Auteur slowly pulled it from her hands and began to read:

Dream Journal Entry 4

The green void tore around her body, a violent wind that ached and pulled and squeezed. She could see faces in it: friends, enemies, strangers. There was Alice MacLeod, giving some sort of big speech. Manuel Salazar, asking for a surgical tool during an operation. Her mother, screaming at her. A woman she'd never seen before in a Batman t-shirt standing by the Berlin wall. And then, a Mammoth. She fell from the end of the portal, and rolling neatly, came to her feet as though she'd planned it that way, shoving the whisk into her bag as her comrades rolled out of the portal behind her.

The room was as she'd seen it. Bone and clockwork, a great vessel of a construction unlike anything in her own home. A circle of Mammoths turned, their huge, dark eyes blinking at her. Painted Warriors lined the room. The walls ticked and groaned.

"Original Mammoths! My name is Graelyn Scythes of Dawn. I'm here to talk." She stood as tall as she could, and the other four spread out as wings behind her, five against history.

One of the Mammoths, who had parts of his fur braided and laced with beads, stomped ahead of his fellows.

"Talk?" it communicated...somehow. Graelyn strained to figure out if it was telepathy or something else. Whatever it was, it was...old. Older than words, or paint on rocks. "Your realm has fallen, you have nothing to do but beg to your conqueror, Taranis."

"I have plenty to do but that," Graelyn snarled, "in my time you're bones, history, and you have the nerve to steal my own future."

Taranis trumpeted, “A future of infinite bloodshed! Do you think we have not read the prophecy? Know your plans, she-with-the-arm-of-gold.”

Graelyn furrowed her brows. “Uhh,” she looked at her comrades, “no, this is the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Yes,” the Emissary said, “I can’t say I’m familiar with this prophecy.”

The Painted Warriors moved closer, and so did Taranis. “Then you shall know your fate. The Prophecy states that from the realm of 10,000 rises of the sun, the end of the Mammoths will come. That she-with-the-arm-of-gold will be the herald of the end, and the end of all things for our kind. That Mammoths would be massacred by her, and then by all of the armies of the sunrises. We learned of the theft of the gauntlet from those who guard the ticking of the eons, and knew that we had to act to protect ourselves.”

“I didn’t steal the gauntlet!” Graelyn cried out, “I took it from the people who did steal it!”

“A cheap lie,” Taranis said, “We have given your realm more compassion than it deserved. We found holes between your realm and ours, and sent our Painted Warriors through. Freezing every person in a moment in time, and harming none. We will give you the same option.”

The ceiling lit up as Taranis spoke, showing the path of the Warriors through the holes, bright lights that seemed to form a shape, like a constellation or a sigil.

“Taranis, please, this is a misunderstanding, the prophecy is wrong, we don’t want to hurt you, or any of the Mammoths. We didn’t even know who you were till today.”

“Lies! I give you one last chance, Graelyn Scythes of Dawn.”

That was when the Emissary started cracking up. She had tried to hold it in, keeping her lips pursed tight, putting a hand over her mouth, but it all just came out, and she doubled over, trying to hold her belly with her heavy laughs, and then falling onto the floor. Everyone just watched her, confused.

“Your friend has lost her mind,” Taranis said.

She stood up, wiping tears from her face. “Oh, oh, I’m sorry about that, I really am, but I just...you guys were being so sincere. This could have been a BBC drama, well, the effects would be too good, but you get me.” She stepped between the two groups and applauded. “Truly, a great performance by everyone here. I was nearly moved.”

Taranis reared onto his hind legs, and dropped down, causing a thunderous boom that staggered most of the beings with two legs. “I find no humor in this.”

She rolled her eyes. “You Mammoths always were so dull. No wonder you went extinct.” She reached an arm out, and Graelyn’s arm began to tug. She pulled back, trying to hold onto the gauntlet, Arch reaching over to attempt to hold it in place, but it shot off, hurtling across the room, and sliding right onto the Emissary’s arm. “Graelyn wasn’t lying, by the way. She didn’t steal the gauntlet. I did.”

Coloth, somewhat unexpectedly, yelled from the back, “You’re a coward and a traitor! Your gods will shame you when you die!”

“And you will die,” Taranis said, one of his big eyes shifting to Graelyn with a soft sorrow. “The *Diosca Eitilte* shall never bow. Warriors, destroy her.”

The Painted Warriors began to vanish, and The Emissary simply waved the gauntlet, spinning her body in a circle, and the bones on the walls were filled with new paintings: warriors, fierce but shocked, frozen in illustration.

“You’re so simple!” she guffawed again, prancing around the room, whirling with glee. “Oh, Taranis, you don’t get it, do you? Who do you think wrote the prophecy?”

“The Sisters at-”

“I did! I wrote it, not my best work admittedly, a few too many rhyming couplets, but you believed it. And then my people and I stole the gauntlet, and cut a bunch of holes in the universe. Little ones, nothing that would be noticed by the powers that be, but enough for, say, a single warrior to slip through.” The lights on the ceiling lit up brighter. “And now all of you have done just what I thought you’d do!”

She looked at Coloth pointedly. “Except you! Good on you for the bravery thing, I mean, it didn’t make a difference, but still!” She gave him a thumbs up. “Gold star for effort.”

Lady Aesc, Arch, Coloth, and Graelyn began edging towards Taranis, whose Mammoths were forming up into a battle line.

“You’ve lied to us this whole time,” Lady Aesc said, “so who are you?”

She grinned. “Oh, no one really, my name’s Auteur. And you’re part of the greatest piece of performance art ever accomplished.”

The Mammoths charged and they fell to the floor, their fur turning to pages, their bones to spines, their brains to ink. Each landed with a dull thud.

“I made the largest ritual circle in history. Oh, come on, be impressed,” she frowned, “I think it’s impressive.”

Arch walked over to one of the books and picked it up, opening it to the first page.

Luigsech was born under the waxing moon to her parents—

“It’s her life story...” he said softly.

“Yep!” Auteur said, and Arch fell to the floor, clattering in his complete film boxset case.

Graelyn screamed. She ran towards the case, trying to make any sense of this, trying to understand how this was even happening. This was lunacy, this couldn’t be real. She was dreaming. She picked up the case. It had Arch’s picture on it, jumping away from an explosion. It was just a case. She heard Coloth charging, and then he dropped to the floor too. Lady Aesculapius pulled out some Gizmo, but she dropped to the floor, a pile of 276 Blu-Ray disks.

Graelyn didn’t even realize that she wasn’t on the floor anymore, that she was being carried, at first, wrapped in Taranis’ trunk as he charged down a corridor.

“Small one, I have made error. I don’t know how to fight her, and I have wronged you.”

“She’s going to turn us into stories, we have to...”

She looked up at him. “Taranis, you made statues that were alive?”

“We did, yes.”

“Then...I have an idea. It might be stupid but...”

Auteur found her, standing alone in a room lined with tusks.

“So, the last one, ey? You held out well. Where’s Taranis? He run away?”

Graelyn stared at her. “Go on then. Do it.”

Auteur shook her head. “This is the end, you know. I thought you’d want some sort of great last words. You’re the sole survivor of 10,000 Universes, that has to be a big burden on your heart. Don’t you want revenge? Come on, give me drama!”

She looked at Auteur sadly. “A long time ago, there was a girl named Graelyn Scythes.”

Auteur waited for more and gestured with her gauntleted hand. “And?”

“And she knew the story wasn’t going to go the way Auteur thought. So she was brave, even though she was scared.”

Auteur shrugged. “Weird, but okay.” She did a flourish of her arm, and Graelyn dropped to the floor as a book.

Auteur cracked her neck and walked over to the book. Finally, all these years of planning, all this work— and the book began to shake.

She stepped back. That wasn’t normal. Or part of the plan. Her eyes grew wide. She opened the book even as the thing spasmed, and turned to the last page. She looked above Graelyn’s last words, and saw—

“And Graelyn wrote on her arms, knowing that the text would become lines in the book, and those lines read:”

“Aw, crap,” Auteur said, and the room went white.

* * *

Auteur looked up. “The prose here is much better. I didn’t even need to rework it this time.”

Graelyn pulled her lips in. “Miss Auteur, I don’t think that’s the thing we need to talk about.”

Auteur drummed her fingers on the desk. “I suppose it isn’t. And I suppose there’s no convincing you this was all a dream.”

“Of course not.”

“So you know why you’re here.”

“I know enough, at least. But a lot of it doesn’t make any sense.”

Auteur unlocked a drawer of her desk, and pulled out a piece of paper. “I figured I owe you at least the end, whatever happens next.”

Dream Journal Ending, by Auteur

Auteur looked down where there should have been a book, and there was a baby. A crying baby on the floor of the *Diosca Eitilte*. She picked it up and soothed it. She'd been a mother and a father before, and a parent. But her mind was already filled with dread at the next conversation as Gideon arrived.

"Auteur, Congratulations. I take it things went according to plan?" He was dressed to the nines, as always.

She held out the baby. "Nearly, I'm afraid."

Gideon frowned. "Why haven't you killed her?"

Auteur nearly threw the baby in exasperation. "I can't, because then I'll ruin the whole ritual. The girl needs to get old enough so she can end the story, presumably by writing herself the ending we want."

Gideon rubbed his chin. "That'll take years."

Bellow them, the endless unmade white stretched. "I can build a scenario for her...a few years is nothing. We can salvage this. Trust me."

Auteur's Office

Graelyn stopped reading and looked up. "Who fed me as a baby?"

Auteur frowned. "I had to, obviously. You really wasted my time, you were a clever girl, are a clever girl."

"I had to live a whole other life here."

"Oh come on, you're a time traveller. Don't tell me you didn't lose track of time before, spend years in a place. Spend months in a high school for a mission. Wait on an empty moon. Infiltrate a World War II special operations mission to rescue a friend. Seventeen years is nothing. We don't live like other people, Graelyn. We don't even live like the rest of this Town."

Graelyn shook her head, "You want to erase all the people I knew and loved, to make them stories."

"Stories to rewrite history with. To make an alternate history, one strong enough that it can overpower the entirety of the old one. And I can do it. I just need you."

"I won't let you."

"You really think you can stop me?"

The door swung open, and Auteur's jaw dropped.

"It looks like you're trying to erase me from existence, would you like some help with that?" Archimedes Von Ahnerabe said.

* * *

“Arch,” Graelyn said, the glow of the screen illuminating her. “I need you. I need you more than ever, and you’re not even real. You’re a character. A story I read to make myself feel better at night. But you’re here, aren’t you? You’re my friend. And...”

The face of Arch on the screen turned to her, and she touched it. The fabric rippled, and the light grew, and her hand bled into it. She felt something and grasped it. It was a hand. She pulled, and from the screen, a glowing figure came. Their skin was light, and then it dimmed to a carapace of screens, with one electric eye.

He looked at his hands, and looked up at her. And the memories flooded back.

“Arch!” she hugged him. “You’re real! You’re really real!”

He returned the hug, and they held each other tight. “I...suppose I am, yes.”

Another figure came out of the screen.

“Where are we, Arch?”

“Oh uh, hi Celeste. Meet Graelyn.”

Graelyn waved. “Big fan.”

From the projection booth, Hollow and 176 were freaking out.

* * *

Auteur rose from her desk. “You can’t have brought him back. He’s fictional.”

Arch struck a pose. “Not anymore.”

Auteur looks at you, and mouths, “Well, sort of.” No one really notices this, though. “It looks like I’ll have to move ahead on the plan then.”

The Hollow Childe, Citizen 176, and Celeste Roth rushed into the room after them, Hollow rising into the air, objects trembling around her.

“No, Auteur. This whole plan ends now.”

“It’s Christmas, though. We can always put this off.”

Graelyn sighed, “I’m sorry.” She pulled the toy mammoth from her satchel, and Auteur laughed.

“That’s what’s going to stop me? A toy?”

“Auteur, it may be Christmas, but welcome to the ice age!” She threw the toy, and the toy suddenly began growing, its fur becoming real, its plush tusks hardening, till in the air ready to drop on Auteur’s head was a full-sized mammoth. It crushed her desk, breaking the wall and the ceiling, Auteur scampering out from under it, bloody, and hurling the Hollow Childe through the air and out of the way with a flick of her gauntlet as she charged through, running out her own door. Outside, Auteur was stopped in her tracks.

In the sky, Songbird was swooping about on her dragon, Jack and Aladdin on the ground fighting the members of the cult. Lady Aesc and Coloth were back to back, taking on a group of her own people. There were hundreds of characters, and more were spilling out from the movie theater every second. Auteur looked back at Graelyn in shock.

“You are clever.” She gave a smile that seemed too honest. “I’m proud of you. I hope you know that’s, uh, not something I usually tell anyone.”

“It’s over, Auteur!” Celeste yelled. “Give up.”

“Please,” Graelyn said, “surrender. I don’t want you to die.”

Auteur nodded. “I lose. Thank goodness. There’s no way I can beat this.” The cult was being subdued all across the Town, every resident held by their fictional captors. Graelyn’s dream journal glowed through her bag, and Auteur grinned. “And it looks I lost just in time.”

THE END

The journal flew from Graelyn’s bag, and into Auteur’s hands, and Songbird and her dragon were sucked into it, then ten members of the cult.

“What’s happening?” Hollow yelled, covering her ears.

Graelyn’s face fell. “She was trying to turn everyone into stories.”

Auteur threw her arms up, and did a weird little jig. “You figured it out!”

176 watched as her hands turned into letters, drifting to the book. “Hollow, I—”

But she was gone, and Hollow screamed, her eyes turning black, her scream shattering windows, which in turn vanished with Hollow in a puff of fiction..

Cá Bảy Mâu and Axastyakis were trying to pull Hole with them, but Mullion shoved them forward.

“It’s too slow, leave it behind!”

But it was no use either way. The White Canvas swallowed them, and like the rest of the town, Auteur watched as they were written into her book.

Celeste vanished, the buildings vanished. Taranis charged Auteur, and vanished again. And the book filled up.

“Arch, hold onto me, come on now. You’re the brawn, right?”

He was already melting into letters as he shook his head. “I was never the brawn, you know that, Grae. I give kids candybars, and—”

He whispered into ink, and flew into Auteur’s book. Shutting it, the snap echoed in eternity.

“Well, that worked out. Whew. I was worried there for a few years. Yipee!”

Graelyn sunk to her knees. “I...Auteur...” her eyes welled with tears. “Auteur, what did you do?”

“Turned everyone into stories! I realized I was never going to get you to crack, so instead I realized there was another way. If your story ended, I could just take everyone else’s, and that would finish the ritual like I’d planned. Sure, it meant a few hundred members of that stupid little death cult would get fictionalized, but who cares about them anyway.

Graelyn shook her head. “They’re people, Auteur. You can’t...”

“No, pretty sure I just did. Nice sentiment, though.”

“So what now?”

Auteur shrugged. “I don’t really need anyone. Especially not that cult. Ugh. They were a bit...extra? I mean, I know I’m definitely a member in the future, but I can fix that. Fix anything. All the plot holes in history especially. I mean, really, reality is ridiculous. I can do a lot better.”

Graelyn shuddered. “You’re going to kill me now?”

Auteur paused. She looked at Graelyn, and walked over to her, arms open for a hug, but Graelyn shirked away.

“Please don’t be like this.”

“You killed my friends!”

“They’re not dead, they’re just fictional!”

“Bring them back.”

“I can’t. Well, I won’t. I certainly can, but that would mean ending the whole ritual, and this has taken decades of work, and so, no.”

“This can’t be what you want.”

“Uh, no, actually this is exactly what I want and I’m very happy about it.” Auteur held a hand out.

“You can be my co-author. I don’t say that lightly, you’re not even particularly good at prose, but you can learn. And I like you. I…” she bit her lip, and scrunched her face up. “I…oooh don’t make me say it.”

Graelyn furrowed her brows through her tears. “Say what?”

Auteur waggled her arms. “You know!”

Graelyn shook her head. “I really really don’t.”

Auteur looked away from Graelyn and pivoted her foot back and forth. “I uh, I love you, um, kinda like a child? You know. Not a big deal. But uh. You know. I did sort of raise you on accident, and um. Wow, this is awkward.”

Graelyn looked at her, tears still in her eyes. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t do this to me.”

“Of course I would! Parents don’t have to be good people! Now come on, let’s rewrite the universe.”

“Your universe,” Graelyn said, “there are others.”

Auteur mused on this. “Well… Yeah, I guess so.”

“Get rid of it,” Graelyn said.

Auteur took a step back. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll join you, but you have to make your own universe fictional. We can play with others, but if I don’t get a home, you don’t.”

Auteur rubbed her chin and thought on this. “I…I didn’t think about that but… You know, fair enough, Graelyn.”

She pressed something on her gauntlet. “I already did 10,000, what’s one more?”

Graelyn wiped her tears away. “A mistake?”

Auteur raised an eyebrow, and then felt her past and future self, still in that universe, pulled into the book.

“Oh, come on,” she said, as she vanished into ink, the gauntlet dropping to the ground.

Graelyn stumbled over to the gauntlet and put it on. “Of course, I have to be the last person to exist in 10,000-some universes. The sole survivor. Figures.” She fiddled with it till she found the “eject” setting. “Someone else can take that next time.”

She hit the button, and all of reality spilled out.

It would take too long to describe it all, but everything that had existed existed again. People were dropped into their homes, their universes fitted back in place.

And Graelyn was still alone in there, but she knew it had worked as she picked up her dream journal and found that her dreams had all gone to other people.

“Figures,” she muttered.

“You did well,” F.I.D.O said as he flashed into existence.

“F.I.D.O!” she tensed. “You’re not going to...”

“No, you’re safe. I’ve tired of masters. But I fear that Auteur has written herself into a corner. I fear wherever she went when you ejected her, it’s gone badly.”

“She tried to kill 10,000 universes,” Graelyn replied.

F.I.D.O nodded. “But thanks to you, she didn’t. She’s somewhere living the rest of her life. But she remembers all this, and I don’t think she’ll take it well. She’s destroy herself trying to get here, trying to get to places like here...”

Graelyn shrugged. “And that’s my problem?”

“It’s Christmas, and as much as I try to pretend I’m a bad boy...I’m not.” He bowed his metal head. “I’m asking you to come with me, one last time, to save my Mistress.”

Graelyn walked over to him and pet him. “Good boy, F.I.D.O. Let’s find her.”

Chapter 7: An Artist Lies Dying

Auteur had died, that wasn't a big deal. She'd found a new face. But that old trick was at its limits. Now they were a man, or was a man before his skin had been ripped off. He'd even thought he died, but he clung on. He couldn't even get to death, that was annoying. The world collapsed around him, and his eyes were unable to close. Even so, he wrote in his head. He imagined his blood as paint swirls. If he was human, he'd have died ages ago. But he could cling on. He would cling on.

Ghosts appeared to him, that girl from ages ago, and the dog he'd had once.

"A Christmas Carol!" he shouted as they grabbed him. "You need a third one!"

"Sorry," Graelyn replied, "budget cuts."

They took him back to the White Canvas, and F.I.D.O tried to stabilize him as Graelyn held his bloody hand. "I'm sorry we didn't find you sooner, Auteur."

"Oh, I'm fine, just a flesh wound."

"You are not fine, Master Auteur."

"I know doctors, we can—"

"No doctor can save him in this state...he...I only know one group of people who can..."

Graelyn took a swallow. "That death cult?"

"Oh," Auteur said, "have I joined already or not? I keep forgetting."

"Call them," Graelyn said.

F.I.D.O did, and they whispered in as darkness. The man she recognised as Gideon stepped forward. "Friends, I give you the greatest artist there is."

Graelyn smiled down at Auteur, and up at Gideon. "You can save him?"

"We can."

She let him go, and he vanished into the shadows.

F.I.D.O looked up at her. "Thank you. Our service is done."

Graelyn patted him. "Do me one last favor, you can teleport and stuff right?"

"Yes, Mistress Scythes."

"I uh, don't really have a lift home."

Chapter 8: The Christmas Needle Agreement

Graelyn hadn't had any say in where the negotiations were taking place, but she sure wasn't complaining. The station they were on was the biggest she'd ever seen, and she'd seen dozens of realities. It went on farther than she could see out the window, a size so ridiculous she wondered how practical it was.

"Your first time on the Needle?" The speaker was a floating spinning disk of purple and yellow, only as large as a dime. So, that was new. It spoke incredibly quickly, like it had already moved on from its sentences by the time it started.

"Yeah, first time," she replied. "I'm Graelyn Scythes of Dawn."

"We're Ambassador Galaxy Violet, of the Quoth."

"A pleasure to meet you. If I might ask, when you say 'we'..."

"We're subatomic beings."

"Right, so, a lot. Well, I'm honored to meet the family."

"The pleasure is ours. The Empress is a just negotiator, so I'm sure you'll end up with a very fair treaty. The turnout to witness is impressive, though, representatives from throughout time and space are here."

Graelyn looked past the spinning disk, which wasn't hard since it was so tiny, at the myriad other guests. The Original Mammoth delegation was chatting with a big fuzzy creature she'd heard called a Vo'lach and a member of the Knights of Sky, while ambassadors from the Great Assimilation were chatting up the representative from this universe's equivalent to the Firmament (though she'd been told not to call them that publicly, since apparently they weren't actually remotely the same species, they'd just ended up with the same job), Sergeant-Instructor Littlejohn, who looked extremely unimpressed with the Great Assimilation's bragging about having a multi-universal empire. Kinan Jans was talking to a dejected-looking Gideon, dressed to the nines, who was clearly only here out of obligation and trying not to make eye contact with any of the people he'd nearly helped annihilate earlier. The Firmament was here as well, having a very heated chat with the Bookkeepers. Lady Aesc and Arch had set up a card game with a big mess of aliens, one of whom had just thrown down a losing hand in disgust with the tentacles under their chin. Coloth had apparently won the hand, and was loudly proclaiming his victory, while Lady Aesc was doubling over laughing. Arch popped a few candy bars out of his arm, and that seemed to diffuse the situation. A few painted warriors stood in the corner exactly like how stone statues stand there without doing anything.

Littlejohn walked up to Graelyn, nodding at the Quoth. "A marvelous job you did, giving that death-cult a black eye. You should be proud of yourself, kid."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, "wasn't particularly fun, though."

He nodded. "Never is. I do believe you have something belongs to us, though."

"Oh, right." Graelyn reached into her satchel and pulled out Autuer's gauntlet. "She stole this from your people, and I'm happy to return it to you."

He took the gauntlet, and turned it over examining it close. "Well, at least she took good care of it. Thanks. See you around, kid." He gave her a salute, that she awkwardly returned as a proclaimer in full regalia called for attention from the whole room.

"Please rise for the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, Miranda Dawkins the Last, empress of the universe, commander in chief of the imperial fleets, custodian of the artefacts, mistress of the four keys, head of the galactic bank," the proclaimer took a breath, "...and absolute ruler of the known and unknown planets."

The empress entered, wearing a long ceremonial robe woven from gold and threads so black they vanished the light that trailed behind her, the tails held up by a pair of floating drones. Under the robe, she wore a Batman t-shirt and jeans.

“Welcome everyone, I’m proud to be here to negotiate a truce between the 10,000 Dawns, and the powers from our own universe.” There was polite applause, ululation, clicking of pincers, and membrane tapping. “So, let’s begin.”

The negotiations themselves were boring. Dawkins told a few anecdotes about her father, which everyone seemed to find more interesting than the stories really were for reasons Graelyn didn’t understand, and after agreements were decided upon, one by one, the representatives agreed to various terms and stipulations.

“Taranis,” Graelyn said, “you were a good friend to me, even when I didn’t know it, so I wanted you to have this.” She slid the Mammoth a button with the Dawn Logo on it across the table. The Mammoth picked it up with his trunk, examined it, and then pinned it to his fur, letting out a loud trumpeting that disturbed the proceedings.

“Small Graelyn, I am honored deeply by your gift, and the symbol of your people. As a representative of the Original Mammoths, I ask you to hold your hand out.”

Graelyn looked at Arch, who nodded enthusiastically, and she did. Taranis touched her hand, and a sigil appeared on it, glowing bright, and then sinking in and disappearing.

“You are now marked as an Original Mammoth, granted the privileges of the herd and song. Welcome as friend and equal, and known to all to have the spirit of the tusk.”

“Oh!” Graelyn looked at her hand. “Thank you!” she replied, quickly. “You’re welcome in Spiral, whenever, too.”

The mammoths all trumpeted, and Miranda had to politely ask them to quiet down.

Graelyn hoped the mammoths didn’t know the button was a mass produced giveaway she had a pile of in the bottom of her bag. “I’m very honored.”

“This bond cements our peace more than any paper. Never more will the mammoths threaten your 10,000 Dawns.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Miranda muttered, and moved onto the next point.

Soon, the documents were signed, hands and limbs were shook, and the Christmas Needle Agreement went into effect. Guests began to move to the banquet hall where the celebration would truly begin. She found Arch, and cozied up to his side.

“Hey Grae.”

“Hey Arch.”

“It’s good to be back.”

She nudged him in the side. “I missed you. Your filmography just wasn’t the same.”

“Graelyn!” they turned to see Hollow and 176, holding hands and running up to them as 176 started jabbering. “You’ll never guess what happened, we talked to the Empress and she said there was a place for us here on the Needle!”

Hollow, who was floating a few millimeters above the ground in excitement, grinned. “So we decided we’re going to stay here, and build a life.”

“Congratulations!” Graelyn said, and Hollow and 176 piled on her in a hug as Arch stood awkwardly on the side.

Hollow wiped the tears from her face as she started laughing with happiness. “We’ll have a home here, at the end of the universe.”

Graelyn took her friend’s hands. “You two don’t be strangers though, okay?”

“Promise,” 176 said.

“Oh! I know this song, come on,” Hollow said, and pulled her girlfriend to the dance floor.

As the party really got going, one figure slipped away, however, angling for an empty hallway. Graelyn squeezed Arch’s arm and scampered after them.

“Wait, Gideon!” Graelyn ran up to him, as he was attempting to start up some sort of doohickey she assumed was his ride out.

“I have nothing to say to you, you insolent brat.”

“Hello to you to. I have something for you to give to Auteur, can you do that for me?”

He paused, looking her in the eyes, one of his own twitching. “No promises. What is it?”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a notebook and a pen. “One last Christmas present. Maybe some art therapy will help them.”

He took them from her and sighed. “Fine, sure. You know Auteur was the most powerful person I knew, once upon a time. She ruled planets, created wonders, defied everyone and got away with it...even if they were insufferable, they were my closest friend from face to face...now...I just want you to know that I blame you.”

“They did it to themselves. I didn’t make them.”

“I don’t care. I blame you.” He flipped through the empty notebook and read the note Graelyn had written inside. “Even if perhaps I know you’re right, deep down. I will give this to him. Merry Christmas, Graelyn Scythes.”

“Merr-” but he was already gone.

Graelyn headed back to the celebrations. There were old friends to see, and new ones to meet. And most of all, an Archimedes to bother lovingly. She didn’t know what the future held, but maybe having a white canvas wasn’t so bad after all.